



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation

# **Embracing the views and perspectives of those with lived experience**

David Honeywell

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## Foreword

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HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by David Honeywell, highlighting the need to fully embrace the views and perspectives of those with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Over recent years, those with relevant lived experience have become increasingly involved in the delivery of prison and probation services. Within the Inspectorate, we have also been paying increased attention to how to involve those with lived experience in developing our methodologies, in our inspections, and in our organisation as employees. There has also been an enhanced role for those with lived experience in criminal justice research. This is not about advocating that those with lived experience know better, rather that they offer invaluable additional perspectives that have for too long been silent. Crucially, it would seem nonsensical to try to improve services without engaging and learning from those who have been in receipt of them.

However, as David illustrates, there remain structural hurdles and challenges, and it is important to recognise that being so open about past convictions and adopting the dual identity of ex-offender and academic can be a form of self-labelling and stigmatisation, potentially re-opening old wounds when continually reflecting upon difficult experiences. Addressing barriers and creating safe and inclusive spaces, where all views and perspectives are respected and valued (paying full regard to the processes of rehabilitation and desistance) is thus vital. Ultimately, the more that we can pull together differing perspectives and types of evidence, the more confident we can become in how to deliver high-quality probation and criminal justice services.



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**David Honeywell** is a Criminology Lecturer at Arden University (Manchester campus) and co-investigator at the University of Manchester, currently working on the PROSPECT project about prison suicide. He began his academic career in 2013 at the University of York where he worked as an Associate Criminology Lecturer, and has since taught Criminology at Leeds Beckett, Durham, Hull, Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan universities. In 2018, David completed his PhD on 'Ex-Prisoners and the Transformation of Self through Higher Education' at the University of York which was inspired by his own experiences as a prisoner. While in prison in the 1990's, David gained an Open University foundation course which later led to a BSc (Hons) degree in Criminology, and an MSc in Social Research Methods at Teesside University. Additionally, David has contributed towards the development of prison to college programmes and is a regular keynote speaker at universities and prisons. David's research interests include desistance from crime, prison and punishment, history of crime and punishment, and prisoner and ex-prisoner education.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

# 1. Introduction

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I have extracted this paper from my recent book *Living with Desistance* and highlight the importance of identity transformation to successful desistance and how 'convict criminologists' continually negotiate dual identities as former offenders turned academics, with their pasts informing their academic work. Positively, it would appear that many criminologists with first-hand experiences of the criminal justice system are now teaching criminology and conducting prison and wider criminal justice research. Furthermore, outside the academic world, many ex-offenders are now working across the prison and probation service, recognising that people with lived experience offer invaluable additional perspectives that have for too long been silent.

At the same time, I provide a narrative about a term that I often use in relation to criminal records – 'indelible stain'. This term epitomises the impact a criminal record can have upon people's lives – how it can be imprinted on lives and how it can be unforgiving, regardless of how much one tries to transform him or herself. Organisations such as Timpsons, Boots, Tesco, and Greggs have undertaken excellent work to pro-actively employ ex-offenders, and universities have employed a number of ex-offenders too. However, there remain significant issues when academic researchers with lived experience meet the criminal justice system. While many ex-prisoners have successfully conducted research in prisons, there is a lack of essential communication within the process between funding bodies and prisons. As there is an increasing amount of funding bodies now insisting upon including individuals with lived experience, it is essential that this is resolved as quickly as possible, paying full regard to the processes of rehabilitation and desistance.

Although I have been fortunate in having a straightforward trajectory towards teaching at university, in no small part due to the continual support from the probation service, this article delves into the many barriers I have faced. I have had no barriers as a lecturer and in my career progression, but I have as a researcher; and as many universities insist upon good research from academic staff, this could mean people like myself will always struggle to be fully integrated. I analyse, through the lens of lived experiences, the challenges that many like me have to face despite our educational achievements, which can lead to frustrations due to the continuous attempts required to prove oneself. This article is not just about providing a critical analysis, but more about providing an insight into the difficulties faced by researchers, not only for those with criminal convictions but also those who are part of their research team. While more funding bodies continue to insist upon individuals with lived experience being included within the processes and taking part in research projects, there remains a significant gap in the lack of support for those with criminal convictions gaining access into prisons with the same level of access as their colleagues.

## 2. Identity transitions, dual identities, and indelible stains

### 2.1 Identity transformation

In his 2017 article about desistance as a social movement, Shadd Maruna stated that he saw future desistance studies being conducted mainly by ex-offender desisters. It thus seems fitting to develop further discourse around this idea. As a starting point, it is important to recognise that desistance is a term lost on most academics, never mind the rest of the population, so unless someone is familiar with its meaning, it will not resonate. This lack of clarity is recognised by Maruna and Mann (see [Academic Insights 2019/01](#)) who then helpfully elaborate as follows:

*‘Desistance research takes success stories seriously. The research does not start with programmes and aggregated outcomes, but individual lives and personal trajectories. Recognising the individual as the agent of change, desistance research explores individuals’ social contexts, embedded social networks and subjective interpretations as keys to understanding long-term life change.’*

In my book, *Ambiguities of Desistance* (2021), I argue that at the crux of successful desistance is identity transformation, which Alan Mobley (2003) alludes to when emphasising how convict criminologists are able to combine their past criminal identities and present law-abiding identities to create new identities. He refers to this predicament as ‘the two-legged data dilemma’ which is the dual identity that scholars and contributors with first-hand experience of the criminal justice system and mental health have, drawing upon their pasts to inform their current vocations. Essentially the objective of the convict criminologist is to:

- develop a successful academic career through which they provide critical perspectives on prisons and the wider criminal justice system (including through research with/on prisoners and former prisoners)
- then seek to develop a collective knowledge through their experiences and expertise to influence policy change through academic work and connections to advocacy/campaign groups (Darke, Earle, Aresti, 2012).

Through this process, convict criminologists are able to overcome the period of liminality that often stagnates desisters where they find themselves in a place of limbo; a place where they neither belong to their old world nor their new world (Healy, 2010). Grant Tietjen (2019, p.111) expands upon this, highlighting the complexities as follows

*‘the pathway of a formerly incarcerated convict criminologist involves an ongoing process of attempting to overcome the stigma attached to the ex-convict label, and of grappling with the collateral consequences of a criminal conviction while also endeavouring to establish a legitimate and respected place within the academic environment.’*

Mobley (2003) explains: ‘symbolically, the ex-convict academic represents two antagonistic master statuses: the convict and the professor. The former role informs the latter role but cannot be forgotten, especially when the subject of the research is prison’. And as Tietjen (2019) says, convict criminologists often undertake this process in the company of colleagues, who, while well intentioned, might not understand fully the unique structural hurdles in the pathway of the ex-convict. This argument is a significant one because convict criminology

provides an important contribution to modern criminology, offering a new dynamic within the discipline that gives insight into prison, punishment and the criminal justice system that has in the past been absent. The difficulty for the convict criminologist is becoming trapped within their own position, as being open about past convictions is a form of self-labelling and potential stigmatisation.

## 2.2 The indelible stain and the pains of desistance

Earlier desistance studies focussed upon the influence of external factors on self-change, using an informal social control perspective which discussed 'turning points' such as marriage, college, employment, and the military (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Shover, 1996). In my case, the most significant turning point was education alongside maturity. However, my mental health issues prevented me from following a steady path in life, especially as my personality disorder reached its peak after I was released from prison. Several years later, I looked back on my time with the lifers, and how their words of wisdom had a great impact upon me.

Ainslie (2021) reminds us of how probation has transitioned from a rehabilitative focus upon individual's shortcomings to developing a more desistance-based approach. The rehabilitation approach is what Maruna (2016, p.292) refers to as a medical model:

*'The study of desistance, in fact, originally emerged out of something of a critique of the professionally driven 'medical model' of rehabilitation. To explore desistance (sometimes referred to as 'spontaneous desistance' in early writing, drawing on the notion of 'spontaneous remission' in medicine) was to study those persons who change without the assistance of correctional interventions. From such a perspective, one either 'desists' on one's own accord or else one is 'rehabilitated' through formal counselling or treatment.'*

In other words, rehabilitation is a forced approach aimed at fixing the problem (the offender) whereas desistance is a subjective journey whereby the individual makes their own decision to change their lives for the better. In recent years, desistance has become central to probation work (heavily influenced by the work of Shadd Maruna and Fergus McNeill), and as a former probationer turned desistance scholar, this is something I welcome. Over the years I have had many probation officers, all of whom were trained social workers, and their approach was very nurturing and our rapport was essential to developing trust. There was, in essence, always a desistance-based approach – even if not officially – with practitioners being very encouraging to help probationers find their way towards a better life. At the same time, probation has also veered over the years towards risk-based approaches; I can recall that in 1998, during my final weeks on probation at North Tyneside, my probation officer told me she was planning on retiring because of the major changes in the service. "It's going to become more like the American Parole Officer approach" she said.

Despite all the encouragement and support from the probation service, the pains within the desistance process encompasses many complexities and flaws (as highlighted by Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Complexities include previous substance misuse, lack of housing opportunities, difficulties in finding employment, and the individual's lack of motivation or their inability to achieve status or respect in a legitimate way (Farrall, 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Healy, 2010, 2014). Desistance literature often focusses on moments of hope and optimism, using hooks for change and imagining a future self. As a desister, and drawing on the literature, I argue that desistance can be a very painful process and one could argue that a sentence begins once one

is released from prison. The struggles that continue throughout one's life from having a criminal record can be enough to deflate the most determined desister. The key is to never give up trying, and, as a convict criminologist, this can mean revisiting the pains of desistance for the sake of teaching and research.

In their 2020 paper, *Glimpses across 50 years of prison life from members of British Convict Criminology*, Rod Earle and Bill Davies gave an accurate explanation of my situation.

*'Dr Dave Honeywell ruefully remarks, it can seem like the you never become free of the prison: "What I'm teaching is what I'm part of...It's there with me 24/7. Sometimes I think 'is this dominating myself, am I sort of imprisoning myself here to be always this ex-convict talking about the same thing over and over again"... Dr Honeywell has felt the insidious pull of institutionalisation from two of society's factories of character — the university and the prison — and lives with the unsettling liminality it imposes on his identity: "... the only way I would be able to transform my life through being accepted and fully integrated would be through the university culture... the academy has become the institution in which I am now defined".'*

This supports Earle's earlier work in 2016 when he talks about the impact of indelible stains in relation to criminal background checks and how they discriminate against individuals who have clearly moved on with their lives. I discussed the pains of desistance in *The Ambiguities of Desistance*, but as desistance is an ongoing process, it is something that can always be updated, igniting new areas of debate and discussion.

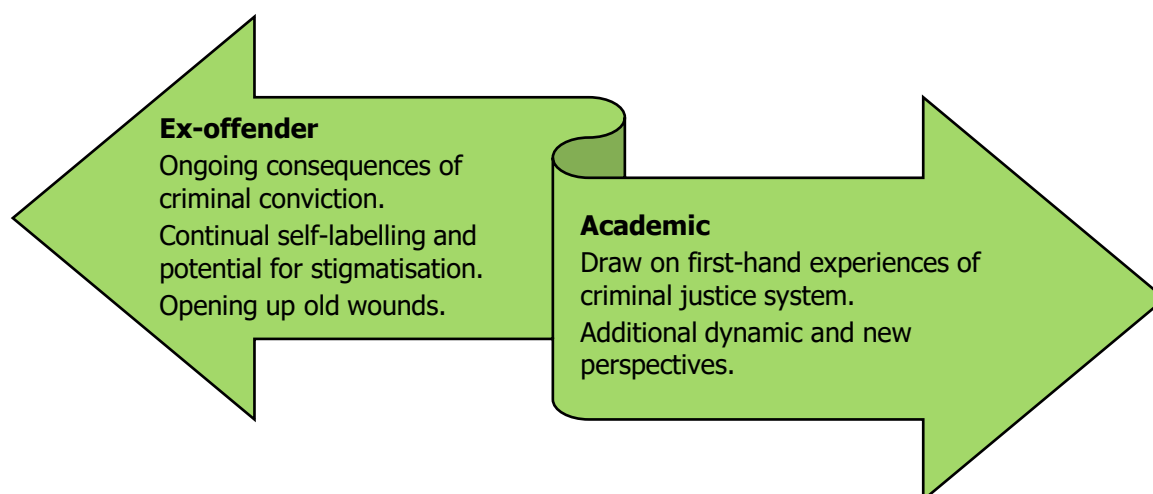
Convict criminologists continually negotiate dual identities as former offenders turned academics, with their pasts informing their academic work (see Figure 1). In relation to my earlier point about teaching and research, I have found this to be quite liberating and refreshing as well as having an important, positive impact on my students. Several years ago, after being interviewed to teach criminology at one of the UKs most prestigious universities, it was suggested by the department that my past would be very useful for leading a particular module which involved taking students into prison. Ironically, it was the very prison where I served my first sentence and began my early education at the age of 19 – the same age as my students (see Honeywell, 2016).

Not only does this feed into university diversity policies but also is recognised as being useful for student engagement. This is true for all those who have experience of the criminal justice system, including former police officers, prison officers, probation officers, governors as well as prisoners. What is particularly interesting is how individuals who may have once been in conflict with one another are able to work together to develop a unique experience for students. It would seem that universities now regard their fellow ex-prisoner and ex-offender colleagues in the same way as their more traditional counterparts. It is important for all universities to see the benefits of having students and staff from diverse backgrounds and embracing the wealth of experience and knowledge they bring with them. As Ross et al. (2010) argue, those with the lived experience of prison and the wider criminal justice system should be allowed the same platform as those who have worked as practitioners.

With regards to teaching, this is largely the case and I have been able to turn bad experiences towards developing a better future through education which started in prison. Positively, it would appear more criminologists with first-hand experiences of the criminal justice system are

now teaching criminology and conducting prison and wider criminal justice research (see Honeywell, 2021; Ancrum, 2011; Aresti and Darke, 2018; Earle and Davies, 2020; Warr, 2020).

**Figure 1: Ex-offender and academic dual identity**



Outside of the academic world, ex-offenders are routinely employed in prisons, and it seems that prisons have come a long way. Prison governors are much more proactive towards ex-prisoners' involvement in prison mentoring and drug counselling and the need for such intervention has now been recognised by the Ministry of Justice who have pledged to roll out more updated and nuanced training and inclusion of diverse groups including ex-offenders. In terms of ex-prisoners working as probation officers, this is nothing new; Bob Turney and Allan Weaver (also see Hylton, 2015) are well-known examples of how people with extensive offending backgrounds can make an invaluable contribution towards the criminal justice system. It is even more common in relation to counselling and mentoring roles; within my PhD study, several of the interviewees were actively working as counsellors and mentors (Honeywell, 2018). HM Inspectorate of Probation has also been paying increased attention to how to involve those with lived experience in developing its methodologies, in its inspections, and in its organisation as employees. A participatory approach is set out based on the following principles (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2025):

### **Collaborative**

We will encourage, listen to, and respond to the views of people with lived experience.

### **Informative**

We will work to ensure our activities deliver the maximum benefit to those who participate.

### **Respectful**

We will respect the individuals we work with, and their lived experience, and treat them as equals.

### **Inclusive**

We will actively encourage people with a broad range of lived experience to participate and will ensure we are able to support the needs of all involved.

### **Relevant**

We will make sure all our activities are relevant and targeted to maximise both our impact and the benefit to those involved.

## **2.3 The challenges of criminal justice and prison research**

For any novice researcher, the custodial environment is challenging, especially when they have learned misleading and exaggerated accounts of the environment, but it can be even more challenging for the novice researcher who has served a custodial sentence, and consideration should always be given to the support that might be required. One might expect that the novice researcher who has experienced prison first-hand will not feel as challenged because they have 'been there and done that'. However, even an experienced researcher and former prisoner such as Rod Earle (2014, p.432) encountered unexpected emotions when he returned to prison 30 years after being a resident:

*'We accumulated hundreds of hours "spending time" in the field but not much of it felt like "serving time," or got close to the sense of doing a prison sentence. Imagine, for a moment, being locked in a train compartment crowded with people you have never met for about 3 months and consider that this train is never going to move but all around you, unseen, the world whirls and moves on. This is the disorienting stasis I experienced in 1982 as a prisoner in my early 20s in a short, and characteristically unnecessary, prison sentence. It was an experience I found I could not avoid reflecting on once I returned to prison environments as a qualitative researcher.'*

Criminology lecturer, researcher and former prisoner, Jason Warr (2020) writes on how his experiences as an 'indeterminately sentenced prisoner' helped shape his research experiences and 'insider' positionality: 'It is important to understand researcher positionality as this affects not only the relationship between researcher and participant but can also impact on method and results' (p.31). My own positionality became central to my PhD study through the

reciprocal narratives which developed with my interviewees, all of whom had by then been out of prison for several years and since developed a new life for themselves.

In recent years there has been movement by medical and psychological research sponsors to insist upon individuals with lived experience to be included in research studies. These individuals (whose identities are always anonymised) are referred to as service users or Patient Public Involvement (PPI) researchers who are actively involved in research projects and research organisations. PPI can be seen as a formal platform for those whose voices in the past have been muted, and can potentially help researchers make sure that the design of their research projects are:

- relevant
- participant friendly
- ethically sound.

In 2019, I was a co-applicant for a prestigious four-year research project on prison suicide (PROSPECT), and I was involved in discussions between the funders and the team about the need for PPI involvement. As part of the funding application process, the sponsors insisted that someone with 'lived experience' be recruited, providing authenticity from a novel insight and acting as a voice for others who have also been in that position. I thus became a full-time costed member of the PROSPECT research team as a research assistant alongside my role as a co-investigator. I felt I had arrived, with education opening doors for me that I could never have imagined – particularly as part of the research would include going into a prison where I served my last custodial sentence and where I gained my university entrance qualifications. As I anticipated re-entering a prison, I could not help but wonder what impact it would have had on my sense of self, but could only surmise that it would be a mixture of bad memories and pride.

It was a worry whether I could bypass the initial university recruitment process and I was honoured when I crossed that bridge. But there was still the next stage to gain access into prisons; DBS checks was the initial stage of the prison vetting process which unfortunately but not unexpectedly led to my application to work in prison being rejected. The day we all received the generic email from the prison which listed everyone's initial vetting outcome left me feeling completely deflated. Although I expected this, seeing 'rejected' next to my name on the list invoked past feelings of rejection by employers, colleagues, and members of society. Higher Education had enabled me to rise above all these in the past but now it became a catch 22 situation where although I was employed by the university, I was unable to fulfil my role as a prison researcher. Ultimately, this was not just a personal rejection but impacted a whole team of people and a research project.

Unfortunately, two years into the study, we (the team) encountered further unexpected delays in securing my access into prison, not because of rejection, but what seemed to be a gap in the vetting process for researchers (on certain projects) with criminal backgrounds. I deliberately emphasise 'certain projects' because other criminologists with convictions have successfully conducted prison research and interviewed prisoners face to face. There were many more questions than answers, and the silence threw the study into such disarray that the team had to find a replacement and even change the recruitment criteria from 'lived experience – essential' to 'lived experience – desirable'. The key underpinning issue was the lack of regard for rehabilitation and desistance, and, after two years of waiting, I eventually decided it was time to move on rather than allow the establishment to continue (as it felt) punishing me.

This experience demonstrates that there remains inconsistencies within the process of supporting the transition into prison for those with lived experience conducting prison research.

This will only become a greater problem as funders are increasingly insisting that research studies include individuals with lived experiences. If sponsors are to insist upon service user involvement, then there must be more transparency and assistance on making this happen.

My appointment at the University of Manchester within the psychology department has broken new ground and, though I wasn't able to gain access to the prison estate, much has been learnt about the important contributions service users can provide as well as highlighting aspects of prison research that need to be reviewed when it comes to service users gaining access. It has also been an important landmark for future ex-offenders who wish to follow the same path as myself and want to conduct clinically-based prison research. Moving forward, there needs to be more scope for PPIs to take a more hands-on role (c.f. a consultant role) within research studies where they are included in the design and study itself, recognising that only those with first-hand experience of imprisonment can fully understand what it is like to be in prison. Therefore, I argue that funders, the Ministry of Justice and the prison estates need to create a pipeline and clear pathway for researchers who have lived experience.

### 3. Conclusion

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The terms 'service user' and 'lived experience' have become widely used in academia and the third sector over recent years, but there has been little, if any, real clarity about what these terms actually mean. For me, 'lived experience' refers to someone who has life experiences which are relevant to a specific topic or subject area and role. Those who draw on their past experiences of substance use to work as drugs counsellors have relevant lived experience and many see themselves as 'wounded healers' (see Maruna, 2001). In relation to my own positionality, I have lived experience of the criminal justice system as a former prisoner, and I have been able to draw on my lived experiences in my capacity as a researcher at the University of Manchester. Therefore, lived experience can offer an additional dynamic and there is no better example than my role as a convict criminologist. Convict criminologists are academics who have lived experience of prison which is drawn upon for research and teaching methods. We do not advocate that we know better because we have been in prison, but rather we can offer an additional perspective that for many years has been silent within academia or has not been taken seriously.

My lived experience only became relevant once I decided to share my past experiences and 'come out' as an ex-offender. Not everyone with lived experiences wants to share their most personal experiences and especially their most painful memories. To put this into perspective, you would have to imagine the worst thing you have done in your life and then continually reflect upon it when speaking at conferences, teaching students, and writing papers. This may seem a worthy cause, but it can also be paralleled to repeatedly ripping a plaster off a cut which can then never heal.

I have learned over many years how to cultivate my past experiences and when to shut them out. For example, in 2018 I was awarded a PhD for my study of ex-prisoners and the transformation of self in higher education which was centred around my own experiences. I was very proud of my achievement, but it came with many challenging experiences. I had underestimated the impact the interviews could have upon myself and how much the lives of those I was interviewing would impact upon my own sense of self. I began to question my own position as a researcher, and I soon realised I was on the same journey as my interviewees. I was still in higher education and still trying to reach certain goals and turn my life around. But more than this, I became quite traumatised during my PhD study because each story I listened to opened up my old wounds too, and so learning to deal with this was essential.

Beyond the PhD, my lived experiences started to become more sought after through guest talks across the university circuit and eventually as a researcher at the University of Manchester. Although I have now been teaching criminology for a number of years where I use my personal experiences in my teaching, the PROSPECT study was the first time my lived experience became an essential criterion for my job role. I continue to draw on my past experiences when teaching students and undertaking research which is personally satisfying because I know I am making a difference. Most importantly though is that prisoners' and ex-prisoners' voices are being heard and their experiences are being taken seriously. For all those involved in the overseeing and delivering probation and criminal justice services, the core message is that there is significant value from giving people with a lived experience a voice, ensuring that this happens in way which is collaborative, non-tokenistic, sensitive, respectful and inclusive.

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