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Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me, leading wherever I choose.

Walt Whitman, A Song of the Open Road
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Discussion
8.1 Summary

The aim of this thesis was to examine how features typical of the lives of emerging adults relate to their delinquent behaviour, specifically, whether or not they desist from delinquency during this period. The early adult years are a crucial time of life in the criminal careers of many young people. The majority of individuals who offend during adolescence, turn away from delinquency as emerging adults. Historically, this time of life has always been demographically dense, with many changes occurring as young people move into adulthood. Whilst this as a period of intense change remains true for the millennial generation, the nature of these changes, the trajectories young people take into adulthood, and the character of their lives as they become adults have altered.

In order to examine changes in delinquent behaviour during emerging adulthood in the Netherlands, I drew on data from two studies, the TransAM study and the CONAMORE study. Much of the work examining the period of emerging adulthood at the beginning of the 21st century was carried out in the USA and often relied upon college students to build and test various theoretical constructs. In addition, much of the work on life-course criminological theories has been based on data from older cohorts, not on the millennial generation, and has often used conviction data, rather than self-report measures of a broad range of delinquent offences. The use of contemporary data in this thesis was, therefore, important. The different challenges successive generations face due to macro-level changes in society are likely to affect the desistance process of young adults. The TransAM study provided an exceptionally rich tapestry of information on many aspects of the lives of ordinary Dutch emerging adults. The CONAMORE study was particularly well suited to examine emerging adults over a longer period of time and when further along the path to adulthood. Both of these studies had general population samples. One of this thesis’ key aims was to provide a Dutch perspective on emerging adult theory, adding to the growing literature on emerging adulthood in Europe, as well as to examine desistance in a contemporary general population, rather than a college student or convicted, sample.

Throughout the thesis, various dynamic criminological theories, explaining the development of criminal behaviour over the life-course, have been put to the test with relation to specific features from emerging adulthood theory. In the following section the main findings of each empirical chapter of the thesis are summarized, with reference to the research questions I set out to answer.
8.1.2 Emerging adulthood in the Netherlands

Emerging adulthood was first proposed as a new theory of development based upon research on North American young adults (Arnett, 2000). Whilst Arnett himself has referred to it recently as a framework for studying this stage of life (Arnett, 2015a), the debate as to whether this is indeed a theory continues and the universality of proposed features of emerging adulthood has in the past been called in to question (Côté, 2000; Hendry & Kloep, 2007a; Silva, 2013). It was important, therefore, at the beginning of this thesis, to establish whether the five key dimensions of emerging adulthood, as set out by Arnett, were relevant in the Dutch context. This was the focus of Chapter 2.

The five often quoted dimensions of emerging adulthood are that this is a time of self-focus, identity exploration, instability, feeling in-between, and possibilities. These characteristics of emerging adulthood are partly a reaction to the delaying of ‘traditional’ life course transitions in modern western society. In the Dutch context, however, it appears that these dimensions are not directly transferable. I found that whilst self-focus is certainly a feature, identity exploration was experienced slightly differently. Dutch emerging adults explore their identity as two separate constructs: as a sense of self and a sense of their future self. Whilst instability is certainly a feature Dutch emerging adults recognise, this dimension is clearly experienced negatively. This as a period of possibilities is also relevant, but this construct was combined with the idea of experimentation. So, I conclude that the Dutch emerging adulthood is similar, but not identical to that of the USA.

As is the case in most European countries, the Dutch population consists of a number of different ethnic minority groups. In the TransAM study emerging adults with a Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Caribbean ethnicity were recruited, alongside native Dutch emerging adults. Exploring how these groups experience emerging adulthood brought to light differences between the ethnicities. Native Dutch experienced this more as a time for explorations of sense of self-identity and less for exploration of their future self. In contrast, Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Caribbean emerging adults did find this to be a time for exploring their future self. Dutch-Moroccan emerging adults viewed the period less as one of experimentation and possibilities and more as a negative and unstable time. Despite these telling differences, I conclude that emerging adults of all three ethnic groups sampled clearly experience emerging adulthood. Similarly, I found no large differences between Dutch emerging adults of different socioeconomic statuses (SES): All SES groups experienced emerging adulthood.

At the outset of this thesis, therefore, I established that emerging adulthood is a recognisable phenomenon in the Netherlands. Whilst the exact nature of this period appears to differ from the USA, and differences between groups within the Netherlands were found, the dimensions of emerging adulthood are broadly identifiable across the Dutch context.
8.1.3 Risk factors for delinquency in emerging adulthood
Changes in the nature of the early adult years have resulted in trajectories into adult roles that are more heterogeneous and a shift in what it means to be an adult, with most young people delaying ‘traditional’ adult roles until later in life. In light of this, I felt it pertinent to augment the vast literature on risk factors for delinquency in adolescence with an examination of risk factors for delinquency in emerging adulthood. Are the same risk factors from adolescence found in emerging adulthood, as the millennial generation fails to grow out of these and ‘become’ adult, or do other risk factors for delinquency emerge during this time of life?

In Chapter 3, I found that two factors frequently linked to individual differences in delinquent behaviour during adolescence predicted delinquency in the TransAM sample of emerging adults. Parental social support was a significant protective factor, with emerging adults who reported having more supportive parents less likely to report committing delinquent offences. This highlights the continued role that parents can play, even after their offspring have exited adolescence and as the nature of the parent-child relationship changes. This might indicate the establishment of a relationship with as an equal adult, a key goal of the emerging adult period (Arnett, 2001). In addition, I found that alcohol use, often found to increase the risk of delinquency during adolescence, had a delinquent effect in emerging adulthood, despite the fact that drinking alcohol is legal for emerging adults. It seems this may indicate the delinquent nature of a party lifestyle during this period.

Other risk factors associated with adolescent delinquency, however, did not predict delinquency in this emerging adult sample. Neither peer delinquency, residing in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, nor need for autonomy were significant predictors. The declining importance of these factors and the continuing importance of parental support and alcohol use highlight the complex nature of emerging adulthood, when young people become adults in some ways, but not others.

8.1.4 Desisting from crime in emerging adulthood: adult roles and the maturity gap
Moffitt’s theory of adolescence-limited offending (Moffitt, 1993a) posits that adolescent offenders are motivated to offend due to the maturity gap: the mismatch between their perceived maturity, i.e., they feel like an adult, and their social reality, i.e., they are not yet afforded the freedoms and responsibilities of adults. Entering adult roles and gaining the desired adult social status should, therefore, decrease motivation for delinquent behaviour. Would this be the case for adult roles relevant to the lives of contemporary emerging adults, rather than more traditional adult roles of, for example, marriage and parenthood?
My findings from Chapter 4 showed that spending time in adult-like roles common for this age group, i.e., being in a relationship (not necessarily co-habiting), being in employment and not in education, and living independently of parents, has a desistance effect. I demonstrate this using an analysis method that controlled for differences between persons, therefore removing likely confounding factors. These findings support Moffitt’s theory, that having a legitimate adult social status results in adolescence-limited offenders turning away from delinquency. However, an unexpected qualification of this effect emerged in searching for evidence of the maturity gap. Based on the theory I expected that when not spending time in adult roles, those who felt very adult would be more delinquent than those who felt less adult. However, the difference I found was when young people spent more time in adult roles: When emerging adults felt more adult they reported a higher number of delinquent offences than when they felt less adult as they spent more time in adult roles. This combination of feeling very adult and spending time in adult roles indicates that, potentially, these young people are not ready for the freedoms of adult life and responded with delinquency. Alternatively, it is possible that these emerging adults still compare themselves to adolescents, and whilst this ensures they perceive themselves to be very adult compared to others, they continue to engage in delinquent behaviour, a normative behaviour in adolescence.

8.1.5 Personality maturation, adult roles, and desistance in emerging adulthood

The link between transitioning into adult roles and desisting from delinquency has been the subject of much work within the field of life-course criminology. As I showed in Chapter 4, the link is also evident for adult roles relevant to emerging adults. Within the personality literature, transitioning into adult roles has been linked to personality maturation; theoretically, in the social investment principle, and empirically, in a separate paper using the dataset employed in this study (van Dijk et al., in preparation). Personality change has also been linked to changes in delinquency, with studies showing that during emerging adulthood they co-develop (Blonigen et al., 2010; Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, et al., 2009). However, whether personality maturation and desisting from delinquency during emerging adulthood can both be explained by transitioning into adult roles had not yet been examined in one study.

In Chapter 5, looking at within-individual change between two time-points six-years apart, the findings showed that declines in delinquency predicted increases in conscientiousness, which in turn predicted transitioning into adult roles. In this case delinquency was the predictor variable, rather than the outcome. However, this relationship between delinquency decline and transitioning into adult roles was entirely mediated by increases in conscientiousness. I argue that this provides
evidence of the Gluecks’ (1950) description of the desistance process in early adulthood: It is the result of psychosocial maturation. Furthermore, I also argue that this provides cautious support for Giordano and colleagues (Giordano et al., 2002) theory of cognitive transformation. The fact that declining delinquency predicts transitioning into adult roles suggests that a decline in delinquent behaviour is a necessary factor in making the transitions. The fact that this relationship is explained by increases in conscientiousness suggests that an internal change is a necessary factor for both desistance and transitioning into adult roles.

8.1.6 ‘Boomeranging’ and delinquent behaviour in emerging adulthood: A person-centered approach to studying role change

One of the five key dimensions of emerging adulthood is that it is a time of instability. As I demonstrated in Chapter 2, Dutch emerging adults do experience this as an unstable time. A characteristic of the early adult years, often criticized in the popular press, is a possible source of this feeling of instability: boomeranging. The millennial generation has been referred to as the ‘boomerang’ generation, due to their tendency to return home to live with their parents after a period of independent living. This idea of boomeranging, from an independent to a dependent status, can be applied to other domains, such as relationships (from coupledom back to being single), education (graduating from education compared to dropping out of education), and employment (from being employed to returning to unemployment). In each instance a young person boomerangs from a more independent status, indicative of making progress towards adulthood, back into a more dependent status, indicative of lack of progression. Given the prominence of instability in the theory of emerging adulthood, as well as the attention paid to boomeranging in the press, I was keen to examine the extent to which boomeranging back into dependent roles occurred in the TransAM sample. Furthermore, given the emphasis on stable adult roles in the desistance literature, I was interested to see whether boomeranging was related to delinquency in emerging adulthood, and conversely whether progression into independent roles without boomeranging was related to lack of delinquency.

In Chapter 6, I found little evidence that boomeranging was a common phenomenon in Dutch emerging adulthood, as least during the short period on which TransAM data were available. Nor did I find evidence of a group of emerging adults who experienced boomeranging simultaneously across all four life domains examined (relationship, education, employment, and living situation). However, for a small group of emerging adults, this was an unsettled time in terms of relationships, employment, and education. These ‘experimenters’ were the most likely to boomerang back to being single from being in a couple, the most likely to drop out of education, and the most likely to become unemployed after a period of
employment. These experiences, possibly indicating ‘bad’ transitions or transitions made too early, went alongside a high likelihood of remaining living in the parental home. This particular combination of boomeranging and dependency resulted in these young people having a higher likelihood of being involved in delinquency during emerging adulthood than other groups.

Making the link between this particular manifestation of instability (boomeranging) and delinquent behaviour highlights a possible dark side of emerging adulthood. Whilst experimentation is generally lauded as a positive feature of the period, allowing young people the time and space to discover who they are, it is possible that too much chopping and changing, and the instability that this causes, does not provide the social context required to turn away from delinquency. Whilst in the TransAM data I found that this pattern of behaviour only applied to a small number of young people, recognizing the potential for this setback is an important finding.

8.1.7 Leaving the bank of mum and dad: Financial independence and delinquency desistance in emerging adulthood

As frequently highlighted in this thesis, and in the wider emerging adulthood literature, the millennial generation place less importance on traditional adult roles. Getting married, being employed, having children; these are no longer used as markers indicating adulthood has been achieved. Rather aspects such as taking responsibility for oneself, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent are judged to indicate one has become an adult. Traditional adult roles have been linked to desistance in several criminological theories and empirically demonstrated to have a desistance effect in a number of studies. Whether the same is true of the markers of adulthood emphasised by emerging adults has yet to be widely empirically tested. Consequently, in Chapter 6 I focus on the link between financial independence and desistance.

Examining within-person changes and so, again, controlling for differences between persons, my findings indicated that emerging adults reported less delinquency when financially independent than when financially dependent. This supports the idea of financial independence as a salient adult role in the mould of the ‘traditional’ roles, which were used to develop life-course theories of desistance, such as Sampson and Laub’s age-graded theory (1993). Achieving financial independence clearly has real life consequences on behaviour.

Interestingly, the interaction effect I expected to find between education status, employment status, or living independently and financial dependence did not emerge. There was neither a cumulative effect, whereby achieving markers of adulthood in multiple domains provided an extra boost to desistance, nor a cognitive dissonance effect, whereby achieving adulthood in some areas whilst remaining
financially dependent was related to higher delinquency. This finding highlights the importance of examining whether alternative measures of adulthood are related to desistance when using contemporary samples. It also confirms the behavioural relevance of these alternative markers of adulthood for emerging adults.

8.2 Discussion

In this thesis, I set out to determine whether the theory of emerging adulthood is relevant in the Dutch context and, if so, how features of this period might affect well-established life-course criminological theories of desistance. The importance of the early adult years to dynamic theories of criminal behaviour should be obvious from the shape of the well-known age-crime curve. It is, however, important for these dynamic theories to be repeatedly put to the test given changing life circumstances from one generation to the next. For example, for the disadvantaged men born during the Great Depression era, originally studied by the Gluecks (Glueck & Glueck, 1950) and on which Sampson and Laub built their theory (Sampson & Laub, 1993a), military service during the early adult years was a near universal experience. This is certainly no longer the case in Europe. In addition, post-secondary education has become increasingly common across western countries since World War II. However, it is important not just to reconsider criminological theories in terms of structural or demographic changes in the nature of the early adult years, but also more subjective terms. As what it means to be an adult changes, do the hooks for change that encourage desistance as one becomes an adult also change?

8.2.1 Emerging adulthood theory

In the introduction, I set out the theory of emerging adulthood, highlighting the five key features of the period, as well as other factors that emerging adults emphasise as important indicators of what it means to be adult. In this thesis, I have shown, first, that these five key features are broadly relevant to the Dutch context. Therefore, alongside the demographic and structural changes that the Dutch millennial generation exhibit, such as delayed marriage and parenthood, the period of emerging adulthood in the Netherlands appears to be a subjectively distinct time of life along the lines outlined by Arnett (2015b) and found in other countries (Atak & Çok, 2008; Fierro Arias & Moreno Hernandez, 2007; Lisha et al., 2012). However, despite this conclusion, in Chapter 5 where I examine boomeranging, I find little evidence for instability, one of these five key features. In this chapter I conceptualise instability in terms of structural instability, demonstrated by switching between independent and dependent roles. A possible reason for not finding much evidence of this manifestation of instability may be the relatively short time frame of the
study. Within a two-year period, experiencing any change in any domain may give rise to a feeling of instability. As we saw in Chapter 2, Dutch emerging adults clearly do recognise this time as one of instability. However, this subjective feeling of instability is not due to frequent switching between independent and dependent role statuses across multiple life domains.

Alongside the five key features of the period, emerging adulthood is also characterised by the value young people place on alternative markers of adulthood. Rather than seeing, for example, marriage or having a steady job as an indication that one has become an adult, they emphasise more individualistic qualities of character, such as achieving financial independence. In Chapter 6, I demonstrate that this marker of adulthood has real life behavioural consequences, namely a decrease in delinquent behaviour. This underlines the importance of financial independence as a salient marker of adulthood, one that emerging adults not only value as an indicator of adulthood, but one that also leads to behaviour change.

In a similar vein, in Chapter 3, I demonstrate that receiving parental social support acts as a protective factor against delinquency. During emerging adulthood, young people’s relationship with their parents generally changes to become more equal, where both parties see the other as individuals rather than solely parents or children (Arnett 2015). The parental social support measure used in Chapter 3 may reflect this shift and if so, the evidence suggests that having a more equal and adult relationship with one’s parents is related to a lack of delinquency. This lack of delinquency is, of course, what we would expect to see during adulthood. Although not as clear cut as with the findings on financial independence, Chapter 3’s findings suggest that developing a positive relationship with parents is indeed a key milestone on the path to adulthood for Dutch emerging adults.

So far then things are looking good for the theory of emerging adulthood and its applicability to the Dutch context. Another of the characteristics of emerging adulthood is that transitioning into what I have referred to as ‘traditional’ adult roles is, not only delayed until later in life (if ever), but downgraded in importance as a marker of adulthood achieved. Emerging adults’ sense of being an adult is not dependent on being married, on being a parent, or on having steady employment, nor is it dependent on having finished education (Arnett, 1997). Because of the delaying of ‘traditional’ adult roles, in Chapter 4, I examine adult roles more relevant to emerging adults, such as romantic relationships (not restricted to marriage or cohabitation) and living independently of parents. Interestingly, I find that these structural changes, despite their lack of emphasis for emerging adults, do relate to a decrease in delinquency. In Chapter 5, I use data from an older sample of emerging adults and I examine a combination of ‘traditional’ adult roles, such as marriage and parenthood, alongside other structural transitions relevant to emerging adults’ lives, such as living independently. I found these role transitions to be related to
personality maturation, as well as predicted by a decrease in delinquency. So, whilst emerging adults may not place importance on demographic or structural transitions as markers of adulthood, these transitions continue to make their effect felt, in terms of delinquent behaviour and personality maturation, if and when young people experience them. This is in fact in line with Arnett’s research (Arnett, 1998) as well as that of some of his critics (Hendry & Kloep, 2010), which has found, for example, that whilst non-parents do not rate parenthood very highly as a marker of adulthood, emerging adults who have become parents rate it as the most important criteria in becoming adult. The same may be true for other structural adult roles: Whilst they may not be seen as important markers of adulthood, they undoubtedly lead in changes in the lives of young people, and, as I have shown, changes in their delinquent behaviour.

In the introduction, I drew attention to critiques of the theory of emerging adulthood. Whilst this thesis did not explicitly set out to refute or confirm these, the findings do offer some insight. Several critics argue that the highlighted features of emerging adulthood, such as it being a time of experimentation, are not applicable to the more disadvantaged sections of society. I show in Chapter 2 that, in the Dutch context at least, this is not true: emerging adults with low socioeconomic status (SES) did not differentiate themselves from those with medium SES on the five key features of emerging adulthood. I argue that this finding may be a result of the stronger social welfare support provided in the Netherlands.

Another point raised by critics is whether emerging adulthood is good for society, placing as it does a heavy burden on parents, wasting economic resources, and engaging in risky activities into the adult years (Hendry & Kloep, 2007b). My findings indicate that this is a point worthy of discussion. Entering adult roles and achieving financial independence is related to declining delinquency. Experiencing instability in relationships, education and employment is related to delinquency. As such, emerging adulthood, if this means delaying transitions into adult roles, not taking responsibility for one’s finances, or boomeranging from independent back into dependent role statuses, does have negative consequences for delinquent behaviour. However, concluding on the basis of this thesis that emerging adulthood is bad for society is rather hasty. Clearly certain aspects are linked to delinquency, but are these aspects entirely new phenomena that previous generations of delinquents did not experience? Or are they just different manifestations of life circumstances that equally applied to delinquents of previous generations? Answering this question would require a comparison between different historical data sources, and so must remain a subject for future research.
8.2.2 Life-course criminological theories

One of my key aims in this thesis was to test the applicability of life-course criminological theories of desistance on a contemporary cohort of emerging adults. The emerging adult period is one in which the majority of young people desist from delinquency and I was interested to see whether theoretical explanations for this decline in delinquency, often developed and tested on older cohorts of adults or on adolescents, still held true. The three main theories discussed in the thesis are Sampson and Laub’s (1993) age-graded theory of social control, Giordano’s (Giordano et al., 2002) cognitive transformation theory, and Moffitt’s (1993) theory of adolescence-limited offending. I will discuss the theoretical implications for each of these.

All three theories contend that transitioning into adult roles is an important factor in desisting from delinquency during adulthood. Sampson and Laub posit that the informal social control these roles exert, providing stability and a connection to conventional society that offenders do not want to jeopardise, drives this effect. Giordano contends that these roles provide a necessary hook for change, but that first a cognitive shift is required in order to grab onto the hook. Moffitt argues that adult roles provide young people with a desired adult social status, thus bridging the maturity gap felt in adolescence and decreasing motivation for delinquency. The adult roles aspect of all the theories is supported by this thesis. Spending time in (Chapter 4) and transitioning into (Chapter 5) adult roles, where these represent structural changes relevant to the lives of emerging adults, is related to decreases in delinquent behaviour. These local life circumstances, therefore, still count, despite their lack of importance as markers of adulthood in the eyes of emerging adults.

Sampson and Laub’s theory explicitly highlights the importance of the stability of adult roles, arguing that this is necessary to provide informal social control and a ‘new’ life not worth jeopardising through delinquency. My findings in this thesis suggest cautious support for this aspect in relation to emerging adults. In Chapter 6 looking at role boomeranging, I find that emerging adults who experienced less role stability were more delinquent than those who experienced more role stability, but only in certain life domains. Stability in living circumstances, i.e., remaining in the parental home, did not differentiate ‘experimenters’ (more likely to be delinquent) and ‘achievement-focussed singles’ (less likely to be delinquent). Stability and role progression in education and employment on the other hand was associated with lower delinquency. Indeed, employment, in terms of the informal social control it offers, plays a prominent role in Sampson and Laub’s theory and has repeatedly been linked to desistance in adulthood (Uggen, 2000; van der Geest et al., 2011). This mechanism of informal social control might be extended to include education. Unlike in adolescence, where education is compulsory, in emerging adulthood being education means choosing to enrol in higher or further education. Progressing stably
through your chosen educational career may confer informal social control, in the same way that employment does, and therefore support desistance. However, on the other hand, being in education can be seen as a clear indication that adulthood, and a fully adult social status, has not yet been achieved and therefore work against desistance. Either or both of these are possibilities. In the case of the former, this would support Sampson and Laub’s theory, in the case of the latter, Moffitt’s theory. Taking a closer look at the life-course theories in terms of further or higher education seems to be necessary.

In this thesis, I did not restrict myself to examining the relevance of structural indications of adulthood to the millennial generation. In line with emerging adulthood theory, which emphasises that young people value alternative markers of adulthood, in Chapter 7, I examined financial independence, one of these alternative markers. The results clearly indicated that achieving financial independence led to a decrease in delinquency among emerging adults. This adult role appears either to provide informal social control (Sampson and Laub), to offer a hook for change (Giordano), or to indicate an adult social status (Moffitt), which in each case would prompt desistance. The exact mechanism as to why financial independence leads to decreases in delinquency is as yet unclear. What is clear is that the principle of these theories holds true for contemporary emerging adults, for structural markers of adulthood, no longer emphasised as key to adulthood, as well as for at least one of the alternative markers of adulthood, prized by emerging adults. Broadening the scope of life-course theories of desistance to include these alternatives appears warranted.

Giordano and colleagues’ (2002) theory of cognitive transformation contends that adult roles alone do not lead to desistance. A cognitive shift is required in order to make the most of the adult roles on offer. This theory highlights the importance of individual agency. This factor may be particularly important for emerging adults, who experience an increasingly heterogeneous path to adulthood; if anything goes, transitioning into adult roles might require a more conscious decision. In Chapter 5 I provide cautious initial support for this theory in a mixed gender, general population sample of emerging adults. I show that the relationship between declining delinquency and transitioning into adult roles is explained by increases in conscientiousness. I did not establish the exact temporal order of the changes, whether the shift to a more mature personality, in terms of increased conscientiousness, occurs prior to entering adult roles, and whether a decline in delinquency is a necessary precursor to entering adult roles. However, that a cognitive shift occurred in conjunction with declining delinquency and transitioning into adult roles, whether it was conscious or otherwise, indicates that it is not just the adult roles that are related to desistance. Some kind of cognitive transformation is also present.
Moffitt’s (1993) adolescence-limited theory and specifically the bridging of the maturity gap in adulthood, was my focus in Chapter 4 of the thesis. The theory states that as young people gain a legitimate adult social status their motivation for delinquency declines. Moffitt argues that this motivation is the result of the maturity gap, whereby adolescents feel adult and, in the absence of an adult social status, seek to fulfil this feeling through means of delinquent behaviour. If emerging adults continued to experience a maturity gap, I would have expected when young people felt very adult but did not experience adult roles (i.e., an adult social status) they would show the highest levels of delinquency. This was not the case and, therefore, the maturity gap as conceptualised by Moffitt does not appear to apply to emerging adults. However, the feeling adult aspect of the theory does seem to have unexpected consequences for delinquency in emerging adulthood, whereby feeling adult was still a risk factor, but now in combination with adult roles. This suggests potential for extending and adapting the theory into emerging adulthood.

In sum, this thesis provides broad support for the dynamic life-course theories of desistance, whereby changing life circumstances associated with adulthood are related to desistance from delinquent behaviour during this period. What the evidence does suggest, however, is that what those changing life circumstances are needs to be re-examined and possibly reformulated to ensure the theories remain relevant to the realities of the lives of the millennial generation of emerging adults and beyond. This thesis brings together some initial steps and ideas towards this update of the desistance process during adulthood.

**8.3 Policy implications**

Understanding the nature of the early adult years and delinquent behaviour during these years is not only of interest to social scientists. For criminal policy makers, as well as for social workers, educators working with young people, and parents, it is important to understand when things go right, why they go right and when things go wrong, why they go wrong. Emerging adulthood is a key period within the life course, sandwiched as it is between adolescence, where delinquency is not unusual, and adulthood, where delinquency is unusual. This is also a period when many important life transitions occur, when groundwork is laid down for later life success, and when young people move from dependency on their family of origin towards, hopefully, independency and self-sufficiency. It is important, therefore, to examine how the characteristics of emerging adulthood are related to delinquency and desisting from delinquency, in order to identify those who are at risk of following the wrong path. Examining desistance in the general population, as I do in this thesis, rather than focussing on high-risk offenders, means that my findings have implications for practitioners across a range of different settings.
I show that, in general, becoming an adult, be that through transitioning into adult roles, experiencing stability in these roles, or becoming financially independent, is linked to decreases in delinquent behaviour. That adulthood goes hand in hand with desistance is nothing new, but that this still applies for the millennial generation of emerging adults, given the changed nature of the early adult years and changes in what it means to be an adult, is important. Nevertheless, the problem of what parents and practitioners can and should do with this information remains the same regardless of the generation. Emerging adults at risk of continued delinquency cannot be forced to start a relationship, to refuse financial assistance from their parents, or to remain in stable employment. Partly because this is not practically or ethically feasible, but also, as the findings from Chapter 5 seem to suggest, because becoming adult is about more than simply structural changes. Structural changes, such as leaving the parental home or entering fulltime employment, go hand in hand with psychological maturation. It is possible that the structural changes will not stick without the accompanying maturation. Therefore, even if it were possible, assigning young offenders to adult roles is unlikely to result in a failsafe path to desistance.

Where parents and practitioners, such as youth workers and educators, can help is in supporting young people in the choices they make and helping them to achieve their goals. Finding the right balance, however, is necessary. On the one hand, emerging adults need to be given autonomy to forge their own pathway to adulthood, to give them a sense of responsibilities and an adult social status. On the other hand, providing them with the support needed to make the right choices is crucial. Too much support will likely undermine their sense of being an adult, not enough support may leave them floundering and not able to take on new roles and responsibilities. This is also a fine line to tread in other ways. As Arnett repeatedly highlights (1997; 2007; 2011; 2015a), emerging adulthood is a period of experimentation, a time when many young people have the opportunity to explore possibilities of who they are and who they want to become, before taking on the responsibilities of adulthood. How can parents and practitioners ensure emerging adulthood can still be time of exploration and experimentation, a time when about-turns can be made and reliance on parents can be positive, whilst still encouraging desistance from adolescent-like delinquent behaviour?

I suppose the answer is that ultimately, beyond providing support when solicited, there is not much they can do. However, it is important to emphasise that the story of this thesis is, on the whole, positive: As young people progress along the path to increased stability and independence they turn away from delinquent behaviour. This will be true for the majority of young people caught up in delinquency early in life. Where care does need to be taken and attention should be paid is to those emerging adults who do not appear to be progressing towards independence or into
stable adult roles in any areas of their lives. This may indicate more than healthy exploration and experimentation, namely a stalled pathway to adulthood. Providing these young people with help so they can take the step towards independence is important. This support could take the form of ongoing educational or careers guidance, or providing housing support or advice on how to look after their financial affairs, to help them take steps towards independence in these areas.

8.4 Future research

The findings of this thesis raise questions for future research, some of which can be answered using the TransAM dataset, some of which would require similar data collected over a longer period of time, and some of which would require different kinds of data.

In this thesis, my aim was to zoom in on the emerging adult period. I was able to examine patterns in delinquent behaviour during this period using a temporally rich dataset (TransAM) and, in one chapter, to take an extended look using a data over a longer time period (CONAMORE). The TransAM study provides data on monthly changes in relationships, education, employment and living arrangements, as well as six-monthly updates on financial situations, delinquency, and a number of psychological measurements. This detail made it uniquely suitable to examining this period of the life-course, where so many changes, across multiple domains, take place. However, the time frame which the TransAM study covers is relatively short in terms of the emerging adult period. Consequently, behaviour over the longer term could not be examined at the same level of detail (hence the choice in Chapter 5 to use an alternative dataset). It goes without saying that many avenues for future research would require data covering a longer period of time.

Throughout this thesis, I have referred to a decline in the number of delinquent offences as being an indication of desistance. This is justified if we consider a decrease in frequency of offending to be the manifestation of an underlying process of change (Farrington 2007). However, it is more common within the life-course criminological literature to take the cessation of offending to indicate desistance. Determining whether the decline in delinquency I have linked to various indications of adulthood does indeed represent an underlying process, of which the end point is cessation, is certainly an area for future research. Following up emerging adults over the entire emerging adult period would be useful to this end, both in terms of examining the complete cessation of offending, but also examining the role that the markers of adulthood play over the longer term. For example, the role instability I examined in Chapter 6 may have different or more pronounced consequences for delinquency if this occurs over a longer period or later in emerging adulthood. If
true, this would be in line with Sampson and Laub’s theory (1993) that stable adult roles are needed to support desistance. Not transitioning into adult roles may have a more profound effect on delinquent behaviour later on in emerging adulthood. This would provide a stronger indication of a stalled pathway to adulthood, which has in the past been linked to a continued criminal career path. Taking an extended look might also reveal young people who get trapped in ‘snares’ (McGee et al., 2015) during the emerging adult period. Moffitt and colleagues (Moffitt et al., 2002) found that some adolescence-limited offenders did not desist in adulthood, as they became ensnared in, for example, addiction or periods of incarceration. Data collected over a longer period would be best suited to examine this.

The two datasets I used in this thesis have general population samples and use self-reported delinquency measures. Data from both these studies can be used to examine ‘normal’, rather than high-risk, offenders. This is important given that, whilst the majority of young people offend during adolescence, the majority also desist during the early adult years. Picturing this ‘normative’ desistance is, therefore, best achieved with data such as those used in this thesis. However, using official conviction data would provide a different angle, picking up on more serious offending and testing whether the conclusions of this thesis also apply to a decline in criminal convictions. In addition, the life-course theories of desistance were generally developed using high-risk samples. Examining whether the features of emerging adulthood I have examined in a general population sample also apply to a high-risk sample would be an equally interesting exercise.

Another aspect that this thesis has not examined, and which would be ripe for future research, is different subtypes of offences. Rather than looking at delinquency in general, homing in on, for example, drug offences, violent crime, or white collar crime, might produce different conclusions as to how delinquency is related to changing life circumstances in emerging adulthood. Cybercrime is another subtype that has, to date, been understudied from a life-course perspective. The growing importance of this type of criminal behaviour cannot be ignored, particularly among younger generations for whom the online world is so prominent. Furthermore, this is a world where surveillance is minimal and where boundaries are more easily crossed. In addition, co-offending during emerging adulthood is another aspect of offending behaviour yet to be examined in much detail. We know that adolescent delinquency is heavily influenced by the peer group (Warr, 2002). My findings in Chapter 3 seem to suggest this is no longer the case in emerging adulthood. However, examining changes in the delinquency of the peer group and in co-offending overtime and in more detail, by using, for example, social network analysis (Weerman, 2011), would provide a more rigorous test of this.

In this thesis, I examined the desistance effect of one of the alternative markers of adulthood, financial independence. Two of the other most frequently named criteria
for adulthood are accepting responsibility for one’s self and making independent decisions. Future research should examine whether these have a desistance effect similar to that of financial independence. Furthermore, taking a closer look at the changing role of the parent-child relationship in desistance also seems warranted, given the findings in Chapter 3.

Longitudinal, quantitative data, as used in this thesis, is particularly well-suited to answer questions about the influence of structural changes in life circumstances on offending behaviour. However, determining the mechanisms behind the effects of these changes may be best approached using qualitative data. In many of the chapters I speculate that achieving adult roles and markers of independence leads to a decline in delinquency because they provide a link to conventional society, informal social control, an adult social status, or because they represent a cognitive shift. One way of determining whether this is indeed the case, is by collecting in-depth interview data from emerging adults. Similarly, the relationship between subjective aspects, such as identity development and attitude change, and delinquency desistance, can be examined using quantitative data, but would also benefit from a qualitative approach. This type of analysis could pick up on the role of individual agency in the desistance process, a key part of the cognitive transformation theory.

8.5 Conclusion
On the evidence of this thesis, we can conclude that for Dutch young people emerging adulthood is a period of being adult in some ways but not in others. For those still finding their way towards the stability, independence and responsibilities of adulthood, desisting from delinquency is not yet self-evident. Certain features of emerging adult life are a risk factor for delinquency during this period of the life course, particularly when these features indicate a lack of maturation, for example, comparing oneself to adolescents, engaging in extreme alcohol use, boomeranging out of adult roles, or relying on parents for financial help. In contrast, indications that adulthood has been achieved, be they having a steady girlfriend, progressing through education and into employment, or standing on one’s own two feet financially, are linked to another achievement typical of adulthood: desistance. This desistance, however, remains a work in progress. Whether the declines in delinquency I have found are carried forward or whether emerging adults are boomeranged back into delinquency is uncertain. What remains true is that as young people mature, becoming adult goes hand in hand with the emergence of desistance.