

Convict criminology

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Introduction

Convict criminology (CC) is a relatively new perspective in the fields of criminology and criminal justice. It provides an alternative to the way that crime and criminal justice problems are analyzed and interpreted by researchers, policy-makers, and politicians – many of whom have had minimal contact with jails, prisons, and convicts. As a result of its theoretical, methodological, and political aims it finds a natural home in the field of critical criminology.

Convict criminology started as a result of the frustrations that an informal group of ex-convict professors (and graduate students) felt when reading the academic literature on crime, corrections, and criminal justice. In their view, much of the published work on correctional facilities reflected the ideas of prison administrators, and largely ignored what convicts knew about the day-to-day realities of imprisonment. Many prison studies tended to approach the subject abstractly, or from secondary data sources, with little detail or differentiation among security levels, state or federal systems, or regional jurisdictions. When details were provided, for example on prison conditions or subculture within a prison, the data and sources were often outdated. Most studies were conducted without even entering the prison concerned or interviewing the prisoners. In response, these former prisoners, along with some allied critical criminologists, set out to carry out research that reflected a more hands-on analysis of prison reality.

The emerging field of CC consists primarily of essays, articles, and books written by critical criminologists, including convicts or ex-convict graduate students and professors. These convict criminologists critique or challenge existing precepts, policies, and practices, thus contributing new perspectives to the field of corrections in particular, and criminology in general.

What is a “convict criminologist”?

Some areas within the academic study of crime and corrections have changed little since the pre-twentieth-century contributions of Bentham, Beccaria, and Lombroso. These scholars of criminology’s “classical” period saw crime as pathological and failed to consider the social, political, and institutional contexts within which “criminal” behavior is defined.

Although many academic criminologists today are more circumspect, there is a tendency to identify with state-sponsored anti-crime agendas that target marginal populations for arrest, conviction, incarceration, re-arrest, and re-incarceration.

One result of the social pathology approach is punitive criminal justice policies that have given the United States easily the largest per capita prison population in the Western world. Today, approximately 2.2 million Americans are currently behind bars, with over 7 million under some form of correctional restraint or supervision. This breaks down to one in 31 American adults under criminal justice control. Such figures disproportionately impact minority populations: one in 27 Hispanics, one in 11 blacks. On current trends, one in three black males can expect to be imprisoned in their lifetime (Pew Center, 2009). By contrast, notwithstanding Edwin Sutherland's (1940) breakthrough research on white-collar crime, we know that crimes committed by corporate elites and governments still go largely unprosecuted and unpunished. Thus, identifying, explaining, and critiquing the effects of race and/or class-based inequalities on crime causation and law enforcement practices is of considerable interest to our group.

In general, a convict criminologist decides to join the group because he or she is interested in the way that criminal defendants and prisoners perceive and experience the criminal justice system. Members may be convicts, ex-convicts, or "non-convicts." Having a criminal record is not a precondition for CC membership. Although convict criminology was originally conceived primarily for "convicts or ex-convicts, on their way to completing or already in possession of a Ph.D." (Ross & Richards, 2003, p. 6), today the group also includes prison reform activists without these academic credentials who have decided to join because of their research interests, their publications, or their work in the community.

Convict criminologists' collective intention is to carry out research that incorporates the experiences of prisoners and prison workers, in an attempt to balance the conventional representations of media and governments. Without this countervailing approach, the production of knowledge will disproportionately reflect the views of criminal justice administrators against the perspectives of their clients. Unchallenged and unilateral ideological thinking undermines democratic principles and leads to misinformed policy-making. Although convict criminology recognizes that criminal justice systems are essential to healthy society, it also holds that excessively repressive law enforcement can compromise the welfare of individuals, families, communities, and ultimately the state as an independent arbiter of justice. Developing a broad, inclusive, and balanced knowledge base is thus vital if we are to have crime control strategies that are humane, fair, and effective.

Historical background

Historically, there have been a number of ex-convicts who have worked at universities in a variety of disciplines. Most have chosen to "stay in the closet" (i.e. remain silent about their criminal records), perhaps because their criminal histories were not relevant to their studies, or because they were afraid of negative reactions from colleagues or employers. One early exception was Frank Tannenbaum (1938), sometimes referred to as the "grandfather of labeling theory," a Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) organizer, political activist, former federal prisoner, professor at Columbia University in the 1930s, and one of the first to openly identify as an ex-convict. Although Tannenbaum only served one year in prison, he had a successful career, first as a journalist, then as a respected scholar.

Intellectually, the modern-day origins of CC began with the published work of John Irwin, notably his books *The Felon* (Irwin, 1970), *Prisons in Turmoil* (Irwin, 1980), *The Jail*

(Irwin, 1985), *It's about Time* (Austin & Irwin, 2001), *The Warehouse Prison* (Irwin, 2005), and *Lifers* (Irwin, 2009). Irwin served five years in prison for armed robbery in the 1950s. In the late 1960s, he was a student of David Matza and Erving Goffman (1961, 1963) as he worked on his Ph.D. at UC Berkeley. Still, even as he became a prominent prison ethnographer, and although many of his colleagues knew of his background, his ex-convict history was apparent only to the close reader of his texts. Nevertheless, Irwin was “out of the closet” so to speak, carrying out inside prison research but still nearly alone in his representation of the convict perspective.

On the heels of Irwin came Richard McCleary, who wrote *Dangerous Men* in 1978 (McCleary, 1978). This book came out of his experience and doctoral research, conducted when he was on parole from prison in Minnesota. McCleary, who served both state and federal time, went on to develop a well-respected career as a quantitative criminologist at the University of California-Irvine.

A decade later, an influential Canadian academic journal began that specialized in publishing the work of convict and ex-convict authors. In 1987, after attending the third International Conference on Penal Abolition held in Montreal, Canadian criminologists Robert Gaucher, Howard Davidson, and Liz Elliot were concerned about the lack of prisoner participation. As a partial response, they started the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) in 1988. A year later, joined by Brian D. MacLean, JPP brought out its first issue and by 2010 had published over 18 volumes featuring convict authors and other critical writers.

In spite of these developments, during the 1980s there were very few ex-convict professors apart from Irwin and McCleary, or scholarly publications such as JPP. Although the prison population grew significantly during the 1970s and 1980s, only a handful of ex-convicts completed Ph.D.s in sociology, criminology, or criminal justice. By the late 1980s, however, Irwin was aware of a growing number of convicts who were gaining advanced degrees while in prison or after they were released. At the 1989 American Society of Criminology (ASC) meetings in Reno, he spoke to New Zealand-based ex-convict professor Greg Newbold about the need for educated former prisoners to get together and start producing material that reflected their unique experience. Irwin talked about it regularly from that time forth.

In 1997, Chuck Terry (then a Ph.D. student at UC-Irvine) complained to his professor Joan Petersilia about “the failure of criminologists to recognize the dehumanizing conditions of the criminal justice system and the lives of those defined as criminal” (Terry, 2003a, p. 113). Petersilia suggested that Terry put together a session for the 1997 ASC conference. Terry invited ex-convict professors John Irwin, Stephen Richards, and Edward Tromanhauser, and Ph.D. student Alan Mobley to participate in a session entitled “Convicts Critique Criminology: The Last Seminar.” This was the first time a collection of ex-convict academics had appeared openly on the same panel at a national conference. The session drew a large audience including national media. That evening, over dinner, James Austin, John Irwin, Stephen Richards, and Chuck Terry discussed the importance and possibilities of ex-con professors working together to conduct “inside studies” of prisons and other criminological matters. This group and the scholarly work they produced eventually became known as “convict criminology.”

In the spring of 1998, Richards spoke with Jeffrey Ian Ross, a former prison worker currently with the University of Baltimore, about the possibility of editing a book using manuscripts produced by ex-con academics. Almost immediately, Ross and Richards sent out formal invitations to ex-convict professors and graduate students, and well-known critical authors of work on corrections. In short order, a proposal was written that would eventually result in the book, *Convict Criminology* (Ross & Richards, 2003).

In 1998, at the ASC's 50th annual meeting in Washington, DC, Richards, Terry, and another ex-con professor, Rick Jones, appeared on a panel honoring Richard Quinney, the famous critical criminologist. Meanwhile, the group used the conference as an opportunity to find and recruit additional ex-convict professors and graduate students. Dan Murphy and Rick Jones joined the group. The following year at the ASC meeting in Toronto, Stephen Richards organized the first official sessions entitled "Convict Criminology." The two sessions, "Convict Criminology: An Introduction to the Movement, Theory, and Research, Part I and Part II," included ex-convict professors Richards, Irwin, Tromanhauser, and Greg Newbold; ex-convict graduate students Terry, Murphy, Warren Gregory, Susan Dearing, and Nick Mitchell; and "non-con" colleagues Jeffrey Ian Ross, Bruce Arrigo, Bud Brown, Randy Sheldon, Preston Elrod, Mike Brooks, and Marianne Fisher-Giorlando. A number of the papers presented in these two sessions were early versions of chapters that were later published in *Convict Criminology*. From here, the activities of the group continued to expand, and by 2010 nearly 30 CC sessions had taken place at major criminology/criminal justice and sociology conferences.

It was Stephen Richards and Jeffrey Ian Ross who coined the term "convict criminology." In 2001, they published the article "The New School of Convict Criminology" in the journal *Social Justice*, discussing the birth and definition of CC and outlining the parameters of the movement and its research perspective (Richards & Ross, 2001). In 2003, they published *Convict Criminology*, which included chapters by the founding members of the group (Ross & Richards, 2003). The book's foreword was written by Todd Clear and the preface by John Irwin, and it contained eight chapters by ex-convict criminologists, and a number of "non-con" colleagues writing about jail and prison issues. For example, Barbara Owen, a leading feminist criminologist, contributed a chapter on women in prison. This was the first time ex-convict academics had appeared in a book together that included discussion of the authors' own criminal convictions, their time in prison, and their experiences in graduate school and as university professors. In 2008, an ASC Presidential Plenary Session on Convict Criminology was held, featuring Dave Curry, John Irwin, Stephen Richards, and Jeffrey Ian Ross. In 2009, Rick Jones, Jeffrey Ian Ross, Stephen Richards, and Daniel Murphy published the article "The First Dime: A Decade of Convict Criminology" in the *Prison Journal* (Jones, Ross, Richards, & Murphy, 2009).

In the tradition of Irwin and McCleary, ex-convict criminologists have added a number of significant ethnographically informed studies to the literature. Charles Terry, a former California and Oregon state convict, wrote about heroin addicts in *The Fellas* (Terry, 2003b). Greg Newbold wrote the New Zealand bestseller *The Big Huey* about his five years inside (Newbold, 1982), followed by *Punishment and Politics* (Newbold, 1989), *Crime and Deviance* (Newbold, 1992), *Crime in New Zealand* (Newbold, 2000), *The Girls in the Gang* (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001), and *The Problem of Prisons* (Newbold, 2007), all of which have analyzed crime and corrections in his country. Stephen C. Richards and Richard S. Jones, both former prisoners, used "inside experience" to inform their studies of prisoners returning home (Richards & Jones, 1997, 2004). Finally, Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards co-authored *Behind Bars* (Ross & Richards, 2002) and *Beyond Bars* (Ross & Richards, 2009), and co-edited *Convict Criminology* (Ross & Richards, 2003).

Convict criminologists in 2010

The CC group today is informally organized as a voluntary writing and activist collective. There is no formal membership or assignment of leadership roles. Different members inspire

or take responsibility for assorted functions, for example lead author on academic articles, research proposals, or program assessments, or mentoring students and junior faculty, or taking responsibility for speaking to the media. The group continues to grow as more prisoners exit prison to attend universities, hear about the group, and decide to contribute to activities. Typically, new members consider “coming out” when they are introduced to the academic community at ASC or Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences (ACJS) conferences.

Today, the former prisoners of the CC group can be roughly divided into four categories. The first consists of the more senior members, all associate or full professors, some of whom have distinguished research records. The second group consists of recent Ph.D. recipients who have recently entered the profession or are still looking for jobs. This group is just beginning to contribute to the research field. Within the third group are graduate student ex-convicts, some still in prison but nonetheless anticipating academic careers. The third group consists of men and women behind bars who already hold advanced degrees and publish academic work about crime and corrections. A number have sole- or co-authored books, have written articles alone or with “free world” academics, and are better published than many professors. A fourth group includes former prisoners working for community organizations while participating in CC research and publication.

In 2010, the CC group included men and women ex-con academics from Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The United States, with the largest prison population in the Western world, continues to contribute the most members.

Comparing the “convict perspective” and the “convict criminology perspective”

Historically, convict authors have written many highly respected books about prison, and composed a vast number of short pieces for periodicals and newspapers. This work has served to illuminate prison conditions for both academics and the public. In addition, about the time that *Convict Criminology* first appeared, several book publishers began accepting manuscripts written by prisoners alone or assisted by established academics (e.g. Carceral, Bernard, Alarid, Bikle, & Bikle, 2004; Johnson & Toch, 2000). These works usually included academic editors writing companion pieces, at least a preface or a foreword that linked the prisoners’ writing to relevant research.

But being a writer in prison does not make him or her a convict criminologist; the “convict perspective” and the “convict criminology perspective” are two separate entities. Although most convict authors in prison understand their immediate environment, they may have little or only dated knowledge of the “free world,” and limited access to academic research material. Thus, they may have difficulty tying their writing to extant academic literature. As prisoners, they are confined by both space and time and may know about prison conditions in only a few institutions. This means that they may have knowledge of only one prison system (national, federal, or state), or one security level (low, medium, high). They may also be unable to comprehend how their own incarceration will impact upon them over time or after their release.

By comparison, the convict criminologist perspective provides a more eclectic view of how the penal apparatus impacts society. Although the experiential foundation remains, the writing incorporates empirical research as well as the informed observations of “non-cons” who may have conducted research inside many penal institutions and studied the prison

literature for years. Incorporating a range of perspectives enables the convict criminologist to better understand discrete phenomena as part of a larger overall picture.

Activities of the CC group

The CC group mentors students, organizes sessions at conferences, collaborates on research projects, co-authors articles and monographs, helps organize and support numerous groups and activities related to criminal justice reform, and provides consulting services and organizes workshops for criminal defense attorneys, correctional organizations, and universities. For example, some members of the group have worked on major prison research projects in California, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, and Ohio. In New Zealand, Greg Newbold has served 13 government policy agencies either as a consultant or as a bona fide member and is frequently called as an expert witness in criminal trials. Collectively, the group has published books, journal articles, and book chapters using “autoethnographic” or “insider” perspectives. Private foundations, including the Soros Foundation Open Society Institute, have supported some of the CC activities, including conference presentations and research. Individuals may serve as consultants or leadership for community groups working on prison issues or legislation.

Some local and national media are interested in how convicts become professors and in their insider expertise, and frequently interview group members. As this is a powerful way of dispelling popular myths about crime, criminals, and the criminal justice system, it is important that convict criminologists become “media savvy” and learn how to answer questions in a clear, direct, informed, and concise way. The media love “good talent,” and journalists will continually return to interviewees who provide them with useful copy. Media stories about the group have appeared in print in many countries.

Most CC members mentor students with criminal records at their respective universities. In doing so, they assist these individuals with the difficult task of adjusting to the effect that a criminal past may have on their hopes for academic programs and careers. Assistance may include parole board appearances, academic advising, emotional support, and or preparation for employment or admission to graduate programs. Many group members also act as role models or advisors for convicts doing time or ex-convicts who might be thinking about attending university. This mentoring of convicts is one of the convict criminologist’s most important roles. In a country like the United States, where more than 500,000 men and women are released from prison every year, there is a large potential population of former prisoners attending universities.

As a consequence of this work, CC is now being taught in universities as well as in some prisons, providing a perspective that may be used as part or all of a course, or simply integrated throughout. In Wisconsin, a program called “Inviting Convicts to College” has been in place since 2004, training pairs of undergraduate intern instructors to go inside prisons to teach a free college program entitled “Convict Criminology.” The course uses the book *Convict Criminology*, donated by the publisher, to inspire the prisoners. Classes are taught for two hours a week, for 14 weeks, and are supervised by ex-convict professors. Prisoners exiting prison use the course as a bridge to entering college, with the final weeks including instruction on completing university admission and financial aid forms. The prisoners soon learn that admission to college and financial aid grants and loans can be a viable parole plan. The program has already helped a number of prisoners to enter universities, where they receive ongoing advice and mentoring from members of the CC group.

Theoretical work carried out by convict criminologists

Although not explicitly theoretical, the papers, articles, and books subsumed under the convict criminology rubric are typically wedded to phenomenological theory (i.e. to the study of human experience and consciousness). Thus, ethnography, particularly autoethnography, is a dominant feature of the CC research method. One of the common criticisms of ethnography, however, is that the objectivity of the researcher, either as a participant-observer or as a witness to a subject, can be compromised through personal bias. In the case of prison research, former convicts are often accused of losing their objectivity by engaging in emotive rants against the correctional enterprise. It is argued that true impartiality can best be achieved by remaining aloof from the subject. Convict criminologists respond by noting that such “objectivity” comes with important consequences, such as a diminished ability to contextualize observations and experiences. To mitigate the ranting on the one hand, and the distancing on the other, therefore, the founders of convict criminology have hoped that possession of advanced training to Ph.D. level will minimize the potential for regression into polemic and permit the production of a truer ethnographic picture.

Ethnographic methodologies: insider perspectives

Convict criminology continues to grow as numerous articles and books based on its perspective are added to the literature and discussed in textbooks. The CC group emphasizes the use of direct observation and “real-life” experience in understanding the various processes, procedures, and institutional settings that comprise the criminal justice system. The methodology includes correspondence with prisoners, face-to-face interviews, retrospective interpretation of experiences, and direct observation inside correctional facilities. The group is especially skilled in gaining entry to prisons, writing research questions, composing interview questionnaires in language that convicts can understand, and analyzing prison records and statistics.

Convict criminology specializes in “on-site” ethnographic research in which a researcher’s previous experience with imprisonment informs his or her work. Through familiarity with the carceral environment, investigators are comfortable interviewing in penitentiary cell blocks, in community penal facilities, or on street corners, using a methodology that may include a combination of survey instruments, structured interviews, informal observation, and casual conversation. As former prisoners, convict criminologists know the “walk” and “talk” of the prisoners, how to gain the confidence of men and women who live inside, and how to interpret what they say. They also know prison rules and regulations and require less prison staff time for orientation and supervision. As a result, they have earned a reputation for collecting interesting, useful, and sometimes controversial data.

Critiques of language

The group is deliberately careful about the type of terminology it uses, recognizing the powerful effect of rhetoric on our perceptions of people and situations (Richards, 1998, 2009). Official terms such as “correction” (imprisonment), “adjustment” (segregation), “behavior management” (solitary confinement), and “control and restraint” (bashing/gassing/electrocuting/handcuffing) are a way that prison administrators sanitize some of the less savory functions they perform. Convict criminologists are conscious of this and try not to use misleading euphemisms in their writing.

Conversely, there is also a lexicon of negative popular terminology of which we are equally aware. Referring to someone as a “robber,” a “burglar,” a “murderer,” or a “rapist,” for example, often conjures up misleading stereotypical images created by sensationalistic fiction. The world is not easily dichotomized into “bad guys” and “good guys” as some television cop shows or action movies might imply. In the real world, people who work or have lived with felons are often surprised at the reserve, sensitivity, gentility, and good humor of people who may have been convicted in the past of serious crimes. Working on the principle that a person is more than the worst thing they ever did, convict criminologists try to avoid referring to people in terms of the crime they were convicted of, as if this were their master status. Rather, if we do allude to a person’s criminal conviction, it is usually in terms of the act itself, rather than as a component of identity. In prison, convict criminologists learned that it takes time to get to know someone, and that a crime may indicate little about a person’s core character and values.

Convict criminology policy recommendations

In terms of policy initiatives, CC has two general orientations. First, we wish to see a cessation of what Jim Austin and John Irwin have called the “imprisonment binge” in America, which began in the 1980s and has caused the national jail and prison population to more than double since 1990 (Austin & Irwin, 2001). The result has seen millions of citizens incarcerated, with immense cost to taxpayers in terms of prison construction, operation, and maintenance, overcrowded courts, overworked parole and probation authorities, and overburdened welfare/social service agencies to which befalls the task of supporting fatherless families.

The reasons for the hike in prison numbers are well known and have little to do with crime rates. At the base of the problem are certain elements within the mass media that tend to exaggerate and sensationalize crime in the quest of increasing their market share of reader- or viewership. Citizens startled by the specter of a “crime wave” encourage politicians to outbid their opponents for votes, and attempt to allay public fears by promising to lock criminals up for long periods of time. Draconian enforcement and sentencing laws (e.g. “broken windows” and “three strikes”) have caused hundreds of thousands of petty offenders to receive prison sentences disproportionate to their crimes.

These laws have been complemented by the imposition of long parole periods after release, with strict conditions, rigorous monitoring, and hair-trigger violation components. By these mechanisms, released prisoners may be summarily returned to prison for breaking rules of supervision as trivial as having a beer or living at an unapproved address. The jails and prisons of the nation are increasingly being filled up with petty violators of this type, who, after years of crime-free liberty, can suddenly lose their jobs, marriages, and homes because of an unexpected visit from a gung-ho parole officer. Living with the Sword of Damocles held so precariously over their heads adds markedly to the stressful lives of parolees and decreases their ability to “make it” in the community.

The second orientation of the CC group concerns jail and prison conditions. Partially as a result of burgeoning correctional populations, rising incarceration costs, crowded institutions, and a thinning of resources, prison conditions have deteriorated. Budgets have tightened and many prison programs have disappeared. In addition, a paper written by Robert Martinson (1974), which argued that “nothing works” in prison reform, added weight to arguments that spending money on programs is a waste of time. This encouraged many American jurisdictions, already struggling under the weight of heavy population

increases, to abandon programs and invest instead in security. Thus, many prisons became warehouses (Irwin, 2005) for felons, where criminals are essentially kept in cold storage until they are paroled or their sentences expire. Unprepared for life in the real world after years of stagnation in the artificial environment of the prison, it is little wonder that so many are unable to survive upon release and end up back inside.

These kinds of critical issue are grist to the mill of the convict criminologist. They are committed to understanding and attempting to remedy the processes, which have given the “Land of the Free” the largest and fastest-growing prison population in the history of the Western world. And within the context of the prison itself, they share a determination to expose and address a carceral environment that, ostensibly created to rehabilitate prisoners, in fact produces social and economic cripples whose chances of return to a felonious lifestyle are enhanced.

Thus, in pursuit of the first objective, the CC group advocates dramatic reductions in the national prison population through attenuating the list of crimes that people are sent to prison for, a review of sentence lengths, and an examination of the parole system. We argue for imprisonment only as a last resort for serious crimes, a cut in overall sentence length, and restrictions on the power of parole boards to arbitrarily revoke parole for petty violations.

In pursuit of the second objective, convict criminologists support the closing of large-scale penitentiaries and reformatories where prisoners are warehoused in massive cell blocks. Over many decades, the design and operation of these “big house” prisons has dehumanized inmates and resulted in high levels of intimidation, serious assault, and sexual predation. As is the case in many other advanced industrialized countries, a reduced prison population housed in smaller institutions could be accomplished by constructing or redesigning prison units with single cells or rooms. In small correctional facilities where prisoners are held in single-celled units of no more than 60, maintaining control and security is easier and the incidence of sexual predation is close to zero. A number of European countries follow a similar model.

In addition to the above, we need to listen carefully to prisoner complaints about bad food, shabby uniforms, ineffective room temperature control, inadequate vocational and education programs, and institutional violence. The list grows longer when we take a careful look at how these conditions contribute to prisoners being poorly prepared to re-enter the community and the large number that return to prison.

Rehabilitative, vocational, and educational programs that dissolved after the population boom began in the 1980s need to be reactivated. Prisoners should be provided with opportunities for better paid institutional employment, advanced vocational training, higher education, and family skills development. Although it is true that most institutions have “token” programs that serve a small number of prisoners – for example a prison may have paid jobs for 20 percent of its prisoners, low-tech training, Adult Basic Education (8th grade), General Education Development (12th grade), and occasional classes or informal groups in a variety of life skills or therapies – the great problem is that these services are limited in scope and availability.

Another matter that concerns convict criminologist is voting rights. The United States is one of the few advanced industrial countries that denies most prisoners and felons voting rights. We suggest that, if men and women incarcerated in prison could vote, many of the recommendations we advocate would become policy because the politicians would be forced to campaign for convict and felon votes. State and federal governments will only notice the conditions in our correctional facilities when prisoners and felons become voters. We would not expect prisoners to be any less interested than free persons in exercising their

right to vote. To the contrary, if polling booths were installed in jails and prisons, we think the voter turnout would be higher than in most outside communities.

To prevent relapses into criminal offenses caused by desperation, we advocate that prisoners released from prison should have enough “gate money” to allow them to pay for up to three months’ rent and food. They could earn some of this money working in prison industries, with the balance provided by the state. All persons exiting correctional institutions should have clothing suitable for the climate and applying for employment, eye glasses (if needed), and identification (social security card, state ID or driver’s license, and a copy of their institutional medical records).

Finally, perhaps our most controversial policy recommendation is that of eliminating the “snitch” system in prison. The snitch system is used by “guards” to supplement their surveillance of convicts. It is used to control prisoners by turning them against each other, and contributes to institutional violence. If our recommendations for a smaller population, housed in single cells, with better food and clothing, voting rights, and well-funded institutional programming, were implemented, the snitch system would become redundant. Small units are easier to manage than large populous ones and the demoralizing and dangerous cooptation of snitch inmates to assist in operational functions becomes unnecessary.

Ongoing activities

In our recent self-assessment of the first ten years of CC (see Jones et al., 2009; also <http://www.convictcriminology.org>) we found a broad range of books and articles written by convict criminologists that provide new insights into how criminal justice systems impact individuals, families, and communities. Our research shows how criminal justice systems utilize their capacity for arbitrary rule-making to create “perpetual incarceration machines” (Richards & Jones, 1997, 2004) through revoking parole for activity unrelated to criminal conduct. We are mentoring a new generation of ex-convict academics by developing new educational programs within prisons. Our work helps other academics and activists to recognize and reduce the harms caused by misuse of the criminal justice system. In particular, we are interested in research on the devastating impacts of mass incarceration on communities (Clear, 2007), and in the development of more effective ways of dealing with the crime problem (Lengyel & Brown, 2009; Lengyel, 2006).

But criminal justice is not our only focus. Our group has expanded on its expertise to research and publish on medical marijuana and its potential for treatment of alcoholics (Lenza, 2007), white-collar crime (Newbold & Ivory, 1993), organized crime (Newbold, 1998), gun control (Newbold, 1999), women in gangs (Dennehy & Newbold, 2001), gender differentiation in court sentencing (Jeffries, Fletcher, & Newbold, 2003), policing and gender (Winfrey, Butler, & Newbold, 2003), policing domestic violence (Cross & Newbold, 2010), research ethics (Lenza, 2004), and the death penalty (Lenza, Keys, & Guess, 2005; Newbold, 1990).

Conclusion

Since the conception of the CC group over a decade ago, there has been a steady increase in the number of ex-con academics willing to step forward and become a part of it. In doing so they show a willingness to challenge the taken-for-granted, and offer fresh insights into some of the oldest questions in sociology and criminology/criminal justice. At a personal level, the group provides mutual support for graduate students or junior faculty who decide

to “come out” and share their first-hand experiences with the criminal justice system. As the group grows and these accounts accumulate, a more complete and relatively current picture of modern prison is beginning to emerge (see Jones & Schmid, 2000; Ross & Richards, 2002, 2009; Terry, 2003b; Irwin, 2005, 2009; Newbold, 2007). Members of the group are able to write with authority about what they observed or experienced in prisons located in different states and different countries.

The CC literature is now being cited regularly in textbooks and academic journals, as appreciation for experience-driven or “autoethnographic” research grows. The “New School of Convict Criminology” (Ross & Richards, 2003, pp. 1–14) assists critical scholars of the prison to cast light on the inner recesses of the criminal justice machine, illuminating mechanisms whose only real function seems to be the confinement of millions of men and women in cages. The CC collective thus encourages the exploration of alternative explanations and remedies to the crime problem, which emanate from different perspectives drawn from the extraordinary experiences of its membership.

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Convict Criminologists, be thinking about papers, Roundtables, and thematic panels for 2019 American Society of Criminology Meeting. Abstracts, thematic panels due March 8th. Call for papers is up! LINK: https://www.asc41.com/Annual_Meeting/2019/2019meeting.html. See all. See more.