

Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory

Convict Criminology

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Having developed in the late 1990s from meetings of ex-convict academics at the conferences of the American Society of Criminology (ASC), convict criminology (CC) is a relatively new area in the discipline of criminology and criminal justice. Since that time, the group has grown in membership, as former prison inmates, non-convict corrections scholars, and a number of prisoners have joined and contributed to its literature.

Although somewhat diverse in terms of its membership and theoretical orientation, this group is unified in its general objective of using heuristic observation and first-person accounts to give depth and context to the social scientific study of prison and criminal justice.

History and Development

The participation of ex-convicts in the study of criminology is not new, but until recent times has been relatively rare. Moreover, perhaps due to fear of victimization, or because they felt their [p. 208 ↓] previous careers were now irrelevant, many former prisoners who became professors of criminology chose to keep their personal histories undisclosed. One of the earliest criminologists who did not hesitate to identify himself as an ex-convict was Frank Tannenbaum, a former labor organizer, journalist, and later professor at Columbia University, who in his 1938 book, *Crime and Community*, coined the term *dramatization of evil* (a precursor of labelling theory) to describe society's reaction to lawbreaking.

A more recent ex-convict contributor is Richard McCleary. McCleary, who served time in both federal and state prisons, published his first book, *Dangerous Men*, in 1978 while on parole in Minnesota. McCleary has gone on to develop a well-respected career at the University of California, Irvine.

The origins of CC as it has emerged in the past decade, however, lie with John Irwin. Irwin, who died in January 2010, was an ex-heroin addict who, during the 1950s, served a 5-year term for armed robbery in California. Irwin commenced academic study while in prison and continued after he was released under the influence of Herbert Blumer, Irving Goffman, and David Matza at the University of California, Berkeley and of Donald Cressey at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Beginning in 1967, Irwin

was a professor at San Francisco State University until his retirement 27 years later. His first book, *The Felon*, was released in 1970, and since then four more books as well as a large number of important papers have appeared under his name.

The influence of Irwin in generating the idea of CC and in shaping its intellectual contour cannot be underestimated. As a graduate student at UCLA, Irwin used his own experience of incarceration to challenge orthodox thinking relating to prison culture. In particular, he disputed the functionalist view that prison culture was primarily a collective reaction to the “pains of imprisonment.” He argued instead that prisoners “imported” their social values into the prison, and that in large measure prisoner behavior and cultural principles were extensions of a broader criminal ethos that existed beyond the walls. In 1962, with Cressey, Irwin developed this view in the seminal article “Thieves, Convicts and the Inmate Culture” in the journal *Social Problems*.

Throughout his life, apart from the academy, Irwin also operated as a hands-on campaigner for prisoners’ rights and prison reform. In the late 1960s, with the assistance of lawyers, prison reform activists, and ex-inmates and their families, he helped to found the United Prisoners’ Union in California and then Project Rebound at San Francisco State University. He has worked on a number of prison reform committees that have been established to further the welfare of inmates and has taken an active and influential interest in the building and direction of the CC group.

It is from Irwin that the idea of the CC group originates. Up to the 1980s, there were too few ex-convict professors to support scholars like Irwin and McCleary in American universities, so for the most part they worked alone. But during the 1980s, when the U.S. prison and jail population increased by about 140 percent, Irwin became aware of a growing number of convicts who were gaining higher degrees in prison or after they got out. In 1989 at the ASC meetings in Reno, Nevada, Irwin spoke to Greg Newbold, a newly appointed professor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Newbold had served a 7.5-year sentence for heroin dealing in New Zealand in the 1970s and, like Irwin, had studied in prison and read for his Ph.D. after release. At Reno, Irwin mentioned the growing number of ex-convict academics and noted the need for a group of educated convicts to produce research that was informed by their prison experiences. He spoke about the idea regularly from that point forth.

Meanwhile, in Canada, a group of scholar/activists—Robert Gaucher, Howard Davidson, and Liz Elliot—were having similar thoughts. Disappointed with presentations, especially the lack of participation of former prisoners, at the International Conference on Penal Abolition III held in Montreal in 1987, they started *The Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, a periodical dedicated to publishing scholarly work written by convicts and ex-convicts. The journal has generated more than 20 issues since that time, and some of the CC group currently serve on its editorial board.

The CC concept itself eventually came to fruition in 1997. That year, Chuck Terry, who had served prison time in California and Oregon and was then studying for his Ph.D. at the University of California, Irvine, remarked to his professor, Joan Petersilia, about the failure of criminologists to [p. 209 ↓] understand the true nature of incarceration in America and its effects. Petersilia suggested that Terry put together a session for the 1997 ASC conference in San Diego. Armed with this advice, Terry contacted ex-convict professors John Irwin, Stephen Richards, Edward Tromanhauser, and Ph.D. student Alan Mobley to participate in a session titled “Convicts Critique Criminology: The Last Seminar.” This was the first time a collection of ex-convicts had appeared openly together on a panel at a national academic conference. That evening, over dinner, Irwin, Richards, Terry, and Jim Austin discussed the important potential of ex-inmate professors working together on studies of prisons and other matters.

From this point things moved fairly quickly. In the spring of 1998, Richards spoke with Jeffrey Ian Ross (a scholar then working for the National Institute of Justice) about the possibility of editing a book of chapters written by ex-convict academics. Having agreed on the concept, formal invitations were sent out to a number of ex-convict academics, as well as to some critical criminologists that were known for their research on prisons, to submit chapters for consideration in the new book. As a result, Ross and Richards published *Convict Criminology* in 2003.

It was Richards and Ross who coined the term *convict criminology*, and since 1998 they have been its most energetic promoters and organizers. At the ASC's 50th annual meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1998, Richards, Terry, and ex-convict professor Rick Jones appeared on a panel honoring the famous critical criminologist Richard Quinney. Meanwhile, the group used the conference as an opportunity to find and recruit additional ex-convict professors and graduate students. Jones and another

ex-convict professor, Dan Murphy, joined the informal discussion. The following year at the ASC meetings in Toronto, Richards organized the first official sessions titled "Convict Criminology." The two sessions involved most of the original CC academics plus Newbold. In addition, there were numerous ex-convict graduate students and non-convict contributors. A number of the papers from these sessions later appeared in *Convict Criminology*. From here, the activities of the group continued to expand, with nearly 30 sessions having been recorded at major criminology and sociology conferences as of 2008.

In 2001, the establishment of CC was formally announced in an article titled "The New School of Convict Criminology," written by Richards and Ross for the journal *Social Justice*. But it was the release of the edited book, *Convict Criminology*, 2 years later that marked the coming of age of the emerging group. The book's foreword was written by Todd Clear and the preface by John Irwin. The volume itself included eight chapters by ex-convict criminologists, including all the founding members, as well as contributions from non-convict associates writing about jail and prison issues. This was the first time ex-convict academics had appeared in a book together which included a discussion of their own experiences as criminals, as convicts, and as university graduates and professors.

Convict Criminologists Today

CC is informally organized as a voluntary writing and activist collective. It has no formal membership and no assigned leadership roles. Different members inspire or assume responsibility for various functions and take their own initiatives on personal collaborative projects. The group has grown with the addition of professors Tracy Andrus, Rudolph Alexander, James Burnett, David Curry, Robert Gaucher, Richard Hogan, Michael Lenza, Vonn Nebbit, Matt Sheridan, Bernadette Olson, and many more. The group also includes numerous convicts and ex-convicts with graduate degrees who do not work for universities. Today, the CC group includes associates 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.

Convict criminologists can roughly be divided into five categories. The first consists of more senior members, all associate or full professors, some of whom have distinguished research records. The second group comprises newly graduated Ph.D. candidates who have recently entered the academic profession or are still looking for jobs. Within the third group are graduate student ex-convicts, some still in prison but nonetheless anticipating academic careers. A fourth group consists of a small collection of men and women currently behind bars who already hold advanced [p. 210 ↓] degrees and publish academic work about crime and corrections. A number of them have authored or coauthored books and refereed articles. Finally, although convicted felons provide CC with its core membership, there is significant input from the non-convict community. The majority of these contributors have worked inside prisons or with ex-prisoners and/or have conducted extensive research on imprisonment and its consequences. The inclusion of non-convicts provides important balance to the perspectives of the group and broadens its potential for scholarly development.

Activities and Orientation

Since its emergence almost a decade ago, CC has developed four major areas of orientation, each of which is described below.

Research, Writing, Teaching, and Conference Presentations

The first and most important area in which the group operates is in research and the dissemination of information arising from its work. CC has no binding “perspective” as such; in fact, members are encouraged to produce original ideas based on their own investigations and knowledge. What makes the work unique is the backgrounds of its writers, most of whom have had years of hands-on contact with crime, corrections, and criminal justice, either as clients or as workers within the system. Having first-hand experience does not make one an expert in criminology, but when combined with tertiary education, it allows informed interpretation of data and responses that may be out of reach to the purely university-trained scholar. Moreover, people with knowledge

of native prison culture and language patterns may have a better idea of what questions need to be asked in prison surveys, how to ask them, and how to interpret them. Access to convicts, and response percentages and patterns, are often affected by subtle differences in the way a researcher operates while in the field.

The outcome of research thus conducted is then released to the wider community by way of conference presentations, articles, chapters in books, and books. It is also passed on to students in lecture halls. The inclusion of personal accounts to illustrate general points enriches the learning experience and brings the study of prison more to life in the classroom setting. Moreover, a fledgling number of scholarly papers and books written by members of the CC group can be found in university libraries. Some of these publications contain significant amounts of ethnographic material. Irwin, for example, drew upon his prison experience in writing *The Felon*, *Prisons in Turmoil*, *The Jail*, *It's About Time* (with James Austin), and *The Warehouse Prison* (with Barbara Owen). McCleary wrote his classic *Dangerous Men* based on his experiences with parole officers. Terry, using correspondence and interviews, wrote in *The Fellas* about drug addiction and incarceration. Newbold wrote the New Zealand bestseller *The Big Huey* about his 5 years inside, followed by *Punishment and Politics*, *Crime and Deviance*, *Quest for Equity*, *Crime in New Zealand*, *The Girls in the Gang*, (with Glennis Dennehy), and *The Problem of Prisons*. Jones wrote *Doing Time* (with Thomas Schmid). Richards and Ross used inside knowledge of the problems convicts face as coauthors of *Behind Bars* and coeditors of *Convict Criminology*. All of the above titles have relied at least in part on analysis influenced by first-hand experience of crime and prison.

Informing Public Opinion and Public Policy

A second important activity of the CC group involves using its research and expertise to inform and influence developments in the public sector. The more senior convict criminologists are frequently consulted on criminal justice issues by the news media and are called to testify as expert witnesses in criminal trials. Members of the group are involved in activities related to criminal law and criminal justice reform and frequently advise research organizations and state agencies. For example, Newbold has served on a total of 13 government agencies either as a consultant or as a bona fide member.

Ross, Richards, Curry, and Murphy, among others, have been frequent contributors to national media debates on crime and corrections. In the United States and elsewhere, convict criminologists serve as consultants and as invited speakers at universities and in various community forums interested in prison issues.

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Supporting Student Prisoners

The concerns of CC extend beyond the realm of research, writing, and speaking to academic and public audiences. There is a mentoring role as well. In the United States, where 2.4 million people are now incarcerated and more than 500,000 people are released from lockup every year, there is a growing population of prisoners wishing to attend universities. CC members are involved in assisting with the education and life adjustment of people who are currently serving time or are newly released. This work demands more than delivering education. It requires services such as writing letters of reference and making personal representations to parole authorities, assisting newly released prisoners to find accommodation and jobs and, if they contemplate university study, advising them on application to appropriate programs and mentoring them through graduation. The CC group now advises and mentors a number of people all the way from prison through to their Ph.D.

Group members also work to help ex-convict students overcome the many obstacles they encounter at universities. For example, many universities ask criminal history questions on student admission forms, and those with convictions may be denied financial aid, campus housing placements, and employment. In some states, ex-convicts can legally be denied admission to graduate programs, or be admitted and then not be allowed to accept graduate assistantship stipends. Ex-convicts may also be denied admission to many academic programs in medicine, law, social work, and counseling. Such restrictions may be waived, however, when university faculty understand supporting equal access for ex-convicts as an ongoing component of their professional work.

As a consequence of this orientation, CC is now being taught at universities as well as in prisons. In Wisconsin, a program called “Inviting Convicts to College” has been in place since 2004, where pairs of undergraduate intern instructors, supervised by ex-convict professors, have been trained to teach free college programs inside local prisons. The courses use *Convict Criminology*, donated by the publisher, as a key text, with the objective of inspiring prisoners to adopt similar paths to those taken by some of its contributors. Prisoners exiting prison use their classes as a bridge to entering college, with the final weeks of the program devoted to instruction in completing admission and financial aid applications. Inviting Convicts to College has already helped a number of prisoners to enter universities, where they receive advice and mentoring from members of the CC group. It should be noted that by no means are these efforts always successful. In many cases, in spite of the support they are given, protégés reoffend or violate conditions of community supervision and return to prison. But sometimes it is the existence of support that makes the difference between success and failure, and such cases provide incentive for members to continue with their efforts.

Supporting Ex-Convict Colleagues

A final important role of the group is providing support for former convicts who have obtained advanced degrees and are commencing careers as academics. Former inmates entering the scholarly profession often suffer stresses and hurdles that are different from those facing the non-convicted graduate. Academia can be a hostile and foreign environment for an ex-convict, and he or she may feel adjustment to be difficult. Faculty appointments, for example, can be subject to criminal background checks causing candidates with criminal records to be disadvantaged in employment searches. If appointed, because of possible embarrassment to their institutions, some ex-convict junior professors have reported faculty advising them to hide their pasts and keep a low profile—for example, by refusing media interviews or publishing without revealing their criminal histories. This provides something of a dilemma to an individual committed to ending a life of deception and living in an open, transparent, and honest way.

Senior members of the CC group ruminate over such problems and provide advice to junior colleagues on how to deal with them. Matters relating to promotion, tenure, relationships with staff and students, and the difficulties people with criminal records

have with international travel, are all considered within the group, and knowledge about how to deal with such issues is shared. However, just as some members have felt negatively discriminated against, others have acknowledged the generous assistance they have [p. 212 ↓] received from university authorities and colleagues sensitive to the pressures they face.

Conclusion

To a large extent, the emergence of the distinctive discipline known as convict criminology is a result of America's harsh criminal sentencing and parole laws, which have seen the nation's prison and jail population more than quadruple since 1980. The result is that, out of the millions of men and women that have served prison time, there are a few more each year interested in completing Ph.D.s in criminology or related disciplines. Some of these will join or affiliate with the group, as they see fit. As each person adds intimate knowledge of particular correctional facilities or prison systems, the group's expertise grows, building a more detailed picture of life behind bars. The broad objectives of the convict criminologists are to use these experiences of incarceration to assist the understanding of what actually happens in prison, to influence the formulation of intelligent public policy, and to help existing and former prisoners in their efforts to build productive careers within the free community.

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See also

- [Irwin, John, and Donald R. Cressey: Importation Theory](#)
- [Maruna, Shadd: Redemption Scripts and Desistance](#)
- [Shaw, Clifford R.: The Jack-Roller](#)
- [Steffensmeier, Darrell J., and Jeffery T. Ulmer: The Professional Fence](#)
- [Sutherland, Edwin H.: The Professional Thief](#)

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