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Rehabilitating Reintegration:
Research and Reflections on What Works

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Research and Reflections on What Works

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“Our role as criminologists is not first and foremost to be perceived as useful problem-solvers, but as problem-raisers (...). We confront society with dilemmas, and suggest some tentative solutions. Changing times create new situations and bring us to new crossroads...

“Together with other cultural workers—because these fields are central for all observers of society—but equipped with our special training in scientific method and theory, it is our obligation as well as pleasure to penetrate these problems. Together with other cultural workers, we will probably also have to keep a constant fight going against being absorbed, tamed, and made responsible, and thereby completely socialized into society—as it is.”
(Nils Christie, 1971:145).

I. Introduction

Fifty years ago, the late Nils Christie (1971:145) described the role of criminologists as cultural workers whose “obligation” it was to “penetrate” contemporary problems as they arise and work alongside policymakers to “keep a constant fight going against being absorbed and tamed” by the status quo of society. Christie assigned to criminologists the ability to transform the way penalty is understood and the responsibility to spread that understanding beyond the halls of academia and into wider political discourse.

Today, 50 years later, it is precisely the same duty that unites over 200 delegates across 43 countries and 5 continents for the 2023 International Correctional Research Symposium in Porto, Portugal.¹

Our obligation as cultural workers to address what has rightfully been called “one of the most important issues facing us in the next few decades” (Maruna, 2001:17); **the question of how we can improve the reintegration of prison-leavers from custody to the community.**

¹ This was the third Correctional Research Symposium organized jointly by the International Corrections & Prisons Association (ICPA) and the European Organisation of Prison and Correctional Services (EuroPris)

With a global prison population of more than **11.7 million²** and a majority (~96%) being released within their lifetime³, the urgency and importance of the call to address and improve prison reintegration cannot be overstated.

Research consistently points to the innumerable challenges that prison-leavers face, threatening successful reintegration: The collateral consequences of punishment (Kirk and Wakefield 2018), limited self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), the disruption of social and familial ties (Sampson and Laub 2003), finding somewhere to live (Gojkovic et al. 2012), the labeling effects and stigma associated with a criminal record (Schwartz and Skolnick 1962), the loss of human capital (Becker 1975), the legal barriers to employment that a criminal record may cause (Dale 1976; Pager 2003;2008), as well as the trauma of the incarceration itself (Parenti 1999), are just some of the many ways that prison-leavers continue to be punished after they've finished serving their prison sentences.

Understanding how we can improve reintegration requires an understanding of what constitutes *good* and *effective* reintegration in the first place? What *can* we, as outsiders – be that academics, criminal justice system (hereafter CJS) professionals, or policymakers – do to aid that process? What *can't* or *shouldn't* we be doing?

In pursuit of answering these questions and addressing the challenge of improving prison reintegration, the International Correctional Research Symposium came away with a number of important conclusions that could be summarized under the following three themes (that will henceforth structure this paper):

- 1) **The Importance of Collaboration in Knowledge-Production**
- 2) **The Democratization of Knowledge**
- 3) **Reintegration as a Human Process**

I will then conclude with some thoughts and unanswered questions for the future that will guide us going into the next symposium.

II. The Importance of Collaboration in Knowledge-Production

It is sad to think how much can be missed when we choose the comfort of familiarity over the risk of exposing ourselves to new people, places, and ideas in fear that they may challenge what *we think we know* to be true. Far too often, we exclude persons and perspectives from our conversations in fear that they might disagree with us – shying away from difference.

Every good 'cultural worker' knows that the most informative experiences will always be those that lay beyond one's comfort zone – immersing oneself in settings and discourses that they are unfamiliar with and entering those experiences with an open mind. The mark of a good 'cultural worker' therefore, is the willingness to embrace challenge and disagreement. This requires having conversations with individuals across a plurality of perspectives and creating dialogue where it has historically been missing.

Collaborative spirit was a consistent undertone of the symposium: From the introductory pre-conference event opening with the importance of collaboration for innovation, to the concluding panel that showcased the value of embedding those with lived experience as MORE than a data-source but as co-producers of data. The symposium's format – with panel discussions and scheduled breaks for interaction – encouraged all attendees to open their thoughts, perspective and expertise to the floor, allowing oneself to develop from

² United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime, 2021

³ Penal Reform International, 2018

the insights and critiques of one's peers. It is only through collaborative discussions and disagreements that we remain critical, inquisitive, and always-improving.

The undeniable value of dialogue *across* difference echoed far beyond the walls of the symposium venue and rang true for our work in criminal justice spaces, prisons and probation services. In nearly every presentation, we heard a call for better communication within, between, and across communities and institutions. We saw examples where the involvement of those with lived experience led to the co-production of knowledge alongside practitioners – rejecting a uni-modal 'teaching' approach and embracing discussion as an opportunity to learn from *each other*.

We also learned of the dangers that come with operational disconnect: the misunderstanding of personal and local needs when implementing a top-down approach to policymaking, and the ways this has negatively impacted prison-leavers globally. We cannot begin to understand the needs and wants of those we have yet to share a meaningful conversation with.

For this reason, the importance of an alliance approach in pursuit of shared futures cannot be overstated. In a CJS that is entangled with processes of silencing and excluding those with different experiences, our duty is to embrace – rather than shy away from – dialogue across difference.

III. Democratizing Knowledge

As 'cultural workers', our duty only begins with the production of knowledge through collaboration. Recall that Christie assigned to criminologists both the ability to transform the way penalty is understood and the responsibility to spread that understanding beyond the halls of academia and into wider political discourse.

The second recurring theme throughout the symposium, therefore, was the need for open and accessible information through the **democratization of knowledge**.

In our field, more than most, *research must guide practice*. We need more rigorous evaluations of current interventions and reintegration support, as well as the strict use of evidence when designing future policy and programming, to avoid any harmful unintended consequences for an already-vulnerable population.

That said, we all find ourselves inflicted with knowledge poverty: practitioners and researchers are often missing the lived-experience, academics are missing the frontline practical perspective of professionals, and those with lived-experience are often restricted access to research and academic literature. And if we are to take an alliance approach toward shared goals, then our strength depends on our ability to share our knowledge and experiences freely and widely.

A few excellent examples from the symposium come to mind:

The Confederation of European Probation (CEP) spoke of their 'Research Expert Groups' whose purpose is to communicate research to probation staff in a way that is reliable and accessible – translating research findings into policy through employing comprehensible language and format. The University of Coimbra Institute for Legal Research also spoke of a 3-day training event where judges, lawyers, CJS professionals, academics and NGOs come together to receive training on international human rights instruments. Criminal justice stakeholders in Portugal spoke of a pilot model of articulation between local mental health teams and local probation offices to co-produce a 'Good Practices Guide'. The University of Milano-Bicocca spoke of the installation of a legal 'helpdesk' inside the prison of Milano-Bollate, Italy, where lawyers and professors volunteer their time supporting those inside the prison with understanding of legal documents

and practices. The Chance for Reentry project in Slovakia spoke of an IT-training program (HOLUP) for those currently incarcerated to prepare them for meaningful employment upon release.

Thus, the answer to **how we can improve the reintegration of prison-leavers from custody to the community** lies in more than just collaborative knowledge production, but in the effective communication of robust and reliable knowledge (of many forms) that can be easily understood and applied by a wider audience; knowledge translation through trusting and productive relationships between researchers, practitioners and the general public.

IV. Reintegration as a Human Process

When revisiting the question of **how we can improve the reintegration of prison-leavers from custody to the community**, we are reminded that reintegration is a human process.

Accordingly, the final takeaway from the symposium was the reminder that we are doing people-centered work, and that we need to remember to put people at the center of our models, our statistics and our measures. Reintegration, like any other human process, will look different for different individuals.

How we define and operationalize ‘successful reintegration’, therefore, should capture the dynamic and heterogeneous nature of human behavioral change. Since desistance from crime is defined as the ongoing management of the risk factors associated with re-entry⁴, successful reintegration must encompass a lot more than the avoidance of reoffence, such as those outcomes involved in the process restoring one’s full citizenship in the community (Petersilia, 2003). Moreover, reintegration is not an event that just occurs and is therefore not synonymous with the termination of offending as there is not a single and sudden ‘turning point’ in behavioral change -- behavioral change is gradual and cumulative in nature (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988). Similarly, as with most behavioral change, the process of reintegration is rarely linear, and would better be described as tumultuous, dynamic and uncertain⁵. As Sheila from *Cork Alliance* reminded us, we mustn’t expect a ‘short-cut’ or ‘fast-track’ to behavioral change, we should *expect* and *accept* lapses and relapses.

Unfortunately, too often we see a failure for reintegration policy and practice to reflect this humanity. First, we see the false conflation of ‘successful reintegration’ with complete cessation of criminal activity, which research repeatedly shows rarely happens instantaneously (Bottoms et al., 2004). Imposing complete termination as the metric of ‘success’ unfortunately discredits individual progress and punishes individuals for hiccups along their reintegration journeys. Second, there is a heavy reliance on arrests and conviction data, which incorrectly reflects changes in *criminal justice involvement*, not changes in *criminal behavior* (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Bushway & Tahamont, 2016). Third, many global re-entry policies still focus solely on the individual, ignoring the importance of social context on the reintegration process.

Thus, the final takeaway was a reminder to all attendees to take that humanity which binds us back into our work, and to remember that the question of how to improve reintegration of prison-leavers is at its core a fundamentally human one.

⁴ The process of abstaining from crime amongst those who previously engaged in a pattern of offending (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016).

⁵ Glaser (1964:57) calls this the ‘zig zag’ path of a criminal career.

V. Conclusion & Reflections for Future Symposiums

Some scholars believe that the potential of successful reintegration is severely limited by the inevitable peripheral difficulties facing prison-leavers. Whilst Maruna (2001) rightfully calls the question of how to improve the reintegration process “one of the most important issues facing [researchers] in the next few decades” (17), he has his doubts that we “can only go so far in opening up opportunities” for prison-leavers whilst “the economy is weak and prejudice is high” (70).

Other scholars, such as myself and the late Nils Christie, take the same doubts as those facing Maruna as an urgent call to improve the knowledge and application of reintegration support for prison-leavers. Because of the innumerable challenges facing individuals as they leave prison, the importance of investing in good reintegration policy cannot be overstated.

Some questions to guide us into the next symposium...

First, we are tasked with the ongoing challenge of balancing the often-competing rights of public safety and individual freedoms. How can we maintain the public’s right to safety and justice without compromising prison-leavers’ freedoms and rights? How can we promote good reintegration into the community whilst respecting the feelings and fears of victims and their families? If reintegration is a human process, we mustn’t forget that human lives are affected by the decisions we make.

Second: Science, algorithms and machine-learning are already heavily embedded in the CJS, with risk-assessments, offender management systems and algorithmic sentencing decisions. We even heard an insightful presentation on the employment of Electronic Monitoring in reintegration and the dangers of intrusive technology. How can we bring science into our practice without replacing what is inherently a human process?

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