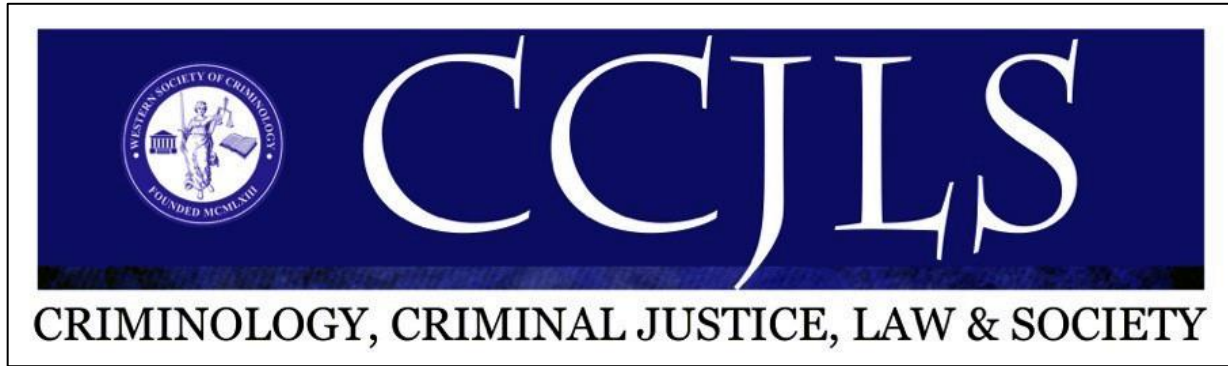




E-ISSN 2332-886X

Available online at

<https://scholasticahq.com/criminology-criminal-justice-law-society/>

Paul Tappan Award Winner Keynote Address:

An Outsider with Insider Privileges: Notes on Going Home

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Article History:

Received July 2, 2023

Accepted July 23, 2023

Keywords:

primary data collection, participant observation, insider-outsider status, community engagement

I have been involved with the Western Society of Criminology (WSC) since 1976 when I entered graduate school at the University of Arizona, and was a student of June Morrison's. The organization founded by Tom Gitchoff and June Morrison was in its infancy. Their vision of the organization was as a space for practitioners, faculty, and students to come together to share ideas and develop working relationships. They recognized the disconnect between the research we conduct and the experiences of those in the field and saw WSC as a place to bridge the gap. My comments today are with their mission in mind.

In John Hepburn's 2013 Paul Tappan Award Keynote Address to the WSC, he stressed the importance of "getting in the trenches" or "getting dirty" when collecting original data (Hepburn, 2013). Hepburn's words were forefront in my mind when I returned to my hometown to collect data. I had not been home for 15 years. The town, notable for many reasons, was Flint, Michigan, and I was reticent; the city had changed and so had I. His address encouraged me to pay particular attention to a number of factors involved in the process of "getting dirty"--in particular, the role of the researcher and the process of understanding and gaining entrance into a community. I was in a unique position, having been granted insider privileges while maintaining the role of an outside researcher.

Some Background

When the last of my family left Flint in 1998, I assumed I would never return. But, life has a way of happening. In 2011, I was hired as a consultant in Flint to assess issues related to female delinquency. I have heard varying accounts of where the agency staff got my name and how I ended up getting that first call; interestingly, at the time, they had no idea I had ties to the community. During that initial visit, I encountered a few people I had known while growing up, from whom I received a great deal of information about what was happening around town. I was struck by the enormous effort being made to improve this city that had been ranked as one of the worst places to live by Forbes, Areavibes, and CNBC. With a depleted tax base, community leaders, elected officials, and social service program directors and staff were doing some very interesting and creative things. My interest was piqued, and my journey began.

The City of Flint: Then and Now

Flint is a city with a unique character and place in American history. It is the home to the 1936-37 sit-down strike which was instrumental in the formation of the organized labor movement in the United States. In 1966, Flint was the first major city to

elect a black mayor. The following year, Flint passed the first open housing ordinance in the country. Prior to the ordinance passage, General Motors owned much of the city's housing, where Blacks and Jews were forbidden to live. With funds from the Mott Foundation, Flint was the birthplace of many community programs, most noteworthy the "community school concept."

Since 1973, the year I left for college, the city had changed dramatically. In its heyday, Flint was a bustling metropolis, with 193, 000 residents and General Motors providing good paying jobs and a massive tax base for the city's operational needs. In the mid-seventies, Flint had the highest hourly wages in the country; however, with the demise of the American auto industry, Flint has recorded one of the highest unemployment rates (Thompson, 2015). In 2012 (when I returned), the official unemployment rate was 16%, though some said the rate was as high as 40% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). According to the 2010 Census, 35.5% of its population was living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), compared to a national rate of 15.1% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). The city's population had dwindled to 95,000 and school enrollment dropped from approximately 50,000 to 5,400 students (Adams, 2015). Flint looked barren with its myriad of empty lots where factories had once stood, supporting a community who formerly did not have to rely on formal education. No longer was it a place where safety was of little concern; Flint had become known for topping the list of cities with the highest rates of crime and violence and as "one of the most dangerous places to live." When I left the city, the murder rate was 15 per 100,000; when I returned it was 66 per 100,000 (Engel et al., 2016; Gliha, 2013); Mack, 2017). To make matters worse, in 2014 the city's water crisis drew scrutiny when local officials indicated it was safe to drink and bathe in the toxic water (Smith et al., 2019). Much had changed in Flint since I had left.

Back in Flint

At the time of my initial visit, as a consultant, I was in the developmental stage of what was to be my final sabbatical proposal. My intent had been to address resiliency in young women in a local Southern California community, where I had previously conducted the evaluation of their Weed and Seed program and had maintained ties. However, as I was reminded, plans are made to be changed. Going to Flint, Michigan for my sabbatical never entered my mind, but talking to people about my initial observations in Flint, prompted me to consider replacing my original plan and study the resiliency of

young women in Flint. After much thought, I figured, why not?

Is There Something Wrong with You?

As I shared the news about my change in plans, the first response I received from virtually every person that I met was, “ARE YOU CRAZY?” This question came from people in Flint, my colleagues at Fullerton, as well as friends and family. “Why would you leave California for eight months to live in Flint?” “You are going *where* on sabbatical?” Yes, one’s idea of going on sabbatical often includes travel to some exotic destination to collect data or to a lovely, quiet place in which to reflect and write. Not me! I realized that my research interest might be best addressed in Flint. After an unsuccessful search for a furnished place to rent, I headed to the Residence Inn. Flint is not a tourist town, and the Marriott provided me an extremely reasonable rate. They were happy to have a long-term occupant, “who was not dealing drugs on the premises.” I had found a place to live and work for the next eight months. Fortunately, I applied for and received a California State University grant that would cover my travel and living expenses.

The questions continued: “Are you crazy?” “Aren’t you afraid?” The answer was no. While I recognized that I would spend a large amount of time in the city’s most violent neighborhoods, I never worried about my safety. However, I did realize that I had a great deal to learn about the city prior to venturing out on my own. During my time in Flint, I was warned to never drive into certain areas, which was impossible. I was also advised by some law enforcement officers that if I ever was stopped at a traffic signal and felt uncomfortable, to just run the light if no cars were coming—advice that I never followed. Early on, while conducting a focus group in a church in the area in which I had grown up, I heard an unfamiliar sound and inquired about it; the girls indicated that it was a gunshot by the park. That evening they identified two additional shots, one by the liquor store and one by the school across the street. Though I was a bit unnerved, the girls did not blink. I quickly became familiar with the sound of gunfire, but I was never able to identify the location. While occasionally alarmed, I never felt that I was in any danger. Had I not been given insider status, I am not sure this would have been the case.

An Observer

Prior to beginning data collection, I made several trips back to Flint. As the project began to take form, I spoke to a community leader (who happened to be the mother of someone I had gone to school with and had seen recently at a social event on the West Coast) and explained what I wanted to do. She asked

me to send her a description of the project and forwarded the document to the Community Foundation. The foundation leaders invited me to give a presentation about the project to representatives from over twenty agencies that worked with young women. Following my talk, they provided lunch, which allowed me the opportunity to speak individually with people. As a result, I was able to meet many individuals who would prove to be invaluable resources. Not only did these agency representatives permit me to speak with the youth in their programs, but they also introduced me to others who engaged with young women in the community and opened other networks to me.

I had the pleasure of reconnecting with an old friend (whom I began referring to as Mr. Flint) while in town for the event. He was still working with young people in the community and offered his assistance in making connections with various programs. In fact, throughout the entire project, I was told that I should speak with my old friend whenever I contacted a program administrator. After explaining that I had known him for nearly forty years and he was supportive of my research, I seemed to gain instant credibility. The social capital I gained through his endorsement opened many additional sectors.

Initial Observations

Between June 2011 and June 2012, I returned to Flint four times, spending nearly ten weeks visiting more than twenty programs, meeting with program directors and staff, and trying to get a feel for the programs and the youth whom they served. During that year, the Board of Education contracted with faculty from the education department at a state university to collect data on the students in the Flint Public Schools. Though, as far as I know, those data were never utilized for their intended purposes, they were given to me. The ability to peruse those data gave me important insight into the youth as I began my work.

I also spent many days driving around Flint with representatives from different agencies, including United Way, Community Foundation, and Downtown Revitalization. During this period, I was introduced to pastors at churches in the area, agency representatives, and local political leaders. I met a number of people who remembered my family and shared memories of family members with me. Though I had no prior encounters with any of them, I was accepted into communities where there is not always a lot of trust because they were familiar with family members. Each of these individuals accompanied me to various events, making a point of introducing me, explaining what I wanted to do as well and its importance. These individuals were influential in helping me gain access

and insider status in the community. Not only did they make those introductions, but they also gave me background information on individuals, cautioned me on topics to avoid, and forewarned me of who might be difficult and how to win them over.

One of the most significant contacts was a pastor who told me that my father had gone to court in support of his mother in the mid-sixties, vouching for her, and assuring the judge that he would find her full-time employment, which he did. It was through this individual that I was introduced to and immediately accepted into the community of church leaders in the area. It is important to note that Flint has more churches per capita than any other city, and of the 632 Flint churches, 150 were located in the First Ward, the area where my research was conducted (*Violence Prevention Summit White Paper*, 2013). As a group, these pastors were directly involved in violence prevention; you could often find them out on the street after midnight, attempting to curb the violence in the area. They firmly believed that they could not be proud of their churches when the neighborhood had one of the highest crime rates.

During those initial trips into town, prior to meeting the young women, I was able to participate in community activities both in and out of the criminal justice system. I spent many days observing several specialty courts, going to events sponsored by various youth programs and other community groups. I became acquainted with members of one church who were focused on violence prevention, enabling me to participate in numerous events sponsored by the church, such as a vigil in memory of victims of violence, an event encouraging community members to sign a pledge of non-violence, and a violence prevention summit. Initially, I attended many of these events with a friend (Mr. Flint), who is well-known to the group. As a result of my association with him, I was believed to be trustworthy and immediately accepted.

In June 2012, I settled into my long-term space in Flint and began attending every community event possible. Without fail, I ran into someone I had known in my early years wherever I went. Some of the encounters were awkward, at best, while others turned into wonderful reunions. At one such event, a man approached me and said, "You are Jill Rosenbaum, aren't you?" When I acknowledged that I was, having no clue to whom I was speaking, he said he had been in my kindergarten class. In fact, he had gone to school with me until junior high and was, at the time, a member of the Flint City Council and proceeded to introduce me to various local officials. At one particular community event, while talking to staff in a program for juvenile offenders, I mentioned my background and where I had attended school; a

staff member asked me if, by chance, I had known her husband. As it turned out, he had been my lab partner in my 10th grade biology class. Not only did I reconnect with my former lab partner, but his wife became an important catalyst, later creating many opportunities for me to meet and engage with the people who assisted me in becoming an insider.

Connecting with the Young Women

Program personnel identified potential participants. Consent forms were given to parents and returned to me, and assent forms were signed at the beginning of the focus group. If girls chose not to participate once in the room, then they could choose to remain in the room or leave. This was to ensure that program staff would not know who, if anyone, chose not to participate. Some of the participants were identified at their court hearings, where they and their parent(s) were given information and consent forms, so that I could complete individual interviews.

To gain full access to the court, I was required to meet and receive permission from the presiding judge. Interestingly, though I had known him in the past, the judge did not recognize me. I received that permission, and, once he remembered me, he actively reached out to others in the community, including the juvenile court administrator, the directors of programs with which the court contracted, and the director of Community Mental Health, encouraging them to speak with me. At one point, I overheard him tell one of these individuals that he could vouch for me as he had known me more than 35 years. Needless to say, I was allowed into that and other programs just because he remembered me. I also met with three other judges to gain permission to speak with youth and their parents who came into their courtrooms. Since the judges all heard juvenile cases at different times, I was able to spend a lot of time in the courthouse and speak with the parents and young women outside the courtroom. The judges were unaware of who participated and who did not. One of the judges, who was initially skeptical about a researcher hanging around his courtroom, relented when he realized I was from Flint.

Even after gaining access to the research site, it is often difficult to develop the trust of participants. Initially, I intended to hire local graduate students to assist with this project. However, I realized quite quickly that this would not be necessary. Initially, some were skeptical about whether the young women would speak openly to me. I brought pizza and soda to the girls in each of the focus groups. While they were eating, I introduced myself to them by telling them that I lived in California and studied young women, but that I had grown up in their town and attended local schools (though many no longer

existed), and I shared some of the difficulties that I had faced as a teenage girl.

Early on, I met with the director of a program that was housed at the community center of a park where I had spent time growing up. While it is now very unsafe (all programs are cost free to make sure that there is no money on the premises), I told him that in high school, a friend and I would leave a car in the park and were transported across town to parties by a friend who drove an ambulance. He immediately called the youth on the premises and asked me to tell them about this experience. He thought it was important for them to hear those kinds of details if I wanted to hear about them. This advice proved to be invaluable when reaching out to the youth.

More often than not, the young women wanted to know where I lived and more about the neighborhood at that time. The neighborhood had been a calm, middle-class area when I was a child; that was no longer the case. Many of the young women I spoke to lived either in the neighborhood or very close to it. They were surprised when I told them about picking wild raspberries in a vacant lot on a corner, where a crack house now stands. In addition, they wanted to know if I knew any of their family members. One unforgettable moment occurred when a 14-year-old participant in a focus group gave me her signed permission slip. She asked if I had ever lived in Flint; I said "Yes." She then asked if I had attended Longfellow School; again, I said "Yes." She then told me that her "great granny", who had signed her permission slip, went to school with me. When I acknowledged that I clearly remembered her great granny, she turned to the other girls and told them, "Granny says, she won't do no BS." While the young women thought it silly to leave California and spend the winter in Flint, they did not see me as an interloper (as many of the researchers were seen); instead, they saw me as someone who cared and wanted to do something to help them. And, as staff at a few programs later told me, some young women gained hope. As one person explained, "Maybe they could also get out of Flint and go to California or somewhere."

In all, I conducted focus groups in 28 different environments (some I visited more than once) with five and eight girls between the ages of 14 and 20 (a combined total of 237 participants), 35 in-depth interviews with young women, and 40 in-depth interviews with service providers. Ninety-two percent of the girls were African American, and the majority lived in or around the First Ward. These neighborhoods, described in vivid detail in Gordon Young's book, *Teardown*, are characterized by high crime rates, large numbers of abandoned or burnt-down houses, and a great deal of general decay. The

participants came from a variety of programs, including juvenile hall, various court-ordered community programs, church programs, the School of Performing Arts, foster care, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, alternative education programs, schools, high school athletic teams, a program for teen mothers, and a program for homeless youth.

The issues discussed during these focus groups centered around their lives in the community, their neighborhood, school, perceptions of fear and safety, future goals, awareness of assistance in the community, and their insights into the problems faced by and the needs of young women. Additional data were gathered from the girls confined to the juvenile detention center. As the girls in court-ordered programs could not talk about their delinquent behavior in a group setting, I also conducted 35 in-depth interviews where I gathered more details and information about their involvement with the justice system. The focus groups and interviews took place in an office provided to me at the University of Michigan-Flint, program conference rooms, and in the back room of a local diner. I took one young woman for breakfast to the diner (whose owner was an old friend), where she told me it was the first time she had ever been in a restaurant where they "served you."

A Participant and an Observer

I developed a strong sense that I needed to give something back to the community as I became more aware of the difficulties faced by both the young women and those trying to assist them. As a result, I found myself offering assistance to various agencies that had granted me access: I read and made suggestions on grant proposals, helped agencies identify data that might be useful, and attempted to bring together people who had similar goals. In the course of my research, I identified some changes that could easily be implemented and would not require a lot of time or money. For example, it became clear that while many programs existed, people were unaware of what services were available. I suggested the creation of a website with existing programs and contact information that could be regularly updated. The director of one agency was very interested in the idea but had no money or skills for implementation. Fortunately, I was able to convince a community leader whom I knew to help find the funds for the creation of the website.

Every week, I spent an afternoon in one of the family court judges' specialized courtrooms. I was allowed access to team meetings and periodically socialized with team members. I also spent an enormous amount of time at juvenile hall and conducting focus groups and working with an arts project in which I was involved. As a result, there

were occasions when the judge or probation officer asked my opinion on a young woman's progress. In general, I avoided answering these questions, though occasionally I would share an anecdote about their participation in the arts program. However, the freedom with which these officials spoke about the girls gave me a great deal of information about their lives and families that I otherwise would never have gotten.

Because I was invited to or included in numerous meetings and workshops of the various groups around town, I realized that I was one of the few people who knew what was going on in the community. For example, I was invited to join a school social worker at an event where the schools and a few other agencies in the area were informed about a new program that was soon to be implemented in the neighborhood. It was clear that the new services were a duplication of an existent program in the same area. Following this event, I called the director of the already existing program and asked if they had heard about this new program, which they had not. I put the two agencies in touch with one another, and they were able to work together to give greater services to the neighborhood.

Post-Sabbatical Commitment

Those eight months turned into a multi-year commitment. In fact, until 2020, I regularly returned to assist with the Arts Behind Bars programs and Girls' Court that I helped to design. In addition, I assisted with the evaluations of two other programs. In one situation, an outside evaluator reached out to me to discuss some questionable practices in one of the programs that I had observed. Together we made these practices known to the funding agency. A few groups asked me to come back and discuss some of the areas that I identified as needs and to offer suggestions; I was pleased to do so. Though it never crossed my mind that I would one day work in Flint after so many years removed, my experience as an outsider with insider privileges gave me insights that would have been otherwise impossible to gain.

During one of these trips to Flint, I met members of the Environmental Protection Agency group who were in Flint to test the residents' water. They told me about their frustrations, notably their inability to acquire the necessary access to homes. This was a community whose trust in anything government-related was non-existent. I was able to reach out to the most influential pastors and explain the situation. They took it upon themselves to assist these workers in gaining the trust of the residents, and thus the ability to assess the lead in residential water. It was then I realized that I had come full circle; now I

was the person establishing credibility in the community for others.

Lessons Learned

As I became immersed in my research, I was aware of the differences in collecting data in my hometown compared to prior research experiences. While I was clearly an outsider, I was granted insider privileges. Though there is potential for this status to compromise the researcher's objectivity and professionalism, it allows the researcher greater credibility and increased rapport with participants. I was less reliant on pre-established social networks and ultimately able to identify programs and interviewees on my own because I was granted insider access to a wide spectrum of the community.

The "caring community" in Flint has been studied endlessly; on numerous occasions, I heard variations of, "We are sick of being lab rats." However, program staff and participants made it clear that they saw my work as different. In fact, I was told, "You are not like those PhDs who come in and tell us all the things we don't know. You really listen to what we are saying." My guess is that the only difference was that they saw me as a "Flintstone." From the beginning, I realized that, due to the nature of the city and its problems, which has resulted in a deluge of researchers studying various aspects of the city, it was important to be as inconspicuous as possible.

While people spent time familiarizing me with the necessary players, there was an assumption that I knew my way around and understood the community. In some instances, I was able to give an historical perspective on the community that many lacked. Because they believed that I would not take cheap shots at them (which is one of their fears of researchers), they were comfortable sharing a great deal of information that would otherwise be unheard.

In all, "getting dirty" is tough work, but it allowed me to gain insight into personal, social, and historical contexts of situations. As researchers, we hope that our findings will lead to improvements in the systems and the lives of the people we study. Listening to members of this often-studied community forced me to think about how we are viewed as we conduct our research. To agency staff there is no difference between researchers and consultants. We are ALL disrupting their routine, taking time away from far too heavy caseloads and perceived as being there only to identify their faults. Perhaps, as we are designing projects, we should also be asking ourselves how we can make things better on the ground. Rather than simply focusing on how we collect data, analyze data, and publish the findings, we need to give greater consideration to how our presence affects the agencies

we study and how we can give back to the groups and communities we study.

Finally, my experiences in Flint reminded me of the importance of the original mission of WSC. Over the years, the role of practitioners in the organization has been diminished. Perhaps it is time to revert to the past and increase the presence and involvement of practitioners. In the early years of the organization, there was always at least one WSC board member who was actively working in the field. One of that member's roles was to increase the involvement of their co-workers in the annual meeting. It might be worth trying that, again. In doing so, maybe we can do our small part to bridge the dissonance between practitioners and academics.

In retrospect, my negative response to, "Are you crazy?" was correct. There was, in fact, a real possibility this project could have gone awry quickly. When I returned to Flint, I thought it would be interesting and knew that I had the support of some insiders. However, I began the project with the idea that I was an outsider, with limited knowledge of the city in its current form. I had a history that gave me limited knowledge and "alumni" status. Little did I know that the director of the juvenile detention center was a guy who lived down the street; that one of the judges was the sister of a young man I had dated in high school; that the director of a mental health program was the brother of a childhood friend; that a high school classmate was on the Flint City Council; or that the prosecutor was married to someone with whom I had grown up. Clearly, my prior involvement with these individuals gave me greater acceptance into the community. These individuals did not need to be convinced of my intentions, and because of their standing in the community, other adults were willing to bring me into the fold and view me similarly. I am less clear about why the young women accepted and trusted me; perhaps it was that I knew their neighborhood well, had spent a great deal of time in the same places they had and was willing to share some of my experiences, or, simply, that I was so interested in what they had to say. Maybe, I was just lucky. Rather than an outrageous thing to do, my experiences in Flint allowed me to look at my role as a researcher/consultant in a different light. I could not have ended my career in a better place.

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