

A Look at Ron Huff's Contributions to Social Justice¹

Brian Forst² Interviewed by Robert M. Worley³

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RW: Who is Ron Huff?

BF: C. Ronald ("Ron") Huff was a respected scholar, an inspiring teacher and storyteller, a highly effective administrator, a widely admired and jovial colleague, and a down-to-earth, really nice person. He earned

¹ A version of this interview is forthcoming in ACJS Today.

² **Brian Forst** is Professor of Justice, Law and Criminology at the American University School of Public Affairs. He joined the AU faculty in 1992, following three years on the George Washington University faculty. Before that, he was director of research at the Institute for Law and Social Research (1977-85) and the Police Foundation (1985-89). He was Visiting Professor in Residence at the University of California, Irvine, for the fall 2017 term. His research on errors of justice, prosecution, policing, terrorism, and the deterrent effect of the death penalty is cited extensively. He has published nine books and over 100 refereed articles, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, and monographs. His book, *Errors of Justice: Nature, Sources and Remedies* (Cambridge University Press), was named Book of the Year for 2006 by the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences. The Cambridge University Press released his book, *Terrorism, Crime, and Public Policy*, in the fall of 2008. Professor Forst chaired the Justice, Law & Criminology Department's doctoral program from 2000 to 2010 and supervised eleven doctoral dissertations from 2000 to 2016. He was awarded the School of Public Affairs Bernard H. Ross Teaching Excellence Award in 2002 and the School's Outstanding Scholarship Award in 2008 and 2011. He was a voting member of the D.C. Sentencing Commission from 2004 through 2010. He played cello with the AU Orchestra in 1998.

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his doctorate in sociology from Ohio State in 1974, studying criminology under his main mentor, Simon ("Sy") Dinitz. He became a leading authority on gangs and wrongful convictions. Ron served as a consultant on gangs, youth violence, and public policy to several federal agencies, including the US Senate Judiciary Committee, the FBI National Academy, the US Department of Justice, as well as state and local agencies and other organizations throughout the nation. His 13 books and more than 100 articles and book chapters have been widely read and cited not only in the United States, but across the world as well. About two thirds of his publications are co-authored, often with international colleagues and across disciplines. He died, tragically of pancreatic cancer, still productive and upbeat until near the end in 2019, survived by his wife, Pat, two daughters, and two grandchildren.

RW: In a tribute to Huff, you called him a "criminologist for all seasons". Why?

BF: In endorsing the American Society of Criminology's honoring Ron with the Vollmer Award in 2015 (see *Criminology & Public Policy*, Volume 15, Issue 1, pp. 17-26), I noted that the ASC selected a person whose career mirrored August Vollmer's – arguably the first criminologist for all seasons – in several remarkable ways. Like Vollmer, Huff was a renowned scholar, a university administrator, and a criminal justice executive. His scholarship in several major areas – gangs and youth violence, wrongful convictions, corrections, mediation, and police employment – further attest to his demonstrated range. His leadership in growing a vibrant criminology program as dean of the School of Social Ecology, University of California-Irvine, paralleled Vollmer's heading the first criminal justice program at the University of California-Berkeley. Ron's serving as a practitioner – director of psychiatric social work at the Lima State Hospital, a maximum-security institution for mentally disordered criminal offenders – roughly parallels Vollmer's brief term (1923-1924) as chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, and with greater success than Vollmer. And the similarities went beyond the professional. Both men, it turns out, were also accomplished athletes before establishing eminence in criminology – Vollmer a boxer and swimmer, and Huff a football linebacker.

RW: You say his first major research was on gangs and delinquency. How did that work contribute to our knowledge of gangs?

BF: Ron's scholarship was both broad and deep. In the area of gangs and youth violence, his study of gangs in South Florida and the Denver area was one of the first to compare samples of gang youths with at-risk, non-gang youths to determine whether and how gang involvement influences criminal behavior. The US Department of Justice used the findings to address gang issues nationwide. Later, Ron directed research on gangs in Ohio, finding they were dominated by local youth and not the product of importation of Los Angeles or Chicago gangs, contrary to popular myths prevailing at the time.

Ron edited three editions of *Gangs in America*, a widely used and much-cited text documenting original research that informed both scholarship and public policy on gangs, crime, and delinquency. In 1993 he co-edited *The Gang Intervention Handbook*, the first book I know of to evaluate gang-prevention programs through the lens of social and behavioral science. In 1997, he co-authored a paper with Matthew Meyer on managing prison gangs, which was later used by federal and state prison authorities to assess their policies and procedures. He also co-edited *Youth Violence: Prevention, Intervention, and Social Policy* (1999), which applied theory to practices and policies on youth violence.

RW: And how did he contribute to our understanding of wrongful convictions?

BF: Ron's research contributions to the field of wrongful convictions and miscarriages of justice are no less substantial. His work on these problems became prominent in 1996 with the publication of his path-breaking book, *Convicted but Innocent: Wrongful Conviction and Public Policy*, co-authored with Arye Rattner and Edward Sagarin – a work that was stimulated by Ron's doctoral student, Rattner. They identified the primary sources of wrongful convictions: overly zealous police and prosecutors inducing false confessions and flawed informants, faulty lineup practices, and weak defense lawyers.

He followed up that research by committing, in his 2001 ASC presidential address, to understanding how wrongful convictions in the US compare with those in other countries. Ron made good on this pledge not long afterward: In August 2003, his international conference on wrongful convictions, funded by a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, was held in Breil/Brigels, Switzerland, hosted by the Swiss criminologist, Martin Killias. The conference brought together scholars and practitioners from the United States, Canada, several

European nations, and Israel to share information about wrongful convictions. I was an attendee, and I found it to be one of the most successful and rewarding conferences in which I have ever participated.

That conference set the foundation for the book, *Wrongful Conviction: International Perspectives on Miscarriages of Justice*, co-edited with Martin Killias (2013). The book consists of 15 chapters on the subject by 18 contributors from nine countries. It described the problem of wrongful convictions in the United States and Canada, Europe, and Israel, synthesizing the information by focusing on key issues that transcend national boundaries. This work focused heavily on wrongful convictions, but it placed the subject in the larger context of miscarriages of justice and reported in some detail pertinent findings about different types of miscarriages of justice. It addressed the nature, sources, and frequency of wrongful convictions, offering explanations of the role of forensic science in reducing both wrongful convictions and failures to convict actual offenders. It examined the "innocence movement", offering insights into the challenges wrongfully convicted people face in trying to reintegrate into society after imprisonment, often many years of it. Other topics included the impact of plea bargaining on wrongful convictions, the impact of fear of terrorism on legislation that worsens the problem of wrongful convictions, and pressures to offer false confessions in the shadow of such legislation and political repression. The book was used by the International Division of the National Institute of Justice as the foundation for a 2012 international conference hosted by the National Institute of Justice to explore how this problem might be better addressed. Ron was the invited keynote speaker at the conference.

Several important policy implications emanated from that work. It became clear, first, that plea bargaining is a major source of wrongful convictions, which may be substantially reduced by restricting the practice to the most serious crimes. It became clear as well that DNA evidence provided a useful window into the extent and nature of wrongful convictions and that this technology should be made more widely available in justice systems throughout the world.

Then, in 2018, Ron and I wrote a book chapter – "Preventing Violent Crimes by Reducing Wrongful Convictions," in the *Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression*, 2nd edition – on how wrongful convictions not only impose harms on the innocent, but how they contribute as well to harms on society at large by diverting scarce

criminal justice resources away from actual offenders, allowing them to commit more crimes. We were surprised to see how little had been written on this important issue in either the literature on wrongful convictions or that of the causes of crime.

RW: What about his other research contributions?

BF: Professor Huff's research on corrections, mediation, police employment, and cross-national justice issues is also noteworthy. Other organizations have recognized his considerable achievements in all these areas. In 1992, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency gave him the Donald R. Cressey Award for "outstanding contribution to the field of criminology that promotes programs and policies that are fair, humane, effective, and economically sound." In 1993, the Western Society of Criminology gave him the Paul Tappan Award for "outstanding contributions to criminology". In 2010, the Academy for Criminal Justice Sciences gave him the Gerhard O. W. Mueller International Award for "outstanding contributions to international criminal justice." He has also contributed to the improvement of criminal justice through his research assistance to many federal, state, and local agencies and advisory boards.

RW: Tell me more about his administrative accomplishments.

BF: Ron was an extremely effective administrator – as director of the Ohio State University's Criminal Justice Research Center and John Glenn School of Public Affairs; dean of the School of Social Ecology at the University of California, Irvine, from 1999 to 2009; and president of the American Society of Criminology in 2001. As dean at UC-Irvine, he expanded the school in number of students, majors, degree offerings, and faculty. But perhaps his most lasting contribution was the legacy he left the school for fundamental decency and daily acts of kindness. The faculty admired and loved him.

RW: What was he like as a person?

BF: Ron was a dear friend. His most endearing qualities were his authenticity, his enthusiasm and eternal optimism, and his intelligence. He was fun to be around – a great listener and conversationalist, curious, and always in good spirits.

I came to know him first by his published work, then at criminology meetings, and eventually as collaborators and good friends. But I came to know him, and his wife, Pat, in the Swiss Alps, where Ron's research on wrongful convictions converged with mine on errors of justice. Ron loved telling stories. A favorite was how, as a hitchhiker, he was picked up by and befriended astronaut Neil Armstrong's father. The connection led to Ron's summer job at the Lima State Hospital, noted earlier. Three summers working there as a "gofer" led to experiential knowledge of psychology, administration, and criminology – all before receiving degrees in psychology and criminology.

His sunny approach to life continued even after he was diagnosed with terminal cancer. About a year before the cancer finally overwhelmed him, he purchased tickets for a cruise in Europe with his wife, Pat, a trip he was never able to take.

RW: What are the main lessons he leaves for students of criminology?

BF: There are several. One is that there is extra benefit in gravitating toward research issues that are, to use Ron's words – "problem driven" – ones that aim to inform policy. Doing so can also contribute to respectability for the criminology profession, to emphasize its practical value for our society.

Another is the importance of pursuing a breadth of research interests. Gangs, miscarriages of justice, corrections, mediation, and police employment are distinct domains with not that much in common. In much the same way that a healthy investment portfolio will have a mix of assets with varying degrees of risk and yield, across a variety of markets and instruments, so is it extremely valuable to have a mix of problem areas to pursue. Some will inevitably turn out more fruitful than others, but it's impossible to know in advance which ones will bear the most fruit.

But I think the deepest legacy for all criminologists that Ron left us is the power of positive thinking, a vital lesson for these fractious times. He was widely known for his infectious good nature, gregariousness, and can-do spirit. His preternatural positivity stimulated collaborations with more than the usual degree of research complementarities. This quality not only expanded the range and impact of his work, but it made for serendipity too. Ron's life was a testament to the proposition that serious

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research in the service of scholarship and policy can be an enjoyable and memorable experience for all involved. With some luck, and our persistence in remembering and promoting this wisdom, the infection may spread.