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# BEYOND TOKENISM: INTEGRATING CONVICT PERSPECTIVES INTO EVIDENCE-BASED CORRECTIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, fields such as education, medicine, social work, and criminology/criminal justice have increasingly acknowledged the value of integrating lived experience into knowledge production and professional practice. In corrections, this trend is exemplified by Convict Criminology, which emphasizes the voices and experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people in scholarly research, mentorship, and activism. Yet, integrating these perspectives faces persistent challenges, including the conflation of practitioner experience with lived experience and the demand for robust empirical evidence to justify such approaches. This paper critically examines these challenges and outlines strategies for incorporating formerly incarcerated individuals into correctional program design and policy development. It presents evidence-based frameworks for utilizing their expertise in the corrections field, offers practical guidelines for mentorship programs that bridge academic research and practitioner knowledge, and suggests methods for overcoming professionals' resistance within correctional institutions to such integration. By doing so, this paper contributes to the growing movement toward more humane, effective, and socially just correctional policy and practice.

**Keywords:** Convict Criminology, Convict Perspectives, Corrections Policy and Practice, Lived Experience, Mentorship

## Introduction

Contemporary professional practice in many fields has experienced an epistemological shift. Expertise is no longer considered to be solely held by credentialed professionals, but valuable insights can be gained from people who have lived experience. Feminist standpoint theory, patient-centered medicine, and co-production in social services all argue that individuals with lived experience provide important knowledge (Beresford & Croft, 2004; Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Harding, 1991)[1]. The dominant branches of criminal justice have also been grappling with this challenge. More specifically, the field of corrections has primarily been shaped by practitioners and academics. Convict Criminology, on the other hand, which emerged in the mid-1990s, challenges that tradition by highlighting formerly incarcerated scholars and activists as legitimate sources of knowledge (Ross & Richards, 2003; Ross & Vianello, 2019; Ross, 2024).

This paper asks a practical question: how can corrections systematically and rigorously incorporate insights of formerly incarcerated individuals (FIs) into evidence-based policy and programming? Answering that question requires acknowledging both the unique contributions of convict perspectives and the methodological, cultural, and institutional barriers that have limited their adoption. The paper situates the convict perspectives within broader movements toward co-production, summarizing known benefits, cataloging barriers, and then offers evidence-aligned strategies for integration.

## Why Convict Perspectives Matter

Formerly incarcerated people (FIs) occupy a distinct epistemic position. Unlike correctional administrators, support staff, and officers who work in an institution during shifts, FIs have continuous, embodied experience of incarceration and reentry. That approach has several pragmatic advantages. These include, but are not limited to:

- Diagnostic insight. Many FIs are well-suited to identify operational blind spots in policies and practices that appear neutral to staff, but have harmful, cumulative effects on inmates.

- Legitimacy and adoption. Interventions co-designed with target populations are more likely to be accepted and sustained. Lessons from public health and social services show that stakeholder involvement improves relevance and implementation (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Israel et al., 1998;

- Humanization and narrative correction. Including convict voices has the potential to disrupt dehumanizing frameworks and negative characterizations of incarcerated and FI people that justify and promote punitive policies, practices, and laws, and help reframe rehabilitation and reentry as social problems requiring thoughtful solutions.

- Desistance and reintegration. Engagement in reform and reentry programming often supports identity transformation, an established predictor of reduced recidivism (LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001).

These contributions do not negate the need for rigorous evidence-based research and the findings

1 *Although selective examples of co-production exist in the field of criminal justice (Goldstein, 1979; 1987; Johns, et al., 2022), adoption is uneven among the different branches.*

they produce; rather, they expand on what counts as evidence and attempt to improve the design, interpretation, and implementation of correctional interventions.

### Key Barriers to Inclusion

Despite the potential, three persistent challenges impede the inclusion of convict perspectives.

1. Conflation of different kinds of experience. Correctional administrators, staff, consultants, and FI individuals all bring experience. But practitioner experience (focused on institutional maintenance and order) is not the same as the experiential knowledge of being forced to live (and survive) in a correctional facility. Treating them as interchangeable minimizes the distinct analytic power of convict perspectives.

2. Demand for conventional empirical evidence. Anecdotes and narratives are often dismissed as biased stories. Critics ask for randomized trials, large datasets, and objective measures. While empirical rigor is important, a false dichotomy between lived experience and other types of evidence hampers innovation. The solution is methodological pluralism: integrating participatory methods with quantitative evaluation so that lived expertise informs hypotheses, measurement, implementation, and interpretation (Harding, 1991; Greenhalgh et al., 2016).

3. Institutional resistance and stigma. Correctional cultures prize authority, control, and risk avoidance. Staff skepticism can range from procedural inertia to overt distrust, perceiving FIs as untrustworthy or as potential agitators (Gurusami, 2019). Legal and hiring barriers, as well as credentialing requirements, further constrain the meaningful participation of FIs.

### Systematic Strategies for Integration

To translate convict insights into evidence-based practice, corrections should adopt approaches that utilize FIs as legitimate stakeholders at every stage of the program cycle (i.e., design, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination).

1. Participatory Program Design and Evaluation

Borrowing from Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Hacker, 2013), programs should involve FIs as co-designers and co-evaluators. More specifically, co-design workshops should be hosted where FI individuals and advisory groups help define problems, agree on appropriate outcomes, and refine interventions (e.g., Ross, Zaldivar & Tewksbury, 2015). There should be effort to train peer evaluators who are FI individuals who collect qualitative and quantitative data and participate in analysis. More use should be made of mixed methods: qualitative narratives to generate hypotheses; relevant quantitative designs to test outcomes. As experienced in other fields, CBPR can improve the relevance and adoption of new policies, practices, and laws in criminal justice contexts and align with best practices for stakeholder engagement (Israel et al., 1998; Wallerstein & Duran, 2010).

2. Institutionalized Advisory Councils and Governance Roles

Advisory councils composed of FIs have the potential to formalize participation. Effective councils:

- Have clear mandates, appropriate budgets, and clear decision-making authority.
- Rotate membership and leadership to avoid tokenization and ensure meaningful, diverse

representation (e.g., gender, race, offense type, time since release, etc.).
- Provide adequate compensation and access to training that enables meaningful contribution.
- Use justice-reinvestment structures to integrate lived experience into budgeting and priority setting (Clear, 2011); similar governance models can anchor FI input in corrections.

3. Training and Capacity Building

To bridge experiential insights and professional standards, programs should invest in capacity building. These include:

- Research and policy and practice training to participants in relevant subjects (i.e., research methods, ethics, data literacy, etc.).
- Facilitation and public speaking skills to enable FIs to co-lead staff trainings and public engagement
- Support for academic advancement (mentoring that enables the earning of academic degrees and peer-reviewed publications).
- Programs like Inside-Out (Pompa, 2013). and university partnerships demonstrate how training strengthens FI contributions as educators, researchers, and advocates.

4. Implementation-Oriented Frameworks

Implementation science emphasizes context, stakeholder buy-in, and fidelity. Including FIs as key stakeholders aligns with this approach: they help identify contextual barriers, adapt interventions to local norms, and foster sustainable adoption (Fixsen et al., 2005).

**Practical Guidelines for Mentorship Programs**

Mentoring (Tewksbury & Ross, 2019) bridges lived experience and formal research/practice. Effective mentorship programs should be intentionally structured to:

- Define goals and pathways to achieve them. It is important from the onset to clarify the purpose of mentorship at each stage. Is it directed at developing researchers, classroom instructors, policy advocates, or peer service providers?
- Mutual learning model. Position mentorship as reciprocal; mentors (FIs) and mentees (students, staff) teach and learn from one another.
- Provide remuneration and institutional recognition. Compensate mentors fairly, offer course credit or stipends, and include mentorship in performance evaluations. Pending their personal approval, acknowledge the individuals and organizations that assisted in any publicly shared documents (e.g., on the web, in newsletters, etc.).
- Support academic credentialization. Help mentors access continuing education, degree programs, and publishing opportunities.
- Create networks and communities of practice. Link mentors to supportive peers, funding sources, and professional associations, building appropriate in-demand career pathways for FIs.
- Convict Criminology, in particular, has a respected history of mentoring incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students (Ross, 2024).

**Overcoming Professional Resistance**

Reducing staff resistance requires frequent explanation regarding the goals of the tasks, rationales, and deliberate experimentation. This includes:

- Leadership buy-in. Executive endorsement legitimizes FI participation. Leaders should publicly articulate the rationale, allocate resources, and model engagement.
- Staff training co-facilitated by FIs. Joint trainings humanize experiences and creates more meaningful dialogue among participants. When staff hear accounts alongside empirical data, their skepticism tends to soften.
- Pilot projects with clear metrics. Start with small, well-monitored pilot projects that measure engagement, satisfaction, and intermediate outcomes (e.g., program retention, disciplinary incidents). Demonstrated gains create momentum.
- Policy mandates and protections. Where feasible, incorporate stakeholder participation into policy or contractual requirements to avoid ad hoc or tokenistic inclusion. Legal hiring barriers should be reviewed and mitigated through fair-chance hiring policies and role redefinition that match skills to responsibilities.

**Evidence and Illustrative Findings from Convict Criminology**

Members of the Convict Criminology (CC) network have contributed via scholarship, teaching, mentorship, and activism. Their collective work includes peer-reviewed research on prison conditions and reentry (Ross & Copes, 2022), op-eds and public scholarship, in-prison education programs, and advisory roles on policy panels. These activities yield several practical outcomes:

- Improved curriculum relevance in prison education and reentry programs.
- Enhanced media framing through expert commentary that challenges punitive narratives.
- Advisory contributions that inform policy deliberations at local and national levels.

While impact evaluations of these contributions are limited, the observed outcomes are consistent with broader evidence that participatory approaches improve program design, legitimacy, and uptake (Greenhalgh et al., 2016; Israel et al., 1998). Nonetheless, rigorous, outcome-oriented research is still needed to quantify effects on recidivism, institutional culture, and cost-effectiveness.

**Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The evidence base linking FI inclusion to specific correctional outcomes is uneven. Many CC activities are diffuse, decentralized, and context-specific, making standard evaluation methods difficult. Future research priorities include:

- Program evaluation. Rigorous, mixed-methods studies of FI-co-designed interventions using appropriate comparison designs.
- Longitudinal workforce studies. Tracking career trajectories of FIs engaged in research, education, and practice to identify barriers and enablers.
- Cost-benefit analyses. Estimating fiscal impacts of participatory reforms (e.g., reduced disciplinary incidents, improved reentry outcomes).
- Comparative institutional studies. Examining which correctional contexts (e.g., security level, governance structure) are most receptive to FI integration.
- Additional ethical questions: Explore the compensation, confidentiality, and potential retraumatization of FI individuals doing this work.

## Conclusion

Integrating convict perspectives into evidence-based correctional practice is both an ethical imperative and a pragmatic strategy for improving policy and programming. The approach does not threaten empirical rigor; rather, it enriches the evidence base by adding situated knowledge, improving relevance, and strengthening implementation. Achieving meaningful inclusion requires institutional commitment: participatory design processes, formal advisory roles, training and capacity building, and implementation-oriented evaluation. Convict criminology demonstrates the practical value of centering formerly incarcerated scholars and advocates in research, mentorship, and policy work. To move beyond tokenism, corrections must institutionalize mechanisms that compensate and train FIs, measure impacts rigorously, and adjust professional norms to recognize lived experience as a form of expertise. Doing so advances more humane, effective, and socially just correctional systems.

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