



Criminals Among Us?
Fingerprinting and Criminal Background Checks in Pre-WWII New York City
Tuesday, July 28, 2020, 5-6:30pm

Dan Ewert
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Speaker Bio: Dan Ewert is a PhD candidate in the History Department at Princeton University. His ongoing dissertation project, tentatively titled "The Civil Cage: Criminal Records and the American Shadow Carceral State, 1900-1980," examines the growing role of criminal records and law enforcement in screening applicants for civil benefits in the twentieth-century United States. Before beginning his doctoral work, Dan was a public defense investigator in Brooklyn and an educator at the Tenement Museum on the Lower East Side in Manhattan.

Lecture Outline

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. A Brief History of Criminal Identification**
 - a. The rise of identification documents during the Industrial Revolution
 - b. Early efforts: using words to describe suspects
 - c. Criminal mugshots and the New York Police Department "Rogues' Gallery"
 - d. Fingerprinting and centralization of criminal records in the 1920s and 1930s
 - e. Video: "You Can't Get Away With It," 1936
- 3. Case Study One: The Case Murder**
 - a. Depression-Era anxieties: unemployment, migration, race, and crime
 - b. Fingerprinting service workers in New York City's large, diverse working class
 - c. Resistance by workers and the American Civil Liberties Union
- 4. Case Study Two: The Works Progress Administration**
 - a. The New Deal & the rights of people with criminal records to access work relief
 - b. Which is more authoritative: a criminal record, or an employee's history on the job?
 - c. Lewis Valentine vs. Morris Ernst on the future of fingerprinting in America
 - d. William Gropper's "FBI and Statue of Liberty," circa approximately 1940
- 5. Today's Fight to Reform the System**
 - a. "Ban the Box" and "Fair Chance" reforms in an age of technological change

The Museum is grateful to The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which supports a Predoctoral Fellowship Program in History Education.

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Additional Reading

- Beckett, Katherine & Murakawa, Naomi. "Mapping the Shadow Carceral State: Toward an Institutionally Capacious Approach to Punishment," *Theoretical Criminology*, 16 (2) (April, 2012): 221–244.
- Cole, Simon. *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Jacobs, James. *The Eternal Criminal Record*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Pavlich, George. "The Subjects of Criminal Identification," *Punishment & Society*, 11 (2) (April, 2009): 171–190.
- Sekula, Allan. "The Body and the Archive," *October*, Winter, 1986, Vol. 39 (Winter, 1986): 3-64.
- Walker, Samuel. *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Resources on "Ban the Box" Reform

- "Fact Sheet: Research Supports Fair-Chance Policies," *National Employment Law Project*, August 2016. Access at: <https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Fair-Chance-Ban-the-Box-Research.pdf>
- Avery, Beth. "Ban the Box: U.S. Cities, Counties, and States Adopt Fair-Chance Policies to Advance Employment Opportunities for People with Past Convictions," *National Employment Law Project*, July 2019. Access at: <https://s27147.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Ban-the-Box-Fair-Chance-State-and-Local-Guide-July-2019.pdf>

Resources on Collateral Consequences of Conviction

- National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction: niccc.csgjusticecenter.org
- American Bar Association, "Collateral Consequences of Criminal Convictions: Judicial Bench Book," *National Criminal Justice Reference Service*, March 2018. Access at: www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/251583.pdf

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