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University

Beyond Positive Convictions?

The emergence of ex-prisoners as criminologists in the UK

'In order to explain a cultural product it is necessary to know it. And to know it, in matters of thought and emotion, is to have experienced it.'

Bronislaw Malinowski (Anthropologist) 1962,
Sex, Culture and Myth, p.291

How does the disqualification of a criminal conviction combine with the qualification of a doctorate in criminology? This ISRF funded research examined the perspectives of academics, like myself, who can combine first-hand experiences of imprisonment with their teaching and learning about crime at university. Such people are sometimes called *convict criminologists*. Are they simply statistically unusual, 'deviant cases', or can they produce 'deviant knowledge', i.e. distinctive criminological perspectives that combine their personal experience of crime and punishment with their study of it?

Criminology has a proven track-record in advancing the careers of police and probation officers, social workers and prison staff. Many people from these backgrounds successfully combine their personal experience with their interest in criminology to further their professional prospects, but can someone coming from the 'other side' of the correctional divide make such connections and combinations? What can ex-convicts offer criminology?

Perhaps unsurprisingly there are relatively few people who can even try to make such a contribution. A prison sentence and an academic career are usually mutually exclusive. One will lock you down and out of society, the other secures your elevated position in its upper ranks. It can be a long uphill journey from a prison cell to a university office but recently, as criminology in the UK has expanded, something remarkable has happened. Some ex-prisoners are making that journey, getting out of prison and into criminology, and getting jobs as criminologists. What do they know about crime and punishment or law and order? What can they teach students? What research questions does an ex-prisoner have about prisons, punishment and rehabilitation? How do they conduct research in prisons or about crime? Do they research prison and prisoners differently?

Interviewing convicts

My research sought answers to these kinds of questions. I recorded interviews with nearly all those people in the UK who meet the definition of a convict criminologist established by the US Convict Criminology group: a scholar who has graduated from a prison sentence and has either completed or is close to completing a PhD in criminology or a related subject.

Six biographical interviews were completed, all but one being with men. Of these, four have permanent lecturer or senior lecturer positions in British universities and one has secured a full-time research grant. Analysis of the interviews and the development of their implications for convict criminology is being written up for publication in 2018.



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A further element of the ISRF funding was for a small symposium of convict criminologists held in London in March 2017. It brought together those who had been interviewed, supportive academics and activists, and two undergraduate criminology students who are progressing from prison sentences to criminological scholarship. Of the twelve people attending all but two had been imprisoned, and each provided an account of how their relationship to criminology was influenced by their carceral experiences. The prison sentences represented in the group ranged from 3 months to 'life', the result of convictions as diverse as their duration suggests. Two women ex-prisoners, one an undergraduate, the other whose PhD thesis has been submitted, provided perspectives on women's incarceration and their routes into criminology. This group now meets as British Convict Criminology twice a year. It offers mutual support and encouragement to people with experience of imprisonment who want to develop their interest in criminology.



Participants at the first UK symposium on convict criminology held at The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, London March 2017: (from left, Dr Rod Earle, (The Open University), Marie-Claire O'Brian (New Leaf), Dr Bill Davies (Leeds Beckett University), Michael Irwin (author), Jack Rinaldi (Westminster University student), Dr Sacha Darke, (Westminster University)

...you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you work.

C. Wright Mills: *The Sociological Imagination*, 1959 p.196

Why prisons matter

Prison is a profoundly misunderstood institution but one that enjoys a central position in popular beliefs about law and order, crime and punishment. In the UK prison populations stand at record levels, far higher than other European countries, despite consistent and persistent falls in most forms of crime. In the UK, prison sentences are getting longer, prisons are getting bigger and more prisons are being built. The people in prison are predominantly men, from poor communities and increasingly from minority ethnic groups. As prisons grow, freedom shrinks. More prisons do not make us safer and tend to make us more fearful. Among critical criminologists they are increasingly recognised as a form of socialised vengeance that do little more than add to the sum of violence and sorrow in the world.

Within criminology and popular culture the actual voices of those who have been imprisoned are rarely heard. Convict criminology, by connecting personal experience with critical social science, promises to generate new understandings of the prison system from people who have been imprisoned.

For more information about this study, convict criminology in general and the British Convict Criminology group contact:

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What is convict criminology?

Convict criminology was developed in the United States in the late 1990s. It is based on the idea that first-hand experience of imprisonment may have the potential to contribute valuable insights into the study of crime and punishment. Until recently it has been associated with the US prison system but that is changing as the approach becomes viable in the UK. In 2016, the first book-length treatment by a single author of the convict criminology phenomenon was published in the UK.

Convict criminology: Inside and out by Dr Rod Earle emerged from the unavoidable connections he discovered between conducting research in prison and his own experiences of imprisonment as a young man. Using an auto-ethnographic approach that links his prison experiences to the development of his interest in criminology, it provides a detailed and engaging introduction to the study of crime

and punishment. It offers an original account of the pre-history of convict criminology in the work of the US sociologist Frank Tannenbaum and the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. In addition to providing a detailed account of US convict criminology, it considers how the approach is developing in Europe, and what it may contribute to critical studies of crime, punishment and social order.

Personally revealing and intellectually adventurous, it offers a platform for the development of further work in convict criminology, such as that emerging from the ISRF Beyond Positive Convictions study.

Convict criminology: Inside and out is available from bookshops, or can be ordered from the publisher, Policy Press: policypress.co.uk/convict-criminology and online retailers such as:

amazon.co.uk/Convict-Criminology-Inside-Out-Horizons/dp/1447323645

and waterstones.com/book/convict-criminology/rod-earle/9781447323648

