

# **Beyond the Ivory Tower: The Need for Collective Activism in Convict Criminology**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this essay, I argue that the Division of Convict Criminology must reject the academic status quo by engaging in collective activism. Academia convinces scholars that the primary goal of their work is individual accolades with little regard for creating substantive change in the world. In doing so, academia exploits marginalized populations, like convicts, by pillaging data while offering little meaningful assistance to marginalized groups. As Convict Criminology continues to expand its reach within academia, we have a duty to reject the academic status quo by adopting the scholarvist model that advocates for scholarship coupled with activism. It is our responsibility to combat the structural violence inherent in both academia and the criminal injustice system. This essay is a call for collective activism that targets the foundations of oppressive social institutions. The time has come for us to move beyond public statements and towards policy change that creates a more equitable society for current and future convicts.

“The sooner we create our vision of all we desire, set our intention to implement it together, and put our individual capacities into collective action, the greater our chances of success”.

– Elisabet Sahtouris (2006, p. 41)

## **INTRODUCTION**

The above quote from renowned biologist Dr. Elisabet Sahtouris effectively summarizes the main argument of this essay. I posit that there is a need for collective activism within American Convict Criminology with a specific focus on the newly developed Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) of the American Society of Criminology (ASC). In 2020, Convict Criminology (CC) in the United States became a formally recognized division of ASC. In doing so, the board members and the founding members of the collective previously known as Convict Criminology sought to establish a space to support and uplift convict scholars and other justice-impacted scholars.<sup>1</sup> The development of DCC was the first step in creating a more equitable and accepting academic space for scholars with direct criminal justice

experience. However, it cannot be the last step. In this essay, I issue a call to action to all members and supporters of DCC. I posit that there is dire need to engage in collective activism.

Although many members of DCC are in the trenches fighting for the rights of marginalized persons, individual efforts are insufficient to create substantive change at the institutional and structural-level. Collective activism, rather than individual efforts, is required to break the chains that bind convicts to oppressive institutions. DCC must avoid becoming another complacent division that focuses on individual-level academic accolades. The Division must actively strive to demand and implement necessary changes so that future convict-scholars and justice-impacted scholars do not face the same discrimination experienced by the founding members of Convict Criminology in the United States.

### **ACADEMIC STATUS QUO**

Academia trains us to become obedient to the publish or perish model that measures a scholar's value by the number of publications they have in top-tier journals (Vossen, 2017), rather than the impact they have on knowledge or humanity (Ortiz, 2021). Academia also teaches us to strive for academic accolades, including professional awards. However, top academic accolades are largely given to positivist, quantitative research because top-tier journals in criminology rarely publish qualitative or critical research (Copes et al., 2015; Tewksbury et al., 2010). Academics are also beholden to government grants to fund their research, which limits the use of critical theoretical or methodological frameworks in proposed studies (Ortiz, 2021). Thus, in striving to win academic accolades, the field pushes scholars away from critical research that critiques systems of oppression and towards research that perpetuates the status-quo in society. Adherence to this academic status quo is problematic for many reasons.

While publishing in top-tier journals and obtaining research grants ensures that we individually have illustrious and successful careers in criminology, we must acknowledge that these goals are largely meaningless in the fight for social justice. The reality is that most of our published works are never read by the stakeholders that have the power to create change both in academia and the world beyond the ivory tower. Our publications are individual achievements that distract us from the tireless

work of developing a more inclusive world for marginalized people and scholars. The year 2020 is a prime example of how academic scholarship rarely translates to social change.

In 2020, following the brutal murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor we witnessed large scale performative allyship from institutions and individual scholars. Between March and August 2020, nearly every university and corporation in the United States issued public statements regarding the Black Lives Matter movement and the need to honor diversity. These public statements were not heartfelt commitments to combat structural issues, but rather served to assuage academic and corporate guilt without creating any real substantive change. Based on the return to silence on the part of most academic institutions, it appears they may believe that they solved racism with their public statements and life can return to normal in 2022. The status quo remains intact and marginalized people continue to be oppressed. Nothing has changed except the news cycle. If 2020 taught us anything, it should be that we need to reject the social and academic status quos. This is the call I issue to the Division of Convict Criminology.

## **REJECTING THE STATUS QUO**

As a newly formed division of ASC and a division comprised of convict and justice-impacted scholars who experience marginalization both within and outside of the Ivory Tower, it behooves us to not only reject but directly challenge the academic status quo. We must engage in a deeper conversation that grapples with several moral questions. Why did we become a division? Was it to carve out a “new” space that demands conformity to the academic status quo? Or did we aim to challenge and disrupt the institutions that oppress us? The answers to these questions are imperative for determining how we move forward as a division. How are we going to be different from other divisions? How are we going to avoid becoming part of the problem?

The first step for DCC should be the development of clear goals for the next dime (Jones, et al., 2009). Current DCC members must begin to envision the legacy of the New School of Convict Criminology (Richards, 2013). We must take an inventory of our division and begin to develop initiatives to achieve our goals. Of primary importance to the DCC should be increasing and supporting diversity within our division. The academy has

historically been an elitist institution that actively sought to exclude people of color, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and convicts (Boustani & Taylor, 2020; Kennelly et al., 1999; Pierce et al., 2014). The DCC must actively engage with methods of combating that exclusion. The founders of DCC have expressed their commitment to this endeavor. One need only look at the diversity of the inaugural board to see that commitment in action (Convict Criminology, 2020). Moreover, when the board debated how much to charge for membership dues, we decided that justice-impacted students should not take on additional financial burdens. Thus, student membership in DCC is free to all current students (American Society of Criminology, 2020). This inclusionary practice directly rejects the notion that divisions should remain focused on fundraising. As the DCC continues to progress and develop, we must remain committed to active inclusion for all persons. We should expand our initiatives to ensure not just diversity but equity in our division.

When I envision the future of DCC, I see a division that offers scholarships to convict scholars whose criminal records render them ineligible for other scholarships. I also envision a Convict Criminology journal where the works of convict and system-impacted scholars from undergraduates to full professors are not only published, but are made freely available to the public and all stakeholders. In doing so, I see the DCC shattering the walls of the Ivory Tower and giving knowledge back to the people, where it belongs. Perhaps my loftiest goal for DCC is the development of our own conference where registration fees are optional and virtual presentations are welcomed. A DCC conference would eliminate the legal and financial barriers that inhibit convict scholars and other marginalized groups from participating in academic conferences. For example, virtual options would alleviate issues surrounding travel visas for individuals with criminal records. Such inclusionary practices would help DCC members combat the structural violence they experience in academia. Although my vision may seem lofty and some may dismiss them as idealistic, I want to remind members that at one point forming the DCC was viewed as a lofty goal. We can create change within our division that radically transforms the lives of convict and system-impacted scholars if we dare to dream big. However, if we want to avoid merely perpetuating or replicating the academic status quo, our work must extend beyond our division and to the real-world. We must reject the academic status quo and concentrate our privilege and power on activism. I believe this is only possible if the DCC moves towards collective activism.

## **BECOMING SCHOLARVISTS THROUGH COLLECTIVE ACTIVISM**

Collective activism or collective action refers to when a group of people work in concert to challenge inequality, exclusion, and injustice to improve their collective social positions or experiences (Millward & Takhar, 2019). The term scholarvist combines the words scholar and activist, and refers to academics who prioritize using their scholarship and social capital to fight for social change (Green, 2018). In this section, I issue a call to action for collective activism as a mechanism for transforming DCC into a collective of scholarvists who reject the academic status quo. However, I want to first acknowledge our predecessors who worked tirelessly to carve out a space for convicts in criminology. I want to ensure that my words are not misconstrued as a dismissal of the foundational work written by scholars who fought to develop Convict Criminology within a field that actively rejects first-person narratives and autoethnographic research as ‘unscientific’. I am truly grateful for the over ten years of work that allowed for the formation of the DCC (see Jones et al, 2009 and Richards, 2013 for overviews of this work). John Irwin’s academic research (e.g. *The Felon*) and his role as a mentor for formerly incarcerated academics was pivotal to the formation of Convict Criminology. Still others like Jeffrey Ross, Charles Terry, Barbara Owen, and Stephen Richards provided a foundation for us to build upon. Their work was revolutionary and radical for its time, and I am truly grateful for the men and women who paved the road we find ourselves upon. However, now that we stand on a strong foundation, we must move beyond development and towards policy reform and abolition. As a Division we must be unafraid of academic retribution as we forge ahead in our collective battle for respect and empowerment. I acknowledge that those of us who are precariously employed or who fear retribution during tenure processes may be unable to join the battle at this time. However, those of us with career stability, including tenured members, must begin the work of developing our collective of activists.

There are substantial ways for the DCC to engage in collective activism. Of primary importance is demanding that academia and all its institutions Ban the Box (Craigie, 2020) on college admissions and employment applications to address the exclusion of scholars with criminal records (Stewart & Uggen, 2020; Ortiz et al., 2022). Again, I want to acknowledge

that many scholars including members of DCC have advocated for this policy change. In 2021, the DCC issued a statement calling on universities to Ban the Box, however, public statements are insufficient to create change without additional collective action on our part. The DCC should engage in a concerted effort to communicate directly with universities and colleges to demand this change. We could write letters, request meetings, contact politicians, and work directly with grassroots organizations that are fighting to change this policy (e.g. Unlock Higher Education). Collectively, we must shake the foundation of the Ivory Tower until its oppressive structure crumbles. We must demand change no matter the costs. We must move beyond the individual need to be successful and work towards making “good trouble” (Lewis, 2020). In American history, change has never occurred without rocking the proverbial boat.

The DCC should also fight to make our scholarship publicly available so that it can be used to create change. The fact that with few exceptions (e.g. *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*), we publish journal articles hidden behind paywalls is antithetical to who we are as a division. Every DCC member is here today because non-academics supported us along our journeys. We must remain cognizant of this fact so that we do not become complicit in academia. Knowledge belongs to the people, not to journal publishers and universities who profit from our marginalization. While I acknowledge the need for publications to ensure tenure, this does not preclude us also making that knowledge available in public. A simple method of ensuring our knowledge is publicly available is developing an online repository that contains one-page summaries of our research devoid of all the academic jargon and statistical charts. Such a repository could be shared with all members of the public including those in non-profit organizations, as well as public officials. In giving knowledge back to the people, we can move beyond academic accolades and towards a world where our research can make a difference.

Another area where DCC can begin to engage in collective activism is by rejecting academic elitism. Elitism permeates academia through financial barriers (Baum & Johnson, 2015), which at the graduate and faculty level includes professional organization membership fees, conference expenses, and publishing costs. DCC could begin to demand an end to these financial barriers, especially in the wake of the 2020 discussions of social justice. While this goal may seem unrealistic to those who are accustomed to

passively accepting the academic status-quo, I beg to differ. One collective way to challenge these fees is to boycott our engagement with journals and conferences whose financial fees serve to exclude marginalized persons. A conference that has modeled inclusivity is the *New Directions in Critical Criminology Conference* that is free to all attendees. We could also issue public challenges to membership fees in organizations like ASC especially given the financial issues ASC faces in the wake of 2020. Why should one board of people, which has historically lacked diversity among its ranks, maintain control over our field? Why should justice-impacted scholars whose voices have been excluded from most conversations be beholden to an oppressive institution? I acknowledge the irony of both being a division of ASC and advocating for a boycott of its conference, however, consumer activism has a long history in the United States that led to radical changes in other social institutions (Glickman, 2009). Through collective consumer activism we can demand change that will alleviate the suffering of other convicts and marginalized scholars.

The DCC should also work to advocate for young scholars whose voices are marginalized and dismissed. In 2021, I witnessed another Twitter dispute in which a doctoral student at a top ten program in our field had her voice and experiences dismissed because she was ‘just’ a student. Furthermore, when I originally proposed a collected volume on gangs, the reviewers disagreed with our inclusion of graduate student pieces because they were ‘not experts’. As Convict Criminologists, we must reject these elitist views of who is an expert and whose voice is worthy of acknowledgment. Many of the young scholars in DCC have more expertise on imprisonment and the carceral system than most self-proclaimed correctional experts. We must strive to highlight, promote, and support research by young scholars by creating spaces for undergraduate and graduate students. For example, at the 2017 ASC Conference I developed an undergraduate researcher panel where two of my students presented analyses they had conducted. This experience was transformational in the lives of both students, one of whom has now completed a master’s degree and is applying to doctoral programs. Another way that we could promote and support young scholars is by developing an online repository where they can share their work. My institution publishes both an undergraduate and graduate journal annually. By creating a space for these young scholars to share their

work, we help them become part of our collective action. Lastly, I believe we should support young scholars by developing a fund for those who want to attend conferences, but are unable to do so because of financial restraints. At our 2021 business meeting at the ASC Conference, the DCC board voted to establish an Early Career Travel scholarship and I have personally committed to contributing funds annually so that convict and system-impacted students have the same opportunities as privileged students.

Beyond academia, the DCC should strive to engage in political activism at the state and national level. We must use our social, political, and human capital to challenge oppressive policies especially within the criminal justice system. For example, we can engage in financial resistance by refusing to support institutions and corporations who support and maintain the status quo. Again, I know that some will dismiss this call as unrealistic or unlikely to create change. I disagree wholeheartedly. One need only look at the Montgomery Bus Boycott to see the power of financial violence committed against oppressive institutions (The History Channel, 2021; Glickman, 2009). A single voice will be drowned out, but thousands of voices cannot be silenced. Moving beyond boycotts, we can develop relationships with and support organizations run by formerly incarcerated individuals. For example, we could partner with Just Leadership USA, All of Us or None of Us, and other organizations that are actively fighting to address the needs of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals. We can also work to elect or remove politicians from office especially at the national level. We are the experts in corrections and the criminal justice system. They can ignore one of us, but collectively we can stir the foundation of the system that has taken so much from so many of us.

Regardless of which strategies we implore or which problems we choose to tackle, we must remember the power of collective action. A strategy in war is to divide armies so that they are weakened and easier to conquer. While I do not want to minimize the severity of war by drawing an analogy with our battle in academia, I do want us to remain cognizant of the fact that the easiest way to conquer a people is to divide them. Said differently, “The most common way people give up their power is by believing they have none” (Alice Walker quoted in Martin, 2004, p. 173). Our power to bring about change and to dismantle the oppressive structures in academia and society can only be manifested when we unite to combat the issue.



## CONCLUSION

The Division of Convict Criminology has the social and political capital to create change if we reject the academic status quo and envision a division comprised of scholarvists who demand change and work tirelessly to create a better world for convict scholars, system-impacted scholars, and marginalized scholars. The onus is on us, the convict criminologists, to fight back against the system at all costs. We cannot wait for academia to cut the chains that bind us to its oppressive structure. Academia does not accept convicts as experts because our presence is a direct challenge to the institution's power. Academia did not willingly grant us admission to its elitist Ivory Tower; we overcame the structural violence inherent in academia to penetrate the heavily guarded gates that sought to exclude scholars like us. We infiltrated criminology and for twenty-five years the field has sought to discredit and dismiss Convict Criminology. Our cause cannot be demanding respect or acceptance within oppressive institutions like academia. Our cause must be dismantling these institutions and envisioning a space where all are welcome not because they conform, but precisely because they refuse to conform. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi, "*First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win*".

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> While original members of Convict Criminology all identified as convicts, within our current membership some individuals prefer to use terms like system-impacted because either the term is perceived as less stigmatizing or the term is inclusive of persons who did not serve time within a correctional facility. For a full discussion of language within Convict Criminology, see Ortiz and colleagues (2022).

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