

Seldom does the opportunity arise to view the criminal justice system through the eyes of a person who has experienced it. Chuck Terry is most unusual in that, after more than twenty years of heroin addiction, twelve of them incarcerated, he has “beaten the habit,” earned a Ph.D., and is now an assistant professor of criminal justice. The vivid chronicles of his journey, which conclude each part of this book, provide rare insights into the workings of “the system.” His reflections should be thoughtfully considered by all students of criminal justice.

Tight handcuffs. Loud cellblocks. Racial tension. No women, kids, or pets. Violence. Road dogs (close friends). Iron bars. Concrete beds. Hate. Guard towers. Getting booked. Count times. Food lines. Parole boards. Judges. Degradation. District attorneys. Death. Cops. A.M.'s and P.M.'s—year in and year out. Monotony. Withdrawals. Preliminary hearings. The need to show no pain—ever. Release dates. Parole officers. Alienation. Hopelessness. Determinate sentencing. A guard on the way out of prison: “See you when you get back, Terry. Guys like you are job security for guys like me.” A lot to deal with for a white, California-raised kid from middle-class suburbia. A lot for anybody.

From my first arrest in 1970 to my last discharge from parole in 1992, I became intimately familiar with all the components of the criminal justice system. Over the course of this twenty-plus-year “career,” which included spending over twelve years inside state (prisons) and county (jails) “correctional” facilities for drug-related crimes, I experienced almost everything the system has to offer—except the death penalty or a sentence of life without possibility of parole.

These experiences have taught me that the way “criminals” are dealt with in America is anything but “fair” or “just.” Rather, their fate is determined by who they are and how they are seen by system actors such as judges and prosecutors, and by the general public. It is important to note that this “seeing” varies dramatically and is relative to an ever-changing social, economic, political, and historical context.

Crime today is politicized and a main focus of media attention. The “threat” posed by “criminals” is used to generate fear and to legitimate spending millions on more police, more prisons, and

more mechanisms of social control. The reasons for this are complex and controversial. But it hasn’t always been like this.

I was a kid in the 1960s, when the civil rights movement, protests against the Vietnam war, and an antiestablishment-oriented “counterculture” were in full swing. Instead of bombarding the public with visions of low-level street crime, the nightly news sent us images from the war, urban riots, and people getting beaten by police for participating in nonviolent sit-ins. Governmental policies and social inequality rather than addicts and “juvenile predators” were seen as “criminal” by a significant portion of the population. Rules and rule enforcers (like racial segregation policies, drug laws, government officials) were the targets of attention. In defiance of “the way things were,” we grew our hair, spoke out against social norms, and got high.

My own drug use began in 1967 and escalated over time. Initially, I used whatever was available: alcohol, marijuana, reds, yellows, whites, LSD. In 1969 I used heroin for the first time.

Now, how could any sane person try heroin? Doesn’t everyone know it’s a “bad” thing to do? Though it was scary, I rationalized it as being okay. After all, I knew several people who used it. They seemed to be fine. Everything I had been told about all the other drugs I used had proved to be a lie; we were told that if we smoked pot we’d lie down on train tracks, and if we took LSD we’d jump out of tall buildings and lose our minds. So one night at a party I gave it a shot. Or, I should say, I stuck my arm out and a friend gave me a shot.

Turning points. Crossroads. Where do we go from here? The first thing I thought when I felt the effects of heroin was, “I can’t believe I’ve been doing anything in life other than trying to use this stuff all the time.” For the next twenty-plus years I did just that. Heroin made me feel

INSIDE THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND BEYOND: ONE MAN’S JOURNEY

My Affair with Heroin

WRITTEN BY CHUCK TERRY

“normal,” like I fit, belonged, was not out of place. It is a powerfully enticing drug: many first-time users instantly fall in love with it. I was one of those people. It provided me with a clear purpose in life and, though I didn’t know it at first, a future that would involve spending a lot of time inside the various worlds of the criminal justice system.

Once I began using illegal drugs, I started seeing anyone affiliated with any type of legal authority as a potential enemy—especially police, whose job (in my mind) was to “catch” or “arrest” me. This distrustful outlook became magnified once I began using heroin. After all, heroin users are seen as “real” criminals.

The people in my life changed as my heroin habit took hold. Where I used to have friends who were about my age and white, now I frequently hung out with older people who were often a different color, brown or black. Their images remain. A 40-year-old hooker fixing (injecting narcotics), sores all over her body, pushing scabs on her arms out of the way with the needle in a desperate attempt to find a vein. A 65-year-old, jaundiced-eyed black man welcoming me into his home to share the joys of addiction. Trips into ethnic neighborhoods to

buy dope where few, if any, white people were seen. Nodding. Throwing up. People getting arrested, disappearing, overdosing, dying. As my social circle changed, so did the way I saw the world and myself. Without realizing it I was “becoming” what society calls “criminal.”

My love of heroin took me down a road that included many unplanned pit stops. I was investigated, arrested, booked more times than I care to recall. I appeared more than once at a preliminary hearing, still going through withdrawal—looking sickly and feeling weak as I interacted with bailiffs, public defenders, judges, and other prisoners. The road took me through cramped cellblocks, courtroom holding tanks, and jail-house chow halls—to places where I witnessed alcoholics suffering from the DT’s, epileptics and diabetics going into convulsions from a lack of medication, people jammed into cells with bullets still in their bodies, and more. From four different prison commitments came years behind walls, isolated from the world. My love of heroin took me down a path where I was either on the run, locked up, or on probation or parole for more than twenty years. The pieces that conclude each part of this book are scenes from that journey. ■