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**Presentation title:** "He inspired me to turn my life around": A qualitative inquiry of peer mentoring to leverage desistance

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Objective: Peer mentoring programs often use so-called "credible messengers" or "experts by experience" to support individuals in early desistance to break away from street life and violence. Credible messengers are individuals who are in later stages of desistance from crime, and mentoring is an intrinsic part of their new identities. Credible messengers often operate independently of law enforcement and can more easily gain trust in marginalized inner-city communities impacted by violence. Research exploring how peer mentoring can support desistance is scarce. Furthermore, it is unclear how credible messengers use their own "street background" to promote desistance among people engaged in violent crime. This study explored how credible messengers, with sustained desistance, used their own narratives and identity shifts to mentor and promote desistance among high-risk young people. Methods: This study employed a narrative framework. We interviewed 40 young people at-risk who expressed a desire to desist from crime and 12 credible messengers with sustained desistance. Thematic analysis was used to examine (1) the strategies used by credible messengers to promote desistance among young people at-risk, and (2) how young people at-risk used mentoring as leverage to leave street life. Results: The comparison of narrative interviews with peer mentors and those with mentees identified several common themes around redemption, empowerment and caring responsibilities, suggesting mentees have identified with and adopted several of the key messages of the mentors. In short, mentees' nascent desistance scripts reflected closely the established self-narratives of their mentors. Implications: This thematic analysis suggests peer mentors may have a distinct (and probably unique) proficiency in impacting the narratives utilized to make sense of their chaotic lives. These advantages likely could be leveraged to extend the types of support that peer mentors offer.