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Data Science and Criminal Justice: An Invitation and Cautionary Note

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In the United States, academic and applied criminal justice have entered the age of data science with a burgeoning supply of data sources of varying degrees of utility, an uncertain toolkit for analysis, and a series of ethical and methodological concerns that overlay the first two. This paper is an exploratory discourse primarily focused on recognizing the immense promise of criminal justice as informed by data science and tempering that optimism with the realities, ethics, and data quality that may generate.

Criminal justice is a discipline born from systems analysis (Blumstein, 1967) and heavily reliant on the understanding of how cases are processed from arrest to conviction and punishment in a classic flowchart of decision points (Bureau of Justice

Statistics, 2017). This should be contrasted with criminology, which is the study of crime and

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Poverty to PhD: An Insider Account of Structural Barriers That Affect Impoverished Students of Color

Dr. Charles Bell *

Among the many issues that concern criminal justice and criminology scholars, increasing minority representation within graduate programs remains a challenging endeavor. Data featured in the 2017 Association of Doctoral Programs in Criminology and Criminal Justice survey shows black (7.94%) and Latino (8.61%) students are underrepresented in doctoral programs. As criminal justice and criminology programs develop strategies to recruit underrepresented minorities, it is important to understand the challenges people of color from impoverished backgrounds experience. The purpose of this essay is to share my experiences as an African American scholar from an impoverished background to aid in the recruitment of racial minorities.

As a Detroit, Michigan native and first-generation college graduate, I consider myself to be a nontraditional criminal justice scholar. Much of my childhood and early adult life was shaped by a residence in which drug trafficking, community violence, and extreme poverty were extensive. I recall near daily drive-by shootings during my childhood, and despite my best intentions, it was difficult to believe I would live long enough to benefit from my education. Researchers who study the experiences of low-income urban youth have found my experience with community violence to be common. In a study that explored adverse childhood experiences, participants ranked community stressors (i.e., neighborhood violence,

crime, and death) as the second most stressful experience in their lives (Wade et al., 2014). Considering the lived experiences of many urban youth who navigate community violence, criminal justice and criminology programs are in a strong position to recruit students from impoverished urban backgrounds and provide a unique opportunity to study such issues. I firmly believe if more urban students were aware of criminal justice scholars that are engaged in research on community violence issues, those students would gravitate toward the criminal justice sciences much sooner in their education.

In addition to community stressors, many impoverished urban students may not be aware of the dynamics associated with pursuing an advanced education. Besides my K–12 teachers, I did not know anyone who had successfully navigated the higher education environment, and my circumstances made it seem unrealistic that I would be the first. During the later portion of high school, unfortunate circumstances necessitated that I leave home and establish my independence. At the age of 17, I found myself in a dire situation; I was torn between pursuing higher education and making the necessary adjustments to solidify my survival. After receiving the Detroit Compact Scholarship, I was recruited into the Initiative for Maximizing Student Development (IMSD) program at Wayne State University and informed about the doctorate degree. While simultaneously maintaining two low-paying

jobs throughout my undergraduate career and working more than 60 hours per week, I was stunned when I learned that doctoral students can receive stipends to focus wholeheartedly on their studies. Moreover, the promise of health insurance, a tuition fee waiver, and guaranteed support throughout the doctoral program proved to be very appealing. As an undergraduate student, I yearned for the opportunity to focus exclusively on my studies without disruption from outside work required for my survival. Bearing in mind the unique opportunities doctoral programs provide, such as allowing students to receive advanced instruction, conduct research in a specific area of interest, and receive some financial support, more urban students would pursue advanced degrees in the criminal justice sciences if they were recruited into the discipline during the early stages of their careers.

While some strategies have been employed to recruit underrepresented students into higher education programs, criminal justice and criminology scholars should recognize that studies show undergraduate research opportunities are very effective. According to Hirsch et al. (2012), students report overwhelmingly favorable assessments of working with faculty members on research projects. As program directors consider novel strategies to recruit minorities from impoverished backgrounds, they should consider the cumulative disadvantages that affect this population and the impact research opportunities have on student development. The IMSD program and the Alliance for Graduate Education in the Professoriate (AGEP) played a key role in

providing the opportunities necessary to build my research skills. Specifically, the opportunity to conduct research under the guidance of an established scholar, participate in the manuscript development process, and present findings at national conferences undoubtedly contributed to my ability to matriculate through a doctoral program. It would be very exciting to see criminal justice and criminology programs develop stronger partnerships with existing undergraduate research organizations or replicate such models at a departmental level, to show a commitment to the recruitment of underrepresented students.

Currently, I am an assistant professor in the Criminal Justice Sciences department at Illinois State University. My research focuses on race, school discipline, policing, and incarceration. I am a recipient of the 2017 American Society of Criminology Ruth Peterson fellowship and I was featured in a Detroit Public Television documentary titled "Pathways to Prison." In addition to my research, I created a vibrant community engagement series in Detroit that includes panelists from diverse backgrounds who explore criminal justice issues in a solution-oriented manner. My community engagement series has included Detroit public school students, educators, formerly incarcerated individuals, law enforcement officers, and district court judges. In light of my academic and community engagement endeavors, I fear we are missing out on the potential contributions of urban students from impoverished backgrounds because of deficiencies in graduate program recruitment strategies.

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