CONTEXT

I (Paula) am a prisoner activist desiring social change at a systemic level. I seek to live in a society that is more equitable. I work, and lead on prisoner engagement at, the Prison Reform Trust (PRT), a voluntary sector organisation (VSO) in the criminal 'justice' system, working to create a just, humane and effective penal system. At the PRT, a primary objective is to ensure that the prisoner's voice is at the heart of its work. Having worked for a variety of voluntary sector organizations in the criminal justice sector, for a number of years, it is apparent that in most instances, the prisoner's voice is not central to the work that they do. This is also the view of the second named author, Andy Aresti, who whilst an academic, has worked with a variety of these voluntary sector organisations in varying contexts. A recent article by Aresti and colleagues (2016) has highlighted this issue, arguing that the prisoner's voice is often silenced or at least diluted.

Historically, whilst VSO's have, and do acknowledge that current and former prisoners are a useful resource, they have typically utilized their expertise at a grassroots level. Specifically, very few have been employed at a senior level or held managerial positions, and this of course has a number of implications in terms of knowledge production, organizational focus and direction (Aresti et al, 2016). This will be discussed in more detail later, but suffice to say that it is only more recently, that the prisoner's voice is being brought to the foreground, by VSO's, in criminal 'justice' discussions and debates.

Given this, and the PRT's focus on ensuring that the prisoner's voice is central to its work, I sought like-minded individuals whose priority is to privilege the contributions that imprisoned persons can and do make. It was through a conversation with a colleague that I heard about Andy, a former prisoner and now an academic, who was doing work under the banner of British Convict Criminology (BCC). The kind of work they were, and are doing, resonates with me and my world-view, so I sought to make contact.

My relationship with BCC began through a meeting with Andy when first taking up my role at PRT. I knew that my key task at PRT, to build a national network of prisoners, would require the support of intellectuals and academics in the sector. Collective voice will always mean collective sharing of strengths and resources, including social, intellectual and financial

capital. Considering this, and given that like the thousands of others who have walked through the prison gates, the pains of imprisonment do not dissipate for Convict Criminologists. These individuals are essential to the movement (prisoner network) to build its intellectual vision, to support its evidence base, and to combine all of their collective knowledge, networks and insight in the quest for an 'authentic voice', rooted in truth and power.

The meeting was full of positive energy. Like the energy experienced when soldiers meet on the battlefield, knowing that their chances of success are doubled through the meeting of comrades, and so relief, renewed strength and revitalised vision and hope ensue. Convict Criminology cannot operate in a vacuum, it too needs to be heard and have voice beyond academia, and so here was the start of what I believe to be a creative, innovative and complimentary relationship.

Such collaborations are particularly important, given that Criminology has been accused of being somewhat static in terms of research activism. In her presidential address to the American Society of Criminology, Belknap (2015) voiced her concerns with the discipline and its lack of involvement in activism. She was particularly critical of Convict Criminology, stating that she was concerned that academia neglects "our commitment to advancing social and legal justice changes, what I refer to as criminology activism" (Belknap, 2015, p. 1). Whilst challenges to this claim have been put forward by Aresti and Darke (2016) amongst others (Ross et al, 2016), these authors acknowledge that the need for further engagement and collaborations with research activist groups is paramount. I discuss such collaborations in more detail later in the paper.

Relative to this, an equally pressing issue concerns Critical Criminology and its epistemological positioning and ontological focus. In short, Critical Criminology has been criticized for "pursuing conventional agendas of criminological inquiry in an accustomed way" to the detriment of considering the broader changing social, political and economic climate (Hill and Robertson, 2003, p. 9). As these authors articulate:

> Despite a longstanding appreciation among critical criminologists of the link between crime control and other areas of government, it is still the case that this branch of the discipline (and indeed the discipline in general) tend to focus excessively on representations of 'the crime problem' and the general processes and practices of criminalisation and penalty (ibid, p. 94).

They go on to argue that Critical Criminology tends to focus on a narrow range of behaviours and governmental practices that are predominantly confined within the limits of the criminal law. Hence, it ignores or plays down broader social harms that emerge from wider social, economic and political arrangements. Given this, Critical Criminology needs to move beyond the confines of academic knowledge production and its exclusive focus on crime and penalty. Hill and Robertson (2003, p. 95) further argue that Critical Criminology, in general, needs to shift its focus to the broader issue of social harms and human rights violations. A social harm approach seems better placed to engage with, and overcome the limitations posed by focusing on the criminal law or cultures of crime control. Moreover, by considering the complex systems and practices of control and regulation that directly affect, and impact on particular populations, it is far more fruitful and progressive in terms of understanding 'crime' (ibid). This notion is certainly something that resonates with both Andy and myself, and is explored further later in the paper.

WHO AM I AND WHY DO I WRITE?

I contribute this paper as a person committed to activism, given my lived expertise as a prisoner and the application of this learned expertise. I am not an 'academic', but have over ten years of experience working in the social justice non-governmental organization (NGO) sector. In my work history, I have held a number of strategic roles. I have worked as a regional manager for Change-makers, as Head of Programmes for User Voice, as Head of Involvement at Revolving Doors Agency, and now as a senior management member of The Prison Reform Trust, where I lead on prisoner engagement work. All of these organizations focus on delivering services to prisoners, while also advocating on behalf of prisoners and wider social justice issues. I am currently in receipt of a Griffins Fellowship at the Institute of Criminology, Cambridge University, doing a small research project into the impact of maternal imprisonment.

My current role is focused on ensuring that the Prison Reform Trust places prisoners at the heart of its work and that it constantly checks itself, to ensure that it serves the needs of prisoners. Specifically, that it reflects on the power and privilege it holds as an organization and staff team, and that it shares its wealth of social and intellectual capital with prisoners, to support

them, so that they play a critical role in relevant debates. It is imperative that the PRT understands that merely advocating is not enough and that supporting prisoners to be visible in this debate, is equally important for long-term, wide scale impact and change.

Aresti and colleagues (2016) have recently argued that the voice of the prisoner is constantly diluted when being articulated through the lens of the statutory services and NGO's working in the criminal 'justice' system. These organizations, more often than not, work from their own ideological frameworks and perceive prisons, prisoner experience and the penal debate through their own filtered, and often privileged lens (ibid, p. 8). Of course, some notable exceptions include UNLOCK (National Association for Reformed Offenders) and User Voice as both of these NGOs were founded by former prisoners and have the like working at CEO, senior management level and/or trustee level positions.

Relative to this, I also lead the Prisoner Policy Network, a newly launched framework, enabling the collective voice of current and former prisoners to be heard at policy level. I will discuss this in more detail later in this paper, although suffice to say, fragmentation of current prisoner-led initiatives means as a consequence, the fragmentation of impact at a policy and influencing level. This Network seeks to address this gap, by creating a network of prisoners and prisoner-led groups, from which I hope to see the birth of a movement that can shape policy, affect delivery of services, and build grassroots confidence in self-determination. This idea is not new and has been implemented elsewhere, most notably in Europe, evident in the works of the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP), which I consider later in the article, and the work of KROM, the Norwegian Association for Penal Reform, a non-governmental political organization and pressure group in the area of penal policy. Thomas Mathiesen, a leading figure in this movement, provides an article on KROM in this special issue.

EXPERIENCING CRIMINAL INJUSTICE

I received an eight-year custodial sentence for supplying class 'A' drugs, namely cocaine, in 2004. I was released in 2008 and have been on licence since, until 2012. I had a similar conviction prior to this, although here I received a suspended (prison) sentence.

I am the partner of Jamaican man who has served numerous prison sentences for supplying both class 'A 'and 'B' drugs. I am a mother of five mixed-heritage children, one of whom has also served a prison sentence as an 18-year-old, whilst three of the others have had minor contact with the criminal 'justice' system.

I have experienced and observed how the criminal 'justice' system operates in my personal and familial community – an oppressive, divisive, racist, classist, and inequitable experience. This of course is not limited to my own experience, but the experience of arguably many individuals belonging to marginalized cohorts, who have experienced the criminal 'justice' system, directly or indirectly. As illustrated in a plethora of academic contributions over the years, the tendency to marginalize and oppress these particular cohorts, especially the poorer and working classes, along with ethnic minorities, are rooted in wider social and structural inequalities, and manifest in wider institutional practices. That is, the process of criminalization and racialization practices are far more reaching than just the criminal 'justice' system. Yet, it is these wider structural, social and institutional processes that directly inform, influence and impact the criminal 'justice' system (Dilts, 2017; Garner, 2010; Hill and Robertson, 2003; Jacobson, Phillips and Edgar, 2010; Roberts, 2004).

Historically, crime, has shifted from being widely attributed to individual or social pathology, and has increasingly come to be seen as a feature of particular cohorts – the poor and ethnic minorities (Dilts, 2017; Roberts, 2004; Saleh-Hanna, 2017; Wacquant, 2008; Webster, 2010). The over-representation of these cohorts through every stage of the criminal 'justice' system (Jacobson et al, 2010) and in particular prison, lays testament to this. Recent statistics illustrate that ethnic minorities, in general, are over 50% more likely to receive a custodial sentence in England and Wales, in comparison to their white counterparts. The numbers increase significantly for particular minority ethnic populations (Hopkins et al, 2015; PRT, 2018).

These dramatic figures have a variety of implications. First, the mass incarceration and over representation of ethnic minorities (and the poorer classes) normalizes these inequalities, thus reducing opportunities and life chances for affected persons (Robertson, 2004; Saleh-Hanna, 2017). Second, and in conjunction with this, high levels of incarceration concentrated on particular impoverished communities destabilizes the community, via the

loss of informal social controls, fragmented norms, values and beliefs, which subsequently have implications for conduct and therefore plays a significant role in reproducing the cycle of 'crime' (Roberts, 2004, p. 1285).

Given my observations and personal experiences of how the criminal 'justice' system operates, and serves to function as an oppressive, divisive, racist and classist institution, the need to broaden our focus on wider social harms, rather than 'crime' and its control, is paramount (Hill and Robertson, 2003). This idea is echoed by Saleh-Hannah (2017) and Roberts (2004) who like, Hill and Robertson (2003) argue that the focus on the "crime problem" and the use of the criminal 'justice' system's conceptualizations and understandings of crime, crime control and penality, deflects wider social issues and social harms. Specifically, these authors focus on 'race' and consider the mass incarceration of BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic groups) and the damage this does to these marginalised communities. Moreover, Saleh-Hannah, (2017, p. 420) considers the purpose mass incarceration serves, arguing that 'crime's' primary residence, or its home base, is located within the interlocking structures of Racist-Imperialist-Patriarchy. In effect, arguing that 'crime' as an inception, is a function of white supremacy and the desire to maintain power, and oppress 'inferior' and distinct populations, most notably Black and non-white ethnic minorities.

This certainly provides a fruitful lens to explore the wider structural and social harms that contribute to, and influence the racial disparities within the criminal 'justice' system (Hill and Robertson, 2003) and the increasing trend to overly incarcerate BAME cohorts in comparison to their white counterparts (Hopkins et al, 2015; Jacobson et al, 2010; PRT, 2018). Undoubtedly, the racial disparities within the criminal 'justice' process are clear, as evidenced earlier, and the need to look further into the wider structural and social processes that are central to oppressing and marginalizing certain populations is critical.

Considering this, alongside my personal experiences of the criminal 'justice' system, I am left with a world-view that always ever more sees this society and system as a dangerous place – a society that is not benevolent and protecting of all its citizens, but one which is arbitrary and ultimately malevolent. This is a system that normalizes inequality. It normalizes racism and is dismissive of the economic, social and well- being struggles of the poorest in our society. It restrains and constrains challenges and resistance to dominant norms through

the threat and practice of imprisonment. These ideas are not new and have been considered by many authors (for example, Christie, 2000; Dilts, 2017; Roberts, 2004, Saleh-Hannah, 2017; Wacquant, 2008).

Relative to this, the commercialization of the criminal 'justice' industry embeds notions of exploitative profit into the imprisonment of people. This is manifest in the growing trend over the last few decades or so, to use imprisonment as a means of 'dealing with the crime problem'. Prison expansion, that is the building of more prisons and increasing the capacity of the prison estate, serve to reinforce this trend (Aresti, 2014, p. 24). Interestingly, prison has become an attractive alternative to more productive ways of dealing with crime and other social problems. As Christie (2000) argues, "expansion" serves to "solve" and "control" a number of other "unmanageable" social issues, for example drug abuse, unemployment, inequalities and other social tensions. Both here in the UK and the US, expansion not only manifests itself in the growth of prisons, both structurally and in terms of capacity, but also in terms of more punitive penal policy and a shift to privatization in the form of an increased involvement of the private sector in service delivery and the 'running' of prisons. In this sense, expansion means the growth of prison as a business with fruitful economic gains (Aresti, 2014; Christie, 2001; Waquant, 2008).

Reinforcing this, Davis (2003) contends that mass incarceration is better understood through an economic and financial lens. She uses the concept of "the prison industrial complex" (PIC) to argue that the "real" underlying purpose of prison expansion and mass incarceration is exploitative profit. Whilst Davis (2003) is predominantly focusing on the US, this notion is applicable to the UK. Aresti (2014, p. 24) argues that the rapid expansion of the prison estate and its population in the US, and the political influence private companies working in this field have, in the provision of services and goods, is a trend we are increasingly following in the UK. Prisons are not only a big employer, they are also a big business, so expansion is a very good way of providing employment and making money. As many a critic has articulated, the prison industrial complex is a "self-perpetuating machine": the substantial investment in prisons, 'correctional' facilities, and law enforcement strategies combined with the perceived and unchallenged political benefits of crime control have led to policies that ensure that more people are sentenced to prison, thereby creating more prison spaces (Davis, 2003; Ross and Richards, 2003).

Considering the exploitative, classist, racist nature of mass incarceration, along with my own my negative experiences of the criminal 'justice' system, and my belief that society is a dangerous place, it begs the question; how does that make me feel as a former prisoner?

My 25-year-old daughter recently summed it up for me one day when we were out. She held my hand as we approached armed police at Euston train station, a key transport hub in Central London, and said:

> Mum, there are two types of people in the world, those that see the police as a protector. I have friends Mum, on a night out, who see the police about and feel safe, and then there's people like us, who see the police and feel frightened, as they have power over us. And nobody will lift a finger to speak out and we can disappear into the dark hole of total invisibility and maybe lose our lives.

This fear and lack of security is something that many of us experience and observe, frequently in our communities. 'Justice', safety and protection from harm are concepts that are, more often than not, absent in many communities. Dilts (2017, pp. 184-185) reinforces this, illustrating that the institutions that serve to 'protect' the public and provide 'justice', are in-fact the source of grave injustices. He highlights the failure of the 'justice' system to protect certain populations in society, arguing that when a person is from a minority ethnic group and/or is perceived to be a criminal, they are in danger of becoming a 'victim' of the very people appointed to protect them. In this instance, Dilts (2017) is discussing police brutality and mass incarceration in the US, although of course this is applicable to the UK. He makes a significant point that *we*, the people, look to the system for justice, yet argues that if the system was indeed successful in serving justice, the implications for the marginalized communities would be devastating. 'Justice' would in effect be injustice, manifesting in the reinforcement of detrimental policing practices, concentrated harm on specific marginalized communities and hyper-incarceration (Dilts, 2017, p. 185).

HOW DO WE PREPARE FOR CHANGE?

The reason I share who I am, personally, politically and professionally is exactly because many do not. They hide themselves away from deep internal

and external questioning. They hide from facing the tension and power dynamics of control that lie behind artificial constructs of professionalism. Professionalism, hierarchies, protocols, regulations and boundaries can, and often do, act to desensitize and protect people from having to explore and defend the moral and ethical assumptions regarding the need for and efficacy of punishment, as well as the social-political inequalities and lack of mutual respect for human rights that sit alongside this. By hiding behind professionalism, we witness those, who without thought can sit comfortably with rescuing, with researching and supporting us, the prisoners, to comply after punishment, as they seek to persuade themselves (and *us*) that we are solely and individually responsible for our crimes. A notion critiqued by many (e.g. Hill and Robertson, 2003: Roberts, 2004; Saleh-Hannah, 2017). We are told we owe enormous debts to society that can never be repaid, so we should accept our estrangement forever without dissent. Prisoner stories which demonize, and their counterpoint, those stories of exceptional individual heroism, battling seemingly impenetrable personal challenges, act to deflect both public and personal examination of the deep systemic failings that often lie at the heart of crime.

Often professionals engage us in conversations about criminal 'justice' without establishing from the beginning what they really think deep down about the practice of imprisonment, and the moral and political assumptions that underpin their interest in it. What is their worldview? It is important to establish where you are in the political discourse as you discuss *our* experience as prisoners with *us*. Without this openness, all dialogue with the prisoner reduces *us* to the position of objects being observed and tested, as to our readiness to comply with existing norms. The researchers, the politicians and the 'helpers' all feel like voyeurs from another world. They belong to the set of people that are not frightened when they see a policeman and, as such, cannot comprehend how we navigate this world post-imprisonment.

Can empathy be enough for non-prisoners' seeking to contribute to the prison reform/abolition movement? In my view, it can only if that non-prisoner first seeks to understand their own world view, and commences engagement with the agenda for change in an honest and reflective way. If you believe that damaging individuals through incarceration is a good way to get people to reflect and change their behaviour, if ultimately you think prison works, but just not in the form we have it now, at least proclaim that

from the outset. Hiding behind professional codes of conduct and ethics applications for research projects with prisoners, that assess the risks that they pose to the researcher, as well as the integrity of the research and maintenance of strict professional boundaries, all smack of strengthening existing ways of working and knowledge production. In my view, the adage "if you always do what you always did, you will always get what you always got" is true. And for prisoners that means not much in the way of solutions.

The production of prisoner-based knowledge, and the ethics, morality and efficacy of imprisonment are delivered to the public through a system of education and information that is dominated by a particular value system, norms, morals, and beliefs about the world. Drawing parallels with Hill and Robertson's (2003) critique of Critical Criminology, typically, practitioners, policy makers and other people working with prisoners work within a framework that conceptualizes crime through the confines of the criminal 'justice' system. Consequently, they reinforce dominant ideologies, discourses, and understandings of crime and the 'crime problem'.

There is an undoubted dominance of a world view of power and privilege that filters into everything to do with prisoners. It impacts research funding, statutory interventions and even the charity sector, who have recently extended their role of benevolent rescuers mitigating the harsh treatment of the state, to service providers profiting from the industry. This is my belief and a notion reinforced by others.

As previously articulated, Aresti and colleagues (2016, pp. 8-13) questioned the role of both statutory and non-statutory services working in the criminal 'justice' system. In essence, they argued that along with academia, statutory and non-statutory services working within the field serve to perpetuate dominant, mediated discourses that misrepresent the lived realities of prisoners' lives and prisons. They argue that whilst there is an abundance of knowledge on prisoner experiences, the prisoner's views and perceptions of prisons and the penal debate are typically silenced:

> Considering the substantive and highly influential role that both statutory and non-statutory agencies play in constructing prisoner realities and wider public discourses, it is critical to explore how these realities are represented. Arguably, the lack of prisoner voice in both statutory and non-statutory service agencies renders the knowledge and representations produced by and through these organisations as highly questionable…it could be argued

that much of the knowledge produced by these organisations is standpoint specific, and thus...it becomes filtered through a privileged lens and is thus articulated through organisational understandings and experiences, rather than those of the prisoners (Aresti et al, 2016, p. 8).

Echoing some of these arguments is INCITE, a Black feminist movement, which provides an equally hostile critique (Smith, 2007). In their visionary work, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, a damning critique of the devastating role charities play in reinforcing social injustice is provided. Smith (2007, p. 8), a contributor to this text, discusses these injustices through the lens of the non-profit industrial complex (NPIC), "a set of symbiotic relationships [institutions, agencies, organisations, foundations] that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology…". In essence, Smith (2007, pp. 8-10) argues that the NPIC serves to negotiate dissent from charities or social justice movements that do not conform to the officially held views or dominant ideological frameworks. Any organization that challenges, deviates or critiques these dominant views and belief systems, are dealt with by either ostracising them (depriving them of resources such as funding) or by coercion. Typically, the charities/social justice movements that resist and challenge these dominant and conservative views, are left-wing and radical in orientation.

Without state funding or funding from the mainstream funders (big corporations or foundations, etc.), who are typically in alliance with the state, radical, non-conformist charities/social justice movements have limited survival chances. Funding, as well as other resources, tend go to the charities or social justice movements that reinforce the dominant, and typically state held definitions of what is a social issue/problem and how they should be dealt with. Moreover, much of the funding that does go to these charities or social justice movements does not filter down to the programs or services that would benefit the poor or disenfranchised. As a result, typically these efforts do not affect social change (Smith, 2007, p. 9).

To what extent this is applicable to the UK is open to debate and requires further exploration. However, Smith (2007) provides a strong case, making some very significant and valid points. Many parallels can be drawn with the UK and in particular in relation to funding bodies, both state-controlled and in the private sector (Aresti et al, 2016).

Considering this in conjunction with the other critiques outlined in this paper, I ask the question: where are our allies? Indeed, a rhetorical question, and this is exactly why unleashing the voice and the capacity of prisoners to speak up about their experiences themselves, is so very important and why I work to support this endeavour. If prisoners continue waiting on the change with little involvement or organization in it, then I believe we will be waiting for a very long time.

WHERE TO NOW?

It would appear that the only way to counter the current power dynamic is through the creation of a window to an alternative view and collective organising to advance *our* alternative perspective as prisoners. Hooks (1994, p. 6) asserted that identity politics emerge out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups, who have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures. Developing this, Gilchrist and colleagues (2010) argued that claiming shared identity allows people to enjoy positive affirmation of their experience, contribute to collective action and may open up new insights into how to gain opportunities in an unfair world, an observation conducive with that of the Convict Criminologist (Ross and Richards, 2003). Michel Foucault also recognised this in his works. In 1971, he supported the founding of the Groupe d'information sur les prisons (GIP) in France, which sought to create a framework for prisoners themselves to become visible in speaking out publicly about issues to do with prison, and to activate collective agency regarding what needed to change. Within this debate, Foucault was clear about "the indignity of speaking for others" (see https://paris-luttes.info/le-groupe-d-information-sur-les?lang=fr). The GIP's legacy is often regarded as the emergence of a new model of activism for prisoners, where prisoners are at the forefront of the debate, moving away from a vulnerable/powerless identity, to a new identity of influential actor, able to speak independently of an advocate. These were lessons that had been witnessed in the civil rights movement in the US in the 1960s and again, a notion conducive with that of the Convict Criminologist (Ross and Richards, 2003). GIP's mission statement included the following:

> We want to break the double isolation in which prisoners are trapped:
> through our investigation, we want them to be able to talk to each other,

to share what they know, and to communicate from prison to prison and from cell to cell. We want inmates to address the population, and for the population to speak to them. These individual experiences, these isolated rebellions must be transformed into a shared body of knowledge, and into coordinated action… our investigation is not designed to amass facts, but to increase our intolerance, and transform it into active intolerance (Brich, 2008, p. 26).

GIP's membership included prisoners, former prisoners, families of those in prison and a mixture of professionals, who were prepared to work together on systemic change, within a theoretical framework that acknowledged the power and privilege of the non-prisoners who worked within it. The work of GIP was to move beyond simplistic storytelling of individual experience, which limits prisoners to observing only on their personal narrative of powerlessness in the face of the system, to moving prisoners as a collective, to speak on wider intersecting issues of social inequalities. Writing in the introduction to Serge Livrozet's (1973, p. 6) book, *De la Prison à la révolte*, Foucault spoke out about the dominance of the prisoner storytelling narrative as strengthening the belief that a criminalized person cannot have thoughts, as she or he may only have recollections. His or her memory alone is accepted, but not their ideas. This insight and experience shifts the focus of voice work away from narrative storytelling as an imperative and requires more strategic presentation of the experience to disrupt thinking.

More recently, Maruna (2017) has written about how future research into desistance needs to be focused on understanding its new iteration as a social movement challenging societal norms. Most importantly, challenging researchers to collaborate with newly emerging prisoner activists with the adage "nothing for us without us" applies to researchers in this sector. For Maruna (2017, p. 13), "Thinking of desistance in this way shifts the lens away from individual journeys to a much more collective experience, drawing attention to the macro-political issues involved in crime, justice and reintegration".

THE CALL TO ACTION

This paper has outlined the need for those advocating on behalf of prisoners to ensure that their voice is central to the debate on prisons and penal

policy. It has argued that these advocates need to reflect on their position of privilege and power, and how it serves to silence the prisoner's voice. Advocating is not enough! Prisoners need to be visible in the debate.

It has also questioned the role of statutory and non-statutory organizations and institutions working in the criminal 'justice' sector, arguing that they play a significant role in reproducing dominant, yet damaging, wider public discourses, beliefs, and knowledge about prisons and prisoners. We have argued that much of this misrepresents the lived realities of prisoners and functions to oppress, control, and marginalize certain communities and populations. Relative to this, we have argued the need for critical criminologists to shift away from the typical focus on 'crime and its control' to the broader issue of social harm and human rights violations. As noted, a social harm approach is better placed to understand how wider structural and institutional processes directly inform and impact the criminal 'justice' system. Moreover, we need to consider how wider social, economic and political arrangements serve to criminalize and oppress certain populations and communities.

Given this, this paper is a call to action and seeks to address the absent voice in the penal debate. It is a call to those directly affected by the criminal 'justice' system, current and former prisoners, and the advocates working on their behalf to rally together and unite.

This discussion sets the scene for the launch of the Prisoner Policy Network on 13 July 2018 at HMP Grendon. It is an independent network of prisoners hosted by The Prison Reform Trust that can move beyond storytelling and beneficiary involvement activities to establishing prisoners as vital stakeholders in any discussions, deliberations or political decisions about prisoners. It seeks to act as a mechanism by which a collective voice of prisoners can be heard, and establish a platform for the seeds of a collective movement and agenda for change.

The three founding members of British Convict Criminology (Andreas Aresti, Sacha Darke and Rod Earle) were present, as were other members of BCC. Attendees also included current prisoners from HMP Springhill and HMP Grendon, former prisoners, activists, and senior staff of voluntary and charitable organizations working in the sector. Sir Edward Garnier, former Attorney General, and representatives of the prison service were also there.

The Network set out its ambition for prisoners to come together in a collective voice. It set out a first call to action for the membership to discuss

broadly, "what incentives work in prison", as this is a current feature of current government policy. The question remained open for contributions until October 2018. The response from prisoners was immense with over 2,000 contributors through letters, phone calls, emails and focus groups in prison. Several prisoner councils responded on behalf of the prisoner population. Many user-led organizations nationally responded to the call for collective voice and over 24 organizations submitted evidence. A comprehensive data base of members has been established and regular updates as to activity and further plans have been communicated directly to prisoners as individual members, as well as through use of *Inside Times*, the prison newspaper, and National Prison Radio.

The inaugural report of the PPN is due to be published in December 2018, with a far-reaching dissemination process envisaged to establish the PPN as a collective voice of prisoners in the debate. It is a beginning, but it requires the energy of collaboration, an energy that includes a willingness to move beyond current assumptions and knowledge, and hence a need for unlearning, and the energy to explore and discover new knowledge. It requires a revitalized vision and shift to action, ultimately to an uncharted destination if not now, then when?

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