

All Doing Time

Given an opportunity to describe himself during an interview, an Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (ODRC) resident, adamantly declared, "I ain't a snitch. I don't fuck wit boys. And I don't break under pressure" (Mr. Prisoner, 2016, personal interview). When asked during this interview was he the proverbial "inmate" or "convict", he answered, "I'm a prisoner – there's a difference" (Mr. Prisoner, 2016, personal interview). Apparently these titles – inmate, convict, and prisoner – bear distinctions among those in the criminal justice system. But to those unaware in the outside world, they probably equal one meaning – criminal. However, for those confined behind bars earning or representing one of these titles can make the difference between being respected or scorned, admired or hated, noticed or ignored. For one to accept one of these titles, an inmate, convict, or prisoner, is associating himself with a different set of values and principles that defines how he does his time.

The stigma attached to being a convicted criminal has always been seen in a negative light. To society, a criminal is someone who cannot be trusted. Moreover, an image of being dangerous usually comes to mind when a criminal is thought of. These negative images tend to be reinforced when the criminal's offense requires him to serve a sentence, because they are housed with other so-called untrustworthy dangerous criminals. But behind bars, those same criminals experience what best could be described as a sort of informal classification among both their peers and staff.

According to Mr. Prisoner, the term "prisoner" is more of a legal representation. As he explained it, "a prisoner is different from a convict or inmate because he fights for his freedom from beginning to end"

(Mr. Prisoner, 2016, personal interview). By “fight” he means litigating his case in the court of law to have his conviction overturned. When asked was he actually innocent of the crime that he was convicted of, and does innocence play a part in the prisoner title, his answer interesting enough was, “yes, to the first; and no to the second. It’s the fight taken all the way to the United States Supreme Court that matters. When you litigate your case in the federal court, they officially label you a prisoner” (Mr. Prisoner, 2016, personal interview).

But as a whole, the term “prisoner” is rarely used by the prison staff towards convicted criminals. And most persons in the penal system seem not to have an opinion or definition of the term. However, asking these same persons behind bars, criminal and staff alike, their meaning of “inmate” and “convict”, a hodgepodge of viewpoints are shared. One ODRC resident had this to say about who he was, and who he was not:

I’m a *convict*. As a convict, ~~what~~ you won’t ever catch me doing certain things with staff. For example, in my dorm the case manager regularly keeps a “DO NOT DISTURB – DOING PAPERWORK” sign in the office window. But there’s an *inmate* who remains in the office standing over the desk obviously scanning personal paperwork... Restricted documents such as visiting forms that contain...driver’s licenses’ numbers, personal photos, phone numbers, and addresses... (Mr. Convict, 2016, personal interview).

In any event, Mr. Convict went on to share that the meanings to those terms are not etched in stone, and that a self-described “inmate” would probably paint himself in a more favorable light (Mr. Convict, 2016, personal interview).

Most prison staff tend to refer to all of those confined as inmates because they were trained to do so. However, there was a self-described inmate who explained why he foregoes the convict or prisoner title:

When I first arrived at the reception center after being sentenced, the officer at orientation gave a group of us a lecture about the difference between being an inmate and convict. Judging by his tone, it was as if he gave convicts more respect than inmates. But were I to label myself either of the two, I would call myself an inmate because I don’t fit the convict or prisoner criteria. I did do

the crime and I repent for it. I'm doing my time, taking as many programs as possible to better myself, and trying hard to stay out of trouble. From my understanding, a convict's mission is to stay out of trouble by evading getting caught. (Mr. Inmate, 2016, personal interview).

In *A Con by Any Other Name*, author Luke Monde claims that, "the prisoner subtitles' thing given to each other serves two purposes: 1. It establishes an easier identifiable pecking order among prison inhabitants and staff; and, 2. It creates another form of control...without which control of a prison would be more challenging" (2001, np.).

Were a prison a school, the inmates would probably be the majority of the student body. They would be the ones who went to classes, i.e., programs, played sports, and involved themselves with other sanctioned activities. On the other hand, the convicts would be the "cool kids' who were tough, had a rebellious nature, and experienced disciplinary issues, and the prisoners would be the outcasts or ones who challenged authority. These examples are made to be taken lightly. Just like high school or college, class distinction and group labeling has a gray area where everybody intermingles with each other and adopts the ways and mannerisms of those outside their comfort zone. Thus, comparing these groups becomes a sketchy subject.

However, convicts, inmates, and prisoners, all comparatively share a history of fighting for their basic human rights. "The underlying assumption [...] that people who are detained or imprisoned do not cease to be humans", according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, "...rests on the principle that the deprivation of liberty (that is, imprisonment) is the operative punishment and that it should not be augmented by unnecessarily restrictive conditions" (2013). Contrary to this assumption, inmates, convicts, and prisoners, experience their fair share of abuse, from both their imprisoners and themselves. Accordingly, regardless what differences those titles may represent, there are some things that causes that line to be erased that separates these incarcerated persons.

In closing, it seems that on the surface, inmates will be looked upon as the good guys of the penitentiary, convicts will be perceived as the career criminals of the lot, and prisoners will be the proverbial protesters that fight the powers that be. But from the outside, there will always be one simple name for them – criminals. Although those names create images of different prison personas, anybody sets themselves up to be misled if they give real substance to a simple title. However, when that title reflects something rather positive or at least has some positive elements to it, there should be nothing wrong with adopting such a name and striving to live up to the good side of that title. In sum, whatever they are called, they are all doing time.