

Convict Criminology: Learning from the Past, Confronting the Present, Expanding for the Future

Abstract

As the machine of mass-incarceration continues down its destructive path, ever-increasing numbers of formerly incarcerated citizens have been released back into society. Convict Criminology (CC) was created out of the societal chaos produced by these events. This article presents an ever-expanding CC perspective—over two decades since its founding. The article begins with a journey into the field’s dynamic past, and then examines the present, delineating examples of the multiple pathways individuals have taken to align with the spirit and goals of CC. Next, this article addresses claims regarding the lack of diversity in CC and explains how a heterogeneous membership currently exists within the group. The article’s final sections undertake further development of a theoretical model of CC, discuss current ideological debates within CC, and demonstrate how the field has grown. The article concludes by summarizing the benefits of CC to ex-convicts, society and criminology, and then outlines tasks that need to be addressed in the future.

A Brief Introduction and History of Convict Criminology

As the substantive and collateral damage from mass-incarceration continue in the United States, Convict Criminology (CC), as a group, grows and evolves to meet the ever-present need for the incarcerated/formerly-incarcerated (FI) voice within criminological scholarship. From the turbulence and violence of the “War on Drugs” in the 1980s and 1990s, to the politically chaotic (and in some ways, socially regressive) present, this article examines how CC has continued to conduct relevant research, mentor FI scholars, and advocate for progressive justice reform for the justice-impacted and society. This article charts the history and growth of CC, tells the story of early trailblazers, such as Frank Tannenbaum and John Irwin, and presents the creation and founding concepts of the group. The final sections chart CC’s shift into the twenty-first

century through multiple pathways and diversity, and discuss theoretical development and future research goals.

Frank Tannenbaum and John Irwin

In many ways, CC existed prior to the formal assembling of the group in the late 1990s. Before CC was recognized as a group and academic perspective, there were FI individuals who made substantial contributions to the study of criminology. One of the earliest individuals to function as a FI convict criminologist was Frank Tannenbaum, who was active in the early twentieth century in the United States. In Tannenbaum's era, the formal discipline of CC did not exist in name as of yet, but his life experiences, devotion to social justice issues, and academic work align well with the practices of the modern discipline of CC (Richards 2013). Yeager (2011), in his recent book on the life of Tannenbaum, explains that he, Tannenbaum, spent a year in prison for unlawful organizing of a labor rally. As Richards (2013) explains, Tannenbaum wrote numerous papers based on his stay in prison, and later published a popular criminological textbook, *Crime and the Community* (Tannenbaum 1937).

Another early FI criminologist who became a founding member of the CC group was the late John Irwin, who passed away in 2010. Irwin was a Professor of Sociology and Criminology for over a quarter of a century at San Francisco State University and is probably the most widely known convict criminologist. Irwin was a prolific writer, authoring multiple books, including: *The Felon* (1970), *Prisons In Turmoil* (1980), *The Jail* (1985), *It's About Time* (1994, with James Austin), *The Warehouse Prison* (2005), and *Lifers* (2009), along with a personal memoir that was unfinished at the time of his passing. In addition to such books, Irwin wrote numerous articles and magazine pieces.

And as a FI academic, he was a tireless advocate for the rights of the people both within prison, and ex-convicts within society.

Irwin used his connections, social capital, and resources as a well-established and highly regarded academic to assist in the establishment of CC in the late 1990s. Irwin also served as a mentor and steadfast supporter of several other founding members of the group. While I never had the opportunity to meet Professor Irwin, I own the majority of his books, which are standard reference material for CC research and literature. I harbor a great respect for his legacy—one that helped pave the way and demonstrate for current junior members of the group that ex-convicts can use higher education to become productive pro-social academics.

Formation of the Convict Criminology Group

Criminal justice policy and practice in the late twentieth century took a more punitive turn, with the emergence of the “War on Drugs” and the “tough on crime” movements. These initiatives were implemented nationwide at both the state and federal levels. While their impact was felt throughout American society, they had a particularly pernicious effect on disadvantaged and marginalized groups. As Clear (2007, p. 5) explains, “The growth in imprisonment has been concentrated among poor, minority males who live in impoverished neighborhoods.” Thus, families were destroyed and entire neighborhoods devastated by the millions of American citizens suddenly thrown behind bars because of draconian legislation and criminal justice practices that mandated their long-term incarceration.

In 1997, out of the chaos and social upheaval of this environment, a group of FI students and scholars of criminology, criminal justice, and political science (“con

members” of CC), convened with several scholars/academics who, although not FI (“non-con members” of CC), had first-hand experience about the socially destructive and oppressive impacts of mass incarceration (Richards 2013). The impetus for meeting and forming a group of self-proclaimed “convict criminologists” came from the vexation and anger that convicts and ex-convicts experienced when prison administrators, politicians and society, more generally, ignored their voices, experiential wisdom, and concerns. CC members, who are FI, have experienced directly the system of oppression, structural bias, and discrimination which prisoners and ex-convicts endure in the United States every day. During their arduous journeys from prison to professors, early CC scholars discovered that academia and the institutions of higher education could serve as powerful and legitimate conduits through which to deliver their knowledge and voices to society, while, at the same time, still encountering their own forms of institutional bias/discriminatory practices.

Convict Criminology establishes itself as an academic perspective

CC held its first session at the American Society of Criminology (ASC) in 1997, and members began writing scholarly books and submitting articles for peer review in criminological, criminal justice, and social science journals. In 2001, Stephen C. Richards and Jeffrey Ian Ross wrote one of the initial definitive articles of CC, *Introducing the New School of Convict Criminology*, which announced to the academic world our new approach. Shortly thereafter, the first book was written, *Convict Criminology* (Ross and Richard 2003), which compiled the writings of several of the early members and contributors within the CC group. Within academic circles, CC was now becoming established. Multiple, well-received sessions at ASC’s annual meetings and ongoing

publications in reputable peer-reviewed journals granted CC further legitimacy. Contemporaneously, ex-convicts, identifying themselves with CC, were becoming undergraduate students, graduate students, researchers, and professors in criminology, criminal justice, and sociology departments in universities across the United States and in Europe.

Convict Criminology in the 21st Century

As CC moves into the twenty-first century, the substance and scope of its inquiry continues to develop. Mass incarceration has not abated and the prison industrial complex continues to create an entire conglomerate of corporations built around supporting the world's largest prison system (Kaeble and Cowhig 2018)—an industry that is notorious for being poorly run and managed, and dangerous for both incarcerated citizens and staff (Hallett 2006). In addition, the U.S. has sustained its losing “War on Drugs,” which has furthered the methamphetamine (Brisman 2006, Linnemann 2016, Reding 2010) and opiate epidemics (Macy 2018), filling jails and prisons to the breaking point with hundreds of thousands of substance addicted citizens, while creating stronger illicit drug markets for foreign and domestic drug traffickers (Lessing 2017). Historically oppressed minorities account for a disproportionate percentage of the jail and prison population, and most of the citizens incarcerated by the “War on Drugs” continue to originate from positions of economic disadvantage. At the same time, the profit-driven private prison industry, alluded to above, is experiencing a boom under the repressive immigration and criminal justice policies being perpetrated by the current presidential administration in Washington, D.C.

With the development of the ever-increasing numbers of U.S. citizens cycling through the world's largest criminal justice system, more and more people are being released back to the streets who are interested in improving their life chances and opportunities through higher education. Many such people are finding their way to CC.

Examples of Pathways to Convict Criminology

Individuals who identify as “convict criminologists” are often categorized as either “cons” (those with a felony conviction) or “non-cons” (those without a criminal record but who support the goals of CC and produce work in this vein). In what follows, I describe the different routes that individuals may take to CC, beginning with ‘cons’ and then focus on ‘non-cons.’”

i.) Detour route

A common narrative for many members of the CC family is the action of being derailed by crime and deviance. From youth, such women and men were often astute, curious, intellectually stimulated students. Though some performed very well academically in their formative years, not all these students received top marks in their studies in school (including elementary, high school, and college). Yet, all of these individuals possessed the ability to learn, a thirst for knowledge, and, when motivated, were quite capable of high accomplishment in academic spheres. A common thread in this group is the individual's involvement in deviant behavior and crime, leading to a criminal conviction, and often a period of incarceration (although not always). Although each individual experiences prison differently, for many (eventual) convict criminologists, prison provided time for introspection and a reconnection to and/or rekindling of their interest in

learning and education. Some would take college classes while in prison; others would commence or continue their formal education after they were released from prison. Thus, we can conceptualize these individuals as those whose intellectual paths were “detoured” or “derailed” by involvement in crime, followed by a period of punishment, and subsequently a return to education and learning.

ii.) Force of nature route

For some, the path to CC involves overcoming some sort of hardship. As I explained in an earlier work (Tietjen 2013: 80), some convict criminologists “come[] from lower socio-economic status and espouse[] street culture or working-class mannerisms that make it more difficult to navigate the middle-class social interactions expected in the academy, and have limited access to positive and/or influential social and human capital.” In other words, such individuals are united in that they all encountered and overcame, *inter alia*, abuse, severe economic disadvantage, or socially marginalized/devalued cultural capital on their way to academic achievement. Determining why some individuals encounter success while others do not warrants further research. One explanation is that some already possessed middle-class privilege and the cultural and social capital needed to negotiate formal education beyond the secondary school level. Kravetz and Feldman (2014) identify a similar phenomenon whereby specific individuals who survive extreme life experiences subsequently achieve exceptional levels of success. Such individuals recognize what is not within their power to change, and instead of giving up, accept the help of supportive others, and restructure their goals to forge another path to pro-social involvement with society. Thus, the defining feature of this group is the extent to which its individuals feel agency with respect to circumstances that

lead to engagement and desistance from crime. While there may be some disagreement as to the extent to which such individuals feel they were “compelled,” or “forced” or “pulled/pushed” into crime, many of these convict criminologists attempt to change societal perceptions and increase political/civil rights of the FI, and to bring about further social equality and a more equitable justice system.

iii.) Non-con

Many of the most diligent and productive CC members do not have a felony conviction, yet share a dedicated interest in the group due to various life experiences, such as being a family member of an incarcerated individual or working in a correctional facility. Within criminology (and the social sciences, more generally), so-called “insider perspectives” are often valued more than “outsider perspectives.” If one were to assume such an either/or binary approach to CC, this would mean that the contributions of “cons” would be privileged over those of “non-cons”—somewhat of a reversal of the way in which society often treats those with criminal records. Unsurprisingly, CC challenges the criminological academy to reconsider how they conceptualize this inside-outside dichotomy. As Arresti and Darke (2016: 543) explain, “the ex-con versus non-con dichotomy is problematic and exclusionary, . . . it is more fruitful to conceptualize experience, or more specifically ‘access to one’s experience’ be it your own, or someone else’s, on a continuum, and as a matter of degree.”

While I return to issues surrounding the “insider” and “outsider” perspectives below, what is important, for present purposes, is that the non-con perspective within CC has been a vital part of our organization since its inception and will continue to be so. Non-cons’ experiences interacting with the criminal justice system place a spotlight on

relevant issues that might otherwise be left unexplored, such as “How are families impacted by imprisoned family members?,” “What are the problems within the felony probation system?” or “What are effective ways for drug counselors to provide care for prisoners?”

Essentially, CC is comprised of a diverse group of scholars who have followed many roads to reach our group, and we have arrived here while maneuvering through drastically shifting criminal justice policies. Through the many pathways to our field, we have become aware of constant struggles with institutional discrimination and prejudices against FI citizens that exist within society, in general, and within the academy.

Assessing the Past/Planning for the Future

In the six years since Stephen C. Richards’ 2013 article, “The New School of Convict Criminology Thrives and Matures,” the social and political climate in the U.S. has changed. CC has evolved, and expanded in relation to national and global events, and this article now turns to a discussion of these developments.

In 2014, CC was mentioned by then-President Joanne Belknap in her Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology (ASC) in the context of concerns about inclusivity with respect to class, gender and race. Belknap’s address—later published as an article in *Criminology* (2015)—pointed to a lack of visible diversity within CC, citing many prominent publications written primarily by FI white men and non-FI white women. While Belknap’s overall points about activism and advocacy within criminology—and her attention to issues of diversity and inclusivity—were well-intended, her comments did not reflect a comprehensive understanding of the

group dynamics of CC. A subsequent response from Ross and colleagues (2016) clarified that there was, in-fact, diverse membership within the group, and that such representation had been increasing over time. In addition, Ross and colleagues (2016) noted that many members of CC who identify as members of ethnic or racial minorities (or other historically-oppressed groups) were fearful of revealing their FI status, and consequently, did not discuss this in their research and maintained a low profile in regards to publicly identifying as FI.

While the old adage that any publicity is good publicity may be apropos and while convict criminologists were pleased that CC had entered mainstream criminological vernacular, the absence of a more elaborate explanation of CC goals and interests created an opportunity to respond to Belknap's address and to elucidate more fully the serious limitations imposed by multiple forms bias that many group members face every day. In a 2016 special edition of this journal ("Critical Criminology as Academic Activism: On Praxis and Pedagogy, Resistance and Revolution," Volume 24, Issue 1), convict criminologists offered articles that illuminated the struggles of the many less known but active members of CC, who have struggled with multiple marginalized and oppressed identities, while also carrying a past felony conviction (e.g., Arresti and Darke 2016; Ross et al. 2016). Arresti and Darke (2016) introduced the recent development of a British Convict Criminology (BCC)¹ and also described many very active and supportive non-FI members, whom they referred to as "non-con academics." As Arresti and Darke (2016) explained, such non-FI scholars have been involved heavily with advocacy and work closely with FI scholars, FI citizens (both in CC and BCC), and prisoners. Through

¹ BCC was founded in 2012, and similar to CC in America, is comprised of both ex-convict academics, and non-con academics.

accumulated experience, non-FI scholars have developed a profound understanding of the carceral environment and its impact on those who have been residents therein. Ross and colleagues (2016) described the struggles of FI members of CC, many of whom have multiple historically oppressed and stigmatized identities. While the negative social stigma surrounding a felony conviction is significant for anyone, it is significantly greater for historically oppressed minorities, LGBT+ people, and women (see Ball, this issue; Henne and Troshynski, this issue; Musto, this issue). Many FI members cannot reveal their backgrounds without fear of damage to their careers and/or bias from the very institutions that employ them. Consequently, they have kept their FI identities private. While discrimination on the basis of gender, race or sex is prohibited, a past felony conviction carries no such legal protections, and bias, discrimination and prejudice against such individuals is often permitted and even encouraged. This environment problematizes the “coming out” process for the FI, who fear—and rightfully so—that such an action will endanger their career and life course success within academia. In the process of attempting to navigate the halls of academic graduate programs, academic job searches, and academic departments, the ex-convict academic must balance the risk of supporting the cause of social injustices against FI people by openly self-identifying as such, while at the same time, endeavoring to manage the massive professional responsibilities expected of the successful academic. Thus, many people with an affinity for CC choose to not to disclose their identities within their professional environments, despite their active involvement with CC group activities, assisting with mentorship of new convict criminologists, collaborating on research with other convict criminologists, and taking part in CC social justice advocacy.

Women and Minorities in Convict Criminology

Both men and women identify as convict criminologists and the number of women involved with CC continues to grow. While there are established “second generation” female convict criminologists² who have disclosed their identity as an ex-con to the professional and general public, early on, many women chose not to reveal their ex-convict status to the public, despite their engagement with CC. To some extent, this has been true of the “third generation” of female convict criminologists. Most of these women members are still working their way through graduate schools and attempting to enter the academic/research job markets, and are fearful of the consequences many of the senior members of CC have faced, such as rejection for faculty positions, attempted denial of tenure/promotion, and public shaming by hostile colleagues (Ross and Richards 2003, Richards 2013).

Despite the public reticence on the part of female convict criminologists about their involvement with CC and their status as ex-con, these female convict criminologists have been responsible for a large proportion of CC scholarship, mentorship, and advocacy. In addition, many women have been organizing their own panels and roundtables at annual ASC conferences on issues peculiar to female convict criminologists. These have been some of the most well-attended and heavily supported CC events within such meetings. For example, Ross and colleagues (2016), in an examination of the gender of participants in CC panels at the annual ASC meeting from 1999 to 2015, point out that women have been the fastest growing subset of convict

² In this article, I refer to the first group of founding CC members as “first generation,” while the “second generation,” of which I am a member, was mentored by the “first generation.” The first-generation group (many of which are now retired) and second-generation group are now mentoring a third generation of CC people, many of whom are still progressing through graduate school. Richards, in his 2013 article on the state of CC, referred to these generations as “cohorts.”

criminologists, increasing from 9.6% over the period of 1999-2004 to 27.4% during the years 2005-2010 to 33.3% in 2011-2015.

Members of minority groups with criminal convictions must often confront both structural barriers and the stigma of having a record. Whereas white men from middle class backgrounds are sometimes able to use their cultural and social capital to negotiate undergraduate and graduate study, and to receive academic posts, despite their pasts, members of minority groups often find this to be more challenging. While members of minority groups have been involved with CC since its emergence in the late 1990s, their numbers have been small, due, in part, to race-based institutional discrimination and bias present within society at large. Overcoming the inequalities and injustices of racialized society has been the focus of much CC action and research (Richards et al. 2008; Richards 2013; Ross et al. 2016; Ross and Richards 2003), and minority representation and presence has been increasing. Looking at CC session participant demographics from 1999 to 2015, Ross and colleagues explain that minority participation in CC sessions at the annual ASC meeting has increased from 1.8% in 1999-2004 to 8.8% during the years 2010 to 2015.

Furthering the Establishment of a Formal Convict Criminology Theory

Multiple papers within the last several years have grappled with establishing a theoretical model for CC (Larsen and Piche´ 2012, Jones et al. 2014, Richards 2013). Richards (2013) points out that CC “is a theoretical perspective that uses direct observation, face-to-face interviews, autoethnography, and retrospective analysis to penetrate the reality of distant social worlds.” Over the last twenty years, CC scholars

have engaged in qualitative research and theoretical writing (Malkin 2016; Sheridan and Richards 2014; Tietjen 2013), as well as quantitative analysis (Horowitz and Uggem 2018; Tietjen et al. 2018a; Yeager 2004). Yet, a vital question that underlies the development of a CC theory is essentially: what is CC? Are we forging a unique criminological perspective that supports desistance from crime through higher education and/or shifts in criminal justice policy towards progressive reform? Does the prison centered and FI perspective of CC illuminate areas of the justice system that would otherwise be unrecognized/ignored, or are we simply a large group of FI criminologists and allies working together to share resources and encourage one another? I embrace a more capacious notion of “theory” (see generally Brisman 2014; Brisman et al. 2017) and advocate for (and subsequently delineate) the formal definition of CC as a *unique criminological perspective*.

Previous discussions in regard to defining a CC theoretical model have pointed out parallels between standpoint theory (Smith 1989) and CC’s literature (Larson and Piche’ 2012). Standpoint theory speaks to the authority of the ex-convict’s experiences and the unique perspective that gives the FI scholar in comparison to non-FI scholars. At the same time, however, CC scholarship posits that our contribution to criminological theory diverges from being founded purely on the insider’s perspective. While I do not wish to discount the immense value of the FI scholar's direct experience within the criminal justice system, I seek to establish (in subsequent paragraphs) a more expansive theoretical structure for CC, based on my analysis of the field’s research, and previous contributions to scholarship.

Richards (2013:380) has suggested that CC contemplates the following hypotheses in its exploration of bias and prejudice within the institutions of academia and the harm caused by institutionalized criminal justice words/terms:

1. The longer a person is in prison, the more likely he/she will return.
2. The higher security-level of imprisonment, the more likely he/she will return.
3. The more people in prison, the more social class inequality.
4. The longer time (months, years) a prisoner spends in solitary confinement, the more likely he/she will be mentally and/or physically damaged.

While CC is making large strides towards theoretical development, a great distance must still be traversed to establish an operational CC model. There are many additional CC concepts that need to be subjected to scrutiny in order to determine which components (many listed directly above in this section) will comprise a unified CC theory. I will attempt to build on this process by adding three further important concepts or themes which need to be addressed in constructing the CC theoretical model and how these sections add to this project. The theoretical model of CC advances the scholarly reach of the field beyond simplistic definitions of being purely self-reflective “me-search,” often critiqued as limited in criminological impact and scientific rigor, to a more complex and meaningful criminological phenomenon. In the first section, I emphasize how the insider-perspective has great potential for challenging conventional criminological knowledge and exposing new developments at the organic level within the dynamics being examined by the academy. In the second section, I explain how mentoring and collaborative actions that exist within CC act to connect often disjointed and fragmented pockets of individual CC experience and knowledge, allowing new ideas and concepts to congeal into the production of new understandings of criminological phenomenon and correctional/FI cultures. In the final theory section, I emphasize that the rigors of enduring total

institutional structures of prisons, coupled with the stigma that is placed on FI individuals post-release, can function to provide scholars impacted by these experiences with improved capabilities of reflexivity, challenging the notion that their subjective experiences somehow nullify completely the findings of FI scholars engaged in analyzing their own backgrounds.

Inside the Machine

As alluded to above, the “insider perspective” (Earle 2014, Irwin 1987, Newbold 2014)) is an important facet of the CC body of academic literature for it draws directly on the experience of FI individuals. To be sure—and as also noted above—the insider perspective is controversial and has come under criticism for being biased and insufficiently objective (e.g., Hammersley, 2005). Yet, many scholars both within (Earle 2014, Irwin 1987, Ross and Richards 2001, Tietjen 2013) and outside of CC (Greene et al. 2006, Jewkes 2012) have presented powerful arguments for the use of the insider perspective of prisoners to strengthen the process of criminological research and to expand our understanding of crime and punishment.

What makes CC unique is that it treats the convict-professor as both a subject of research and a researcher: In other words, the convict criminologist is simultaneously *what* is being studied, *who* is conducting the study, and the person *teaching about* both (Jones 2014, Mobley 2003). To be sure, there are inherent problems and potential complications when one is so directly familiar with a research topic, but open acknowledgment of one’s position can help contextualize matters—with the end result being a more expansive understanding of otherwise unilluminated spheres of criminological knowledge. Newbold (2014:446) captures this well, by stating, “The

views of insiders break the complacency that hegemony of official interpretations brings. They disrupt familiar thought patterns and challenge what is often taken for granted.” Thus, CC is a means to contribute more in-depth and ground-level perspectives to inform conventional criminological research and question the official knowledge base presented by the institutions of criminal justice themselves. Much of CC research (Frana 2012; Newbold et al. 2014; Richards & Ross 2001; Ross et al. 2016) challenges or diverges from accepted conventional criminological doctrine and tends to align with many of the principles of critical criminology. CC, similar to critical criminology, questions systems of control and power that influence heavily the criminal justice system, often examining and critiquing how such systems interact with and influence prisons, prisoners, and citizens released from prison. While attempting to define how the experience of being inside the prison machine influences the CC worldview as a whole, it must be acknowledged that some members of the group are less critical in their views than others. For instance, a portion of the group maintains that aligning with conventional criminology and not exposing their ex-convict identities is a better path to a more successful and sustained academic career. While other others believe in full self-disclosure of their backgrounds, re-claiming the language of the institutions (such as the word *convict*), and exposing the shortcomings of the criminal justice system. The latter group does not align with conventional criminology and asserts that mainstream criminological scholarship often supports and legitimates the very systems of oppression that operate within the American criminal justice system.

An example of adoption of oppressive systems by mainstream criminology is the use of institutional and stigmatizing terms such as “felon” or “offender” in scholarly

literature. A report from the Urban Institute (Okeke and La Vigne 2018, November 29) notes,

When we refer to people who are, or have been, in contact with the criminal justice system as “felons,” “offenders,” “inmates,” or “convicts,” we define them by the worst act of their lives, creating a stigma that lingers long after they’ve paid their debt to society.

Within the ranks of CC, there is a divergence of opinion with respect to how to speak about FI people. The use of the pejorative term, “convict” within CC’s namesake is a topic of current debate within the group. CC was founded during a time period (late 1990s) when many of the early members believed that reclaiming the stigmatizing term, “convict,” was important. If we, as a group of rigorous productive FI scholars with PhDs and faculty positions and our allies, could take back the term “convict,” we could reverse its negative effect, and instead use the term as a means of empowerment. Yet, over twenty years later, there is discussion within CC circles that cultural shifts within society and criminal justice have altered how the world perceives the term “convict,” and many people find the term offensive, potentially deterring some FI students and professors from affiliating with the CC field. This is an ongoing discussion that has the potential to reshape CC’s impact on justice reform and reach a wider spectrum of justice-impacted people.

Mentoring and Collaborating to a Theory of Convict Criminology

For CC, mentorship is a vital insofar as ex-convicts transfer academic wisdom and practical know-how to other ex-convict students and scholars, and academic collaboration is how mentors introduce new members of CC into the research and writing process. This exchange assists our newer members with successful passage through the complex and often daunting (to the newly released ex-convict) university institution and

faculty job market. While mentorship coupled with collaborative research is commonly envisioned as one of the primary actions of the CC group, I would like to propose that we also frame it as a vital component of theoretical development. Taylor (2008) describes *bridging* as attempting to traverse cultural disparities between the mentors and mentees, and I would submit that a bridging culture is formed through the CC mentorship process. This action forms a knowledge conduit through which the shared insights and perspectives of multiple generations and cultures of FI criminology scholars can evolve (Tietjen et al. 2018b). If one were to examine the CC publications cited in this article, one would see that there are multiple authors listed for a large number of these papers. This phenomenon constructs a body of ever-evolving knowledge based on direct experience and contact with correctional institutions as residents of said institutions. As suggested above, CC has long argued that such “insider perspective,” while not the only form of criminological knowledge production (Lenza 2012), is one of the most important and most often overlooked (by conventional criminology) means of criminological understanding (Irwin 1987, Ross and Richards 2001). From such direct experiential perspectives, criminologists can illuminate and describe the nuances of prison(er) cultures, while accessing directly the struggles of the FI as they strive to reintegrate into society.

To date, much of the writing by convict criminologists consists of individual pieces or fragments. We, as a group of convict criminologists, have yet to collect, categorize, and analyze and interpret the perspectives that we share and the knowledge we have obtained. One task before us is to synthesize the collected direct institutional knowledge, prisoner cultural capital, and experiential information archived within the

collective group of convict criminologists into a functional theory of CC. The extent to which we engage in mentorship will necessarily impact the scope and breadth of our process of theory formation.

The Total Institution and Stigma

FI individuals lead a double life with respect to their intellectual and personal worldviews—one life shaped by the total institution (Goffman 1963) of the prison, and another molded by the forces of the world outside of prison. Essentially, convict criminologists attempt to research the very institutions that, at one point, incapacitated them physically. This could be seen as an impediment to objective study, but as Jones (2014: 159) explains, “Theoretically, CC is also rooted in Goffman’s (1959, 1962, 1963) study of total institutions and stigma. Except, with ex-convict professors, the theoretical explanation becomes somewhat more complicated, even compromised, as the theorists themselves are institutional products that directly suffer stigma.”

The pathway of a FI convict criminologist involves an ongoing process of attempting to overcome the stigma attached to the ex-convict label, and of grappling with the collateral consequences of a felony conviction (Brisman 2004, 2007; Pinard 2010), while also endeavoring to establish a legitimate and respected place within the academic environment. Convict criminologists often undertake this process in the company of colleagues, who, while well intentioned, might not understand fully the unique structural hurdles in the pathway of the ex-convict. The stigma of the criminal conviction in modern society carries the additional weight of manufactured public fear (Simon 2007), sensationalized by media misrepresentations. As Earle (2016: 94) explains, “People with criminal convictions are at risk of being condemned to a new dark age of digital

suspicion and exclusion, the identified personal objects of an unidentified social malaise.” This is unfortunate and problematic given Lenza’s (2012) assertion that the academic voices of the FI must be included within mainstream research if the disciplines of criminology and criminal justice are going to make progress in overcoming the institutional bias and “move beyond stigmatizing stereotypes and unrecognized bias in studies of crime and our criminal justice system, and move toward valid knowledge production” (2012: 74).

Time spent in the isolating (but overcrowded) prison environment forces many individuals to withdraw in order to cope with the strains of prison life (Earle 2016). The self-awareness and introspection required to survive (in) prison provides convict criminologists with the unique ability to engage in reflexive critical criminological analysis. In so doing, the convict criminologist can illuminate the difficulties and obstacles that plague those with a felony conviction, thereby challenging the criminal justice system’s failing policies and obsolete practices (i.e., tough-on-crime policing, mandatory minimums, mass imprisonment).

Conclusion

While millions of Americans (over 6.6 million, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Kaeble and Cowhig 2018)) are under the supervision of the criminal justice system, whether in jail or prison, or on parole or probation, for many Americans, their only exposure to incarceration is through crime dramas, movies or “shockumentaries.” Given that more than 600,000 individuals reenter society per year (Brisman 2004; Richards 2013), an increasing number of citizens is being exposed to the destructive

repercussions of America's prison industrial complex (Hartnett 2010). Fortunately, a growing progressive voice of dissent has emerged in response.

CC was born from the needs and interests of FI women and men, who had completed graduate programs in fields such as criminal justice, criminology, and sociology, and who had been trained to identify and analyze critically systems of oppression. While CC serves many key functions, one of the most important has been to serve as a form of critical criminology that advances the insiders' perspective. Jones (2014: 156) explains that, "CC also challenges commonly held beliefs; thus, it is coterminous with many of the epistemological approaches found in critical criminology, which tries to deconstruct myths and look for deeper meanings." In other words, the insider's experiences add a more comprehensive understanding of the carceral system, such as by illuminating the nuances of convict culture and by describing intricate dynamics of inmate/staff interactions. The goal is to help ensure that criminal justice legislation and policy not continue to be based on incomplete information and analysis.

Since Richards' 2013 article, "The New School of Convict Criminology Thrives and Matures," the number of professors identifying as convict criminologists has increased, as have the number of FI undergraduate and graduate students. The experiences of bias and discrimination (based on, *inter alia*, class/socioeconomic status, ethnicity, gender, race, sex, sexual orientation) have continued to deprive many CC members of professional and academic opportunities. CC has attempted to speak to the structural hurdles and institutional biases that often limit members from marginalized groups (Arresti and Darke 2016; Ross et al. 2016) and to propose possible solutions to these obstacles.

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, a theory of CC is ongoing, and much work remains. This involves exploring prejudice and discrimination against FI scholars within universities and revealing how the regularly accepted terminology and vernacular of criminal justice and academic criminology function to dehumanize incarcerated and FI people. The insights of FI individuals are often discounted and/or marginalized within criminology to the detriment of criminology as a science and to the life chances of the incarcerated and FI. Those in a position within higher education to improve the lives of those negatively affected by the criminal justice system have the ability to assist in creating opportunities for FI students and scholars. There is immense pro-social benefit in continuing the ongoing research and progressive impact of CC, and immeasurable potential for future positive influence on the criminal justice system and those impacted by it.

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