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# VOLLMER AWARD ADDRESS

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## V O L L M E R   A W A R D

### Research With Considerations of Use

#### Problem-Driven Research and Attempts to Improve Public Policy and Practice

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*University of California, Irvine*

*The Ohio State University*

*The August Vollmer Award Address is intended to focus on contributions to justice and the recipient's research and policy experiences. This is a story of one person's career focusing mainly on research with "considerations of use." After receiving a formal education in psychology, social work, and sociology, as well as experience as a practitioner, the author's academic career has primarily focused on the link between research and criminal justice policy and practice. This is the story of that journey and how it was aided by events that could not have been foreseen.*

**A**s a long-time admirer of the Vollmer Award and what it represents, it is a special honor to receive it. The award is accompanied by an invitation to contribute this article focusing on my contributions to justice and my research and policy experiences. Writing an article focused on one's own contributions is a unique experience, and it certainly results in a very different list of references! The research that I have undertaken during my academic career has largely been problem driven and designed to address some major public policy challenges confronting our criminal justice system. I prefer to think of this as "research with considerations of use," an elegant term I borrowed from a friend, the late Donald E. Stokes, former dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. In his influential book, *Pasteur's Quadrant* (1997), he compared and contrasted pure basic research, pure applied research, and use-inspired basic research, which he defined as follows:

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[B]asic research that seeks to extend the frontiers of understanding but is also inspired by *considerations of use* [emphasis added]. It deserves to be known as Pasteur's quadrant in view of how clearly Pasteur's drive toward understanding and use illustrates this combination of goals. (Stokes, 1997: 73–74)

In recognizing my contributions, the ASC award notification focused especially on my research and policy contributions in two areas in which I have increasingly concentrated during the last several decades: gangs and wrongful convictions. Before discussing those topics, however, it is important to explain how this journey began.

### **Combining Formal Education and Experience in the Trenches**

When students ask how I became interested in criminology and criminal justice, I answer by saying, "Hitchhiking." After noting the looks of bemusement on their faces, I explain that as a college freshman in the "dark ages" (to them) of the mid-1960s at a university where freshmen were not allowed to have cars, I frequently wanted to go back to my hometown on weekends other than in the fall when, as a member of my college football team, I was pretty busy. My family still lived there and so did my high-school girlfriend (who has been my wife for the past 47 years). But without a car, I often hitchhiked—against my parents' wishes. Back then, hitchhiking seemed much more common and few of us gave any thought to the possibility of being picked up by a serial killer. One day, as I stood along the highway on a Friday afternoon with a sign indicating that my destination was Lima, Ohio, a man stopped and offered to give me a ride. He said he was driving to his home, which was near Lima. That man turned out to be Stephen Armstrong, father of astronaut Neil Armstrong, who would later become famous throughout the world. Mr. Armstrong ("Steve") was assistant director of the department that oversaw all state mental health and correctional facilities and programs at that time.

Steve and his wife, Viola, had their home in Wapakoneta, so while he was in that high-level administrative position, he drove approximately 90 miles to his office in Columbus every Monday, worked very long days, stayed at a hotel near his office downtown, and returned home after work on Fridays, which is when he picked up this young hitchhiker. Thus, we began a friendship and a remarkable journey that was much more impactful for me than that 90-mile ride. We talked a lot on that trip, and he offered to give me a ride on any Friday. I took him up on his offer, and we became friends. In fact, he was often very tired by Friday afternoon and he preferred that I do the driving. After learning that I was a psychology major and wanted to find a summer job back home in Lima, he told me that one of the institutions overseen by his department was Lima State Hospital, a maximum-security institution with approximately 1,500 "patients" (actually, as I came to discover, they were more like inmates than patients). A brief description of that Auburn-style institution appears on the current website of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction:

[O]riginally known as the Lima State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Situated on 628 acres three miles north of downtown Lima, the hospital was constructed between 1908 and 1915. Built at a cost of \$2.1 million, it was the largest poured-concrete structure in the country until superseded by the Pentagon. Its walls are at least 14 inches thick, with steel reinforcement going right down to bedrock.

For much of its history, Lima State Hospital functioned largely as a warehouse. Patients sometimes staged dramatic protests against the conditions of their confinement, and frequently escaped (more than 300 escapes by 1978). Conditions improved significantly after 1974 as a result of a class-action lawsuit filed on behalf of the patients. In a landmark ruling, U.S. District Judge Nicholas J. Walinski spelled out detailed requirements for assuring each patient's rights to "dignity, privacy and human care." In its last years, the state hospital was used for the filming of a made-for-television movie about the Attica Prison riots in New York. (Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2015: para. 1-2)

Steve was not only kind and generous but also a very professional and ethical man. He told me that it would not be ethical for him to "get me a position" in that institution but that he could arrange an interview with the personnel manager and it would be up to me to convince him to hire me in some capacity. The only position for which I qualified at that time was that of a recreation aide, but I pleaded my case to the personnel manager, telling him that as a college football player, I did not need more experience in recreation. I wanted to learn about psychology. I finally wore him down, and he called the head of the psychology department to ask whether he could use someone like me. To my delight, he was thrilled and said he could use a "gofer" who could escort patients to and from psychological testing and help score IQ tests, and so on. Although classified as a recreation aide and earning \$250 a month, I was able to work as an undergraduate psychology intern during the summers of 1965-1967 while in college. For me, that institution was a giant laboratory in which I observed, read hundreds of files, interviewed many patients, and kept asking questions. I learned a great deal about psychology, criminal justice, and human behavior while at work and as the third baseman on the employees' softball team after work, as games offered a chance to discuss work-related issues, including safety concerns. I often wonder whether any of that experience would have occurred had I not hitchhiked at that place and time and had not met Steve Armstrong.

After earning my undergraduate psychology degree, I worked briefly as a cottage life supervisor for several teenage boys' cottages serving dependent, neglected, and abused teens as part of a children's services agency. I learned a lot about the interrelationships among family problems, children's services, and juvenile justice, but it was clear to me that I needed more education if I wanted to improve my chances of having a career in which

I could address some of the larger problems in society that resulted in so many people being institutionalized. Therefore, I decided to pursue a master of social work degree at the University of Michigan. Because I came from a blue-collar family in which no one had ever gone to college before me, the thought of earning a Ph.D. degree had not entered my mind, but I was driven by the need to learn more. At Michigan, I took courses ranging from clinical psychology to social stratification to complex organizations to law to research methods, along with 2 years of field internships. I learned a lot about the human impacts of socioeconomic and sociocultural factors such as poverty and racism, as well as how those and other social forces, in turn, impacted social institutions such as the family and systems such as criminal justice and mental health. I learned to value how much research could benefit policy and practice and how it was important to be able to use research to effect social change. Finally, knowing that I would be returning to Lima State Hospital as director of psychiatric social work, I used some term paper assignments to map out possible reform strategies and tactics so that I could benefit from feedback from the Michigan faculty before trying to implement them.

Back at Lima State Hospital, conditions were even worse than I had remembered. After reorganizing my department, relocating my social workers' offices from the central administration building to the housing units, and implementing programs such as family therapy during visiting days, I came to the realization that I was working on the wrong end of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We were asking patients to address self-actualization when they were worried about being abused. A group of us attempted to call to the administration's attention the abuses that were occurring and reforms that were needed, but we had no success. Therefore, we decided to initiate reform from outside the institution. We leaked information to the press and worked with some law professors to initiate legal action. This effort resulted in a lawsuit and a grand jury investigation, some convictions of staff, and ultimately, significant judicially imposed reforms (*Davis v. Watkins*, 1974). The court correctly observed that the facility more closely resembled a prison than a therapeutic hospital. Patients were routinely chemically or physically restrained and placed in seclusion. Psychotropic medication dosages were adjusted by direct care staff instead of by a physician. To me, this represented a case study of human rights violations and the opportunity to help reform an abusive total institution.

But it seemed that no matter what we did to help people, larger social and economic forces resulted in a steady supply of individuals in mental hospitals and prisons. To improve my understanding of those forces, I pursued a doctorate in sociology at The Ohio State University under the mentorship of Simon ("Sy") Dinitz, a brilliant sociologist and world-renowned criminologist whose many honors included the ASC's Sutherland Award. He was a great mentor who had a profound influence on me and was the most engaging teacher I have ever known, which was reflected in his being named by the *Chicago Tribune* (Cross, 1968) as one of the Big Ten's 10 most exciting teachers.

Sy and I shared an interest in corrections at the time, and a prisoners' movement was emerging in Ohio and elsewhere advocating expanded rights for prisoners. In Ohio, this took the form of the Ohio Prisoners' Labor Union (OPLU) movement. I wrote a seminar paper on this movement. Sy liked the paper and recommended that I expand my study into a doctoral dissertation, which I did (Huff, 1974a). With the cooperation of the OPLU's attorneys and the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, I attended OPLU meetings and collected data on prisoners who joined the OPLU movement. I expanded the study to include secondary analyses of other movements in California and Europe. Doing so brought me into contact with a criminologist whose scholarly work I admired—John Irwin, an ex-offender who co-founded The Prisoners Union, based in San Francisco. John allowed me to attend their meetings, including a national organizing conference, and to analyze their files during my research. Although public acceptance of such a movement was low, the courts had been steadily expanding prisoners' rights, and this was a civil rights movement. Also, although correctional administrators strongly resisted any hint of bargaining with inmates, I knew the truth—that informal bargaining goes on every day inside prisons, and generally it favors stronger or better connected inmates. Therefore, I argued that a more open, participatory, and transparent mechanism for resolving grievances and avoiding violence could be a positive development. Jacobs (1977) put this in an appropriate theoretical perspective a few years later when he argued that the expansion of prisoners' rights was consistent with the Shils (1962) theory of mass society, whereby the extension of civil rights to previously marginal groups such as racial minorities, the poor, and ultimately, the incarcerated has evolved from the center of society outward toward those marginalized populations.

### **An Academic Career Focused on Pursuing Research With Considerations of Use**

My academic career and my pursuit of research with considerations of use began at the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine), where several journal publications, including a paper based on my dissertation (Huff, 1974b), helped me obtain my first academic position. While there, I had the opportunity to collaborate with Ross Conner, a former student of Donald Campbell with considerable expertise in field-based experimental and quasi-experimental evaluations, on a nationwide evaluation of the American Bar Association's Bar Association Support to Improve Correctional Services (BASICS) programs, which were designed to determine whether bar associations could be activated as agents of correctional and criminal justice reform. We spent several years using rigorous designs (sometimes compromised by events in the field to which we had to adapt) in evaluating programs throughout the nation (Conner and Huff, 1979), addressing such problems as legal barriers to employment for ex-offenders, alternative dispute resolution, and inmate legal services, among many others.

In 1976, I accepted a position at Purdue University, where I directed the applied sociology program and developed the major in criminology and criminal justice. With excellent leadership provided by our visionary department head, Robert Perrucci, we helped students learn to use concepts put forward by Lazarsfeld and Reitz (1975), engage in “the sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959), and apply sociological theory and research to help address societal problems (Perrucci, Potter, and Huff, 1979). Many of our students applied these concepts via internship experiences working with police, public defenders, and other community organizations.

During the 20 years I spent at The Ohio State University and the ensuing 16 years at UC Irvine, most of my research has focused on the two areas highlighted by the Vollmer Award Committee: gangs and the conviction of innocent persons. Through my contacts with practitioners around Ohio, I learned that gangs had formed in several Ohio cities beginning in the 1980s. With a small grant from the state of Ohio, I conducted a study to determine where and to what extent gang formation was occurring; the nature of the gangs; and whether they resulted from gang migration from other cities, especially Los Angeles and Chicago, as had been rumored. In fact, gangs were emerging in major Ohio cities, but there was a great deal of political denial going on (Huff, 1990a). Also, the Ohio gangs that were forming were not the result of gang migration; rather, they were imitating Los Angeles and Chicago graffiti and other symbols but were Ohio youth. To be sure, the leader of the largest Columbus gang at the time, the Crips, was from Los Angeles. But he was in Ohio because his parents divorced and he moved to Ohio. I found that deindustrialization and the associated loss of jobs, especially in Cleveland, along with other socioeconomic problems, the disruption of African American families, and gang *member* migration resulting from the geographic mobility of our society, were important contributors in Ohio rather than *gang migration* (Huff, 1989). The data I collected via interviews with gang members gave me insights that I used in working with community organizations, law enforcement, and corrections in addressing the emerging gang problem in Ohio.

Subsequently, with more funding from the state of Ohio and a major grant from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), I conducted studies of gangs that were emerging in Colorado and Florida, as well as a more detailed study of those emerging in Cleveland (Huff, 1995, 1998, 2004). In all of those sites, I developed samples of gang-involved youth (despite whether they were known to the police in order to avoid sample bias) and samples of at-risk but not gang-involved youth, mainly from the same neighborhoods, to compare the samples with respect to their involvement in criminal behavior. Despite some sampling problems, those studies clearly showed that gang members were far more involved in crime than were similarly situated and economically challenged youth from comparable neighborhoods who had not joined gangs. The criminogenic effects of gangs were clear, and they have subsequently been analyzed further via sophisticated longitudinal designs (see Melde and Esbensen, 2012, for a useful overview).

In addition to my own research on gangs, I have tried to contribute to the literature by bringing together some of the best original scholarship on gangs, as reflected in three volumes of my *Gangs in America* trilogy (Huff, 1990b, 1996, 2002a). My contributors made significant contributions to our knowledge concerning the origins, dynamics, prevention, and control of gangs and gang-related crime. I have also tried to collaborate with other scholars (see, for example, Goldstein and Huff, 1993; Flannery and Huff, 1999) and practitioners to advance our knowledge of best practices in addressing the problems posed by gangs for law enforcement (Huff and McBride, 1993; Huff and Shafer, 2002), corrections (Huff and Meyer, 1997), and schools (Huff and Trump, 1996). More recently, this effort has included detailed analyses of the use of gang intelligence databases, with the inherent challenges they represent in attempting to protect public safety while not violating civil liberties (Barrows and Huff, 2009; Huff and Barrows, 2015).

My research on wrongful conviction began with another fortuitous event—a luncheon discussion at a deli across from The Ohio State University campus. My Israeli doctoral student, Arye Rattner, needed to identify a dissertation topic, so we went to lunch with Edward Sagarin, a visiting distinguished professor of sociology, to brainstorm. Ed noted that there had been a long gap in research on wrongful convictions and that it was a topic deserving of more scholarly attention. Arye and I agreed, and his dissertation (Rattner, 1983) along with some of our subsequent publications (Huff, Rattner, and Sagarin, 1986, 1996) were among the earliest contemporary studies of what has become a rapidly growing body of research on this important problem that threatens both civil liberties (convicting the innocent) and public safety (allowing the guilty to remain free to commit additional crimes). Because it is impossible to know with precision how frequently such errors occur, we conducted a survey of experts in Ohio and nationally to determine their *estimates*. Based on their responses several decades ago (and prior to the use of DNA to prove innocence in the United States), a conservative estimate was 0.5%. Since then, with the use of DNA and wider publicity accompanying cases of actual innocence, estimates tend to approximate 1% to 5% (see, for example, Gross, 2013).

These “errors of justice” have tragic consequences, as also occurs in cases in which guilty offenders are not brought to justice, or are acquitted, for serious crimes. Both Type 1 and Type 2 errors impose major costs, serious challenges, and undermine the legitimacy of and respect for our justice system (Forst, 2004). Although my own research has focused on wrongful convictions, there are indeed other important “miscarriages of justice,” including the acquittal of the guilty. For crime victims, such errors of justice seem unimaginable and undermine their respect for our criminal justice system. Another example that has attracted my interest in recent years is the convictions and, often, imprisonment of those whose acts constituted “crimes” because they were so defined by repressive regimes such as those found during the Nazi era in Europe and in South Africa under apartheid (Huff, 2013).

While pursuing my own research on wrongful conviction in the U.S. context, I became convinced that we needed to engage in cross-national, comparative research to determine



how much of a problem this is in other nations' systems of justice and whether we might learn from each other to reduce such tragic errors. I proposed that during my 2001 ASC presidential address:

[T]he subject of wrongful conviction presents rich opportunities for future research—within jurisdictions, across jurisdictions, and cross-nationally. . . . I believe that a cross-national, comparative study by a team of social scientists and legal scholars could make an important contribution to our knowledge, and I hope to begin organizing such a group. One model for such an undertaking is Malcolm Klein's initiative, which has led to the Eurogang network of European and American scholars researching gangs. (Huff, 2002b: 14)

That led to my collaboration with Swiss criminologist Martin Killias, founding president of the European Society of Criminology. We began with the first international conference on wrongful conviction, which we held in Switzerland, bringing together scholars from North America, Europe, and Israel to discuss wrongful conviction and to share ideas concerning research and public policy. Killias and I have since brought together the work of some of the world's leading scholars in our two books (Huff and Killias, 2008, 2013) to analyze the nature and scope of wrongful convictions and recommend best practices and policy reforms to address these errors.

Our cross-national, comparative research attracted the attention of the International Division of the NIJ and in 2010 NIJ, under the leadership of John Laub, brought together scholars and policy makers from several continents and different types of justice systems in a highly successful workshop designed to examine alternative international practices to prevent and correct wrongful convictions (for a report, see Jolicoeur, 2010). My keynote address at that workshop summarized what Killias and I had learned from our research and that of our European colleagues (Huff, 2010). The workshop was an inspiring exemplar of international collaboration to address an important public policy issue, and all of us learned a great deal from each other.

It is both gratifying and inspiring to witness the burgeoning, high-quality scholarship on both gangs and wrongful convictions that has been produced in the past two decades. In my case, I am once again fortunate because I have colleagues in my department at UC Irvine who are contributing to this scholarship, including Cheryl Maxson, George Tita, and Diego Vigil (gangs), as well as Simon Cole, Beth Loftus, and Bill Thompson, whose focus on the uses and misuses of science has helped us better understand the errors that often contribute to wrongful convictions.

Finally, I am especially pleased that this article will appear in *Criminology & Public Policy*. During my term as ASC president in 2001, we initiated this journal through a collaborative effort involving our vice president, Todd Clear, and the members of our executive board. We believed that there existed a need for a journal that would publish high-quality, policy-oriented research to stimulate more such research and to provide a

forum for the discussion of such issues without necessitating an organizational endorsement of particular policy positions. I believe that *Criminology & Public Policy* has admirably fulfilled that vision, which is consistent with the spirit of the August Vollmer Award.

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