

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Lived experience to lived experience expertise: embracing lived experience in Australian criminology

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ABSTRACT

This paper, authored by some individuals with lived experience of the Australian criminal legal-punishment system, serves as a call to action for their recognition and integration within the criminal legal sector. We highlight the importance of acknowledging the deep personal nature of criminal legal-punishment system experiences, which, though potentially traumatic, offer valuable insights for improving social justice outcomes. Through vignettes, we discuss some of the challenges of integrating lived experiences into professional roles within the criminal legal-punishment system. Ultimately, by drawing from our own experiences, we argue for the meaningful involvement of individuals with lived prison experience in relevant Australian conversations and decisions. We emphasise that in Australia, lived experience should be seen as an expert contribution to the field of criminology, advocating for a more inclusive and participatory approach in policy and academic discourse.

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Introduction

How did these three authors, lived experience scholars and an academic come to publish an article together? We believe the below vignette from Author One introduces the motivation behind this article:

My journey into criminology began during my time in prison from 2019 to 2021. There, I was enrolled into a Bachelor of Arts (one of the very few limited courses provisioned to incarcerated students) program through an Australian university and studied courses such as corrections, policing, and the sociology of crime. The knowledge proliferated in these courses was only through the perspectives and analyses of academic researchers. This led me to critically examine the foundations of this knowledge. I questioned how these epistemological frameworks were constructed, and the impact of the researchers' own ontological beliefs on their work. In pursuit of a more challenging perspective, I sought out criminological knowledge produced by individuals who had firsthand experience of incarceration, like me. My exploration led me to Convict Criminology, primarily focusing on contributions from the

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United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), recognising a lack of scholarship from Australia. While I was studying criminology in prison, I discovered the work of the third author, which I believed had a major impact on me and how I saw my potential to contribute to criminology. Her work delved into the integration of lived experiences within the field of criminology. Inspired by this article, I composed an essay for a university assignment that endorsed her perspectives. However, the feedback I received from my lecturer was disheartening. My assessors opined that the field of criminology wasn't sufficiently mature and claimed that experience of incarceration didn't automatically qualify someone as a prison expert. I was baffled and deeply troubled by these remarks. To have my own experiences deemed inadequate in providing expertise struck a nerve. This interaction left me feeling a mix of anger, frustration, and disillusionment with the academic world, especially criminology, which I had hoped would offer me refuge during a challenging time. The genesis of this paper commenced whilst I was incarcerated and was almost a motivation to disapprove the views of the assessor who marked my work. It wasn't until the 2023 Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology (ANZSOC) Conference in Melbourne that my path crossed with the (third) author whose paper I found so impactful. I believe that meeting her in person was a turning point. This interaction provided us with an opportunity to collaborate on this project that we both deemed significant: acknowledging and valuing lived experience as a crucial element in criminological research and discourse. But a collateral consequence of my assessor's comments continues to give me the feeling of imposter syndrome, as if my lived experience doesn't render sufficient expertise, one which is capable of meaningful contribution. (Author One)

In this paper, readers will see reference to 'we' and 'us.' Two authors (Authors One and Two) are uniquely positioned, having direct, lived experience with the Australian criminal legal-punishment system. We believe this experiential knowledge offers invaluable insights into the realities and complexities of this system, transcending traditional academic knowledge. Whilst Author Three does not have lived experience of the Australian criminal legal-punishment system, their experience adds a different dimension to the discourse, as they bring theoretical knowledge and an external perspective, which, when combined with the experiential insights and wisdom of Authors One and Two, creates a more holistic view. This blend of lived experience and academic understanding, we argue, allows for a multifaceted approach to the subject matter, achieving a balance between personal insight and scholarly analysis. Thus, we model what we hope to see within the academic landscape in Australia and beyond.

We see this paper as a collaborative effort between authors bringing distinct yet complementary perspectives to the discussion. Our journey through, and ongoing engagement with, both the criminology and criminalisation aspects present a rare duality. We consider ourselves a group of allies, united by a shared belief in the transformative power of lived experience in shaping criminological discourse. We recognise that this experience is not merely an anecdotal account; rather, it is a critical component of understanding the criminal legal-punishment system. It influences our way of *knowing* and interpreting the world, providing a lens through which we can analyse and critique the system. We believe this collaboration aims to bridge the gap between experiential and academic knowledge, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to criminological study. Our collective approach underscores the importance of integrating diverse perspectives in academic research, particularly in fields like criminology, where personal experiences can significantly impact one's understanding of, and interaction with, the criminal legal-punishment system. By embracing both lived and learned

experiences, we aim to contribute to a more empathetic, informed, and robust discourse in criminology: one that acknowledges the value of different forms of knowledge and the power of collaborative and inclusive research.

There is a general consensus that people with lived experience contain unique and important perspectives (Antojado et al., 2024; Martinovic et al., 2022). But lived experience and lived experience expertise across the Australian criminal justice sector is at varying levels of maturity. We believe there is a dearth of Australian literature which illuminates upon the collective journey from those who have lived experience within the criminal legal-punishment system, to leveraging that experience to develop expertise within that field of practice or study. We write this paper to address this gap by looking at some of the problems we have identified in criminology and how it is valuable for people with lived experience expertise to sit alongside people in the academic community and policy-makers. We advocate the need for the meaningful involvement of people in Australia with lived prison experience in conversations or decisions that are about *them*. It is about giving formerly incarcerated citizens a seat at the table and framing the lived experience voice as an expert in punishment and in survival. The intention of using vignettes in this article is to elicit “emotional identification and understanding” (Denzin, 1989, p. 124) from readers. We are asking readers to relive *our* experiences through *our* eyes (Denzin, 2000, emphasis added) and grasp the obstacles we encountered in our pursuit to be recognised as individuals with valuable and complementary perspectives.

In this paper, we explore the concept of *lived experience* and interrogate the positioning of formerly incarcerated people in institutions, such as universities that shape and engage criminal punishment policy. By focusing on the Australian university-prison nexus, we extrapolate the tensions and opportunities that can exist because of this dynamic. We explore Australian criminology’s failure to embrace lived experience voices – the voices of people we believe the discipline has exploited and benefited from since the 1800s. We see this paper as a call to action to the Australian academic community and criminal justice policymakers. For these stakeholders to value the voices of people with lived experience in the criminal legal-punishment system, to hear their stories, and to respect their knowledge not as supplementary to traditional ways of knowing but rather as complementary ways of knowing. Providing our lived experience is deeply personal. It involves more than reporting statistics and data trends. It requires us to constantly introspect on matters that can evoke trauma, pain, and suffering. This article is therefore written to develop a lived experience practice that considers the human and personal element attached to lived experience, to make this practice sustainable and safe for the lived experience expert. Finally, and this is where we argue the most action is required, a path forward; a way to work together that benefits us all.

From lived experience to lived experience expertise

For us, Sandhu’s (2017) work has been pivotal in distinguishing between lived experience and lived experience expertise. Sandhu (2017) defines lived experience as direct personal experience of a social issue, while lived experience expertise refers to insights gathered through lived experience (Brierly, 2023). This delineation, we argue, is crucial as it highlights the difference between direct experience and the knowledge and understanding acquired from that experience. Sandhu’s (2017) conceptualisation aligns with our belief

that lived experience expertise involves a deeper level of insight and understanding gained from personal encounters with a particular issue (Brierly, 2023). Moreover, Sandhu's (2017) work emphasises the role of experts by experience, who utilise their lived experience to inform social purpose organisations or social change work (Brierly, 2023). In this way, for us, lived experience work is not merely to construct new epistemological concepts, especially in the context of criminology, as advocacy and the drive for change are inherently construed and embedded within the model of lived experience in criminology and elsewhere.

Within criminology, there has been a persistent, although slow, adoption of lived experience as sources of epistemological wisdom. The field of Convict Criminology has achieved steady growth in the US and the UK (see Earle, 2018; Newbold, 2017; Richards & Ross, 2001; Tregoe, 2014), but we believe its adoption into Australian criminology has been slow. There are, of course, issues with the very term *convict* in Australia. Aside from *convict* being a derogatory system label, it is also rooted in colonialism in the Australian context (Antojado, 2023a; Carey, Aresti, et al., 2022; Doyle et al., 2021; Roscoe & Godfrey, 2022). As Ortiz et al. (2022) argues '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' (p. 261). We, following Antojado (2023a), address this challenge by suggesting a shift in terminology in Australia, from *Convict Criminology* to *Lived Experience Criminology*. This recommendation is intended to broaden the discipline's focus to encompass a wider range of experiences in the criminal legal-punishment system. Such as the need for incorporating various academic methods (see Doyle et al., 2022) and moving away from the strong emphasis on autoethnography, which has often been a defining feature of Convict Criminology (Newbold et al., 2014). As an example, according to the Australian lived experience academic, Antojado (2023a), lived experience for those with lived prison and/or criminal-justice sanction experience is relational and forms what he terms persistent experiential narratives and common experiential narratives (see Antojado, 2023a).

One of the criticisms of centring the lived experience is that "emphasising an experience that is 'lived' immediately puts the focus on an experience that is highly individual" (McIntosh & Wright, 2019, p. 458). Additionally, by exploring interactions that are unique to an individual, the broader social context and dominant discourses that enable injustice can be lost in the analysis (Scott, 1992, as cited in McIntosh & Wright, 2019). Having said that, McIntosh and Wright (2019) argue that lived experience involves "clusters of commonalities and shared intersubjective experience"- (p. 459). For example, writings by formerly incarcerated people and their allies (Davis, 2012; Kilroy, 2018; Lean, 2021; Porter, 2016) foreground the shared lived experience and the problematic narratives and policy responses that contribute to their collective oppression. As people who have experienced this collective awareness, we can say that there is something particularly comforting and powerful about recognising one's own struggle in the stories of others. This observation recognises that experiences are not wholly individual and separate, but that others may share and learn from them, or what Antojado (2023a) coined the *common experiential narrative*.

Lived experience is also imagined to be theoretically and methodologically untethered, yet McIntosh and Wright (2019) argue that its origins lie with the anti-positivistic discipline of critical phenomenology and its feminist manifestations. As McIntosh and Wright (2019)

argue: critical phenomenology is about challenging universal truths and “taken-for-granted assumptions” (p. 453) and explaining phenomena “through the consciousness” (p. 453) of the person experiencing them. Feminist phenomenology is similarly concerned with questioning the *knower* as well as understanding the embodied lived experience. For example, through the seminal work of de Beauvoir (1970), her personal narratives and representations of women’s voices uncovered commonalities in their collective lived experiences. Additionally, over 40 years ago, Black feminism embraced the principle that the *personal is the political* (Collective Coombahee River, 1977). Embodying the lived experience of gender, race and class oppression, Collective Coombahee River (1977) conceptualised Black feminist politics after focusing on their own oppression. They realised “that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us” (Collective Coombahee River, 1977, para. 10). The same can be said for formerly incarcerated people who, we believe, have spent far too long explaining to criminologists how dreadful things are, only for things to continue to be dreadful.

While the gradual incorporation of lived experience into criminology and the criminal legal-punishment system has noticeably expanded professional opportunities in the industry, challenges remain. Some of these challenges are noted in the below vignette from Author One:

In Australia, I’ve seen how the integration of lived experience into criminology faces unique challenges, accentuated by the nation’s complex social fabric and the legacy of its penal history. Efforts by scholars like me who champion Lived Experience Criminology have to confront a landscape marred by reluctance and historical sensitivities. I see how the term ‘Convict Criminology,’ resonant in the US but grates against the Australian consciousness, evoking painful memories of colonial oppression and indigenous displacement. I’ve seen how academics with criminal records face daunting barriers, both in professional acceptance and in practical hurdles, such as stringent US visa policies that limit their participation in pivotal international conferences, as well as universities requiring police checks that hinder their ability to obtain sustained and tenured academic positions. Within the academic sphere, I’ve witnessed how individuals with lived prison and criminal justice sanction experience often find themselves marginalised, their potential as equal contributors overshadowed by a prevailing academic elitism which values ‘knowledge’ by the number of papers published in top tier journals and citations to research. I’m almost caught, because this hesitancy to fully embrace lived experience not only stifles the diversification of criminological discourse but also overlooks the rich insights that these narratives can provide. Narratives that I believe are essential for a nuanced understanding of justice in the contemporary Australian context. Do I stay in this industry which sometimes rejects me and my knowledge? Or do I keep fighting in the hope that one day my calls will be listened to? (Author One)

Roles have been created to engage individuals with lived prison and criminal justice sanction experience in Australia. We see that this evolution has enabled people to transform their personal criminal legal-punishment system encounters into valuable professional competencies. This trend is evident in roles offered by organisations like the Australian Community Support Organisation, Vacro, Jesuit Social Services, Sisters Inside, the Justice Reform Initiative and the Salvation Army (see Australian Community Support Organisation, n.d.; Vacro, 2021). For example, Debbie Kilroy, who has lived experience of incarceration established Sisters Inside as an organisation run by women with lived prison experiences that advocates for the human rights of women in the criminal legal-punishment system (Sisters Inside, n.d.). These roles either explicitly aim to hire people with lived

prison and criminal justice sanction experience or adapt hiring practices by removing stringent probity checks such as the ones seen in the not-for-profit sector and universities. But a recurring concern among us is the insufficiency of lived experience alone to meet the qualifications traditionally required for these roles. These roles typically necessitate professional and academic credentials. This observation suggests a need for a balanced approach that values *both* lived experience and formal qualifications.

In recent years, we have seen an increasing interest in people with lived experience providing their stories. But we see there appears to be a welcomed collateral consequence of conviction – the rise of the *credentialed* lived experience voice. It is in these musings that we suggest those of us who share the experience of incarceration should be mindful to not conflate symbolic inclusivity that is exclusively done on the institution's terms, with authentic inclusion, participation, and contribution on *our* terms.

Lived experience and the 'Academic-Industrial Complex'

Author Two: I wholeheartedly believe personal narrative is a powerful tool for a reader to relive my experience through their eyes, so let me tell you a story:

It's 2018 and my first day of university. I was thrilled to be offered a place in the Bachelor of Criminology as a first-generation student and was confident that the discipline of criminology would be a safe space for me and my voice. I had met two of the faculty's academics in the women's prison when they came in to conduct research. and I was so inspired by that interaction, I wanted in. It was also my first day outside of the prison walls in 4.5 years and as I sat in the front row of the lecture hall with my prison-issued pen and paper, I listened to a respected criminologist refer to people like me as 'prisoners', 'offenders', and 'criminals.' It was a slap in the face and a brutal introduction to the world of criminology and law. These labels are part of the dehumanising project of the prison and the ease with which they are spoken in places of education demonstrates how the tentacles of the carceral system reach into places that I'd assumed would be liberatory. Moreover, derogatory system language has been developed, represented, and legitimized in non-carceral settings where it continues the prison effect, leaving folks like me feeling disparaged and increasingly fed up. Fast forward to 2021. I began my Honors year with a timely presentation requesting that fellow students reframe from referring to people like me using derogatory system language. I argued that criminalised people have a right to be referred to using the descriptors that we choose. I provided supporting documentation with practical person-centred swap-outs. Yet, from that day forward, I sat in every single class and heard the same offensive terminology, prisoners, offenders, criminals I had been subjected to my whole degree. From these experiences, I've vowed to never take part in research again. I like Author One wonder if criminology is the right field of study for me. I constantly question if the discipline is safe for us – as formerly incarcerated people. (Author Two)

This vignette from Author Two demonstrates some of the tensions that can exist in sites of supposed neutrality. Like Author One, they are unsure if they should keep fighting and advocating or if perhaps academia in Australia is not yet ready to embrace the experiences of people with lived experience. When describing the problematic relationship between universities and systems of oppression, A. Smith (2016) uses the term *Academic-Industrial Complex*. We see this expression is just as relevant to the university-prison nexus. The activist scholar Sudbury (2016) identified several functions that could wed the university to the prison. One of these functions is the production of an educated carceral workforce that can tap into "a plethora of new employment opportunities" (Sudbury,

2016, p. 23) as the carceral state expands prison, security, surveillance, supervision, and detention. Another function is that universities are “the handmaiden for the punishing state” (Sudbury, 2016, p. 24); or that scholars are invested in producing carceral logics and social control mechanisms that have directly contributed to the punishment of more and more people and more and more behaviours. Reciprocally, prisons supply universities with the “raw material for knowledge production, whether as experimental subjects, participants of social science research, or objects of mass media news stories” (Sudbury, 2016, pp. 23–24). Sudbury paints a grim picture of the relationship between the researched and the researcher, and the institution and the regime. This is a trajectory we see in Australia, illustrating the complex and often contentious relationship between academia and the carceral system, almost highlighting the role of universities in perpetuating systems of oppression. By drawing on the insights of scholars like Sudbury (2016), we see there is an urgent need for a critical examination of how academic practices contribute to the expansion of carceral states and the marginalisation of those with lived prison experiences.

Another challenge considered by scholars are ethical ones associated with conducting research in carceral systems (Gacek & Ricciardelli, 2020). Ward and Willis (2013) argue that scholars abide by an agreed upon set of ethical norms that should ensure study participants benefit from their involvement, rather than being harmed by it. Human research ethics committees play a crucial role in offering researchers guidance on the ethical conduct of their studies (Ross, 2023). As highlighted by Macintyre (2014), there is a perception among ethics committees that *good research* necessitates a detachment, advocating for an objective stance from researchers. Yet, this perspective is at odds with the necessity for qualitative researchers to establish trust and rapport with participants, a critical aspect especially when engaging with individuals transitioning out of incarceration (Bell, 2014; Richards & Ross, 2001). Further complicating the ethical landscape, Wynn and Israel (2018) have pointed out that the requirement for written consent forms can transform what should be collaborative relationships into mere procedural interactions. Additionally, such forms can introduce difficulties in safeguarding the privacy and confidentiality of incarcerated individuals (Abbott et al., 2018). In response to these concerns, certain ethics committees in Australia have developed alternative approaches, such as offering scripts that allow for verbal consent from participants in situations where written consent poses challenges or is not suitable (see University of New South Wales, n.d.). However, the Second Author’s encounters with researchers in 2019 are more closely aligned with Sudbury’s (2016) observations. As a collective of people with lived prison and criminal justice sanction experience, we wish there were more Richard Quinney’s around campus. As a US-based *peacemaking criminologist* in the 1990s, Quinney (1993) grounded his scholarship in compassion, arguing that the “original project [of criminology was] the creation of a better world, a world in which we are capable of forming” (p.9). His “criminology of non-violence” (Quinney, 1993, p. 7) focused on compassion and an awareness of our interconnectedness in the hope it would encourage cooperation rather than exploitation. This reflection on the compassionate approach advocated by Quinney (1993) highlights the potential for criminology to evolve towards inclusivity and understanding, bridging the gap between historical practices of domination and the contemporary push for a decolonised discipline that prioritises the voices and rights of Indigenous communities and those with lived experiences.

Lived experience in sites of struggles

I find myself hunched over my laptop, surrounded by scattered notes and the soft hum of silence. The task at hand is, in theory, straightforward: draft an abstract for an upcoming conference in Australia. Yet, every word feels like a struggle, a step across a chasm between worlds. The polished, intricate language of academia feels alien, far removed from the realities I've lived through. Transitioning from incarceration into the academic field has been a journey of countless barriers, and this feels like yet another barrier. As I click through the conference website, the registration fee looms large on the screen – a stark reminder of the financial hurdles ahead – how are people like me, without fulltime ongoing positions in academia, meant to pay this much money merely to attend? Without the backing of a university, this figure isn't just daunting; it's a gatekeeper, stark and insurmountable. Adding to that, the travel costs add layers of complexity to what should be a straightforward endeavour. The act of attending, meant to bridge me into the academic community, seems riddled with obstacles at every turn. I can't help but ponder the social nuances of this conference. The field is filled with scholars who've studied prisons, yet many have never felt the chill of a cell or the weight of handcuffs. How will it be, standing among those who've observed from a distance the world I've lived? Will there be room for my voice, for the raw, unpolished truths of my experience? The thought of navigating the social intricacies after a session, the informal gatherings over coffee breaks, fills me with anxiety. These moments, meant for networking and camaraderie, seem like a minefield of academic hierarchies and personal insecurities. Who will I talk to? Will there be anyone who can understand the journey I've made, from the margins of society to this place of learning? Despite these fears, I find a resolve within me. This isn't just about attending a conference; it's about challenging the structures that make these barriers so daunting. By confronting the language, the financial obstacles, the geographic limitations, and the social dynamics, I aim to carve out a space where lived experience isn't a footnote but a foundational aspect of criminology. As I draft my abstract, I decide to incorporate these challenges into my narrative, making visible the barriers that many never have to consider. It's a small act of defiance, a statement that the insights born from lived experience are not just valuable but essential. The road ahead is uncertain, filled with both known and unforeseen challenges. Yet, I press on, driven by the conviction that the most profound understanding often emerges from the most unexpected sources. (Author One)

We see how criminology is facing its own calls for cooperation rather than exploitation. As a settler-invader colony that was built on the attempted genocide of the First Peoples, Australian coloniality is rooted in imperialist notions of domination and silencing (Bond et al., 2018; Watson, 2016). In reckoning with a discipline that has shaped the policies that have resulted in an exponential number of surveilled and incarcerated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, Indigenous scholars, people with lived experience and their allies are demanding a voice (see Antojado, 2023a; Antojado & McPhee, 2024; Antojado et al., 2024; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012; McCallum et al., 2012). For example, in 2021 the Aotearoa Indigenous criminologist Juan Tauri (Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology [ANZSOC], 2021) penned a statement addressing representation and reconciliation in the ANZSOC after decades of speaking back to criminologists. Tauri challenged ANZSOC to do the necessary work of decolonising the discipline. We believe that thanks to the intellectual labour of scholars like Tauri, people with lived experience who are harmed by criminology will be centred in discussions about the discipline's future, or at least we are hopeful.

Despite the existence of a critical stream and expressions of discontent at existing punishment systems, we see that Australian criminology has largely avoided amplifying

the voices of criminalised storytellers, preferring to cultivate the stories of the *other* for academic benefit, such as publications in top tier journals or competitive research grants. Narrative criminologists Presser and Sandberg (2019) identified the ways in which dominant ideologies and institutions govern whose voices can be heard and under what circumstances. In doing so, they found that the credibility of a storyteller is called into question when those voices belong to certain groups or are elevated in spaces where they would ordinarily be silenced or at the very least, censored. Polletta (2006, as cited in Presser & Sandberg, 2019) believes this type of dynamic oppression “may operate to legitimate an institution – and to insulate it from attack” (Presser & Sandberg, 2019, p. 137). This brand of silencing and censoring is ubiquitous in our lives post-release, but some North American scholars (see J. M. Smith & Kinzel, 2021) are witnessing a rise of the *credentialed* lived experience voice.

In 2021, lived experience criminologist Aaron Kinzel wrote a joint paper for *Critical Criminology* with an allied Associate Professor, Justin Smith, in which they discussed the dichotomies of *carceral citizenship* or citizenship that separates members from the body politic and subjects them to an array of legal and extra-legal burdens that would not ordinarily be deployed in an otherwise caring society (Miller & Alexander, 2016; J. M. Smith & Kinzel, 2021). They found that carceral citizenship does not necessarily mean a life lived only in the margins. J. M. Smith and Kinzel (2021) point out that having lived prison experience and consequently membership in a sizeable carceral citizenry has provided some with considerable socio-political power. This power manifests not only in their capacity to influence public discourse on justice reform and abolition but also in their unique ability to offer authentic insights into the carceral system’s impacts on individuals and communities. We see that our voices, grounded in firsthand experience, hold the potential to drive meaningful change and challenge prevailing narratives around incarceration.

We see how the power of solidarity is evidenced in the growing number of mobilising organisations established by people with lived prison experience and their allies. Sisters Inside (Kilroy, 2018) and Keenan Mundine and Carly Stanley’s Deadly Connections Community and Justice Services (n.d.) are two Australian examples of grassroots organisations that have mobilised to influence carceral discourse and policy and challenge punishment practices. In the US there are many more examples of formerly incarcerated people that have created and inspired life-changing movements. For example, one of Time Magazines 100 Most Influential People, Desmond Meade (Abrams, n.d.) earned a law degree post-incarceration and began restoring voting rights to formerly incarcerated Floridians. Sheena Meade established the Clean Slate Initiative: a bipartisan project that now automatically clears the criminal records of millions of North American citizens (Clean Slate Initiative, 2021). Community civil rights movement was started by formerly incarcerated people to eliminate the many forms of discrimination they encountered upon release from prison. Legal Services for Prisoners with Children’s (2021) All of Us or None have run successful campaigns to remove discrimination in employment hiring practices and reduce voter disenfranchisement.

The socio-political power of the North American examples is fuelled by the lived experience of people who have survived prison, but it is not that alone. These activists accessed higher education, earned degrees, and developed strategic alliances whilst in prison. For them, the university became a catalyst for collaboration and transformation.

Sudbury (2016) recognises that communities of resistance and the academy have a history of being *interlinked sites of struggle*. For example, in 1998 at a Californian university, a pivotal conference Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison-Industrial Complex took place (Critical Resistance, 2018; Sudbury, 2016). The University-funded conference brought together thousands of formerly incarcerated people, advocates and scholars, and has been used as a framework for other academic-activist collaborations (Sudbury, 2016). The framework has also been useful in calls to make academia more accountable to the communities it benefits from (Smith, 2000, as cited in Sudbury, 2016). More recently, in 2013 the Berkeley Underground Scholars formed to create a pathway for incarcerated, formerly incarcerated and system impacted individuals into higher education (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2021). The initiative is now co-funded by the university and the state, with the purpose of recruiting, retaining, and advocating for identifying students across several campuses to directly challenge the stigmas associated with that cohort and to create safe spaces that understand and uplift their lived experiences (Berkeley Underground Scholars, 2021). This is echoed by the first and third author and their colleagues, to provide meaningful avenues, including access to higher education, in which formerly incarcerated people can participate in discourses about them (Antojado & McPhee, 2024).

The former examples of successful grassroots organisations and activist movements supported access to higher education for formerly incarcerated people – we believe this access to education was a vital ingredient of their success, and a requirement for employment in the ranks of academia. Research into Californian-based pathways programs that support and advocate for students who have lived prison experience has shown that this cohort of students greatly benefit from supportive program staff who were a constant source of support and encouragement (L. Smith & Digard, 2020). According to L. Smith and Digard's (2020) research, the programs provided students with a "safe place," "a family dynamic," and "an opportunity to reframe their personal narrative" (pp. 32–40), a chance to challenge other's stereotypes, and fostered a yearning to "pay it forward" (pp. 32–40) by helping other people who face similar challenges to their own. This allows these graduates contribute to and generate new ideas and ways of thinking about the criminal legal-punishment system, capitalised by the disciplining of Convict Criminology, predominantly in the US and the UK (Earle, 2018; Ross et al., 2014; J. M. Smith & Kinzel, 2021).

The Convict Criminology movement has provided a platform and a journal for formerly incarcerated academics who have become credentialled voices, publishing and participating from within the academy (J. M. Smith & Kinzel, 2021). Convict Criminology as a reflexive lived experience discipline utilises autoethnography as a methodology for elevating the "insider perspective" (J. M. Smith & Kinzel, 2021, p. 98). There are numerous examples from the US of lived experiences voices being included in knowledge production and the development of carceral policy. There are however limited examples from Australia. Academic papers written by people with lived experience of the criminal legal-punishment system in Australia are in their infancy. For example, Craig Minogue has been serving a life imprisonment since 1986 and has published in academic journals on a range of issues concerning people in prison, such as human rights (Minogue, 2000), access to education (Minogue, 2001) and strip searching (Minogue, 2005). There are only a handful of individuals in Australia with experience of the prison system who have written about

their experiences in academic spaces, including: Lukas Carey (Carey et al., 2022), Dwayne Antojado (Antojado, 2023b), and Tina McPhee (McPhee, 2021). In 2021, three Australians working together as co-producers of criminal-justice knowledge: two never-imprisoned academics and one formerly imprisoned non-academic choose to amalgamate and anonymise their identities to represent their dedication to the idea of producing together, as equals (see DEDICA-20, 2021). An important contribution in this space also came in 2023 with the publication of *Co-production and Criminal Justice* by Australian authors Johns et al. (2022). As acknowledged by a reviewer of their book, Hart (2023), the authorship team did not include someone with lived experience but this shortcoming was addressed through the “rich description and theory” (p. 373) by the authors throughout the book.

Successfully accessing the academy in Australia as a student or as a scholar with lived prison experience requires more than an open door. Like any project in equitable access, we believe it needs deliberate action to establish clear pathways that offer both practical and emotional support. A project which we commend our Australian colleague, Antojado (2023a) for embarking on and suggesting the term *Lived Experience Criminology* as a way of pushing the theoretical domains of what Convict Criminology offers into new and uncharted territory for this type of work. Lived Experience Criminology aims to explore fresh perspectives on conceptualising lived experiences beyond the scope of autoethnography. This field endeavours to create a vibrant exchange and celebration of ideas concerning the comprehension of lived experiences both within the academic realm and beyond. It aspires to expand the methodological and theoretical boundaries, empowering those with direct experiences of the criminal legal-punishment system to uncover new insights. The motivation for this pioneering approach stems from the critiques faced by Convict Criminology, such as that the discipline is mainly a North American phenomenon (Ross et al., 2014). As such, Lived Experience Criminology contextualises its roots within the Australian criminological landscape – that is not to say that its principles do not transcend geographical and political boundaries. Additionally, Belknap (2015) argues that the discipline lacks representation of men of colour, women or LGBTQIA+ individuals, indicating a significant gap in diverse perspectives. Lived Experience Criminology addresses this in its forthcoming monograph by Antojado et al. (in press), inviting a diverse range of scholarship from actors within the criminal legal-punishment system.

Concluding remarks

We positioned this paper as a call to action and in doing so structured the text to illuminate some of the challenges faced by those with lived prison experience, and what can be life-changing benefits of inclusion. By focusing on the university-prison nexus that is most evident in today’s criminology, it is hoped that we, as a collective of allies, can advocate for a prison to university pathway that does not leave formerly incarcerated students feeling harmed by an institution they may have turned to for transformation.

This paper transcends a mere illumination of issues arising from our shared experiences. It stands as a protest and a call to action, urging the recognition and respect of our voices not as supplementary but as *complementary* to traditional epistemologies. Our exploration underscores the significance of lived experience in shaping and informing

social justice practices. We emphasise the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of this expertise in the context of the Australian criminological landscape. The potential for transformation lies in the recognition of lived experience as both deeply personal and professionally relevant. We call for a balanced approach where both lived experience and formal qualifications are valued in the criminal legal-punishment system where this integration is still nascent.

As we advocate for a more inclusive and participatory approach, we also recognise the challenges and obstacles that come with integrating lived experience into academic and professional settings. The journey is not without its difficulties, especially when considering the deeply personal nature of these experiences and their potential to evoke trauma. However, the intersection of these experiences with academic and professional knowledge can enrich and improve outcomes, making this endeavour necessary and invaluable. This paper serves as a testament to the power and potential of these voices, calling for a reimagining of how we perceive, value, and integrate lived experience into our collective efforts to advance social justice. By doing so, we believe we can create more inclusive, informed, and effective approaches that truly reflect the diverse and complex realities of those we aim to serve and represent – people impacted by the criminal legal-punishment system.

But what's next? We are calling on you, the reader, to not only digest these words and critique their merit against the rubrics of academia, but to actively respond to them. Responding might include making a safe place for formerly incarcerated voices, or by challenging the carceral paradigms that exist in our shared spaces. If you support our call to action, then please know that we do not need you to speak for us. We are not voiceless; we are silenced. You see, as members of the carceral citizenry we embody the contemporary practices, policies and provisions that exist to discredit our voices and bring us harm.

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