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Crisis in Criminology: Reflections on the Concept of Crisis in the Time of COVID-19

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Abstract

In this reflection paper, we explore the concept of crisis in criminology. Crisis is frequently used by criminologists as a defining and evaluative category in empirical examinations of policing and incarceration, for example. Despite its frequent use, the concept of crisis has received little attention in contemporary criminological work. We call on scholars in the field to recognize crisis as an important defining category in criminology. Crisis demands our critical attention as we not only navigate the current global health pandemic and the existing, deep-seated social crises that emanate from our penal institutions, but importantly, also observe how the former impacts the latter. To this end, we propose a range of considerations that we find particularly salient to criminologists in this time of crisis.

Introduction

Crisis has become a constant, if not omnipresent, descriptive category to describe both contemporary and past moments in time (Roitman, 2014). Globally, crisis has been used to describe the state of our climate, the financial market, the housing market, and now, the COVID-19 pandemic. As Koselleck (2006) states, "in our century, there is virtually no area of life that has not been examined and interpreted through this concept" (p. 358). As no exception to this theoretical rule, crisis is also frequently mobilized by criminologists to describe the state of our criminal legal institutions, including the police and prison system. Yet, despite being a "central catchword" (Koselleck, 2006) in criminological research, a closer examination of

the concept itself has largely escaped our attention. To address this gap, we take pause to reflect on the role that the concept of crisis generally plays in criminological scholarship, as well as the specific use and merits of crisis for criminologists during the time of COVID-19. The goal of this article is to neither outright define crisis nor evaluate whether specific crises, past or present, are "real" or "fabricated." Rather, we reflect on the role of crisis in criminological research as we call on scholars in the field to recognize crisis as an important defining category in criminology. The deployment of the term crisis demands our critical attention as we not only navigate the current global health pandemic and the existing, deep-seated social crises that emanate from our penal institutions, but importantly, also observe how the former impacts the latter. In this context, we elucidate the need for stronger cross-disciplinary synergies between criminology and other fields in their discussions of intersecting crises, power, and change.

The impetus for this article stems from a larger, ongoing study. Prior to the initial COVID-19 shutdown in Canada, we, the authors of this paper, were in the process of examining the nature of social crises primarily through the disciplinary lens of criminology. Our entry point was the so-called "meth crisis" that had been unfolding in the province of Manitoba over the past number of years. We were in the midst of exploring how different actors and institutions, including police and public health workers, defined the nature of this so-called crisis. Moreover, we were working to understand to what end narratives of crisis emerged among these different actors, recognizing that publicly labelled crisis moments present opportunities for said actors to not only accept or deflect responsibility for the problem at hand but also to demand more powers, resources, and/or re-define their work role in society or their relationships with others. Proving to be a pervasive framing mechanism, our analysis of local news coverage of meth and meth-related crime in Manitoba found that the majority[1] of articles in our project framed these issues in terms of a "full-blown crisis" that was "gripping" our province (see also Maier,

[1] For example, we found that in 2019, 44 of 76 *Winnipeg Sun* articles and 36 of 72 *Winnipeg Free Press* articles describe meth or meth-related crime in Winnipeg as a crisis.

2019). In the context of meth, crisis appears to be used as a claim rather than an empirical fact. For example, police may use the language of "meth crisis" in an effort to affirm their power. As scholars have written about in the context of other drug panics, widespread and exaggerated public fears about drugs, crime, and social vice are commonly stoked by the media and subsequently mobilized by governments and other agents to chart new institutional responses like increased police power and capacity (e.g., Linnemann, 2016). Others have pointed out that claims of drug crises also contribute to drawing attention away from structural problems such as poverty and social marginalization that make individuals more vulnerable to the risks of drug use (Boyd & Carter, 2010), such as being hyperpoliced, for example.

In other situations, crisis is used as a descriptive category rather than a claim. Recently, Black-led social movements have forced open a long-brewing crisis of state and police legitimacy in the US and Canada. In these contexts, crisis is used as a descriptive and evaluative category to identify the deep failures of our criminal legal institutions and their grave impacts on BIPOC communities. Because the term crisis appears in so many different contexts and situations, it is not surprising that it also referred to as a "travelling concept" (Beck & Knecht, 2016). Yet, despite its frequent use, crisis continues to be a "largely unquestioned way of naming and seeing" (Carr, 2019, p. 161) problems, situations, and events.

In our study of what has been labelled a "meth crisis" in Manitoba, we have also noticed how media attention in the province has significantly shifted over the past year or so: news coverage has shifted away from meth use(rs), first toward a so-called "epidemic" of liquor store thefts across prairie cities (MacLean, 2019; see also Wilt, 2019), and again to the global health crisis we currently find ourselves in. We can see across these examples that crisis is indeed "an omnipresent, even *indispensable*, qualifier in the public discourse" that is frequently invoked by media, politicians, and other influential individuals (Carr, 2019, p. 161). While crises play out in peoples' lives in layered and intersecting ways, it has often seemed like the media can only treat one crisis at a time, as if crises existed within a vacuum or came in succession. For us, however, the ability

to identify the relationship between these cascading and overlapping crisis points (poverty, health, incarceration, etc.) has led us to pivot the substantive focus of our research. Moreover, it has also encouraged us to engage more seriously with the concept of crisis itself and ask what this concept means for criminologists.

In the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we ask: What is the role of criminologists and criminological research in a time of such crises? Specifically, what does the concept of crisis offer us, as criminologists, for making sense of these "unprecedented" times? To this end, we seek to contribute to a discussion about the use of crisis specifically in criminology and especially in the current moment. This includes an exploration of both the definition and deployment of crisis in criminological scholarship, as well as a reflection on the importance of studying the interrelationships between the different crises that COVID-19 has laid so bare. Thus, in this reflective piece, we first outline more general definitions of the term crisis before proceeding to explore the crisis concept in criminology. We then offer a set of questions and considerations for scholars who are engaging in criminological research during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Crisis: Defined

Writings on crisis typically start with reference to the origins of the term, or its "self-defining history in history" (Starn, 1971, p. 4). The etymology of crisis originates in the medical and legal fields of ancient Greece. The word *krinô,* which means "to separate," "to choose," "to judge," or "to decide" (see Koselleck, 2006; see also Bizas, 2016; Roitman, 2011), was used in situations where a crucial judgment or decision was made regarding an illness or trial (Barrios, 2017). Citing the Hippocratic treatise *On Affections,* Starn (1971) writes that a crisis situation "occurs in diseases whenever the diseases increase in intensity or go away or change into another disease or end altogether" (p. 4). More generally, crises denote high-stakes situations, a temporal rupture, or turning point that "would tip the scales" (Koselleck, 2006, p. 358; Barrios, 2017). Crisis simultaneously implies definitive judgment and swift action. As Carr (2019) states, "crisis projects *urgency*," demanding "*fast, more immediate*" action in the sense of "do now, think later" (p. 162).

Indeed, the declaration of COVID-19 as a global health crisis has led to political decisions that have changed people's everyday lives in significant ways that, not even a year ago, would have seemed unimaginable. As we continue to see infection rates grow, with some countries experiencing their second and even third waves of the virus, we can also see how crises can become permanent conditions of everyday life. While this enduring quality is contrary to the traditional usage of the term crisis that evokes a stated change or definitive endpoint, it shows that the label of crisis may be used even in situations where immediate action does not lead to the resolution of crisis, but where crisis becomes "an enduring condition of life" (Roitman, 2014, p. 2). In other words, rather than describing a decisive moment in time, crisis may come to characterize "a chronic condition, a malaise that signifies contingency and paradox" (Khasnabish 2014, p. 569). The crisis that is the COVID-19 pandemic offers us an apt example of this paradox: life-changing yet protracted, premised on the reality that "things aren't going to go back to 'normal' [because] there's no 'normal' to go back to" (Fox, 2020).

Scholars of various disciplines have sought to provide further definitions of crisis. For example, Visacovsky (2017) explains that crises are "liminal moments in which a given order that is considered normal or desired is dissolved, breaks down, is affected by a decomposition or imbalance and has to be restored" (p. 7; see also Turner, 1969, for the concept of liminality). Similarly, Barrios (2017) maintains that crisis denotes "an extraordinary condition when the customary flow of life is brought into question and when those states of affairs that were previously credited as normative come to be seen as no longer tenable" (p. 152). Other scholars have described crisis as the antithesis to integration. Bidney (1946) specifically distinguishes between "natural" and "cultural" crises; the former applies to events that are beyond human control (e.g., natural disasters), while the latter is the "*result of some dysfunction inherent in the very form and dynamics of a given form of culture*" (p. 537). While these authors offer a definition of "general crisis" (Starn, 1971), what constitutes a crisis in a specific situation remains unclear (see also Carr, 2019). Indeed, we may ask: At what point does a *problem* reach *crisis*

levels? Or at what point does *dysfunction* signify *crisis*? In other words, what is the crisis threshold for researchers who want to study or describe it? As Stark (1971) states, "[few] historians […] are likely to agree on what constitutes a crisis, let alone *the* crisis [itself]" (p. 22).

Beyond the difficulties of defining what constitutes a crisis, scholars have argued that rather than treating crises as empirical facts, we should focus on the meanings and effects of when crisis, as a way of seeing and speaking of certain situations, is invoked. Beck and Knecht (2016), for example, write that crisis is "first and foremost a transformative space in and through which ethnographic knowledge can be gathered" (p. 111). The authors argue that situations or events labelled as crises offer a useful entry into anthropological analyses of social structures, persistence, and change. In this context, anthropologist Roitman's work is particularly noteworthy. Roitman (2014) argues that "crisis is not a condition to be observed, it is an observation that produces meaning" (p. 39). In this sense, crisis is perhaps more aptly described as a "way of seeing rather than a self-evident state of affairs" (Carr, 2019, p. 163). For Roitman (2014), rather than asking what constitutes crisis, she encourages us to think critically about what we enable but also foreclose by invoking the term crisis as a "narrative device." Similarly, Henderson (2014), writing within a legal and political science context, states that "crisis discourse creates a rupture in an existing discourse." Invoking the language of crisis creates what Henderson (2014) calls "dislocation": "a break or gap in a particular narrative." Crisis, thus, creates opportunity for discursive change.

In addition to discursive change, labelling something a crisis creates opportunity for action. Lawrence (2013), who studies crisis as a "technique of government" in the context of EU politics, articulates that "[to] speak of crisis, then, is to evoke a moment in which decisions must be made; a moment of political opportunity" (p. 190). Lawrence's (2013) work shows that once a problem has been articulated as crisis, it creates an opportunity or space for governments to "leap into action," sometimes in ways that go beyond what would have seemed possible pre-crisis (p. 189). In other words, declarations of crisis produce opportunities for radical political

decision-making. In this sense, crises have the possibility to facilitate the production of new social structures (Beck & Knecht, 2016). In sum, these authors explain that crisis is, first and foremost, a narrative device that produces meaning and can lead to rupture in discourses and the status quo. So where does that leave researchers who wish to study, use, or develop the concept?

Crisis and Criminology

As can be seen, scholars of various disciplines, anthropology in particular, have engaged with the concept of crisis (see also Koselleck, 2006). In criminology, however, crisis has not received the same attention. This gap remains, despite the fact that it is used frequently as a hook to signify the importance of the subject of research and, more specifically, express concern over the failures of the criminal legal system. Put differently, crisis is invoked primarily as an evaluative category for the state of policing, imprisonment, and other institutions or practices in the realm of punishment and control more broadly. More specifically, when we see crisis mentioned in criminological accounts of incarceration and other issues, it is often in reference to the scale of the issue in question: to mark a scalar or temporal break from previous conditions that were considered more "normal." For example, examinations of "mass incarceration" typically start with reference to the staggering number of people behind bars. This is what Cavadino, Dignan, and Mair (2013) refer to as a "numbers crisis." It can be argued that criminologists' definitions of certain issues or situations as crises alone carries relatively little meaning. As Stark (1971) says, "what the historian defines as a crisis situation does not necessarily change anything at all so much as reveal the fibre of its subject; it may be something like [their] best equivalent of the instruments with which the physicist speeds up the processes of matter in order to make them more visible" (p. 16–17). Applied to criminology, it can be argued that while naming an issue (e.g., mass incarceration) as crisis signifies its importance, it tells us about neither the context and nature of the actual issue at hand, nor the resolution to the crisis. Indeed, we have seen perpetuation of the system of mass incarceration in spite of its alleged crisis state.

Some scholars contend that the use of crisis in descriptions of the

prison system may be outright harmful (see Arbel, 2019). In Canadian criminology in particular, crisis often appears in the context of examining the incarceration of Indigenous peoples. In this context, some scholars have argued that crisis is a misguided and even harmful way of talking about this issue (see Nichols, 2014; Arbel, 2019). Defined as a critical moment in time, crisis sits uneasy with descriptions of the history and contemporary state of the criminal legal system and our penal institutions, especially in settler colonial states like Canada where historical and ongoing policies of state-led genocide are unchanged and ever-present. Police violence and racism, for example, are enduring, rather than momentary conditions of police work. They are symptoms of a larger problem: underneath the widespread police violence against BIPOC communities and the so-called "numbers crisis" are logics of white supremacy, racial capitalism, and undisputed land theft that are entrenched into the very fabric of our state and legal systems (see also Sparks & Bottoms, 1995). Along these same lines, Arbel (2019) argues that crisis is a misnomer in judicial discourses referring to Indigenous incarceration in Canada, for it "implies that Indigenous mass incarceration is somehow exceptional—an unstable phenomenon that is, as crises are, transient and unique" (p. 438). In consequence, the language of crisis "mischaracterizes its nature and impedes understanding" (Arbel, 2019, p. 439). Arbel (2019), moreover, explains that "the language of crisis suggests that Indigenous mass imprisonment is capable of resolution through a decisive change or juncture, as crises are" (p. 439), concluding that while sometimes invoked with good intentions—like, for example, when academics use the language of crisis in the context of Indigenous mass incarceration to express their anger or outrage and to signify the seriousness of the issue—invoking crisis discourse does more harm than good in our efforts to understand the nature of the issue, or effective responses to it. In a word: crisis is complicated.

Building on this work, we contend that, especially in the context of the current pandemic, it is more crucial than ever to engage more seriously with the language of crisis. What is more, in line with past calls by scholars of other disciplines (see Starn, 1971), we reflect upon what crisis has become for criminologists. In the next section,

we highlight the need to further develop current, critical, and cross-disciplinary understandings of crisis; this is not, however, a fully developed set of considerations but rather the start of a discussion on the possibilities that the crisis concept offers to criminologists during this particular moment in time.

A Criminology of Crisis: Considerations for Criminologists in the Time of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic provides fertile ground for rich and generative social science research; this no doubt includes criminological work and the development of social theory. Given that crises generally "indicate an individually or collectively experienced moment when the customary flow of everyday life is brought into question" (Barrios 2017, p. 152), they thus "provide a unique optic for analyzing the structure for social relations, which is otherwise difficult to observe" (Camp, 2016, p. 4; see also Elliott & Pais, 2006). Indeed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become particularly apparent who is working hard to preserve and defend the existing political, economic, and ideological structures from which they themselves benefit. That is because power dynamics and social structures are more exposed than they are normally during relatively settled times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only laid bare existing vulnerabilities but also deepened these inequalities, making them exceptionally difficult to ignore. We know that the risk of contracting and suffering severe outcomes from COVID-19 as well as the social, economic, and mental health effects of the pandemic are unevenly distributed across society (see Cheung, 2020). Prisons, in particular, have become hotspots for infection outbreaks, meaning that incarcerated people, who are already predisposed to various health risks, are placed at heightened risk of illness and death. This is not even to mention existing sanitary issues and concerns for overcrowding that would make an outbreak nearly unstoppable in a prison institution. Prisoners, as well as individuals under community-based supervision (e.g., probation and parole), are also particularly vulnerable to the risks of social isolation. In response to physical distancing protocols, prisons and other penal institutions have not

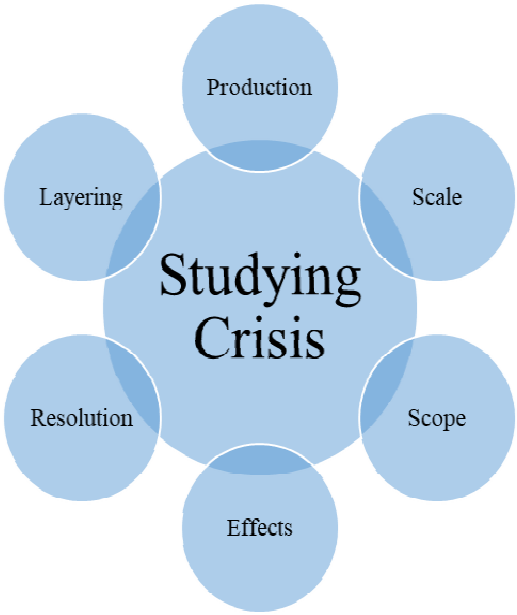
only severely restricted visitor access and people's contact with "non-essential" others (see also McNeill, 2020), but also instituted the use of extended "medical isolation," which is effectively solitary confinement for 23 hours or more per day (Ling, 2020b).

Looking at the issues of incarceration, we can see that not all problems receive the label of crisis. As COVID-19 infections swept across Canada, prisoners and solidarity activists across the country tried hard to draw attention to how the impending health crisis would disproportionately harm prisoners because the virus spreads especially quickly in these contained, institutionalized settings (e.g., Ling, 2020a). But for incarcerated people in Canada and elsewhere, a public sense of crisis never quite took hold. Reminiscent of permanent and ongoing social crises of hunger, homelessness, criminalization, and lack of access to safe drug supply that have made people particularly vulnerable to the effects of meth and other drugs, the effects of COVID-19 in criminal legal institutions were never named as a relevant crisis that demanded radical political action.

Heightened by conditions that were (at least, officially) brought on by the current pandemic, we argue that these kinds of issues present an important opportunity for criminological intervention that could meaningfully contribute to public sense-making of the effects of COVID-19. What is more, criminologists are also able to clarify the role that institutions of punishment and control have played in affirming hierarchies of human value. In this context, critically assessing the use of crisis discourse is crucial because it directs our attention to a number of important considerations as we continue to observe criminological issues in the time of COVID-19 and beyond. We argue it is critical that criminologists situate these criminological issues in relation to their necessary social, political, and ideological movements. In addition to criminology, much contemporary, critical theorizing of the carceral state has happened within other fields and disciplines: American Studies, Geography, History, Political Science, and Anthropology (see Brown & Schept, 2016; Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Gilmore, 2007; Hinton, 2016; Murakawa, 2014; Pelot-Hobbs, 2013). It is notable also that the current movement to name policing itself as a crisis did not grow out of criminological critiques but emerged instead from the social critiques and visions of change as

articulated by Black feminisms (see Diverlus et al., 2020; Maynard, 2017; Oparah, 2005; Richie, 2012; Ritchie & Davis, 2017). Below, we draw on a range of disciplines to reflect on a number of issues related to crisis for criminologists to consider during the time of COVID-19.

Figure 1: Studying Crisis



Production of Crises

To start, we highlight the importance of studying the production of crises, noting that while triggering conditions such as disease or weather events may be out of human control (i.e., "natural crises"; see Bidney, 1946), damage and harm caused by a crisis—social, health, or environmental—should be treated as the outcome of political and policy decisions. Geographer Neil Smith (2006) made this point in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina where he powerfully asserted that *There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster*. Smith writes against the supposed naturalness of the death toll in New Orleans, stating that:

> It is difficult, so soon on the heels of such an unnecessarily deadly disaster, to be discompassionate, but it is important in the heat of the moment to put social science to work as a counterweight to official attempts to relegate Katrina to the historical dustbin of inevitable 'natural' disasters. (Smith, 2006)

Smith (2006) essentially says that every aspect of a crisis involves social actors: its causes, the uneven vulnerability of different groups, people's preparedness to respond to a crisis, the results of the crisis, and the reconstruction efforts that follow.

Following Smith's (2006) thinking, we urge criminologists to study the structures of power and conditions that lead to uneven rates of disease in prison, for example, and to resist discourses that suggest that the spread of COVID-19 has been inevitable. For example, prisons are commonly referred to as "incubators" of the disease. This scientific laboratory language obscures the decisions being made to preserve the conditions that we know will accelerate the spread, including overcriminalization, overcrowding, and subpar health conditions inside correctional facilities. In the case of prisons and other institutionalized settings like personal care homes, this language naturalizes the spread of the disease in the same discursive moment as it naturalizes the institutions themselves, as if a prison was an ecosystem and not a social structure (see Linton, 2021). Characterizations of crisis that depict them as inevitable or out of control thus hide the levers of power that constructed the crisis in the first place and, as a result, may also impede its resolution.

For Smith (2006), the question of who lives and who dies in so-called natural disasters is essentially a social calculus. Indeed, this is playing out in the uneven death toll of COVID-19: within and across national boundaries, depending on people's access to healthcare, labour protections, housing, and sanitation infrastructure. Again, in line with Smith's (2006) writing, we urge criminologists and others to study the political and socio-economic conditions that have created crises situations for prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, this means going beyond the declaration that prisons are "incubators" of disease, to recognizing the myriad of factors that have

fundamentally rendered prisoners and other criminalized populations deeply vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19.

A social calculus is equally present in the *distribution* of the crisis label; for example, to those who have died from COVID-19 but not to the state of privatized care homes in disarray; to those who lost their lives in Hurricane Katrina after the fact but not to those who were abandoned in the Superdome while the hurricane unfolded (Smith, 2006); and to those whose property is damaged by people high on drugs but not to those whose lives have been lost due to unsafe and unregulated drug supplies or the lack of help and support. Smith (2006) again highlights that whether or not a natural event becomes a crisis or disaster depends on where it happens as well as who it happens to. Thus, criminologists, during and beyond the pandemic, will also need to a keep a critical eye on who and what is labelled a crisis situation during this time or, in other words, which personal crises make it into the public realm.

In line with existing work on crisis (e.g., Roitman, 2014), we also urge criminologists to study how crisis narratives emerge, how they are used and to what ends, as well as what is foreclosed and what stays hidden when crisis is invoked. Foundational to this work is, of course, Stuart Hall and colleagues' (1978) germinal work *Policing the Crisis,* which examines a popular panic or "crisis" about "mugging" as a symptom of other shifts in the social fabric of society. The authors ask:

> What is the repressed social and historical content of 'mugging' and the response to it? What does this tell us about the nature of social control, the ideologies of crime, the role of the state and its apparatuses, the historical and political conjuncture in which this cycle appears? (Hall et al., 1978, p. 182)

Their study was groundbreaking in its approach as they sought to understand a so-called crisis of crime by refusing the common-sense notion that crime was the problem that needed to be studied and solved. Instead, they examine what they refer to as a crisis of "hegemony" in British society. While a more comprehensive

overview of the relevance of Hall et al.'s work for contemporary criminological analyses is not possible here, we cite Hall et al. (1978) in an effort to further encourage criminological work that critically examines crisis labels and provides empirical evidence into policy and political decisions in the realm of punishment and control that may be put in place in response to so-called crime or drug crises.

Scale, Scope, and the Effects of Crisis

We suggest that criminologists who are studying prisons, policing, and other criminal legal issues in this moment will also need to consider the scale, scope, and effects of different crisis situations. For one, this means reflecting upon whether or not a moment is labelled a crisis simply due to its scale. In this context, we may need to ask ourselves: How many lives need to be lost before something is officially registered as a crisis? Are we prepared to engage in calculus in our own use of the term? Here, we wish to highlight the reality that crises play out on multiple scales, and thus need to be treated accordingly. A study that speaks only to broad numbers or systems risks reifying crisis on a macro level without considering its expression on the micro level and elides a substantive and nuanced discussion of the moment in question (see also Carr, 2019). For example, Nichols (2014) asserts that by focusing on the "over-representation" of Indigenous peoples in Canadian prisons, the issue is inaccurately presented as one of proportionality, and thus obscures how the Canadian carceral system is fundamentally built on colonialism and the targeting of Indigenous bodies.

Closely related to scale, moreover, any analysis of crisis in criminology needs to also consider the scope of crisis moments. Here, we implore scholars to study both the interconnectedness of current crises and how and why multiple crises may simultaneously overlap. Taken together, what do these crises say about the way our society is built? We encourage studies that examine crisis in crime, prisons, and policing, for example, not to limit the scope of their analysis to only the penal system. Instead, we suggest that these works look beyond the bounds of criminology to perhaps uncover patterns that speak to latent logics that permeate the way our society is organized more broadly. As Barrios (2017) articulates, focusing on uncovering what

went wrong in this particular moment to cause a crisis actually steers the observer's evaluation away from the quotidian and normative practices that engender such occurrences "and presents catastrophic outcomes as the effect of errors or accidents that are aberrations of the normal operation of things" (p. 153; see also Roitman, 2014).

In keeping with the previous example, characterizing the mass imprisonment of Indigenous peoples as a crisis rhetorically constructs the issue as atypical rather than a manifestation of colonial violence (see Arbel, 2019). It is thus necessary, when studying narratives of crisis in the Canadian penal system, to unpack how the colonial logics that underpin that individual system are actually fundamental to not only all state institutions, but also speak to logics of Canadian hegemony that, writ large, are premised on the dispossession and elimination of Indigenous peoples altogether. In addition, any criminological analysis of crisis will need to examine the place of subjective human experience and perceptions of crisis on a micro scale.

Resolutions of Crisis

In addition to presenting opportunities for clarity about the way things work (or don't work), crises are also critical moments for articulating our normative views (as criminologists) about the state and role of the penal system in society and decisive opportunities for pushing for change based on those articulations. That is because, as Roitman (2014) explains, crisis references a "norm": it naturally implies a "comparative state of judgment" (p. 2). Understood as a political technique of government, Lawrence (2013) adds, "crisis discourse is not simply a way of identifying a deviation from the norm but is rather a way of talking about what the norm should be" (p. 194). In other words, the willingness to name something a crisis reveals what is acceptable as "normal" to those doing the naming.

For criminologists, to invoke crisis means to grapple with the following question: "crisis compared to what?" (Roitman, 2014, p. 4). In other words, what would a non-crisis state look like, or what is the implied resolution to a crisis? For example, what would be an acceptable or non-crisis level of imprisonment during the current

pandemic and beyond? Returning to Arbel's (2019) work on judicial discourses of Indigenous imprisonment, we might also ask: Is there ever a non-crisis level of Indigenous incarceration knowing that Canadian prisons present and function, fundamentally, as colonial institutions (see also Nichols, 2014)? Or rather, is this system working as intended? In the context of COVID-19, scholars have also problematized the central role police have come to play in enforcing public health and emergency orders (see Luscombe & McClelland, 2020). Again, here we may ask: Should police ever occupy a role in the management of a public health crisis? If so, what would be an acceptable form and level of policing? Crises, to summarize, provide a unique window for reflection as we seek to examine and clarify the role of criminal legal institutions and actors in society, both during this current moment and beyond.

As a related point, we also contend that crises should be used by criminologists as opportunities for action and change. As Koselleck (2006) states, crisis "is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death" (p. 361). Camp and Heatherton (2016) also notes that the purpose of describing crisis moments, and understanding them in all of their specificity, is to develop the skills required to intervene in them. Invoking crisis, we highlight, is thus a normative call to arms for criminologists, which entails recognizing that our studies of social phenomena are always socially positioned, and which pushes to align our research with broader struggles and projects committed to political resistance and social change.

Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this reflection is to offer some insight into the concept of crisis generally. More specifically, we also explored its merits and possibilities for criminologists in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. While there currently exists a notable gap in criminological literatures that engage with crisis more broadly, we suggested that COVID-19 has exposed the gap further, highlighting the imperative need to critically assess the implications of the current pandemic on criminal justice institutions and systems. In response,

we argue that criminologists should take crisis more seriously, for example, by engaging with existing theorizations of crisis in other disciplines. Koselleck (2006), in his foundational theorization on crisis, notes that "a tendency towards imprecision and vagueness, however, may itself be viewed as the symptom of a historical crisis that cannot yet be fully gauged. This makes it all the more important for scholars to weigh the concept carefully before adopting it in their own terminology" (p. 399–400). In this vein, we contend that conceptualizing crisis is not just a matter of theoretical musings, but essential insofar as our understanding of crisis bears important relevance on our ability to study and fully understand the role of policing, incarceration, and other institutions and forms of penal control during this moment in time, as well as work to change people's consciousness regarding the need for change, reform, and resolution. To this end, we considered a number of different issues and questions pertaining to the crisis concept that we believe are important considerations for criminologists in the present moment.

More specifically, we note that the current COVID-19 pandemic is an opportune time for criminologists to engage with crisis as it provides an ideal setting in which to examine core dimensions of social life. We urge criminologists to study the various dimensions of crisis moments and situations beyond the "numbers crisis," including the production, scale, scope, and effects of crisis, including the ways in which these effects are classed, racialized, and gendered. Additionally, as we conclude here, we encourage criminologists in particular to study the ways in which different crises (health, social, penal, and so on) are layered and interlocking. It is obvious that COVID-19 is laying bare and intensifying the social inequalities and vulnerabilities that permeate our society, deepening various forms of structural and personal crises. The present moment, in other words, is providing us with a case study in multiple crises overlaid on top of each other.

While we recognize this layering, we also note the risk that the nature and effects of these intersecting crises often get lost in media and public discussions of COVID-19. As Schieder (1962) expresses, "when two crises cross each other the stronger consumes the weaker" (as cited by Koselleck, 2006, p. 387). Indeed, crises are often

presented as coming in succession or being linear and distinct from one another. To challenge this notion, we call on criminologists to study the intersecting forms of marginalization and resulting vulnerabilities that have been laid bare in the time of COVID-19. Doing so requires theoretical and empirical engagement with disciplines beyond the field of criminology that draw our attention to the social production and nature of structural and experiential crises at different scales.

At the same time, it is also important to not dismiss but engage with popular understandings of crisis as represented in media and other outlets. Indeed, if we aspire to produce work that shapes thinking beyond a narrow academic sphere, we need to think about how we can bridge popular and scholarly understandings and uses of crisis. Specifically, to the extent that we, as criminologists, are interested in helping individuals and communities make systematic sense of the world around them, we may ask: What does the concept of crisis have to offer when it is used in such diffuse ways? Also, to the extent that we are often trying to temper popular panics about crime or drug crises with empirical evidence, how can we use the term crisis in ways that are clarifying rather than inflammatory? And lastly, how can we honour popular notions of what constitutes a crisis often rooted in personal, deeply felt experiences, with analyses that take on a different scale or suggest that the nature of the crisis might be much different than what it appears to be?

We end this article by returning to the progress of our own research. While public focus on the so-called "meth crisis" has declined since the outbreak of COVID-19, our research on meth and the governance of drugs more broadly has not become irrelevant. In fact, we see how issues around drug use and overdose deaths have intensified alongside predominant issues of income inequality, poverty, and access to housing (see Bula, 2020). For example, the overdose crisis has now been dubbed Canada's "other health crisis": provinces all across Canada are reporting surges in overdose deaths as access to harm reduction services continues to shrink behind the shadow of COVID-19 (Vaghela, 2020). In fact, this year in British Columbia, "nearly four times as many people in the province have died of a suspected overdose [...] as have died of the coronavirus" (Coletta,

2020). It is imperative that we understand the interconnectedness between COVID-19 and the exponential increase in overdose-related deaths as public health crises and other forms of social crises in an effort to better grasp the ways different crises moment are layered and intersecting.

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