Public Criminology in the Australian Higher Education Classroom: Bringing Criminology and History together through Citizen Social Science

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Abstract

In 2020, students studying with authors Nagy in the unit "Crime and Criminal Justice" at the University of Tasmania or Cushing in the unit "Australian Underworlds: Histories of Crime in Australia" were required to complete a Primary Source Transcription and Self-Reflection exercise. This allowed students to participate in real research through Piper's "Criminal Characters" project, generating valuable data for criminological and historical inquiries from handwritten prisoner records held by the Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV). Without the work of the students and a host of volunteers, valuable data about the life histories and criminal careers of offenders across time in Victoria would be impossible to interrogate and potentially lost over time.

Through the assessment students had an opportunity to probe these offenders' criminal records and encounters with the legal system, which cannot be undertaken with contemporary data due to legal and privacy restrictions. This task has been repeated in both courses in 2021 and 2022, expanded to involve prisoner records from New South Wales and Tasmania. By inviting reflection on the relationship between criminology and history, this exemplar demonstrates how citizen social science can be used as a tool both to engage student learners and to extend the impact of public criminology.

Background

Public criminology arose in response to a desire to better connect criminology with non-criminological and non-academic audiences (Loader and Sparks 2011). Uggen and Inderbitzen (2010) identified public criminology as a distinct silo within the discipline, along with "professional", "policy" and "critical" criminologies. However, we believe that this understanding is quite limiting as it suggests that there is only one type of criminology that

should seek to engage the public. As Hamilton (2013) points out, there would be few criminologists at universities who do not see their work as being important to or involving policymakers or the public. The working definition of public criminology is centred on the public's *responses* to crime, public debates, and intersections with policymaking (Loader and Sparks 2011; Hamilton 2013). Public criminology is therefore less about bringing the public into the discipline as active participants and more about taking findings to them. This definition is one that Sexton (2020) disagrees with, and rightfully so, as it suggests that there is nothing that the public can offer – they must wait for our expertise to appear to them, suitably presented. Seeking to challenge this position, Ruggiero (2020) and Sexton (2020) argue a true public criminology requires activity from the public and that they are taken seriously, as activists in crime and justice debates, with support from criminologists. Involving the public or students in collecting data and information about crime to do their own analysis and research could be part of a much more genuinely public criminology than simply engaging the public to listen to criminological research and then pressure policymakers (Shah and Henne 2020).

The purpose of this chapter is not for us to debate what public criminology is (or isn't), or offer a prescriptive response about what public criminology means for higher education and criminology. Rather, we reflect upon the role for history in the teaching of criminology and public criminology. We explore what public criminology means to us, through how we have attempted to engage students in their studies by combining criminology and history. In this reflection we will discuss strategies we applied to help students feel like active participants in their disciplines, and what this means for how we approach criminological education in Australia. We begin by exploring the role that history can have for criminologists not only within historical criminology but within public criminology, while also considering how crime-based citizen history projects in Australia, such as the "Prosecution Project" and "Founders and Survivors", have captured the imagination of students and non-students alike. We conclude the chapter by discussing what we have learned about applying similar ideas with criminology students through our collaboration, reflecting upon our students' experiences with a citizen social science task and how this feeds into public criminology and higher education pedagogy in Australia.

History's Value for Criminology Students

Criminology is introduced to students as interdisciplinary (White, Perrone and Howes, 2021; Carrabine et al 2020). History is listed as one of the disciplines that has helped inform criminology's development (Carrabine et al. 2020). Yet in practice, especially in the training of criminology students, the use of history is limited (Conley 1977, 1993; Jones 1994). While every criminology textbook will cover Beccaria, Bentham, Lombroso and Durkheim, the focus is predominantly on explaining the history of criminological theories or how policing has developed into what we see today (Jones 1994; Dixon 1996). It is a rarity for an introductory criminology textbook to include a chapter on histories of crime, although there are exceptions (Carrabine et al., 2020). Attention to intersections between history and criminology tends to be exclusively on one geographic location and does not provide a global look at crime throughout history. Thus, as students undertake more specialised criminological studies the issues with "presentism" in the discipline emerge, as identified early on by Matza (in Weis 1971) and more recently again criticised by Churchill, Yeomans and Channing (2022), Roth (2017), Lawrence (2012), Nagy (2021), Pratt (1996), and Dixon (1996).

Historical criminology has more recently emerged as a branch of intellectual inquiry within criminology, although some may argue that it should be considered a criminological method and not a distinct branch of the discipline (Churchill, Yeomans and Channing 2022). While lately there has been a greater appreciation for the value of historical data to criminology, it is often used to help consider new ways of thinking about the present rather than to help explain current criminological concerns (Lawrence 2012). Dixon (1996) argues that the divide between the disciplines of criminology and history may exist because criminologists do not understand, or appreciate, the work that historians undertake to ensure the reliability of their sources. It is seen as merely collecting some information and presenting it with no practicable solutions (Dixon 1996). Pratt's (1996) more direct criticism of criminology noted that criminology is positivistic and carceral, thinking of itself as an applied science, hence overlooking historical perspectives. In recent decades, calls to decolonise criminology have identified the need for more history in the discipline (Moore 2020). Preoccupation with the present in criminology, at the expense of the past, has led to, as Moore (2020, pp.489-90) argues, the discipline being conceived of as 'entirely utilitarian' with a 'process of civilization' from the uninformed past to the enlightened present. In order to overcome this, while developing a longitudinal and global understanding of crime, Georgoulas (2022) argues that "collective enterprise" needs to be the next step for criminology. Collective enterprise

should be taken to mean not only interdisciplinarity, but involving public and private institutions, and the general community, within scholarly research.

Public Criminology, Citizen Social Science and History

Collective scholarly enterprises involving members of the public have a much stronger background in the humanities and history than in the social sciences and criminology. The benefits of research-led teaching for promoting student-led learning, transferable skill acquisition, professional practice and problem-solving are well documented in the humanities and sciences (Haaker & Morgan-Brett 2017). The sciences have a long history of utilising public engagement for conducting research, known as "Citizen Science" or "crowdsourcing", which Haaker and Morgan-Brett (2017) state lends itself to integration into classroom teaching approaches. Due to the nature of citizen science, which is as broad or as narrow as a researcher intends to make it, there are a variety of ways in which volunteers can contribute to the collection, categorisation, or dissemination of data (Piper 2020). In History this has often been used to help classify images, categorise or clean data, or transcribe handwritten records – all activities that do not require specialist training but can help contribute to the development of certain skills (e.g. triangulation of data) over time. This type of work is beneficial to increase humanities knowledge amongst the general public and students both inside and outside classrooms (Hedges and Dunn 2018). This form of object-based learning, and its benefits to student attainment has been documented by Ellinghaus et al. (2021) and Piper (2020). Due to the seamless way that citizen science (including humanities for brevity) can be included in classroom activities for all ages, learning guides, lesson plans and other materials are made available by crowdsourcing initiatives such as the "History Unfolded: US Newspapers and the Holocaust" project. Another example is from NASA which has over 30 Citizen Science projects underway, and from these projects has developed learning materials that can be used by teachers and students in primary and high school classrooms (NASA n.d.).

Criminology has not been as active in embracing the possibilities of citizen *social* science, although there are examples relating to policy (Kythreotis et al. 2019) and urban wellbeing (Pykett et al. 2020). The likely reason for this gap is in part methodological, with the types of records used by criminologists being highly sensitive and only available to researchers under

ethics protocols that generally do not permit the open public access to records required for citizen social science projects.

One solution is to access historical records held by galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (the GLAM sector). This raises the further challenge that criminologists may have trouble identifying historical records as having utility in the practice and teaching of criminology, although these institutions are teeming with untapped resources that chart individual as well as community behaviours, including the records of criminal justice systems. Finally, understandings of “public criminology” may also have limited the use of citizen social science methods in the discipline. These barriers need to be addressed if criminology is to take up the citizen social science model.

Incorporating historical considerations into criminology can also be a means of developing richer practices of public criminology. Indeed, using historical sources to keep memories of the past alive is a good starting point for a public criminology that is about debating collective self-understandings, including in the classroom (Sexton 2020; Brown and Rafter 2013). It can also be transparent, applied, evidence-based and committed to empowerment and social justice (Hamilton 2013). Teaching with citizen social science through historical artefacts, can therefore play an important role in helping to develop student activism, as well as understanding of the roots of current social justice issues, while simultaneously giving back to the discipline and supporting the generation of more data for criminological analysis. Prior to discussing how this has played out in our classrooms, it is beneficial to consider how criminal justice public history projects have successfully been navigating the divide between experts and publics.

Crime and Justice in Public History Projects

To a large extent, the expansion of engagement between criminal justice historians and the public can be attributed to the sub-discipline’s early and fervent embracing of the possibilities of digital history. Criminal justice history is a field rich in quantitative as well as qualitative information, and so readily lends itself to the types of digital storytelling that can be told through data visualisations. The field’s openness to quantitative methodologies moreover feeds scholarly enthusiasm for the transformation of crime records into data (Finnane & Piper

2016). It is also significant that such digitisation not only benefits scholars of crime, but academics interested in the wide variety of social and economic topics that can be illuminated through criminal justice archives, from questions of gender, class and race to issues of health, family composition or even urban planning. Importantly, it is not just academic scholars that have pushed for the digitisation of crime records or provide audiences for digital crime histories. It has been an area of high priority for family historians and genealogists, due to the high likelihood of finding relatives who have appeared in crime records as either offenders, victims or witnesses (Oates 2017). This is especially true in Australia, where over the last fifty years the possession of a convict ancestor has been transformed from social taboo to badge of honour (Barnwell 2019).

One of the earliest examples of digital histories was the 2003 launch of the *Old Bailey Online*, which enabled anyone with computer access to search and read 200,000 trial proceedings from London's central criminal court from 1674 to 1913. This radically democratised access to historical sources – no longer gatekept within hard-to-access archives or only viewed through the gaze of scholarly interpretation – leading the site to be badged a 'new history from below', having received millions of visitors within its first decade of existence (Hitchcock 2014; Poole 2005). It also inspired academics about the possibilities created by both digital methods and the obvious public appetite for crime histories, particularly when it came to record linkage. The Old Bailey dataset has formed the basis of a number of subsequent record linkage projects, from *London Lives*, which allows users to search across multiple digitised archives to explore poverty and crime in the eighteenth-century metropolis (Hitchcock & Shoemaker 2015a), to *The Digital Panopticon*, which connects multiple datasets to enable the building of cradle-to-grave life courses for individuals tried at the Central Criminal Court, including those transported to Australia (Godfrey 2017).

While some digital history projects limit users to searching for, manipulating and downloading the data they contain, others include means for users to become contributors. In Australia, there has been particular enthusiasm for such citizen history projects. The National Library of Australia's newspaper digitisation program, Trove, in particular has been heralded as 'the best example of the involvement of a wider public in research'; on the average day, users of Trove make around 100,000 corrections to the OCR-text from images of historical newspapers (Hitchcock & Shoemaker 2015b). This in itself creates a huge resource for researching media coverage of crime over time but has also encouraged more specifically

crime-related projects to adopt crowdsourcing. Launched in 2014, the *Prosecution Project* used crowdsourcing to digitise trial data from across the six state Supreme Courts from when they were established into the 1960s. This archive has since been shared to enable investigation of a range of historical, criminological and legal questions through case-level data, as well as inquiries by local and family historians (Finnane, Kaladelfos and Piper 2018). Zeal for tracing convict ancestors was likewise harnessed by the *Founders and Survivors* project to transcribe and link Tasmanian convict records with a growing number of other record-sets (Bradley, Kippen, Maxwell-Stewart & McCalman 2010). While the *Prosecution Project* and *Founders and Survivors* were both created as part of academic research projects, there are also community-generated resources embracing citizen history. *Convict Records* is a project helmed by volunteers, in association with the State Library of Queensland, that allows family historians to populate a web-resource with their own findings to create one centralised point of access for all convict records across the Australian colonies. Internationally, there are also various crowdsourcing projects that connect to crime or legal history, such as *Transcribe Bentham*, through which volunteers have transcribed tens of thousands of pages of writings by legal philosopher Jeremy Bentham (Causer & Terras 2014).

Citizen Social Science in the Classroom

Crime and justice is thus a thriving area in digital and public history projects, opening up opportunities for involving students with real-life research, records and examples. While community historians, history-minded members of the general public and history students busily engage in digital citizen-powered projects, these opportunities remain largely outside the experience of criminologists and their students. This can be attributed to a lack of awareness of the potential that history holds for enriching criminological understandings as discussed above. In the higher education context specifically (in Australia at least), discussion of the criminology discipline with students focuses on the “job readiness” of a criminology major or degree. These discussions tend to elevate practical tasks and work-integrated learning as central to true criminological experience and expertise. Such an approach broadcasts to students that they should not worry about “irrelevant information” like the historical precedents of current criminal justice issues (Duffee and Bailey 1991; Jones 1994). However, Yeomans (2014) argues that bringing the historical together with the criminological in the classroom can help students see that the present is not inevitable or the product of a natural, linear progression.

One means of overcoming the gap between the disciplines of history and criminology, especially with regards to the training of the next generation of criminologists, is a project that was developed to introduce historical criminal offending to second and third-year students in a large Criminology unit at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), and into a history of crime unit at the University of Newcastle (UON). In total 42 UTAS students and 6 UON students gave permission for the use of their reflections.

The content took the form of a citizen social science-based assessment consisting of a primary source transcription and self-reflection exercise. This covered the assessment requirements of the relevant units, and allowed students actively to participate in the creation of an online resource as part of Alana Piper's *Criminal Characters* project. This activity was run with both criminology and history students aiming to discover if interdisciplinary assessments across institutions were feasible, to see how understandings of crime and justice differed between students undertaking a criminology versus a history unit. The task further explored citizen social science as a means of helping students become better engaged with and find meaning in their studies.

Citizen (social) science has been criticised on the grounds that tasks that can be allocated to the public do not bring about conceptual understanding or demonstrate the reasoning abilities that are required of higher education students (Prather 2013). Addressing this concern, the assessment task was designed so that the transcription of records was only the first step, followed by research, contextualisation and reflection. The intended learning outcomes of the task were to:

• Develop knowledge about crime and criminal justice transferable to different professional contexts and roles;

• Interpret and evaluate information sources about crime and the law, in ways that support further development of oral and/or written communication skills;

• Critically reflect on the historical, social, legal and ethical issues that affect crime and criminal justice across different contexts.

To achieve these outcomes, students followed a series of steps to transcribe handwritten prison records from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, currently held in state repositories in Victoria, Tasmania, or New South Wales, research the offenders whose

records they transcribed and write responses to a series of questions prompting contextualisation and reflection.

Students were given instructions for the assignment as outlined in Figure 1. These instructions were identical for UTAS and UON students.

Figure 1 Assessment Details

Part 1: Transcription of 3 criminal records
Value: 30% - marked on pass/ fail basis

1. Visit the website – https://criminalcharacters.com/. Make sure you register your details and note your username- this needs to be entered in Part 3 of the assignment. Click the button 'Transcribe Prison Records'. On the transcription interface, click the 'About' button and then select the 'FAQ' section.
2. Read carefully through the information provided.
3. Click the 'Classify' button to be taken to a prison record to transcribe. Read through the step-by-step tutorial, and then transcribe information from the prison record into the boxes provided.

As you transcribe the information, make a note of details about the offender in the offender profile worksheet provided with this assignment- this will help you with Parts 2 and 3 (you do not need to submit the worksheet with Part 3).
Remember if you have any trouble with reading the handwriting or completing the transcription that you can seek help on the site. The transcription does not need to be perfect as all transcriptions are checked by other volunteers in the project but must be as complete as possible.
Complete this process for THREE offenders.
Note: If you receive a long record with more than 3 convictions and numerous details about the person's behaviour while incarcerated (i.e. more than 3) then you may choose to only transcribe two records. Please note in your response to Part 3 that you have done this.

Part 2: Research

Primary: See what other information you can find out about the offender by searching for newspaper articles about them on Trove – https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/?q= – and add any additional details to the offender profile.
The best way to find articles about the offender is to enter their full name in the search function within quotation marks, e.g. 'William King', then refine the results returned by the options provided at the left-hand side of the screen. In particular, you will want to select the colony or state in which the offender's convictions occurred under 'Place', and 'Article' under category.
If you are still left with a large number of results, select the decade that the individual was convicted within – after which you can also select the year and month as necessary.
Secondary: Draw upon materials provided in this course, those listed on the Criminal Characters website and your own additional research to develop an understanding of the period in which your offenders were being prosecuted, the types of crimes they committed and how the criminal justice system operated at that time. When writing your reflection, remember to use criminological terms and concepts.

Part 3: Reflection

Value: 70%

Length: 1000 words

Answer the following questions drawing upon the material from the transcripts, additional primary sources and academic sources, and your own responses to learning more about the offenders. Remember to include your username from the Criminal Characters website at the top of the first page so your transcriptions can be checked.

a) What did you learn about the offenders whose records you transcribed? (20 points)

Start with the biographical details of each person but also consider their histories of offending, their behaviour and punishment in prison, what the authorities did or did not know about their other offending and any other relevant observations, such as their age, sex, Indigeneity, class, religion and ethnicity.

b) What did you learn about the nature of the justice system? (20 points)

Think about the legal processes experienced by the offenders, how they progressed through the legal system and the punishments that the offenders received. How do their experiences relate to the period during which they were being prosecuted? Did these processes change over time?

c) What did you learn about changing criminality and popular understandings of crime and criminality? (20 points)

Were you able to find your cases or similar ones in newspapers or in other sources? How were they treated? What are the scholarly understandings of this type of crime and offender? Can you see evidence of change over time in how cases were presented and offenders were understood?

d) How has transcribing these criminal records affected your understandings of offenders in the past and present? (10 points)

Referencing:

References are required in the form used in this course – Harvard. In-text citations are included in the word count; reference lists are not.

Students (in both cohorts) had limited experience with historical or crowdsourcing projects, therefore videos were created by the course coordinators for their respective students outlining how to complete a transcription task. Additional sessions were held online to answer student questions about where to find other primary or secondary data. To aid notetaking, a worksheet (Figure 2) was created for the students and uploaded into the Learning Management Systems (LMS). It was not a requirement to submit the worksheet, however many students did, which demonstrated to us that students had found value in this study tool.

An additional video between the course coordinators and Piper was recorded to give students more information about how they would be contributing to the disciplines of criminology and history. This gave guidance to students about how their work would support Australian research into crime, justice and corrections, and expanded their knowledge about how topics illuminated by the records linked with content covered in the courses.

In conducting our analysis, student responses were deidentified and given a number and prefix (e.g. UTAS01 or UON01). Human research ethics protocols were secured from both UTAS (Ref.: H0018655) and the University of Newcastle (Ref.: H-2020-0166) and the approved participant information statements and consent forms were made available via the LMS. In order to ensure impartiality when marking assignments, students were asked to upload their consent forms into a separate folder that was not accessed by the course co-ordinators until after final marks were released. Due to a low response rate at Newcastle, a second approach was made to students early in 2021, which secured a small number of additional participants.

Reflection- The Criminology Experience

In HGA206/306 Crime and Criminal Justice students were an eclectic mix of those undertaking a criminology major in the BA, or working towards social work, psychology or law degrees. In conversations with students about their decision to undertake the criminology major many noted a desire to work with victims and offenders to keep their communities safe or to help support those who have experienced severe trauma. As the created classroom space (and the online learning environment) for the criminology course was underpinned by trauma informed principles it was a place where students disclosed histories of victimisation, offending, or how these were impacting their friends and family. Thus, activism and social justice due to personal connections to crime was often a driver for UTAS students studying in this unit.

UTAS students live in a state to which over 76,000 convicts were transported by the British government between 1804 and 1853, and where an estimated 74% of Tasmanians today are descended from these convicts. There is an assumption that there is a strong connection to this past. However, though convict heritage is no longer taboo, and even celebrated, there

were few who had knowledge of Australia's penal history. There are numerous students like UTAS41 who said that transcribing the prison records was 'a fascinating experience' because they did not know much about Australia's criminal justice history. UTAS23 was the only one to note that due to where they currently lived, they had a harsh view of offenders; being near Sarah Island, which was the site of the Macquarie Harbour Penal Station, meant that they had heard the stories about why the male convicts were sent to this outpost, often for escaping from other sites and serious offending in Van Diemen's Land.

While there was little knowledge about Australia's past, the content of the unit and the placement of the assessment at the end of the semester meant that students had 12 weeks of criminology instruction covering topics such as criminological methods and theories, interpersonal offending, property crimes, transnational crimes, the role of police, courts and prisons in society, crime prevention, and social inequality. Thus, for the UTAS students they had criminological explanations for offending that they were able to utilise as part of their reflection.

Although students had a theoretical knowledge about offending and people's responses to being incarcerated, some students found the connection to actual people and cases enlightening. Insight into life behind bars was what UTAS13 found to be the most engaging. UTAS28 found their prisoners 'interesting' because

> the typical stereotype of prisoners is that they are misbehaved or participate in antisocial destructive behaviours. My prisoners did not behave in the stereotypical way or if they did the behaviour that they displayed in prison wasn't of significance to then be documented on their prison record.

Other students applied criminological thinking to explain offender motivations. UTAS17 and UTAS29 discussed how labelling was as evident in the past as now and the effects this could have on criminal careers. Economic gain and strain was highlighted by a few students who used it as an example of how criminal offending has changed little, while others were interested in unpacking how punitive approaches, including hard labour, clearly have a long history with little impact on cutting recidivism.

Moral panics and media influences on how offenders are portrayed and understood by the public, were themes that numerous students chose to reflect upon. Students were concerned with the idea that justice is unable to be served correctly where public opinion is ill-informed

and impacts upon expectations of the justice system. Both UTAS13 and UTAS14 were aware of how sensationalistic the representations of their offenders were; UTAS14 reflected how increased media accessibility to the public may be more detrimental to offenders' rights in comparison to the past when trials were over much faster and would not remain in the media cycle for the same period. UTAS17 took a different angle to this issue stating that they 'found the reporting of crime to be more judgemental, moralising and voyeuristic in tone than in contemporary reporting (Newscorp's efforts notwithstanding)'. UTAS17 drew upon Durkheim's ideas of crime's positive functions to social regulation and integration to explain the reporting of criminal behaviour in the past. A few students also highlighted how reporting not only can impact upon the offender or the public, but also victims. UTAS15 was surprised by how victims were named in the past, especially in the cases of two offenders who sexually assaulted young girls.

Half of the 42 UTAS students explicitly discussed change from the past to the present in their reflections, while 13 out of 42 focused on similarities between the past and present to discuss the lack of change. The effect that this task had on students' understanding of both past and present responses to offenders was perhaps best summed up by UTAS20, 'It saddens me that a lot of the issues I noticed in the records, such as the overrepresentation of young minorities, the low conviction rate of 'white-collar' crimes and the likelihood of recidivism are still ever-present issues in the modern justice system.'

The criminalisation of poverty and vagrancy did not come as a surprise to the criminology students who had covered the relationship between social inequalities and crime early in the semester. What was more surprising to students was that while offender motivations have remained the same, there hasn't been the political will to create change even though 'The necessity of targeted criminological intervention to prevent recidivism has also been recognised by the criminal justice system' (UTAS36).

This assessment served to highlight gaps in the lectures and tutorial activities that needed to be filled. As the students had not been trained in history or the humanities more broadly, it meant that the historical precedence of concepts, theories, and data needed direction, which was better explored in the 2021 and 2022 offerings of the unit (for example, giving examples of pre-19th century forensics, exploring the history of Indigenous Australian incarceration pre-2000s, exploring Enlightenment philosophy and the impact this had on how crime was conceptualised and theorised about in the 19th century). Concurrently to training the students

in historical thinking about contemporary problems, upskilling of tutors who had experience teaching and researching contemporary crime and justice but no historical training was undertaken. Although there were these gaps, reading the responses from students highlighted how the task was meaningful. UTAS4 found that this task 'made the learning very personal and memorable'. UTAS41 reflected that what they enjoyed most:

> …Was that this activity felt more engaging and personal in comparison to writing an essay on how crime and criminality have changed over the years. In engaging with primary sources of offenders of the past I was able to learn about them and actually imagine what they looked like and what they were experiencing, rather than just a broad overview of what criminals were like in the 1800's. In doing this I felt as though I was able to gain a more thorough understanding of the topic, and I also believe I was more engaged in the activity, as it was a fresh change from writing essays.

Reading how engaged the students had become, how they had shared this activity with friends and family, and how this task was one that they drew meaning out of, while simultaneously demonstrating their aptitude for applying their criminological knowledge, demonstrated that this task was not just about citizen social science, but a true demonstration of public criminology.

Reflection- The History Experience

For students of HIST2006, Australian Underworlds, at the University of Newcastle, attention to the past was not novel, but at the centre of the course and, for a minority, their program of study. However, the concept of working directly on a larger History project through the practical activity of transcription was new and highly engaging for most students. After some initial concerns about their capacity to read the varied handwriting encountered in the prison records, the support provided on the Criminal Characters website and within the course structure proved sufficient to enable all to complete the task. They drew on this descriptive information to seek out their offenders using the Trove newspaper database, adding to their knowledge of them. This was combined with research into relevant scholarly sources to inform their responses to the set questions.

Just as many criminologists engage with their discipline without incorporating historical perspectives, similarly many historians who examine crime do not draw on criminological theories. Garton took convict historians to task over this omission in 1991. Specialist criminal justice historians are now more inclined to consider relevant criminological theories in their work, but these theories were not known to the History students in HIST2006. Many did try to develop their own explanations of criminality based on what they observed in their limited samples. Several students concluded that factors including poverty, disability and immigrant status had contributed to the commission or prosecution of crimes. UON01 argued that both the class of the offender and of the victim influenced prosecution and sentencing, and pointed to the intersectional nature of ideas of criminality, being influenced by a person's race, class, and gender.

When asked in Week 1 about their motivations for enrolling in the course, students of HIST2006 consistently referred to their enjoyment of true crime, particularly films and podcasts. They chose the course as an elective within teaching, arts, law or criminology degrees as an opportunity to pursue this interest for university credit. One of the aims of the course was the deconstruction of the stark binaries typical of the true crime genre: good and bad; truth and lies; offender and victim. Having the students form a close acquaintance with three historical offenders through the transcription assignment has been very helpful in this. UON05 noted their own shift in views, at first assuming that one subject's extensive criminal record was "reflective of a man with a bad criminal nature" but after further research concluding that his circumstances as a widower with four dependent children needed to be considered. UON03 observed that "My understanding of criminality has changed to accommodate a more detailed historical background for not only the offences committed but also the offenders themselves". The act of typing out the words describing the person's appearance, life history and offending record necessitates a deep familiarity which tends to create empathy and a desire to look beyond the titillating details of crimes to how and why they occurred.

The student-led nature of the assessment task made it engaging for students and markers alike. Students were able to be selective about whose records they chose to transcribe, reviewing those offered to them by the Criminal Characters site until they found one of interest. Further, they could choose from the elements contained in the records they transcribed to focus on just one or several of the offenders, on the individual's backstory or the type of offence committed. UON03 reported having read more widely but chosen to

report on the “three offenders that I particularly enjoyed learning and writing about”. UON06 sought answers to the question of why people break the law by tracing an offender in newspapers across thirteen years from an initial incident of threatened self-harm through eight larceny convictions and numerous infractions while in prison. For those assessing these assignments, the variety of topics and approaches made marking more interesting than in assignments where students answer a narrow range of set questions based on prescribed texts. Markers learned a great deal in reading about the offenders, whose stories until that time had remained unknown. Like the students, we sometimes found ourselves making further queries on Trove to try to follow a person through their criminal career and beyond.

Ideas of social justice infused the responses and were particularly evoked by two categories of offence: vagrancy and child sexual assault. In both cases, it was the disparity in contemporary attitudes to these behaviours and the punishments historically awarded for them which drew attention from the students. For vagrancy, students were outraged that, from their perspectives, poverty and homelessness were being criminalised. UON05 noted that the “homeless were seen as a burden, and criminals instead of victims of their circumstances”, although they accepted the view that jail could be a place of safety compared with life on the streets. UON01 attributed the frequency of convictions for vagrancy to a lack of social support services. UON02 placed vagrancy laws into a context of “moral panics about the degenerate and ‘criminal class’” identifying the large degree of police and magisterial discretion in deciding what behaviour could be described as vagrant. The child sexual assault issue was at the other end of the spectrum, with students questioning why it was often only lightly punished, with shorter sentences than relatively small value thefts. Some, like UON04, were motivated to embark on a research effort into secondary sources which found that sexual offending against children was of community concern and the subject of activist campaigning, despite the short sentences. The shock of seeing what they understood as social problems being criminalised, and serious crimes being minimised, motivated students to look further into these topics, equipping them to participate in contemporary debates on what are ongoing issues.

Starting from the primary sources and moving on to find relevant scholarship gave students new insights into historical methods and practice. UON01 wrote about their developing understanding that both contemporary and historical attitudes and assumptions have the potential to shape the work of historians who did not approach primary sources critically. They wrote: “we must balance the way we view the primary evidence within its historical

context while considering how emerging notions of criminality can influence our historical lens". UON02 noted that the task had helped them to form a view on what continues to be a live question within Australian historiography, whether convict transportation established a long-lasting criminal class in the colonies. This assignment led them to conclude that "there has never been one homogenous 'criminal class'; motivations and the psychology behind offending (and reoffending) are complex."

The transcription assessment task had many positive outcomes for student learning in HIST2006, encouraging them to create more elaborate views of crime previously largely informed by the avid consumption of true crime media. By providing them with the concrete task of transcribing three prison records, students were drawn into the lives of past offenders. They were able to follow the aspects of these lives in which they were most interested, heightening engagement and leading many to reveal that they had actually enjoyed completing the task, something which is often not the case for university assignments. Teaching staff on the subject were impressed not only with the originality of each response, but the deep learning evident within them. Students showed that they had advanced both in their development as historical researchers, and their understanding of social justice issues related to the criminal law evident across the past and present.

Final Thoughts: Enhancing Public Criminology Through History

As stated by Ruggiero (2020) and Sexton (2020), public criminology requires the public to be involved as activists in crime and justice debates. In this scenario, our public was our students. Being introduced to the prison records empowered students by introducing a source of information beyond textbooks and academic articles. We found that the task served as a prompt for wider discussions with peers and relatives about issues of poverty, injustice, and harms, based around the real people they encountered through the records. As transcribers, students supported the work of chronically underfunded public institutions as they seek to increase digital access to their collections, enabling them to better preserve fragile documents relating to Australia's criminal justice history. Making the records available to become part of the database developed as part of the Criminal Characters project helps to advance scholarly enquiry, while allowing us to analyse their reflections contributes to the scholarship of teaching and learning. All of these outcomes show that the use of a citizen social science assessment task is one way in which public criminology can be located in higher education. It shows that the categories articulated by Uggen and Inderbitzen are not mutually exclusive.

This is public criminology, which is also critical criminology, exploring intersections between class, gender, race, and ethnicity to consider the social harms and social justice issues associated with incarceration and criminalisation.

It was also a task that was student-led. Our role was to guide the students to where they might find relevant material. This was of particular importance for the criminology students less familiar with the various digital repositories for historical sources. But the direction that students took with their research, their reflections, and their contextualisation was up to them. Student responses within the assessment and in follow-up emails well after the unit concluded demonstrated that this task made their studies more meaningful than what they had previously encountered.

Teaching throughout the semesters took on a different spirit as well. From the outset, students were positioned as criminologists and historians not merely as "criminology students" or "history students". Their role as active participants in the discipline was supported in online materials and tutorials. This was partially in response to COVID but also, so the assessment was not a sudden change in hierarchy to being student-led. This scaffolding empowered students to feel safe undertaking an assessment task which was purposefully broad when it came to research and reflection. This illustrates McAleese's (2019) findings that for some, doing public criminology requires active engagement. However, as Nelund (2014) points out, reaching the public and influencing policy is social change, but not necessarily social justice. There are those who have successfully advocated for their research to change policy (like Wilson's problematic Broken Windows Theory, or Clarke and Felson's equally criticised Routine Activity Theory) but these have not resulted in social change for the better. Public criminology therefore needs to take a critical perspective and as this assignment demonstrated with both cohorts, moving the standpoints from student to active participant by engaging with primary data enabled a deeper understanding of offending and criminalisation, as well as connection to their studies, disciplines, and social justice.

Reliance on state-created records leads to some tensions with critical criminology's tenets. Research issues with using official administrative records on their own are well documented (Knowx, Lowe, Mummolo 2020; Quinn, Denney, Hardwick, Jalil and Meek 2020). Students were encouraged to find supplementary accounts of the offenders and their offences using the Trove newspaper database. These articles were also written from the stance of proponents of the law, often characterising offenders as immoral, lazy or pathetic. Accounts created by the

people themselves could not easily be accessed. Here the distance in time from the offences was an asset, as it tended to enhance the students' critical stance on how offenders and offences were characterised. Many expressed empathy and even outrage at how people experienced the criminal justice system, in particular those charged with actions which are now largely decriminalised, such as vagrancy and obscene language.

Examining historical cases drew attention to Young's (2011) insight that offenders' personal biographies need to be linked not only with social structures, but also with their particular historical context. It is of no value to continue discussing crime issues in the current socio-political context if we cannot link students with the origins of these problems in other contexts. As criminologists and historians, we agree with the observation that:

> It is [a] profound irony that people who easily dismiss historical research as 'merely academic' or 'impractical' are so often busily introducing 'reforms' which would be identified as ill-conceived and ineffective by anyone with a passing historical knowledge of the issue. (Dixon 1996, p.79)

For public criminology to truly engage students in the issues facing the criminal justice system today, it is necessary for criminology to connect with the past.

Appendix 1 Offender Worksheet

2. Offender Worksheet

Name(s)	
Height	
Complexion	
Hair colour	
Eye colour	
Date of birth	
Place of birth	
Trade	
Religion	
Literacy	
Marital status	
Date of first conviction	
Date of last conviction	
Number of convictions	
Description of offence(s)	
Place(s) convicted	
Number of prison infractions	
Description of prison infractions	
Other information	

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