Convict Criminology and Community Collaboration: Developing a Unique Program to Empower Vulnerable Youth in Idaho

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a debate among those who work with the young adult criminal justice population about how best to serve them. There are various therapeutic programs, behavior modification techniques, and program interventions used to help shape and manage this young adult population.

Nearly four decades ago, Martinson (1974) proclaimed that nothing done in corrections has any meaningful impact on criminal behavior and recidivism. This influenced a defensive posture among juvenile justice practitioners attempting to provide safe and secure environments that young adults need to grow. In some communities, practitioners wanted to remove the at-risk young adults and punish them harshly for antisocial criminal behavior. This negative approach remains influential today in the form of 'tough on crime' policies (including among juveniles) and trying youthful offenders as adults. On the other hand, scholars have subsequently realized that there are principles of structured programming that can effectively reduce recidivism.

As part of our work we asked the following question: "Can at-risk young adults who are sentenced to an intensive supervised release program at the Bannock County Youth Development Center (BCYDC) in Idaho use an intervention program informed by the Convict Criminology (CC) Perspective to make a transition from corrections to college?" In this paper, we discuss how an intervention program – whose design, plan and organization is informed by CC – is merged with a traditional program. Following a brief discussion on Stan Cohen's (1985) concept of *community* from his work, *Visions of Social Control*, we reflect on how the program was conceived and implemented, including preliminary observations from various stakeholders involved in this project. While stakeholders' observations are overwhelmingly positive, a thorough program evaluation has been planned and we will not know its effectiveness until that evaluation has been completed. Nevertheless, the preliminary observations included later in the paper are noteworthy.

TRADITIONAL PROGRAM: BANNOCK COUNTY YOUTH DEVELOPMENT CENTER

The BCYDC is a diversion program that provides a means to hold young adults accountable for their actions, offers a way for them to develop skills and ensures protection of the community through intensive supervision. This program is an alternative to youth being remanded to the custody of the Idaho State Department of Correction. The State of Idaho spends approximately $74,000 per year per youth offender in its standard institutions. In comparison, the total BCYDC program budget is only $100,000. The program includes approximately 20 youth clients at any given time who have been charged for either misdemeanors or felonies. Program participants are referred by the court or probation officer, may be male or female, and typically range between 12 and 18 years of age.

The program has a traditional design in that is has a point system to control conduct with four sequential phases: 1) orientation; 2) development; 3) competency; and 4) reintegration. Clients must complete tasks and develop skills in order to progress through the program. BCYDC includes educational, therapeutic, service-learning, job assignments and adventure activity components.

APPLYING CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH PROGRAMS

While CC has included a number of prominent scholars who have successfully made the transition from incarceration to higher education, most notably John Irwin, there remains a salient need to help many youth progress from corrections to college. Stronger educational programming, social mentoring and opportunities to engage in pro-social activities can connect youth to community, thus facilitating a potential successful transition from juvenile corrections to higher education.

CC offers a humane and empowering approach to developing youth programs. It recognizes the legitimacy of diverse experiences and perspectives among multiple stakeholders, including youth. In other words, it gives youth a voice and encourages their participation in the broader corrections dialogue. CC promotes cooperation among youth, corrections, colleges and universities, and various community partners that can, by working together,

create new and effective programs (see Richards and Ross, 2001; Ross and Richards, 2002, 2003, 2009; Richards *et al.*, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2009; Rose *et al.*, 2010a, 2010b). Through this process, "juvenile delinquency" can be deconstructed and reconstructed, and intensive supervision can be modified to highlight growth-oriented experiences and youth development.

Burnett's Personal Statement of Purpose

For the first author of this article, CC has always meant that one should use his or her voice to address the problem where young people are removed from schools to be locked up in juvenile prisons. He asserts that it is better to process youth through the school system. Ross and Richards' (2003, pp. xvii-xxii) statement that "the failure of criminologists to recognize the dehumanizing conditions of the criminal justice system and the lives of those defined as criminal" motivated the author to want to make a difference. When released from prison in 2002, he realized that he was part of what Arditti and McClintock refer to in *Voices* as the disadvantaged and marginalized minorities controlled by the criminal justice system (see http://www.convictcriminology.org/voices.htm). He also realized that he was part of "soft-line" social control outlined in Stanley Cohen's (1985) *Visions of Social Control*.

Such a position is where the state roots social control in community-based approaches and conventional social boundaries. From his experience in community corrections, the first author had an inside view and decided early in reentry that his contribution would be to let his experience inform the design and critique, enlightenment and contribution to meaningful programming within the "soft-line" system. Within this context, he wanted to provide individuals with strategies of empowerment to break out of the cycle of "soft-line" control, namely an education strategy. CC taught him to challenge the idea that a person's personality traits, level of self-esteem, or moral character can be determined by referral to the fact that they have been convicted of a crime or spent time in prison.

Education, the insider perspective, and the use of ethnography all influenced the program described in this paper. Within the education context, CC encouraged the first author to reach out to and work with others the way that Steve Richards, Annette Kuhlmann, Chris Rose, Tracy Andrus, Rick Jones and others had worked with him. They instilled a desire to improve the conditions and opportunities of others in transition toward personal growth. As reflective of this desire that was cultivated through CC

mentoring, the first author decided to train his students as mentors to help young adults transition from corrections to college.

Program Roots and Convict Criminology

Richards *et al.* (2008) depict the CC Perspective as a proposal of new and less costly strategies that are more humane, provocative and affective approaches to criminology. CC has influenced the research design and implementation of this program, as well as the analytical understanding of the juvenile justice system by: 1) providing an alternative approach to traditional juvenile justice; 2) providing an understanding of victimology and constitutive criminology; 3) drawing on theoretical developments in criminology; 4) making use of perspectives from the inside; and 5) emphasizing the centrality of ethnography.

At a time that the taxpayers are calling for tightening of governmental budgets, the Idaho State University (ISU) BCYDC partnership is working to reduce youth criminal recidivism and help them to become productive citizens in the community. ISU students use creativity and effort to provide services to the mentees that will give them the academic skills they will need to succeed in college.

Victimology and Constitutive Criminology

The authors recognize the importance of including multiple voices and nurturing compassion in the attempt to reach out to and empower the youth involved in the program. Early in the process, a site visit to the BCYDC was scheduled and the ISU representatives listened to the youth express their experiences, needs, hopes, goals and dreams. This opportunity was used to hear the message of this oppressed, marginalized and victimized group of youth to inform the program design (Richards and Jones, 1997, 2004). Acknowledging the importance of these messages allowed the ISU mentors to empower the mentees.

Theoretical Developments in Criminology

The authors seek to enlighten the public discourse on juvenile programs, deconstruct juvenile delinquency, reconstruct intensive supervision to highlight youth development, and to give voice to the people who have the best interests of growth-oriented experiences of youth at heart. The program is rooted in post-modernism and post-structuralism, in the

sense that the participants are encouraged to think beyond the status quo cognitive-behavioral restructuring, which is based on the traditional assumptions of knowledge that look at youth through a deficit lens instead of through humanistic eyes. The program seeks to foster critical thinking and transformation so that new knowledge can inform new behavior.

Additionally, as a result of using a multiplicity of perspectives, the partnership brought in multiple voices, narratives and discourses (Ferrell, 1998). Post-modernism helps to situate the participants in a context that helps to understand these youth as products of the power that seeks to limit their behavior, exclude their voices and marginalize their hopes. Also, using post-modern theory helps them to overcome social inequality through developing human relationships to deal with the concepts of difference (Carrington, 1998).

Perspectives from the Inside

The first author's ex-con background fits into the program as an authentic voice from his experience and perspective. Based on his own standpoint merged with his academic background, he was determined to help these youth progress from corrections to college the way he did. At the same time, he sought to enlighten the public discourse about the current state of carceral issues of youth. This is important because in the world of the youthful offender, the definitions and treatment of delinquency are often informed and maintained by the self-interests of administrative criminologists, who directly benefit from dominant responses to crime and approaches to penality.

Centrality of Ethnography

Both the authors have a practical understanding of juveniles and comprehend their lived experiences, as well as abstract knowledge of the criminal justice machinery that informs what is missing from treating juveniles. Burnett and Williams employ the unique research method of giving voice to the juveniles and their ISU student-mentors, and by tapping into their creative expression through journal entries and visual ethnography. The authors meet the juveniles on their own turf (BCYDC) to observe, interact, serve, empower and to invest in the subjects' personal growth, and as Richards and Ross (2001, p. 185) say, "to get a little dirty by violating social distance and value-free sociology, which is committing an academic felony".

ISU Sociology Program

Despite its admirable purposes, the BCYDC program, like many such programs across North America, needed more resources. It was recognized that trained ISU student mentors could provide individualized vocational and personal counseling, tutoring, service-learning, and participation in social, cultural and artistic activities within the structure of BCYDC.

The first author developed an elective sociology course wherein ISU students could receive three credits for participating in the program. BCYDC staff provided classroom instruction on youth behavior, common legal issues, center rules and regulations, safety issues, substance abuse and violence. Because many youth at BCYDC may have psychological issues concerning abandonment (addressed in therapy), it was important that ISU students trained as mentors were committed to the partnership. The university students provide essential leadership and stability in the lives of youth who they mentor. ISU faculty and BCYDC administrators met regularly to resolve concerns as they occurred, and to make sure the partnership was functioning smoothly.

BCYDC PROGRAM TARGET AREAS

BCYDC targets four major areas for youth development: 1) accountability; 2) social competence; 3) citizenship; and 4) integrity. Client goals are set in each of these areas that will help youth transition to community reintegration and crime-free living. Accountability is fostered by using case management plans that provide individual learning experiences, as well as demonstrate care and concern for each client. An important objective of BCYDC is for youth to increase their capacity for adapting to change in healthy and flexible ways. A client code of conduct and service-learning projects are used to facilitate social competence. Social competence is viewed as the range of skills that help youth integrate their feelings, thoughts, and actions in order to achieve social and interpersonal goals (Caplan *et al.*, 1992; Weissberg *et al.*, 1989). Besides modeling these skills, ISU student mentors engage in the following actions: a) teach youth appropriate information and skills; b) foster pro-social and health enhancing values and beliefs; and c) create environmental supports to reinforce the real-world application of skills. BCYDC promotes citizenship through education, cognitive-behavioral therapy and pre-vocational programs. Youth develop skills concerning their

self-talk and general self-awareness, reading and responding to social cues, making decisions and solving problems, understanding the perspectives of others, and acquiring a positive outlook toward life. The foundation for progression through the program phases noted in a previous section is integrity. In order to progress through the program youth must learn how to make good choices, as well as take responsibility for their decisions and actions. The partnership used three distinct group pairings to enhance programming. Student mentors were trained and assigned to assist youth with education, vocational experiences or service learning.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS AND PERSONAL REPORTS OF SUCCESS

The BCYDC and ISU have partnered for over a year now and feedback from all stakeholders is very positive. Bannock County judges and corrections officials, as well as BCYDC administrators and staff, have been delighted to have help and support from ISU students and faculty. Although a formal program evaluation is underway, BCYDC strongly believes that the partnership is helping youth make therapeutic progress faster and more thoroughly. If this observation proves to be correct, then we would expect the partnership to be effective in lowering costs due to both reductions in recidivism and the longer periods of time that youth would spend in typical programming. ISU faculty members are grateful to BCYDC for helping train university students for work in corrections and providing an important learning opportunity for students to gain experience in applied sociology.

BCYDC Youth

The BCYDC-ISU partnership now has its first youth client that successfully progressed from "crime to college". This client was originally court ordered to the BCYDC due to an aggravated battery charge stemming from stabbing a family member. The client progressed through the phases of the program, learned valuable life skills and completed a high school education. He is now enrolled as a university student at ISU, and based on an application and interview process is eligible for scholarships in his first academic year. He will work with the ISU Center for New Directions to develop a university education and career plan, and counselors and faculty will support this ISU

student in achieving continued academic success. Regarding his youth program experience, this client reported:

> When I first came to BCYDC, I came out of the detention center with anger issues. I was thinking the whole time that I didn't want to be here […] Four months later I acquired my GED by studying hard and following the goals that were given to me by my probation officer […] While working on all of this, I was seeing a counselor for advice on helping me with my anger and family issues. A few months later, I decided to get enrolled in college […] I want to start by getting my Bachelor of Arts and majoring in psychology to get a job as a counselor. YDC has changed my life.

A female participant in the BCYDC program recently completed her high school education. She reported:

> This program has helped me to be more assertive and self-driven toward my goals. Setting goals every week motivates me to complete each step, and by doing so, ultimately moving closer to the main goal itself […] When I knew what I needed to do for that week, it made me work harder to achieve the goal because I knew exactly what I needed to do. Now that I have my GED, my biggest priority right now is getting a job […] I'd like to eventually get a degree in something, but right now I want to be able to support myself and my son. All in all, this place has really helped me turn my life around. Thank you to all of the BCYDC staff and the interns [ISU student mentors].

ISU Student Mentors

Self-reports from ISU student mentors have also been positive. Several of these college students shared how they learned the value of individualized mentoring of youth in correctional programs. Many also discovered personal insights about themselves through the helping process. A non-traditional student majoring in childhood education reported: "I have learned how important community involvement can be. I also have learned the importance of giving our youth real-life experiences". A non-traditional student majoring in sociology added, "I have learned more about who I am and what I truly care about. I care about people. I care about bettering society. And, through this class I have learned that bettering society is an

attainable goal, working one step at a time, one day at a time, one person at a time". A traditional student in the ISU Criminal Justice Program reported how the class impacted her:

> I have learned more about myself this past year than I have in my entire career as a student at ISU. I learned that just being there with the mentees makes a difference, whether we are sitting with them helping them to write a paper or helping them sew sock monkeys. Every ounce of our effort has been rewarded. I have learned patience and humbleness. I think that working with a diverse group of people has helped us all grow in a positive way.

CONCLUSION

CC welcomes and seeks to legitimize a variety of voices and perspectives, and promotes creativity and collaboration. It is connected with social justice and empowering individuals and communities. In our view CC is not only a critical, intellectual approach to criminology (a way of understanding), but it is a process of being actively involved in helping to make positive changes in people's lives, both individually and collectively as a way of practice. It seeks solutions that benefit all people.

The partnership that has been developed and described herein is rooted in a CC Perspective. There were significant challenges in developing the BCYDC-ISU partnership. Of course, all correctional systems function within existing policies, regulations and frameworks. These structures may vary from place to place in conduciveness to establishing potential partnerships, as well as the ability to develop innovative strategies and programming. Nevertheless, it is important to discuss possibilities for improved programming in terms of common needs and values. BCYDC leaders and staff were exceptional in their desire for considering creative new ways to promote positive changes in the lives of the youth in their custody and the community.

Another significant challenge in building the partnership involved helping ISU student-mentors understand the important needs of BCYDC youth and to help motivate them to become actively involved. Put differently, a major challenge was, and still is, changing the immediate college student culture from a place of observation and passivity to one of action and direct involvement. This is an important trade off in that it is easy

to run a traditional program, but an initiative like this requires a lot of work, energy, effort and time. Also, getting the needed training, synchronicity and commitment requires a lot of encouragement, empowerment, and mediation. This process has taken considerable time and patience from ISU faculty, as well as BCYDC administrators and staff. Nevertheless, significant benefits are starting to be realized.

Although formal evaluation of this partnership is forthcoming, the primary contribution of this paper is providing a description of the development of a symbiotic partnership built from CC principles that can facilitate youth transition from "crime to college". Documenting this important process provides valuable practical insights into how such programming may be further developed. We applaud the CC approach and believe that there is a current need to expand its application within communities. Hopefully, our work described here is a positive example of how such expansion can be realized.

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