

**Every Picture Tells a Story:
Framing and Understanding the Activism
of Convict Criminology**
Jeffrey Ian Ross and Grant Tietjen

ABSTRACT

Convict Criminology (CC) consists of three major initiatives. Although scholarship and mentoring have been dominant activities, understanding the activism/policymaking of CC is less well known. This paper reviews the primary United States based activities that CC has done in this area and suggests what it needs to do to assist the interests of individuals who are behind bars and those who are formerly incarcerated, as well as work towards the mission of the CC organization as a whole. Some of the areas where CC has participated politically include the news-making we have done (i.e. interviews with the news media) and the periodic statements released on social media by the American Society of Criminology's Division of Convict Criminology. This paper will also consider the notion of praxis as applied to CC, in that some members consider their research, public speaking, and mentorship to be political actions worthy to be considered political activity.

INTRODUCTION

Most people are uncertain about what politics and political activity encompasses. For them, the political process primarily involves either voting or attending a protest (Ginsberg, 1981). However, there are numerous behaviors that the public can engage in that can have a political and social impact, including letter-writing, social media activities, donations to political campaigns, etc. (Hirsch, 1993; Doherty et al., 2015; Rhodes et al., 2018). When ostensibly apolitical organizations, like those built around scholarship, formally and informally engage in political activities, things become complex. The boundaries between scholarship and activism may be fuzzy. Moreover, there is a tendency to associate activism only with left-wing politics. This perception, however, is incorrect. Clearly, activism exists across the entire political spectrum and can be observed in all major academic fields.

Over the past 25 years, Convict Criminology (CC) (Ross & Richards, 2003) – variously called a group, organization, theoretical approach, or network – “recognized that the convict voice was typically ignored in current

research and policymaking in the fields of criminology and criminal justice in general, and corrections in particular” (Ross, 2021, p. 606). Although none of the previous critiques of CC (e.g. Larsen & Piché, 2012; Newbold & Ross, 2013; Belknap, 2015) have pointed out that Convict Criminology has not engaged in enough activism, there has been some internal discussion about the need to do more in this area.

Some of the work of CC encompasses what some scholars (e.g. Uggen & Inderbitzin, 2010; Loader & Sparks, 2010) call Public Criminology. This involves attempts to bring the findings of criminological research to audiences beyond academic criminologists. Part of the mission of CC is to engage with the public, politicians, and the news media. This is done not only in the classroom and conferences, but engaging with a variety of media, by serving as sources for articles that reporters are writing, consenting to be interviewed, and writing op eds.

To provide a better understanding of the role of activism, the authors, both insiders to the Convict Criminology network and Division of Convict Criminology, reflect upon this important aspect of CC. We know that many people affiliated with the CC perspective have long been engaged in progressive-leaning political actions in support of CC in one way or another. It is important to critically examine this activity to take inventory of what members and supporters have done, where they have made contributions, and ways that improvement can be achieved. In sum, this paper will explore, but is not limited to, different political aspects of CC praxis (Aresti & Darke, 2016; Aresti, Darke, & Manlow, 2016; Cann & DeMeulenaere, 2020; Smith, 2020; Smith & Kinzel, 2020). It primarily reviews and contextualizes CC activist activities in the United States.

WHAT IS ACTIVISM? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY?

To begin, a handful of scholars (e.g. LeBel, 2007, 2008, 2009; Ross, 2018) have noted that many formerly incarcerated individuals engage in activism. This work is both a way that they have dealt with stigma of a criminal conviction and have found their participation in this kind of activity is therapeutic, if not transformational.

Many professors and academic administrators consider activism by scholars to be controversial and even frowned upon this activity. Why? Academia lacks clear-cut guidelines about the role that activism can or should play in professors' activities. Also, some professors and administrators believe that scholars should spend more time doing research and teaching, rather than engaging in political activities. They do not want the proverbial boat to be rocked and possibly draw negative attention to universities. Most importantly, system-impacted scholars may find themselves more susceptible to status fragility when they engage in activism. Participating in activism is risky for many scholars, particularly those who occupy precarious positions of employment (Tietjen & Kavish, 2021).

Some professors argue that their scholarship and teaching is a form of activism and/or praxis (i.e. turning theory into action). On the one hand, the activism aspect of CC is not very well developed, frequently functioning as the most nebulous and neglected element of the organization (e.g. Smith, 2020; Smith & Kinzel, 2020). On the other hand, attempting to provide a widely agreed-upon definition of activism in CC may not be possible. Why? Merely considering activism actions is too simplistic. For example, the formation of CC, member engagement in universities, including bringing CC ideas to classrooms and faculty committees, and advocating for system-impacted students can be offered as evidence of activism.

Thus, the definition of activism within CC may depend on which Convict Criminologist you speak to. And there are a variety of different types of members from students to professors, from formerly incarcerated (FI) individuals to people who are considered to be allies of CC.

To begin with, some may consider the creation of Convict Criminology in 1997 and the establishment of the Division of Convict Criminology in 2020 as acts of activism in and of themselves. Much of the sentiment behind the founding of CC was born out of a desire to stand up against the bias that FI people experienced and to elevate the system-impacted voice in post-secondary education and scholarship circles. As Richards (2013, p. 377) explains:

Convict Criminology was born of the frustration ex-convict graduate students and ex-convict professors felt reading the academic literature on prisons. In our view, most academic textbooks and journal articles reflected the ideas of prison administrators, while largely ignoring what convicts knew about the day-to-day realities of imprisonment.

Thus, if someone identifies with CC and engages in scholarship from a CC perspective, this could also potentially be regarded as activism.

A Brief History of Activism in Convict Criminology?

Before the creation of the Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) within the American Society of Criminology (ASC), the CC group functioned as an informal network of scholars, students, academics, and activists in varying levels of engagement with CC advocacy. As new people joined the group and others left, the type and amount of activism changed. For example, in the early years, few of the members were interested in prison abolition, but now the CC network can count among themselves a handful who do.¹ Similarly, the new, diverse, and expanded membership of CC (Ross et al., 2016) is engaging more with underrepresented and marginalized populations (i.e. LGTBQIA, feminists, African-Americans, etc.) and the issues that directly impact these groups (e.g. Woodall & Boeri, 2014; Malkin & DeJong, 2019). In addition, CC activist work continues to broaden its focus, to also include foreign academics (from the United Kingdom, Italy, South America, and Australia) whose scholarship and other activities aligned with the CC mission (Ross & Darke, 2018; Ross & Vianello, 2021; Veigh Weiss, 2021). It may be helpful to identify the range of activities that CC members and the group in general engage in. Three specific categories of activism can be seen in the CC space: activist scholarship, mentorship as activism, and direct activism.

Activist Scholarship

The most common form of activism performed within CC might be called activist scholarship. CC's research functions as a form of scholarly activism that sheds light on the experiences of directly-impacted people, who are often disregarded or unseen in conventional criminological research (Smith & Kinzel, 2020; Tietjen, 2022). Due to the direct criminal justice contact of many CC scholars, they possess a unique potential to illuminate the value of lived experiences within the discipline of criminological research, which can lean heavily towards lifeless datasets. As Aresti and colleagues (2016, p. 6) explain:

Through its combining of insider and critical research action perspectives on penalty, it is our contention that Convict Criminology is well equipped

to challenge public misconceptions on prisons and prisoners. Further, by insisting on the need to privilege the knowledge and standpoint of those with firsthand experience of prison, convict criminologists find themselves in a strong position to resist institutional pressure to produce quantitative, hypothesis-testing (voodoo, positivistic) research.

While it might be easy for some critics of CC to argue that lived-experience scholarship is too biased and, thus, does not have any “activist” value within criminology, Newbold and colleagues (2014) point out that as long as the lived-experience perspective does not excessively influence the researcher’s objectivity, it can have a valuable place within a criminological study. Newbold and colleagues (2014), referencing Jewkes (2012), emphasize that the insider’s views can add “color, context, and contour” (p. 6) to scholarly findings.

One major question overshadows the others: does the scholarship get into the hands of the people who can best use it, including other relevant prison activists or policy makers and practitioners? There is no guarantee that even if these individuals are given the articles and books we write that they will read this material or do anything different with the information. Also keep in mind that scholarship is not limited to researching, writing, reviewing, and publishing, but it can also involve the transmission of knowledge at conferences, where attendees such as FI and justice-impacted individuals attend and discuss CC ideas, and can be motivated by them.

In short, the type of work that CC does can be considered “scholarivism” (Green, 2018). It is a collaborative-activist scholarship that involves credentialed experts whose activist work is based on rigorous, refereed research and scholarship. This might include Vianello’s research team’s work and her role in establishing/directing the M.A. in Critical Criminology program at University of Padova. In the spirit of CC, her involvement in these activities has created opportunities for system-impacted scholars to earn graduate degrees, as well as contribute research to the field of criminology and the like.

Mentorship as Activism

Since its formation CC has actively attempted to mentor people who are interested in this perspective. This includes individuals who are incarcerated (Darke & Aresti, 2016; Ross et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2015; Ross, 2019; Tewksbury & Ross, 2019) and those who are formerly incarcerated. Some of these people are considering starting a bachelor’s degree, while others

have academic positions. This mentorship includes conducting research together, collaboratively presenting findings on panels, co-authoring/co-editing papers for publication, and offering advisement on the academic job market, including writing letters of recommendation and providing feedback on departmental/college/university politics. We have performed many of the typical tasks pursued by undergraduate and graduate advisors. As testimony to this perspective, FI research participants in the study by Tietjen and colleagues (2021) spoke about the mentorship they received from CC mentors, who provided them with the tools and knowledge to “harness the value of his own lived experiences through higher education” (p. 7).

DIRECT ACTIVISM

The last type of activism involves the carceral-impacted scholars, students, and allies who not only created CC, but who through the reclaiming of the word *Convict* (Ortiz et al., 2022) took a stand against mainstream criminologists (whom many CC scholars saw as having been coopted by the criminal justice system) and the criminal justice system itself (Richards, 2001; Ross & Richards, 2003). More than just bringing the voices of those convicted of crimes to the criminological discipline, CC expanded the utility of the lived-experience autoethnography as a means to both augment and challenge the managerial scholarship of conventional criminology (Earle, 2021).

Direct activism also includes more concrete and less symbolic kinds of behavior. CC members have participated in this kind of activity. This engagement includes a number of major activities: writing news articles or op-eds (e.g. Kalica, 2021); functioning as credible sources for reporters who are writing stories about corrections- and CC-related research (e.g. Tietjen, 2017); participating on Institutional Review Boards (IRBs); delivering public lectures and periodic public statements from the ASC DCC executive; and participating in protest activism, supporting Black Lives Matter, critical resistance, and so on.

CC Engaging in Newsmaking Criminology

Over the past three decades, motivated in part by Barak’s (1988) classic article on news-making criminology, CC scholars have written op-eds about correctional issues and have become informed sources to the news media. They have actively made connections with reporters and editors of news

organizations, and with the increasing proliferation of blogs, podcasts, and the use of YouTube, they have disseminated information about the challenges of the criminal justice system in general and corrections in particular.

Participating as Prisoner Representatives on IRBs or Panels Examining Corrections

Some CC members have served on important committees that are relevant to this field. For example, in the 1990s Greg Newbold engaged in consulting research on the introduction of private prisons to New Zealand (Newbold & Smith, 1996). In 2008 and 2009, Jeffrey Ian Ross and Daniel Murphy served on the prisoner liaison committee for the National Institute of Health/ National Institute of Medicine task force, when these institutes were revising their protocols on testing practices involving prisoners (Ross & Hornblum, 2009). Miguel Zaldivar, an undergraduate formerly associated with of CC, served as a prisoner representative on an IRB with the University of Miami. From 2011 to 2013, Grant Tietjen served as an IRB representative for correctional research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Also, Francesca Vianello has served on numerous commissions charged with making recommendations for the reform of the Italian penitentiary system. Moreover, Daniel Kavish and Adrian Huerta serve as board members for the Carceral Studies Consortium (<https://architecture.ou.edu/csc/>) with Kavish serving as a Core Affiliate Board Member and Huerta as an Affiliate Board member. Although having formerly incarcerated individuals on IRBs may appear to be lip service or tokenism, in most cases CC members are able to assist these bodies do a better (more thoughtful) job.

Serving on Editorial Boards

A handful of CC scholars serve on the editorial boards of criminology/ criminal justice journals and/or actively participate in the peer-review process. This activity can assist these journals when other editorial board members or reviewers of papers are unfamiliar or poorly informed about CC, its history, and CC's body of scholarship.

The ASC Division of Convict Criminology Periodic Public Statements

Shortly after CC became an official division of the ASC, the Executive of the DCC, using Twitter and Facebook, released a number of statements. The

first was in reaction to the death of George Floyd, the 41-year-old African-American man who was killed by a white Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. This was followed a month later by a statement regarding the presence of COVID-19 in our country's correctional facilities, and the failure of state, local, and federal governments to properly respond. In January 2021, the DCC Executive launched its third public statement condemning the insurrection at the United States Capitol. Later in January 2021, the DCC also released a statement addressing Ban the Box.

Participating in Contemporary Progressive Activist Movements

Many members of CC are passionate about allied progressive activist causes. They frequently see connections between what CC does and these larger contemporary movements. They actively participate in activism surrounding Black Lives Matter, LGBTQIA rights, the rights of incarcerated and FI people, and the prison abolition movement – all of which bleed into the formal and informal discussions that CC members engage in. These issues arise during scholarly panels and at social events. Other activities include organizing and attending rallies and public meetings, and participating on diversity committees at various universities. On a related note, other engagement includes actively lobbying against the building of correctional facilities.

More concretely, CC has been identified as a good organization to serve as a “Haven for Radical Racial Exploration” (Wilson, 2021). Although “carcerality” is a central theme in *Convict Criminology*, is it not limited to incarceration experiences only. Rather, as Williams (2021, p. 13) argued, it is important to incorporate an intersectional lens when examining carceral experiences, to account for the “carcerality of Blackness” in the United States, institutions of higher education, and the criminal legal system.

Although these examples are important, they must also be placed in context. Just because a scholar is sympathetic to the *Convict Criminology* perspective and sits on an academic board, committee, and the like does not necessarily mean that they are engaging in activism. Instead, their activities may rightly be called service. The degree of meaningful participation is what is important here. Either way, they have the potential of engaging in activism, especially drawing attention to the convict voice, advocating for the rights of prisoners and ex-prisoners for example, and minimizing the resort to mass incarceration.

CONCLUSION

Summing up, CC incorporates activist scholarship, activism through mentorship, and direct activism. That being said, the activism in CC has varied over time, and individuals have struggled with how, when, and why they should engage in this activity. Why is this so? Formerly incarcerated CC members may struggle with personal traumas and stresses from incarceration and difficult pasts (Kirk & Wakefield, 2018), and are doing their best to work through the difficulties and the injustices they have endured, while learning to be more impactful/effective activists. Alternatively, they may be using activism in an attempt to “take ownership” of their trauma and stress (and thereby overcome it). On the other hand, members who are not formerly incarcerated or justice impacted may be unaware of the most effective way/s to engage in activism with this group.

Both types of individuals may have competing obligations. They may want to be scholars, instructors, and good citizens in their universities and communities, but they may also have parental or caregiver obligations. In addition, many people who have aligned themselves with CC are trying to complete a doctorate or earn tenure. In this case, the focus of their efforts is often on publishing a considerable amount of scholarship and focusing on teaching, and not protesting in the streets and joining the barricades in public demonstrations. With this in mind, the more established members of CC or other individuals and groups may be in a better position to engage in the activism we do. On the other hand, the newer and younger members of the CC group frequently find their way to the CC organization through their involvement in activism. In sum, it is a long and sometimes difficult learning curve for many CC members and those aligned with the mission to learn to effectively balance the two roles of activist and scholar.

CC needs to continue to engage with its respective audiences (i.e. fellow criminologists, students, community groups they are part of or interact with, and the news media). It is important to understand and reach out to the people new to the CC group who may be interested in the broad span of ideas relevant to corrections and reentry in general and CC in particular.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This trend may also be tied to the increased acceptance and popularity of the prison abolition concept.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jeffrey Ian Ross, PhD is a Professor in the School of Criminal Justice, College of Public Affairs, and a Research Fellow in the Center for International and Comparative Law, and the Schaefer Center for Public Policy at the University of Baltimore. He has been a Visiting Professor at Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany and the University of Padua in Italy. Professor Ross has researched, written, and lectured primarily on corrections, policing, political crime, state crime, crimes of the powerful, violence, street culture, as well as crime and justice in American Indian communities for over two decades. His work has appeared in many academic journals and books, including most recently the *Routledge Handbook of Street Culture* (2021) and *Convict Criminology for the Future* (2021). Ross is a respected subject matter expert for local, regional, national and international news media. He has made live appearances on CNN, CNBC, Fox News Network, MSNBC, and NBC. Additionally, Ross has written op-eds for *The (Baltimore) Sun*, the *Baltimore Examiner*, *The (Maryland) Daily Record*, *The Gazette*, *The Hill*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The Tampa Tribune*. Professor Ross is the co-founder of Convict Criminology, and the former co-chair/chair of the Division of Critical Criminology and Social Justice (2014-2017) of the American Society of Criminology. In 2018, Ross was given the Hans W. Mattick Award, “for an individual who has made a distinguished contribution to the field of Criminology & Criminal Justice practice”, from the University of Illinois at Chicago. In 2020, he received the John Howard Award from the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences’ Division of Corrections. The award is the ACJS Corrections Section’s most prestigious award, and was given because of his “outstanding research and service to the field of corrections”. In 2020, he was honored with the John Keith Irwin Distinguished Professor Award from the ASC Division of Convict Criminology. During the early 1980s, Jeff worked for almost four years in a correctional institution.

Grant E. Tietjen, PhD is an Associate Professor in the Criminal Justice Program at the School of Social Work and Criminal Justice at the University of Washington – Tacoma (UWT). He earned his PhD from the Department of Sociology at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln (UNL) in 2013. Dr. Tietjen has written, researched, and lectured on convict criminology, mass

incarceration, class inequality, criminological theory, and pathways to correctional/postcorrectional education. He has published in multiple peer reviewed papers in journals and edited volumes, including most recently in *Humanity and Society*, *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order*, and *Criminal Justice Studies*. He is the author of *Justice Lessons: The Rise of the System Affect Academic Movement*, with the University of California Press, slated for publication in 2024. Dr. Tietjen works closely with multiple System Affected Academic organizations, including Huskies Post Prison Pathways (HP3) at UWT and the Division Convict Criminology (DCC) in the American Society of Criminology (ASC). HP3 is a support program for formerly-incarcerated students. As part of UWT HP3, he is a member of the Steering Committee for this growing initiative. He has also been involved with the CC discipline since 2005, mentoring new CC members, and serving as the group's Co-Chair from 2017-2019. During this time, Tietjen has worked with many other dedicated CC members to strengthen the CC organization. In 2020, he was appointed as the inaugural Chair of the newly formed American Society of Criminology Division of Convict Criminology, and currently serves as DCC Vice-Chair. Dr. Tietjen can be reached for questions at grantt5@uw.edu.