Let the Convicts Speak: A Critical Conversation of the Ongoing Language Debate in Convict Criminology

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, some scholars publicly demanded that the newly established Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) of the American Society of Criminology (ASC) change its name. Critics asserted that the use of 'convict' caused further stigmatization of those of us with direct criminal justice experience. Unbeknownst to those critics, prior to the official formation of the DCC, the informal group known as Convict Criminology engaged in a decades long conversation about language and appropriate terminology. This paper responds to the critiques by exploring the power of language, summarizing various sides of the ongoing language debate, reviewing existing convict criminology research, and addressing structural violence within the academy. We conclude with a call to action that asks scholars to address the endemic structural violence in academia that perpetuates our oppression before attempting to police our language.

Introduction

In 2020, the informal group Convict Criminology (CC) officially became the Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) of the American Society of Criminology (ASC). ASC issued an official announcement of this new division in April 2020. As the members of DCC celebrated this achievement, which resulted from years of hard work, we received harsh criticisms. Academics, especially those with no direct criminal justice system experience (generally referred to as 'non-cons' in the CC discipline), issued demands that we change our name immediately. These academics proceeded to 'inform' us that we were oppressing ourselves by daring to use the term convict in our name. The attacks were at times hostile and infantilizing with some non-cons asserting that we, those with direct experience in the criminal justice system, did not understand the history of the word convict or its impact. Given social media's powerful impact on academic culture (Veletsianos, 2016) and society in general (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018), such criticisms leveled against marginalized groups within a public digital media forum are problematic as they can negatively impact professional careers.

The authors of this paper and others in DCC were astonished at how academics and non-academics, many of whom claim to be against oppression and stigmatizing language, were perpetuating our oppression by attempting to police our language. While some of these academics and non-academics were well-intentioned, they were unaware of the long history of CC and the decades of internal debate regarding the term convict. These academics and non-academics were more concerned with attempting to virtue signal and disseminating their opinions of us rather than listening to our rationale for keeping the term convict. They were convinced that they knew what was best for us convicts. Ironically, they could not see how their behavior was reminiscent of the oppressive strategies perpetrated by the criminal justice system that these academics claimed to be against.

This paper responds to these critiques and aims to begin an academic discussion on the power of language with a specific focus on the word convict. To begin, the authors directly address the critiques posed by non-cons on social media by exploring the power of language, the history of the use of convict within the CC discipline, and both sides of the debate regarding whether the term is appropriate or not. Moreover, we highlight how academia engages in structural violence that continues to result in the marginalization of us, the convicts. We conclude the paper with a call to action for academics to actively support measures to build more inclusive academic environments for system-impacted people by Banning the Box on college admissions and employment applications.

The power of language

'Convict' in convict criminology literature: the evolving word

To date, we do not know of any published article that directly critiques our use of the word convict. Yet, upon becoming a division of the American Society of Criminology, we have heard the grumblings, listened to complaints, made note of requests, and have received critical and/or inquisitive emails from leaders of certain organizations focused on our use of this term. Some of the criticism has come from individuals affiliated with Project Rebound, the very program that John Keith Irwin, the celebrated convict criminologist (and ardent supporter of the creation of Convict Criminology group), created to help jumpstart a prison-to-school pipeline. While that may seem ironic, their perspectives may also point to a generational and/or cultural shift in social perceptions of criminal justice. Yet, unlike Project Rebound, a group which was created with the focused purpose of helping

people who are formerly-incarcerated (FI) earn their bachelor's degrees, CC was formed as a network of FI critical criminological academics (and as an academic discipline). Such academics were speaking out against a conventional criminology they perceived as essentially functioning to support the institutions of the criminal justice system, while ignoring or marginalizing the voices of FI academics. Thus, the use of the term convict in CC was an indictment of mainstream criminology. Moreover, many academics who are demanding that we change our name have little to no knowledge of the long history of this debate within our group.

The use of the word convict has been a central component of CC, since the group's formal inception in the 1990s. In the original journal article that introduced CC to the world, 'Introducing the New School of Convict Criminology,' Richards and Ross (2001) describe convict criminologist members as, 'men and women who had worn prison uniforms and academic gowns, served years behind prisons walls and now as academics were the primary architects of the movement' (p. 181). In the Richards and Ross (2001) paper, the term convict is frequently used to describe incarcerated people, and the term ex-convict is used to describe formerly-incarcerated people. Yet, while providing a detailed account of the founding and primary components of the CC discipline, because their article is focused on the introduction of a new area of scholarship to criminology, it does not offer an analysis of the word convict, or directly address the etymological meaning of this word from a criminal justice or criminological perspective.

In another early CC paper, 'Convict Perspective on the Classification of Prisoners,' Convict Criminologists Richards and Ross (2003) use the word convict in the title, and throughout the paper when referring to incarcerated and ex-convict when discussing formerly incarcerated people. While not directly discussing the word convict, the authors do discuss the use of offensive language within research:

> Fair warning, beware any research that discusses men and women as "offenders" or "inmates." This is the official language used by prosecutors, judges, jailers, prison administrators, and the media to degrade and dehumanize. Even persons with better intentions use these words because they are so rarely challenged. Still, the words we use are important. (Richards & Ross, 2003, p. 244)

This indicates that there is an awareness that language matters within CC, and that CC authors view specific institutional criminal justice terms as offensive and dehumanizing to people impacted by the criminal justice system, yet do not define the term convict within this capacity.

The first paper in which CC seriously took a formal stance on language was, 'The First Dime: A Decade of Convict Criminology,' written in 2009 by convict criminologists Rick Jones, Jeffrey Ian Ross, Stephen Richards, and Daniel Murphy. The authors state that the CC group has, 'called for a careful review of stigmatizing language commonly used in criminal justice articles and textbooks' (Jones, Richards, Ross, & Murphy, 2009, p. 166). They also explain that the term offender is insulting and demeaning to people with direct system contact.[1] The term convict, presented as the preferable humanizing term is defined, 'as a person convicted of a crime' (Jones et al., 2009, p. 166), while the word offender strips individuals of their humanity. Further, the authors critique conventional academics for using the institutional language of prisons and law enforcement, pointing out that this practice furthers the stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and negative labeling of people with direct system contact.

Four years later, Richards moved the CC language dialogue forward in his 2013 article, 'The New School of Convict Criminology Thrives and Matures,' explaining that CC avoids using the institutional language of the criminal justice system. Similar to the Jones et al. (2009) paper, he reiterates that the discipline does not use degrading terms such as inmates or offenders, which are often used by prison administration and staff. CC instead uses the more acceptable terms of convict and/or prisoner. Yet, Richards (2013) demonstrates further awareness of the importance of humanizing language, which would seem to suggest even moving beyond using the term convict, in a pivotal statement: 'When possible, we will discuss prisoners as men or women; and defendants and prisoners as persons, men or women, convicted of criminal offenses' (p. 383). Emphasis is also placed on encouraging the reader, the criminal justice system, and the academy to recognize the sensitivity of the language issue within criminal justice. Richards also critiques the criminological and criminal justice academy which produces scholarship, textbooks, and college courses that use dehumanizing institutional and practitioner terms, which he refers to as criminal justice 'hate words.' Curiously, when referring to one of his previous papers (Richards, 1998) that provides examples of such criminal justice system hate words, Richards includes the word convict, listing, 'Criminal, convict, parolee, jailbird, murderer, rapist, thief, armed robber, burglar . . . ' (Richards, 1998, p. 142–143, 2013, p. 383). This specific inclusion within the hate word list, again asks the question of whether CC may potentially be moving beyond the use of convict.

Additionally, three years after Richards' 2013 paper, Ross, Jones, Lenza, and Richards (2016), in a paper discussing inclusivity within CC, give prominence to the concept that identifying as a convict criminologist is a personal decision, and is not a label or title involuntarily assigned to people by CC academics. Further, many academics choose to refer to themselves by other disciplinary titles or use their own language to discuss their direct or indirect system contact, and CC respects that process.

More recently, Tietjen (2019) advanced the CC language discourse even further. While acknowledging the language discussion in previous CC literature (Jones et al., 2009; Richards, 1998, 2013; Richards & Ross, 2001, 2003; Ross et al., 2016), Tietjen (2019) stated that the term convict is a pejorative term and points out that the use of this word is currently under debate within the CC group. While pointing out that the use of the word convict by CC was at least partially motivated[2] by a form of language reclamation during the early days of CC in the 1990s, he also explained that the criminal justice and cultural norms have changed, stating, 'Yet, over 20 years later, there is discussion within CC circles that cultural shifts within society and criminal justice have altered how the world perceives the term, "convict," and many people find the term offensive, potentially deterring some formerly incarcerated students and professors from affiliating with the CC field' (Tietjen, 2019, pp. 109–110).

Some explanation should be given to drastic shifts in how the United States viewed the issue of criminal justice from the 'tough on crime' days of the 1980s – 1990s to the present. The harsh crime laws of 30–40 years ago brought about a quagmire of problems (Beckett, 2018; Sklansky, 2018), including increased institutionalized racism, mass-incarceration, overburdened state and federal budgets, and drastic slashing of progressive educational and rehabilitative programs in corrections. Through the work of many diligent academics, activists, and concerned citizens, the American public and eventually policymakers (i.e. politicians, criminal justice administrators, community organizations) became aware of these issues. As a result of this shift in attitude, criminal justice policies and practices have very gradually begun to change (Ford, 2015). The US prison population has begun to decline slowly (Goode, 2013), and some correctional education programs (Delaney &

Montagnet, 2020; Fullilove, Cortes, Gamarra, & Maxis, 2020) and progressive reforms (Herman, 2018) are being introduced within the criminal justice system.

Thus, the conceptualization and interpretation of the term convict within CC has evolved. This process began with both an attempt at language reclamation and an early attempt at humanizing language in the 1990s, then shifted to humanizing language in the 2000s, and finally transitioned to a gradually intensifying internal debate about the overall appropriateness of the term convict in the 2010s. In 2020, even as the informal Convict Criminology network became the Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) within the American Society of Criminology (ASC) with broad support, the division's name was still a topic of spirited internal and external discussions, thus the discourse regarding the term convict may be more relevant now than ever.

Convict criminology at the intersection of stigma, language, and academic writing

'Words matter' is a phrase we often see in various contexts and mediums. If words matter, then language is the instrument to make them matter. Words and language are inextricably linked to identity. The issue is that academics have not been able to come to a solid agreement concerning how language should be used to discuss identity. Language can be used to affirm and uplift individuals, but language can also be used to stigmatize and dehumanize people. For example, academics have grappled with how academics use language when discussing the connection between a person's identity and disability (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Dunn, Fisher, & Beard, 2013). Although discussions of disabilities focus primarily on physical and mental disabilities, the collateral consequences of felony convictions have been referenced as 'civil disabilities' by many academics (Chin, 2002, 2011; Mayson, 2015). Unlike academics that discuss physical and mental disabilities, criminologists discuss socially constructed labels, such as felon, convict, inmate, or offender that individuals are 'tagged' with as a social reaction by the criminal justice system (Tannenbaum, 1938).

Person-first language (PFL) was developed in psychology as a direct objection to dehumanizing language and as a means to prevent the association of individuals with socially constructed negative characteristics (Wright, 1983, 1991; see also Dunn & Andrews, 2015). PFL focuses on putting the person before the mention of any type of characteristic, label, or disability that is associated with that person (Center for Disease Control, n.d.). Relatedly, there is identity-first language (IFL), which stems from the minority model of psychological research of disabilities. IFL interprets disability, not as moral deficit or some-thing needing to be cured, but as a socially constructed identity tied to the unique, cultural, & sociopolitical experiences of a group of people living in a society that was not designed by or for them (Dunn & Andrews, 2015; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). The IFL model posits that disability, similar to other characteristics like race and sexual orientation, should be appreciated and considered as an element of cultural diversity. Proponents of IFL assert that the primary impediments for people with a disability are prejudice and discrimination, and that language is a means of counteracting the power differentials between dominant and oppressed groups with less political and social capital (Andrews et al., 2013; Dunn & Andrews, 2015). This aspect of IFL should not be taken lightly within criminology and the other social sciences because norms, especially norms pertaining to language, have historically been established and imposed by the dominant group in a society (Baldwin, 1979). Moreover, any serious discussion of language in criminology must acknowledge the intersectional nature of identity while simultaneously centering the lived-realities of people impacted by the carceral system (Williams, 2019).

Insider perspectives are extremely important for any discussion of language and academic writing (Adler & Adler, 1987; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Within the disability community, some people use slang or traditionally derogatory terms – some of which may be selected intentionally to surprise or shock, such as crip – to refer to themselves and others who have disabilities. Such language choices may also be a way to identify one another within a culture that is not widely recognized or accepted, even among those with disabilities themselves. Disability activists and members of the dis-ability rights movement often use such 'insider' terms or slang (e.g. gimps) to refer to themselves and to promote a sense of community or as ironic or transgressive ways to challenge the dominant (nondisabled) culture (McRuer, 2006; Mitchell & Snyder, 2000; see Brontsema, 2004 for history and discussion). Outsiders – people who are not disabled – should not use these terms but should appreciate how appropriating taboo terms encourages group cohesiveness (Johnson, 2005, 2006).

When applied to discussing terms within criminal justice, reclamation of traditionally derogatory terms highlights exactly what the founders of CC attempted nearly 25 years ago when they decided on the name 'Convict Criminology.' Essentially, there were a group of people associated with a term – convict – commonly used to describe people as untrustworthy and possibly dangerous that decided to combine it with a term – criminologist – commonly used to describe people as educated experts in the study of crime. Thus, not only did the founders of CC attempt to bring individuals together that shared a common identity, but they also included an additional positive label to create a new label that people could be proud of. This attempted reclamation of the word convict has been noted by prior discussions of criminal justice language (Cox, 2020a; LaVigne, 2016).

The discussion of language is relatively new in criminal justice and criminology, and understandably, has been a central issue to formerly incarcerated people who teach and research criminology. We assert that the first mistake criminology made when discussing criminal justice labels was to not approach criminologists with criminal records for their input. An entire book on criminal justice language was written that did not once cite self- proclaimed convict criminologists (Coyle, 2013). Although Coyle's (2013) research is commendable for its focus on how moral entrepreneurs utilize language to encourage and promote mechanisms of social control and punishment, this ethnographic work did not elicit commentary from the individuals most impacted by that language, the justice- involved population.

Convict criminology has largely been overlooked or ignored when criminologists discussed criminal justice language or discourse [aside from the work of LaVigne (2016) and Cox (2020b)]. For instance, in what may have been the first experimental analysis of a potential relationship between the use of specific criminal justice language and the perceptions of other individuals, convict criminology was not cited (Denver, Pickett, & Bushway, 2017). This is especially problematic because, other than a small but informative survey conducted by the Marshall Project (Hickman, 2015), the extent to which individuals labeled by the carceral system prefer certain language has not received attention to date by empirical research. Hickman's (2015) survey revealed a lack of consensus among formerly incarcerated individuals: 38% of respondents preferred 'incarcerated person', 23% preferred the use of 'prisoner,' nearly 10% preferred inmate, and 30% reported that they preferred language that was something 'other' than incarcerated person, inmate, or prisoner. Therefore, it has been shortsighted for academics to rush into the condemnation of what specific language is used in research without first conducting empirical research on the preferences of

individuals that live their lives every day with these labels and are the topic of discussion surrounding debates on criminal justice language.

One problem with the language debate is that some words or labels can have multiple meanings, and these meanings can change based on time, situational context, and the actual language used. The Convict Criminology group (now officially recognized as the DCC) has a long tradition of being an international group with members in Australia, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Italy, New Zealand, as well as the United States. Plus, Convict Criminology in Britain still exists as an informal network. The term convict may not have the same meanings and connotations elsewhere as it does in America. For example, convict is attached to the oppression of Australia's history as a British prison colony (Gregory & Marshall, 2020). That said, DCC could benefit from the valuable insights of international academics affiliated with the DCC as we continue to examine how we can use language to better affirm, represent, and advocate for people that have experienced the pains of incarceration, and anyone else that has been impacted by carceral systems in the United States and across the world.

Another problem with the language debate is that interpretations of PFL have been inconsistent. Use of the term 'person-centered' has often been used interchangeably with 'person-first' language (Hyams, Prater, Rohovit, & Meyer-Kalos, 2018; LaVigne, 2016). This practice is problematic given the clear distinction between the two highlighted above. Person-first and person-centered language are not interchangeable concepts. Add to the mix the terminology of 'identity-first' (Dunn & Andrews, 2015), and the term 'crime-first' (Denver et al., 2017) and it is easy to see how this debate can quickly become over-whelming and confusing.

Reclamation of 'convict' through self-disclosure and individual choice

Despite broad support for the formation of DCC within the ASC, strong varying debates remain for and against keeping the word convict in both the title of the Division, as well as the CC discipline as a whole. It is important to remember that the purpose of this article is not to provide an official stance on whether criminologists should be using the term convict or not, but instead an acknowledgment and discussion of the complexities associated with its use.

While the authors of this paper hold similar positions towards the use of convict, each explicitly discussed their personal and professional opinions on its use before writing this article, which helped critically uncover the differences between our positions. However, one position we are in full agreement with is the reclamation of the word convict through self-disclosure and individual choice. In other words, some academics within the CC discipline will positively embrace the use of the word convict (For); some will disagree and/or take offense to it (Against); while others see valid points from both sides of the argument, or perhaps do not have a strong opinion either way (Neutral). Before reclamation efforts can be discussed, it is crucial to briefly summarize the For, Against, and Neutral stances within CC that have (rightfully) caused much consternation during 2017, 2018, and 2019 Convict Criminology Business Meetings at the ASC conferences.

To begin, those who do not shy away from their convict status seem to have positively embraced the word and – in some cases, proudly – view it as a part of their identity. For these individuals, they have reclaimed the word convict as it represents a significant part of their lived experience. Moreover, some convicts assert that during their incarcerations they strove to be convicts because the alternative label, inmate, was associated with problematic individuals who do not abide by the convict code (Irwin, 1970). Still, others believe that achieving success in academia while bearing the scarlet 'C' represents their resiliency and should be worn as a badge of honor. One of the authors of

this paper asserts that maintaining the term convict in CC is essential because it forces academics to face the decades of problematic criminological research produced that the state has used to justify exclusionary practices and policies against those with criminal convictions.

On the other hand, there are CC academics and students who are against the use of the word. These CC members have vocalized their concerns at numerous CC business meetings and at the 2021 ASC conference, they opted to develop an ad-hoc committee to review the term and to develop potential alternatives terms. Members who are against the term, reject it as they feel it is offensive and just as dehumanizing as similar terms such as 'felon,' 'offender,' and the aforementioned 'inmate.' Critical of the term convict, including its use in the newly formed DCC, some individuals in the Against camp have suggested different words or phrases to use instead. Some examples include 'justice-impacted,' and 'system- impacted.' Others have suggested changing the name of the discipline to a different 'C' word – 'Carceral Criminology' – as a way to encompass the array of experiences in correctional systems. However, each of these terms comes with its own share of criticisms from DCC membership. Another reason that some are against the term convict is that they believe it is not inclusive of other criminal justice experiences outside of those who were formerly incarcerated or who remain incarcerated. For example, there are several DCC members and others involved in CC that have no criminal justice contact, those who have been arrested yet not convicted of a crime, those with friends and family who have been directly impacted by the CJS, and/or those who have been convicted of a crime yet were not incarcerated and instead put under community supervision. Another reason why some individuals choose to reject the term convict, as well as the CC discipline as a whole, can be traced back to the historical lack of diversity and inclusion. Feminist criminologists have criticized CC for being rooted in Western white male privilege (Belknap, 2015, 2016). In her American Society of Criminology (ASC) Presidential Address, Belknap (2015) called attention to the fact that many of the authors in the Richards and Ross (2003) edited book, Convict Criminology, were white men. In a response to Richards' question about when 'the criminal pariah' will be welcome at our universities, Belknap (2015) critically retorts, 'When will men of color, women, and LGBTQ scholars be represented among the convict criminologists?' (p. 10). Recognizing how these marginalized groups are disparately impacted by the criminal legal system, Belknap (2015) concluded that it is unacceptable that convict criminology is 'seemingly a bastion of almost entirely White men or at least portrayed that way' (p. 10).

Convict criminologists responded to Belknap's (2015) critiques through a special edition of Critical Criminology (Aresti & Darke, 2016). Aresti and Darke (2016) acknowledge and address her concerns regarding the absence of marginalized voices in the CC network by drawing attention to the academic activism that British Convict Criminology (BCC) is conducting in Europe. They highlight collaborative research-activist efforts between academics, ex-con and non-con network members.

Similarly, Ross et al. (2016) responded to Belknap (2015) in their own rejoinder. In it, they provide more detail related to the initial formation and growth of CC and highlight several examples of activist criminology (Richards et al., 2011) they have engaged in to build a more inclusive group. They note the unique stigma, discrimination, and prejudice against the formerly incarcerated and argue that 'many criminologists fail to understand or acknowledge the very real stigma associated with being categorized as a felon in the United States' (Ross et al., 2016, p. 492). Ross et al. (2016) go on to point out how levels of stigma, discrimination, and prejudice are likely exacerbated for convict criminologists who are women, people of color, or identify as lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBTQ). Thus, 'they have numerous good reasons for deciding not to out themselves' (Ross et al.,

2016, p. 495). Ross et al. (2016) also point out to Belknap (2015), and other criminologists by proxy, that individuals should self-identify as convict criminologists on their own. Despite these efforts put forth to 'clarify the context and constraints' of CC (Ross et al., 2016, p. 490), Belknap (2016) responded with a follow-up rejoinder where she double-downed her original stance and continued to call for more convicts from diverse races/ethnicities, genders, and sexualities who are also criminology scholars.

While it is largely understood that this was not the intention of the 'founding fathers' of CC, some feel the discipline continues to be rooted in androcentrism, which is akin to the discipline of criminology as a whole. Similar to Belknap's stance, individuals may not see any difference between CC and traditional approaches to criminology. Thus, some scholars and students that align themselves in the 'Against' category push back against the word convict for these specific issues.

Diversity and inclusion are of vast importance to the newly formed DCC Executive Board and this issue will be revisited in the Conclusion section of this article. While we recognize the differences of opinion from those against the use of the word convict, we also see the usefulness in reclaiming this term through self-disclosure and individual choice. In short, we respect those that choose to embrace the term convict, as well as those who choose to reject it. It has also been suggested that these debates centering on the power of language may point to a 'generational divide' across the CC discipline. As younger and early career academics have gotten involved in CC, perhaps this is an additional conversation that needs to be had between the 'founding fathers' and current members. Perhaps some of the authors of The Future of Convict Criminology could be involved in this dialogue, and a call for journal submissions can be distributed purposively asking for diverse voices across age, race, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc. This article certainly aims to be a springboard for this dialogue. This debate is not new. It has been occurring since the formation of CC. Again, while the authors do not take a formal stance supporting or opposing the word convict, they do welcome an ongoing dialogue.

While the term convict may have been originally viewed as a humanizing term to capture the experiences of those who have been convicted of a crime, it has been criticized for not being inclusive of criminal justice and carceral experiences outside of incarceration. Although the CC discipline has evolved to include individuals with vicarious experience with the criminal justice system, some newer members have pushed back against the use of convict as a unifying identity category as this can lead to essentialized understandings about people and problematic forms of identity politics (Anzaldúa, 1991; Giffney, 2009).

Structural violence in academia

Although there exists a rigorous debate regarding the name 'Convict Criminology,' with valid points on both sides, academics remain largely unwilling to discuss the true issue: structural violence in the academy. The term convict causes discomfort in many academics who may benefit from the exclusive norms of status quo academia. Below we highlight examples of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) perpetuated by academia against individuals with criminal records.

The academy remains one of the most exclusive institutions in our society. The Ivory Tower actively excludes system-involved individuals by implementing and utilizing problematic policies that serve no other function than to keep convicts in a subservient position in society. It is telling that 72% of college admissions applications require that an applicant disclose their criminal history (Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Criminal history does not assess whether a potential student can

successfully meet the rigorous demands of college. Furthermore, using criminal history in admissions processes does not increase safety on college campuses (Custer, 2016). The notorious 'box' on these applications is used solely to exclude individuals with criminal records from the illustrious halls of the academy (Pierce, Runyan, & Bangdiwala, 2014). For instance, Stewart and Uggen (2020) found that college applicants with felony records were 2.5 times more likely to receive a rejection when compared to those without criminal records. This audit study's findings are particularly problematic because the sample consisted of individuals with criminal records who were more qualified than the individuals without criminal records, which indicates that the record is the sole determinant for denying admission. Denying individuals with criminal records admission to college is extremely problematic considering studies consistently indicate that a college degree reduces recidivism (Esperian, 2010; Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson, 2012). Moreover, there is no research to suggest that individuals with criminal records are less capable of succeeding in college when compared to non-system-involved individuals. We do know, however, that incarcerated people read and understand dense material including Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago (Tietjen, 2013), Greene's 48 Laws of Power, and Sun Tzu's The Art of War, a highly sought-after text in prisons (Krikokan, 2012) that has been banned by prison administrators in several states. Despite these abilities, academics are not fighting in mass to remove the infamous 'box' from admissions applications.

If academics were truly concerned about the impact of the word convict, instead of policing the language of convicts, academics would be demanding structural change in their individual institutions that would lead to reductions in the stigma surrounding the word convict. Addressing structural barriers would lead to increased inclusion of convict academics in the classroom. Students and faculty would benefit from learning from individuals who have directly experienced the criminal justice system. By actively excluding convicts from our classrooms, we are perpetuating the stigma associated with the term convict. Without convicts in the classroom, academia will continue to treat convicts as scary creatures we discuss only in theory and abstract research included in textbooks written by academics, many of whom have never had direct contact with the people they write about (Young, 2011). Moreover, if academics were truly concerned with racial inequality, they would be demanding that their universities ban the box because disparities in admissions cut along racial lines. Black and Latinx college applicants are more likely to be denied admission based on their criminal record than white college applicants are (Ramaswamy, 2015). This begs the question, where are the national calls to ban the box on college admissions applications?

Structural violence against system-involved individuals is not limited to students. Although not studied as widely as admissions practices, exclusive policies and procedures also exist in hiring, tenure, and promotion processes. Employment applications at most universities demand that applicants reveal their criminal histories (Custer, Malkin, & Castillo, 2020), and 40% conduct full criminal background checks before hiring an applicant (Hughes, Hertz, & White, 2013). This practice is widespread although research indicates it has no impact on campus safety (Hughes, Elliott, & Myers, 2014). Moreover, although Duke University Banned the Box in 2018, their campus experienced declines in all but two crime categories (i.e. liquor law violations and motor vehicle theft) between 2017 and 2019 (Duke University, 2020). Despite this evidence, academics with even the most minor non-violent offenses often face an uphill battle to acquire faculty positions (Custer et al., 2020). Ross et al. (2011) found that qualified academics who were identified as top candidates for positions were denied employment once the university became aware of their criminal background. System-involved academics are keenly aware of this potential discrimination, which leads to uncertainty and fear concerning when to disclose their criminal record (Custer et al., 2020).

Discrimination based on criminal records disproportionately affects academics of color (Stewart & Uggen, 2020) because people of color are more likely to be system-involved than their white counterparts (The Sentencing Project, 2018). If the academy were truly invested in diversity and inclusion, discriminatory hiring practices including the use of criminal backgrounds would cease to exist.

Discriminatory treatment of convicts is further perpetuated by academic disciplines including criminology. The work of convict criminologists is often dismissed as biased based on the academic's proximity to the justice system (Carter & Thomson, 2022). Instead of viewing their experiences as insider knowledge that makes convicts better prepared to analyze the system, their research is often analyzed with suspicion. Interestingly, the work of current and former criminal justice practitioners turned academics does not receive the same level of criticism (Carter & Thomson, 2022). Practitioners turned academics are often viewed as more knowledgeable than traditional academics despite their inherent pro-criminal jus-tice system biases that may prevent them from identifying structural issues in the system. This is yet another example of discriminatory views perpetuated by academics towards system-involved individuals. Either people who directly experience the system have valuable insider knowledge, regardless of whether they are convicts or practitioners, or they are inherently biased. Academia cannot have it both ways.

While criminologists fetishize system-involved individuals (Young, 2011), they offer no meaningful steps to incorporate us into the academy. Thus, engaging in 'word-policing' centered on the term convict seeks to satisfy academia's need to be politically correct without offering any relief to those of us affected by exclusionary practices in academia. The calls to change the term convict without proposing policies to address the stigma itself appear to be a method of assuaging academic guilt rather than providing substantive assistance to convicts. After all, criminology has a long history of producing the research used to justify discriminatory and exclusionary practices against system-involved individuals (Potter, 2015; Young, 2011).

Conclusion

The Division of Convict Criminology is open to all members of the American Society of Criminology. As current DCC members, we welcome individuals interested in the ongoing language debate to become members of the Division so that they may express their concerns or calls for change directly to our membership. We welcome a broad range of opinions and perspectives as we advocate for meaningful change to assist the future generations of convict criminologists. While we recognize the concerns and legitimate oppression suffered by those who have voiced questions about the use of the term convict, we believe that academic energy should focus on policy changes at the institutional level rather than telling us, the convicts, what words we can use to describe ourselves. We encourage academics who are truly concerned with the stigma associated with the term convict to join us in our fight for equality within academia. Thus, we issue the following call to action. Although the authors cannot speak for all convict criminologists, our call to action aligns with public statements made by the Division of Convict Criminology in 2021.

First, academics, activists, and administrators should advocate for Banning the Box on college admissions applications. The practice of requiring individuals to 'out' themselves during the admissions process is problematic. Research indicates this practice serves to exclude convicts from the academy (Stewart & Uggen, 2020). Although the Common College Application was revised in 2018 to exclude the infamous question regarding possession of a criminal record, many colleges and

universities continue to inquire about this in their admissions processes. To truly 'ban the box' academics should work to establish inclusionary practices at their institutions. If individual institutions are reluctant to take up this issue, academics should advocate directly to state legislators. Academics can look to California's SB 776 as a model for their states. This proposed legislation would ban all California colleges and universities from inquiring about criminal records during their application process. The statewide ban would ensure that the 8 million Californians with criminal records will be able to access all universities and colleges (Office of Senator Nancy Skinner, 2020). By advocating for institutional – and state-level bans – we begin to reduce the structural violence that accompanies the stigma associated with the term convict.

Academics and activists should also advocate for Banning the Box on all faculty and staff employment applications. Currently, academics with criminal records must endure a truly arduous battle to acquire gainful employment in the academe, regardless of their credentials or deliverables (Custer et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2011). This exclusionary practice ensures that convict academics do not have a seat at the tables where policies surrounding convicts are debated and studied. Banning the Box on faculty and staff employment applications will help develop a more inclusionary academy that represents a broader range of life experiences. As noted earlier, there is no research to suggest that this exclusionary practice increases public safety on campus (Hughes et al., 2014). Some colleges and universities have already banned the box on employment applications (e.g. Duke University) and some cities have banned the box on all employment applications (e.g. New York City). This inclusionary step benefits both system-involved academics and the broader academy. By including academics with criminal records in the academe, we can begin to address the collateral consequences that lead to our marginalization and the subsequent stigma attached to us. Moreover, students and fellow faculty members will benefit from learning about the justice system through the perspective of those who are most affected by it. Learning directly from convicts can help transform individuals' perspectives by humanizing the formerly incarcerated or system-involved experience (see for example Meyer, 2019). If academics and students come to see us, the convicts, as 'regular' people instead of monsters they should fear, we can begin to address the stigma associated with the word convict.

However, it is not enough to simply eliminate exclusionary practices; we must work to be intentionally inclusionary in practices. For instance, faculty can work to develop inclusive support groups for academics with criminal records that mirror support systems at other universities. To give an example, the University of California system has an organization known as the Underground Scholars Initiative. The goal of this initiative is to create a pathway for incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and system impacted individuals into higher education. We are building a prison-to-school pipe-line through recruitment, retention, and advocacy" (Berkeley Underground Scholars, n. d.). By developing inclusionary groups, we can create a sense of belonging that will result in higher retention rates and better performance in college (Walton & Cohen, 2011).

In the spirit of collegial dialog and academic community, we encourage everyone to read, analyze, and engage with the breadth of rich scholarship of CC literature that has been produced since the discipline's inception in 1997 before issuing direct proclamations, opinions, and/or strong claims in regards to our discipline. There has been a multitude of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, research, thought pieces, issue statements, and numerous books produced by CC academics that grapple with a wide array of issues, and present the diverse stances of academics affiliated with our discipline, including such topics (not comprehensive) as the mentorship of formerly- incarcerated

faculty, theory, experiences of the formerly incarcerated in higher education, auto-ethnographies, and trauma as a predictor of educational program usage.

The benefits of rigorous well-researched critical scholarship are myriad, and any scientific and/or academic discipline should welcome such work, as well as the opportunity it provides for introspection, academic dialogue, and growth. Yet, aca-demic critiques that are inadequately researched can have undeserved negative impacts on the focal topic, even hobbling the potential that a discipline and/or scholarly network may possess to enact pro-social change. Hastily rendered unfounded judgments of any academic discipline or movement do not function to advance productive intellectual discourse, and may encourage harmful bias against those involved in such issues. Thus, when considering writing articles or book chapters about CC and/or people with direct-system contact, in addition to reading CC literature, please consider reaching out to individuals who choose to affiliate with CC. Such individuals include the formerly incarcerated, system-impacted (family/friends with CJS contact), system-involved (legal conviction without incarceration), and system- free (no criminal justice system contact). While there is much variance in perspectives on the CJS and academic worldviews amongst members of CC, as members of this scholarly network (which is now also an ASC division), they can provide unique insight into why they affiliate with the discipline and subsequently – how they choose to define it.

The struggle to find a place within academia has been an issue of concern for those with direct CJS contact for many decades. This issue was intensified with the advent of mass incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s and has continued until the present day. Upon reentry in the United States, the formerly incarcerated individual is faced with over 45,000 civil and regulatory restrictions, known as collateral consequences (Forrest, 2016; Love, Roberts, & Klingele, 2013), which limit and/or regulate such actions as housing, professional licensure, and access to educational institutions. Such regulations, statutes, and restrictions vary by type of institution, with recent literature (Custer, 2016 &, 2018; Tewksbury, 2013) presenting multiple barriers to people with criminal convictions. Further, Stewart and Uggen (2020) find that people with a criminal record are less likely to be admitted to college, and this phenomenon is especially pronounced if the college applicant is Black.

We issue this call not just to critical and activist academics within criminology and criminal justice but upon all branches of criminology and criminal justice (CCJ) to critically self-reflect on how to overcome the structural and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) barriers that function to marginalize and exclude formerly-incarcerated, system-impacted, and system-involved academics. If such critical reflexivity yields the realization that your discipline is functioning to perpetuate structural inequality and limit opportunities for system-impacted academics, then we encourage you actively seek to change such structures to reverse these detrimental and destructive processes. With the massive influx of people with direct criminal justice system contact (and their system-impacted family and loved ones) produced by mass incarceration entering colleges and universities across the country (many studying the very institutions and systems that formerly contained them), the CCJ academy has the potential to not only improve the life chances of such individuals but also weaken powerful structures of inequity.

Moving forward from the important critical reflection on our academic disciplines and institutions concerning reproducing systems and practices that oppress system-impacted people, we encourage the academy to engage in research that functions to identify and deconstruct such processes. Put another way, the pivotal point is then transitioning from critical reflection and discussion to activist scholarship which has the potential to motivate pro-equity policies and practices within mainstream

academic institutions. While some scholarship within specific branches of criminology including critical criminology (Evans, Szkola, & John, 2019; Ross et al., 2011; Terry, 2004; Tewksbury & Ross, 2019; Tietjen, Burnett, & Jessie, 2020), convict criminology (Jones et al., 2009; Richards & Ross, 2007; Tietjen, 2019), and general social justice/inequality focused disciplines (Custer et al., 2020; Jeffers, 2017; Ross, 2019; Tietjen, 2013) have advanced such scholarship, the magnitude of stigmatization and systemic inequality faced by scholars with lived CJ experiences demands that greater action be taken from more branches of mainstream criminological and criminal justice disciplines.

Notes

1. Within this paper, direct system contact refers to people who are currently being prosecuted for a crime, and/or have been convicted of a crime and may or may not have been incarcerated. For those to whom incarceration applies, they may be currently or formerly incarcerated.
2. This paper also discusses how the use of convict by the founding Convict Criminologists may have simultaneously been both a form of language reclamation and an attempt at humanizing language.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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