



A Case for the History of Criminology and Criminal Justice

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The discipline of Criminology and Criminal Justice (CCJ) encompasses the study of any issue associated with crime. This includes, but is not limited to, the study of its meaning and etiology; societal and individual impact; incidence and prevalence; and control and prevention. Given the scope of the subject matter addressed by the discipline, it is inevitable that CCJ would intersect with several “sibling” fields. The closest members of this interdisciplinary family are sociology, psychology, social work, law, and public administration.

CCJ is also predicated on the scientific method as the principal means of knowledge development. Consequently, the conceptual frameworks and training of criminologists are largely ahistorical, especially in the U.S. Various methodologies for advancing knowledge are indeed recognized; however, crime and criminal justice problems are less likely to be studied in historical or localized contexts.

A logical starting point in the case for a history of CCJ, then, is the characteristic voids of the CCJ research. For example, the emphasis on the generalizability of research findings in CCJ means that qualitative or case studies that operate from the “ground up” are less prolific than “top down” research using national-level or other aggregated data. The scientific standard of broader applicability also means that data sources such as written testimony, public records, minutes of meetings, speeches, or other documents will serve a complementary rather than a primary role in the research process. One of the negative implications of this research convention is the absence of a richer story that can explain or bring greater understanding to the aggregate data.

A more pronounced void in the CCJ literature is the neglect of the “resting” evidence of previous historical eras. In the ongoing production of the latest scientific evidence, the vast repository of ideas, intellectual arguments, and empirical data from previous centuries (e.g., 18th, 19th, 20th) is unexplored. In CCJ, there is little understanding of the fact that the crime and criminal justice questions, problems, practices, and outcomes of today can be consistently located in other historical eras. This academic blind spot is likely the result of the “march of progress” bias that underlays much of the social sciences. This bias presumes that old understandings (of criminal behavior and crime control) are either too quaint, distant, or ill-informed to guide the present. However, historical documents reveal the falsity of this assumption and that assessments about the scientific progressions of the criminal justice system are often overestimated.

The case for evolving the CCJ–History relationship can also be built upon the exceptions to the CCJ profile described above. For example, the investigation of long historical trends in crime and punishment rates is not uncommon. These kinds of analyses rely heavily on national and some state-level statistics and can aid both criminological theory and criminal justice policy. Less common, however, are analyses based on the de-aggregated statistics of smaller or less prominent geographical units. This tendency to adopt an aerial or “averaged” view of crime and punishment can be problematic in that a different or contrary picture about crime and punishment is often overlooked.

What is particularly salient to the CCJ–History relationship is the historical literature on penal and social control “innovations” (e.g., prison, probation, parole, juvenile court, reformatories, decarceration). Examples of these rare but highly celebrated works include David Rothman’s *The Discovery of the Asylum*

(Rothman 1971) and *Conscience and Convenience* (Rothman 1981); Alexander Pisciotta's *Benevolent Repression* (Pisciotta 1994); Dario Melossi's *The Prison and the Factory* (Melossi 1981); Andrew Scull's *Decarceration* (Scull 1977); and Jonathan Simon's *Poor Discipline* (Simon 1993). These books have contributed a wealth of insight into the origins, operations, outcomes, and evolution of signature criminal justice reforms in the U.S. Therefore, it is here where the case for a history of CCJ can be made most effectively.

Drawing on the example of these intensive studies, one can imagine a more abbreviated historical approach to evaluating current state and local criminal justice programs and policies. These “downsized” evaluative histories could examine in depth the complex processes, environments, statistics, and key people involved in the implementation and operation of a particular program or policy. This historical approach to contemporary evaluation tends to be more informative than current CCJ approaches, which are often detached from the very dynamics that produce the results of interest, namely crime and offender recidivism.

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