physical exercise, or meditation to deal with the lack of stimulation. Individuals housed in control units evidence more internalized problems, interpersonal distress, and psychiatric symptoms than those in the general population. However, at least one study found no empirical evidence that these symptoms deteriorated after confinement in control units for periods less than 60 days. The effects of longer terms of solitary confinement have not been studied, although personal accounts suggest that it is stressful and may limit inmates’ coping abilities.

The use of control units has been criticized by several organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the American Friends Service Committee, and the National Lawyers Guild, and some have formed campaigns to shut down all control units. These groups raise concerns about the negative psychological impact that such confinement may have on inmates. There is consensus that inmates with serious mental health problems should not be placed in control units. The high constructional and operational costs due to the enhanced security features and intensive staffing necessary to deliver services and programs to inmates individually are also a source of concern for some critics.

In contrast, correctional administrators usually tout three benefits of control units. First, they reduce the level of violence in other correctional institutions throughout a correctional system. The threat of transfer to control units serves as a deterrent to violence, and thus makes the inmate population more manageable. Second, control units house only the most violent prisoners who have demonstrated that they cannot be held at other prisons without jeopardizing the safety of other inmates and correctional staff. However, there is some evidence that in practice broader criteria for entry are employed. Last, control units allow the security at other prisons in that system to be relaxed. No empirical data have been collected to test these claims.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, control units have become commonplace in many penal systems. Given the controversies that still rage over their effectiveness and impact on psychological health, clearly more research needs to be done. Until it is clearer what this modern form of solitary confinement actually achieves, there is a fairly strong case that its use should be kept to an absolute minimum.

—Mary A. Finn

See also ADX (Administrative Maximum) Florence; Alcatraz; Disciplinary Segregation; Lexington High Security Unit; Marion, U.S. Penitentiary; Maximum Security; Mental Health; Pelican Bay State Prison; Protective Custody; Solitary Confinement; Special Housing Unit; Supermax Prisons; Violence

Further Reading


Legal Cases


CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

There are a significant number of former prisoners studying criminology and becoming professors. As a result of their experiences of arrest, trial, and
years of incarceration, they have profound insight that promises to update and inform what we know about crime and correction. Since 1997, ex-convict criminology and criminal justice professors have organized sessions at annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology, Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, and American Correctional Association. These professors discuss academic response to and responsibility for deteriorating prison conditions.

THE NEW SCHOOL OF CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

The conference presentations were used to build a working group of ex-convict and nonconvict critical criminologists to invent the “new school of convict criminology.” This is a new criminology led by ex-convicts who are now academic faculty. These men and women, who have worn both prison uniforms and academic regalia, served years behind prisons walls, and now as academics are the primary architects of the movement. As ex-convicts currently employed at universities, the convict criminologists openly discuss their personal history and distrust of mainstream criminology.

Regardless of criminal history, all the group members share a desire to go beyond “managerial” and “armchair” criminology by conducting research that includes ethnography and the inside perspective. In contrast to normative academic practice, the “convict criminologists” hold no pretense for value-free criminology and are partisan and proactive in their discourse. This includes merging convict, ex-convict, and critical voices in their writing. As Rideau and Wikberg (1992) wrote, “That’s the reality, and to hell with what the class-room bred, degree toting, grant-hustling ‘experts’ say from their well-funded, air-conditioned offices far removed from the grubby realities of the prisoners’ lives” (p. 59).

CONVICT CRIMINOLOGISTS

The ex-convicts can be described, in terms of academic experience, as three distinct cohorts. The first are the more senior members, full and associate professors, some with distinguished research records. A second group of assistant professors is just beginning to contribute to the field. The third, only some of whom have been identified, are graduate student ex-convicts.

While all these individuals provide convict criminology with unique and original experiential resources, some of the most important contributors may yet prove to be scholars who have never served prison time. A number of these authors have worked inside prisons or have conducted extensive research on the subject. The inclusion of these “non-cons” in the new school’s original cohort provides the means to extend the influence of the convict criminology while also supporting existing critical criminology perspectives.

Convict criminologists recognize that they are not the first to criticize the prison and correctional practices. They pay their respects to those who have raised critical questions about prisons and suggested realistic humane reforms. The problem they are most concerned with is that identified by Todd Clear in the foreword to Richard McCleary’s Dangerous Men (1978/1992): “Why does it seem that all good efforts to build reform systems seems inevitably to disadvantage the offender?” The answer is that, despite the best intentions, reform systems were never intended to help convicts. Reformers rarely even bothered to ask the convicts what reforms they desired. The new school “con-sultants” correct this problem by entering prisons and directly asking the prisoners what they want and need.

ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGIES: INSIDER PERSPECTIVES

Convict criminologists specialize in “on site” ethnographic research where their prior experience with imprisonment informs their work. They interview in penitentiary cellblocks, in community penal facilities, or on street corners. Their method is to enter jails and prisons and converse with prisoners. This may include a combination of survey instruments, structured interviews, and informal observation and conversation. As former prisoners they know the
“walk” and “talk” of the prison, as well as how to gain the confidence of the men and women who live inside. Consequently, they have earned a reputation for collecting quality and controversial data. Ex-convict academics have carried out a number of significant ethnographic studies. John Irwin, for example, who served a prison sentence in California, drew on his experience to write the *The Felon*, *Prisons in Turmoil*, *The Jail*, and *It’s About Time* (with James Austin). Richard McCleary, who did both state and federal time, wrote his classic *Dangerous Men* based on his participant observation of parole officers. Charles M. Terry, a former California and Oregon state convict, wrote about how prisoners used humor to mitigate the managerial domination of penitentiary authorities. Greg Newbold, having served prison time in New Zealand, wrote *The Big Huey*, *Punishment and Politics*, and *Crime in New Zealand* to analyze 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. Finally, Jeffrey Ian Ross and Stephen C. Richards coauthored *Behind Bars* and coedited *Convict Criminology*.

**LANGUAGE AND POINT OF VIEW**

The convict criminologists all share an aversion to the language used in most academic research writing on crime and corrections. Typically, researchers use words such as *offender* and *inmate*. In comparison, convict criminology prefers to use *convicts, prisoners*, or simply *men* or *women*. The distinction is important because it illustrates the different point of view of researchers and authors who have never been incarcerated with those that have. *Offender* and *inmate* are managerial words used by police, court officials, and criminal justice administrators to deny the humanity of defendants and prisoners. To the ear of a former prisoner, being referred to as an offender or inmate is analogous to a man being called a boy, or a women a girl. Clearly, the struggle feminists fought to redefine how women were addressed and discussed taught an important lesson to the convict criminologists: Words are important.

**RESPECT FOR CONVICT AUTHORS STILL IN PRISON**

A number of the convict criminologists continue friendships and working relationships with writers in prison, some of whom are well published in...
criminology. This includes Victor Hassine, a prisoner in Pennsylvania who wrote *Life Without Parole*; Wilbert Rideau, a convict in Louisiana who wrote *Life Sentences* (with Ron Wikberg); and Jon Marc Talyor, serving time in Missouri and the author of numerous newspaper and journal articles. The ex-convict academics use correspondence, phone calls, and prison visits to communicate with these prisoners in order to stay current with prison conditions.

The convict authors write serious commentaries on prison life. Unfortunately, much of their research and writing, while critically informed, based on their experiences inside prisons, may be only partially grounded in the academic literature. After all, many of these authors lack or have difficulties obtaining the typical amenities that most scholars take for granted. For example, they may not have access to a computer for writing, to a university library, and or to colleagues educated in criminology. They struggle to write by hand, or with broken or worn out machines, and lack of supplies. They may be unable to procure typewriter ribbons, paper, envelopes, stamps, and so on. In addition, their phones calls are monitored and recorded, and all their mail is opened, searched, and read by prison authorities. In many cases, they suffer the retribution of prison authorities, including denial of parole, loss of “good time” credit, physical threats from staff or inmates, frequent cell searches, confiscation of manuscripts, trips to the hole, and disciplinary transfers to other prisons.

In comparison, convict criminologists have academic resources and credibility to conduct a wide range of research and writing. These resources allow them to use developments in theory, methodology, and public policy to hone their discourse. As academics they know the scholarly literature on prison, including theory, methodologies, and how issues have been debated over the years. This knowledge provides them with the opportunity to generalize from research findings and to understand better how prison conditions compare over time, from state to state, or country to country.

**RECENT POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Convict criminologists have come up with several policy recommendations. First, the group advocates for dramatic reductions in the national prison population through diversion to probation or other community programs. Today, many men and women are sentenced to prison for nonviolent crime. These people should be evaluated as candidates for early release, with the remainder of their sentence to be served under community supervision. The only good reason for locking up a person in a cage is if he and she is a danger to the community. A prisoner should have an opportunity to reduce his or her sentence by earning good-time credit for good behavior and program participation. Unfortunately, many state correctional systems, following the federal model, have moved toward determinate sentencing. This “truth in sentencing” has limited provisions for good-time reductions in sentences, and no parole.

One problem with reducing the prison population is predicting who might commit new crimes. Despite numerous attempts, we still have no reliable instruments to predict the potential risk of either first-time or subsequent criminal behavior by either free or incarcerated individuals. The problems are many, including “false positives,” which predict a person to be a risk who is not. Conversely, “false negatives” are persons predicted not to be dangerous who turn out to be so. Even so, the fact that our science is less than successful at devising classification schemes and prediction scales is not an adequate rationale for failing to support reductions in prison admissions and population.

Second, convict criminologists support the closing of large-scale penitentiaries and reformatories, where prisoners are warehoused in massive cellblocks. Over many decades, the design and operation of these “big house” prisons has resulted in murder, assault, and sexual predation. A reduced prison population housed in smaller institutions would be accomplished by constructing or redesigning prison housing units with single cells or rooms. Smaller prisons, for example, with a maximum of 500 prisoners, with single cells or rooms, should become the correctional standard when we begin to seriously consider the legal requirement for safe and secure institutions. As a model, we should turn to European countries that have much lower rates of incarceration, shorter sentences, and smaller prisons.
Third, we need to listen carefully to prisoner complaints about long sentences, overcrowding, double celling, bad food, old uniforms, lack of heat in winter and air-conditioning in summer, 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 for returning home and the large number that return to prison.

Fourth, we have strong evidence that prison programs are underfunded, since administrators and legislators continue to emphasize custody at the expense of treatment. Prisoners should be provided with opportunities for better-paid institutional employment, advanced vocational training, higher education, and family skills programs. 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% of its prisoners, low-tech training, a general equivalency diploma (GED) program, and occasional classes in life skills or group therapy sessions. The problem is that these services are dramatically limited in scope and availability.

We need to ask convicts what services and programs they want and need to improve their ability to live law-abiding lives rather than assume and then implement what we believe is good for them. One recommendation is that prisoners be provided with paid employment, either inside or outside of the prison, where they will earn enough to pay for their own college tuition. At the very least, all prisons should have a program that supports prisoners to complete college-credit courses by correspondence.

At the present time, most U.S. prisons systems budget very little for prisoner programs. Instead they spend on staff salaries and security. This is because prison administrators are evaluated on preventing escapes and maintaining order in their institutions. So the prisons are operated like zoos where human beings live in cages, with few options to develop skills and a new future.

Fifth, convict criminology advocates voting rights for all prisoners and felons. The United States is one of the few advanced industrial countries that continues to deny prisoners and felons voting rights. We suggest that if convicts could vote, many of the recommendations we advocate would become policy because the politicians would be forced to campaign for convict votes. State and federal government will begin to address the deplorable conditions in our prisons only when prisoners and felons become voters. We do not see prisoners as any less interested than free persons in exercising the right to vote. To the contrary, if voting booths were installed in jails and prisons, we think the voter turnout would be higher than in most outside communities.

Sixth, we advocate that prisoners released from prison have enough “gate money” that would allow them to pay for three months’ worth of rent and food. The ex-cons could earn some of this money working in prison industries, with the balance provided by the institution. All prisoners exiting correctional institutions should have clothing suitable for applying for employment, eyeglasses (if needed), and identification including a social security card, state ID or driver’s license, and a copy of their institutional medical records. They should be given credit for time served on parole supervision. Finally, we need to address the use of drug and alcohol testing as the primary cause of parole violations.

Seventh, our most controversial policy recommendation is eliminating the snitch system in prison. The snitch system is used by “guards” in old-style institutions to supplement their surveillance of convicts. It is used to control prisoners by turning them against each other and is therefore responsible for ongoing institutional violence. If our recommendations for a smaller population, housed in single cells or rooms, with better food and clothing, voting rights, and well-funded institutional programming were implemented, the snitch system would be unnecessary. In a small prison, with these progressive reforms, prison staff would no longer be forced to behave as guards, instead having the opportunity to actively “do corrections” as correctional workers. The staff would be their own eyes and ears, because they would be actively involved in the care and treatment of prisoners.

Finally, we support the termination of the drug war. Military metaphors continue to confuse our
thinking and complicate our approach to crime and drug addiction. For example, the theory of judicial deterrence, discussed as a rationale for sentencing in nearly every criminal justice textbook, is derived from the Cold War idea of nuclear deterrence. This idea evolved into mutually assured destruction (MAD), which was the American rationale for building thousands of nuclear bombs to deter a possible Soviet nuclear attack. The use of deterrence and war has now bled over from the military strategic thinking to colonize criminal justice. The result is another cold war, this one against our own people. We advocate an end to the drug war, amnesty for drug offenders, and a reexamination of how our criminal justice priorities are set.

PROS AND CONS OF CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY

The first strength of convict criminology is that it is based on a bottom-up, inside-out perspective that gives voice to the millions of men and women convicts and felons. The second is that the group is composed of men and women who have served prison time in many different environments including the Federal Bureau of Prisons, various state systems, different countries, and at different levels of security. Altogether, the founding members of the group have served more than 50 years in prison. Finally, it should be remembered that it would have been much easier for the ex-convict professors to conceal their past and quietly enjoy their academic careers. Instead, they decided to “come out of the closet,” develop their own field of study, and take up the fight against the liberal-conservative consensus that continues to ignore the harm done by mass incarceration in the United States.

There are two glaring weaknesses of this new field. First, most of the ex-convict professors are white males. This is the result of two facts: Very few minorities leave prison prepared to enter graduate school, and over 90% of prisoners are male. To some extent, this problem is being addressed through active recruitment of minorities and women into the group. For example, the group does include feminist non-con criminoologists who conduct prison research. Second, because the group is partisan and activist it is clearly biased in its approach to research and publication. On the other hand, the convict criminologists would argue that given the prejudice most people, academics included, have against criminals, convicts, and felons, the idea of value-free prison research is at best a polite fantasy. The only solution to this dilemma is for all researchers who contribute to the literature to discuss their biases openly, including former criminal justice personnel.

CONCLUSION

Convict criminology is a new way of thinking about crime and corrections. The alumni of the penitentiary now study in classrooms and serve as university faculty. The old textbooks in criminology, criminal justice, and corrections will have to be revised. A new field of study has been created, a paradigm shift occurred, and the prison is no longer so distant.

—Stephen C. Richards and Jeffrey Ian Ross

See also Jack Henry Abbott; Celebrities in Prison; Constitutive Criminology; Angela Y. Davis; Education; Gary Gilmore; John Irwin; George Jackson; Literature; Malcolm X; Prison Culture; Prisoner Writing; Resistance

Further Reading


Convict leasing refers to a particular means of putting inmates to work that originally developed in the South following the end of the Civil War, but was eventually used all over the United States. In this system, persons convicted of criminal offenses were sent to sugar and cotton plantations, coal mines, turpentine farms, phosphate beds, brickyards, sawmills, and cotton mills. They were leased to businessmen, planters, and corporations in one of the harshest and most exploitative labor systems known in American history. Though this practice no longer strictly exists in the United States, remnants of it can be found in joint venture programs where prisoners work for the profit of private corporations.

HISTORY
Convicts have been used as a source of cheap and profitable labor for centuries. The ancient Greeks and Romans both put convicted criminals to work on state-operated public works. In the Middle Ages, convicts were routinely sold into slavery, especially galley slavery. By the late 15th and 16th centuries, workhouses were established to confine beggars and vagabonds, to put them to work grinding corn, making nails, spinning fabric, or other labors.

This same trend occurred in the American colonies. In 1699, Massachusetts “declared that rogues and vagabonds were to be punished and set to work in the house of correction” (Rothman, 1971, p. 26). Other colonies followed suit. Inmates of the first American prisons were forced to labor as part of their incarceration. The Walnut Street Jail, which began to accept prisoners in 1790, set its inmates to work under what we now call the piece-price system. With the rise of the penitentiary system in the early 1800s, convict labor was a central focus of reform.

THE AMERICAN CONTEXT
The early debate over the merits of the Pennsylvania and Auburn systems focused on the uses of convict labor and, ultimately, on profitability. The Pennsylvania system reflected a plan for solitary confinement of inmates. Each inmate worked alone in his cell without contact with other inmates. Work was mostly menial and unprofitable for the institution. The Auburn system combined separate confinement with silent, collective work. This system became the model for most prisons in the United States.

A few years after the first prison opened in Auburn, New York, in 1817, a local citizen was given a contract to operate a factory within the prison walls. Prisoners were also leased out to private bidders to be housed, fed, and worked for profit. This practice provided the beginnings of the lease system.

Eventually, three systems of convict labor emerged in the 19th century: the contract system, the state use system, and the convict lease system. The contract system dominated prisons in the northern part of the country. Under this system, the state feeds, clothes, houses, and guards the convict. To do this, the state maintains an institution and a force of guards and other employees. The contractor pays the state a stipulated amount per capita for the services of the convict and sells the final product on the open market. In the lease system, the state enters into a contract with a lessee who agrees to receive the convict; to feed, clothe, house, and guard him; to keep him at work; and to pay the state a specified amount for his labor. The state does not maintain an institution to house prisoners. In the state use system, the state conducts a business of manufacture or production but the sale of the goods produced is limited to state agencies. Today, the state use system is the most commonly used of the systems.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SLAVERY AND CONVICT LEASING
The convict lease system was inexorably intertwined with the post–Civil War economic recovery of the South. Emancipation moved the Southern