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INSIGHTS

Offender Preparation & Education Network, Inc.

Convict Criminology:

Ex-Convicts Become Criminology Professors

by Stephen C. Richards, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Criminology
Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY

*I teach courses in Criminology, Criminal Justice, Corrections, and Community Corrections. Many of my students go on to work in law enforcement, corrections, or law. I serve on the American Society of Criminology National Policy Committee and American Correctional Association National Research Council, publish on prisons and community corrections, and speak at universities, conferences, and public forums. My most recent book, *Convict Criminology* (with Jeffrey Ian Ross) includes nine chapters by ex-convict Criminology and Criminal Justice professors.*

I am also a former federal prisoner that served time in two jails and eight prison institutions in six different states, one work release center, and had six different parole officers. As convict, I did time behind the walls of United States Penitentiaries (USP Atlanta, USP Terre Haute, USP Marion, USP Leavenworth), within the fence of medium security Federal Correctional Institutions (FCI Talladega, FCI Oxford), and minimum security in three different Federal Prison Camps (FPC Terre Haute, FPC Leavenworth, FPC Oxford). I now serve as one of the leaders of the Convict Criminologists.

The *Convict Criminologists* are a group of ex-convict professors, employed at universities around the country, that conduct research, publish books and journal articles, make public presentations, and write evaluation studies. Our most recent group appearance was at the Professional Executive Session, during the American Correctional Association's semi-annual meeting August 2001 in Philadelphia. Together we have written an important new book, *Convict Criminology*, which includes essays by ex-convict professors who have worn both prison uniforms and academic regalia, served years behind prison walls, and now, as academics, critique existing prison policies and practices. These ex-convicts have done time in various prisons and emerged to complete graduate degrees and become professors. They have an intimate knowledge of prisons that they carry

in their heads and hearts, and in some cases wear as scars and tattoos upon their skin.

*("I learned a lot in prison, but it seemed that for the toughest problems the available wisdom was never enough. Lucky for me there were some correctional workers dedicated to helping me help myself.")**

We now number over a dozen ex-con professors of Sociology, Criminology, and Criminal Justice. To this we add a growing

(continued on page 2)

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number of ex-convict graduate students that are joining us as they complete their dissertations, as well as criminologists without criminal records who are well known for their critical orientation towards corrections. The dramatic increase in arrests, convictions, and the rate of incarceration guarantees that the number of professors with profound and traumatic firsthand experience with the criminal justice system will continue to increase.

Most academic criminologists fail to penetrate and comprehend the true experience of prisoners—or are simply misinformed. In comparison, *Convict Criminology* is research carried out by our “felonious friends” who have both personal and abstract knowledge of the criminal justice machinery. Our effort was to create realistic Criminology: to impact the reader by encouraging the authors to write in the first person, provide biographical details, and go beyond the existing research in the field. All the contributors to this volume have firsthand experience with the criminal justice system and prisons, in particular.

*“Although we have something in common in that we have all been rejected by society and sent away to prison, we have not experienced incarceration in the same way. As a result, we shouldn’t expect all ex-convicts to experience re-entry in a similar fashion. Freedom is a tenuous thing, especially for those labeled as felons, no matter how much time passes. Credibility is permanently lost in the eyes of those who are in positions of judgment. I saw the upcoming day of release from prison as the beginning of a struggle to live in the outside, and I know better than anyone that I had no idea how to live in the ordinary world.”**

The ex-convict authors share their stories about arrest, court, jail, prison, release, and post-prison. These individuals discuss their convictions (e.g., drug possession, drug conspiracy, armed robbery, burglary), addictions, deviant lifestyles, and time in prison. They have taken serious risks in publicly discussing their lives. A number of them told us that this was the most difficult writing they ever attempted. In some cases, these admissions were painful, and even frightening. Many still struggle with the guilt of surviving prison, while old friends are still incarcerated, and the pain they may have caused others, including their own families and loved ones. Some may suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder related to remembering their former criminal activities and time incarcerated. All of them have expressed their appreciation for the many mentors and supporters that have

helped them with the difficult transition from the life of a convict in the penitentiary, to being a professor in the university.

*“In many ways, this is the hardest essay that I have ever been asked to write. It could be said that I am one of the more reluctant members in the Convict Criminology group. I am still extremely wary of outing myself, of pronouncing to the world that I am an ex-con and I am not ashamed of it. For example, my children and neighbors still do not know this little secret that my wife and I keep. Nevertheless, I know that my experience as a penitentiary prisoner has educated me in Criminology and provided insights that inform my research, in ways that a textbook education could not.”**

The Need to Document Success Stories

Convict Criminology provides an important wake-up call for correctional employees. We need to know more about correctional clients that have succeeded in building new lives. We have very little statistical information on former prisoners who have returned to the community and started successful lives, and even less about how correctional programs directly helped prisoners become productive citizens. The fact is we have been compiling the wrong set of figures, which serve neither the organizational requirements of programs or clients. Instead, we have been reporting program failures rather than success, blaming this on clients, obscuring our own responsibility, and making an excellent case for budget cut backs.

*“One day a thought crossed my mind: ‘I know I am institutionalized. School is an institution. I like school. Maybe I will get out of prison and go to college. I will just switch institutions.’”**

Unfortunately, correctional agencies only track the failures returned to prison for parole violations or new convictions. Parole violations and recidivism rates support the public perception that prisons and community corrections services are ineffective at rehabilitating prisoners and reducing crime. Legislators are growing tired of funding revolving door agencies that continue to recycle the same individuals from prison, to the streets, back to prison. Why use scarce public resources to pay for institutions and organizations that fail so many individuals? Meanwhile, there has been virtually no effort to demonstrate how correctional programs return clients to the community where they work, pay taxes, raise their families, and contribute to the improvement of the community.

*“I took a correspondence course in Geography from Utah State University, and studied Spanish on my own. Friends within the overwhelmingly Latino inmate population helped me with pronunciation and vocabulary.”**

What ever happened to those former prisoners that made good? Who are they? Where did they go? How did they succeed? What did they learn in prison that helped them to go straight, get their act together, and become law-abiding individuals? What programs helped them? Who are the correctional personnel they remember who contributed to their achievement? How are we supposed to know “what works,” what are the “best correctional practices,”

if we do not make the effort to ask the men and women who actually benefited from imprisonment?

*“I learned enough to eventually earn twelve units of college credit. My big break came when I was transferred to Colorado. FCI Englewood is located in the Denver-Boulder area, so going there was a sort of return to civilization. A college program that offered a full load each semester was just getting started. I enrolled in classes and asked the adjunct faculty to proctor my correspondence courses and equivalency exams. Within five years, I completed a Bachelors degree in Economics and a Masters in Sociology.”**

(continued on page 4)



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(continued from page 3)

Today, at both the federal and state levels, there is a budget struggle. Newspapers report the economy is slipping, the stock market crashed, millions of people have lost their jobs, and federal and state revenues are shrinking. Legislators are wondering, "What do we cut, K-12 schools, universities, or the correctional system?" After years of expansion, government funding for correctional agencies is being slashed. All over the country prisons are being closed, correctional workers laid off, and community programs terminated.

At the same time there is a growing movement to hold public institutions more accountable, for example K-12 education programs. Schools are being forced to test both students and teachers; to show results that reduce the drop out rate and prove the students can read, write, and do math. We might also expect correctional systems to account for public

dollars. One measure of both educational and correctional facilities is the number of persons that successfully complete programs and become contributing citizens of the community. Correctional agencies need to begin collecting evidence of prison and community programs that are successful, as supported by the number of persons that do not return to custody, and the success stories, that until now have received little attention. *Convict Criminology* is a book that begins to document the potential that both correctional workers and prisoners have to "make good."

* *Quotations from...*

CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

By Jeffrey Ian Ross, University of Baltimore and
Stephen C. Richards, Northern Kentucky University

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Part of the Wadsworth "Contemporary Issues in Crime and Justice Series" edited by Todd Clear. Preface by John Irwin. This text emerged from the enthusiastic reception received by the *Convict Criminology* panels at recent American Correctional Association, American Society of Criminology and Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences annual meetings. For additional information contact Dr. Richards at 859-572-5525, richards@nku.edu.