The aim of this study is to explore the modern history of prison physical culture in order to better understand how perceptions of the muscular criminal body have influenced the construction of prison physical culture and opportunities for physical activity in American correctional institutions. My focus on the recent weight lifting ban in the United States is designed to appraise how criminological knowledge of the muscular criminal body has influenced penal policy over time. Through a selection of specific historical episodes in prison physical culture from the late 18th century to current correctional practice I evaluate the complicated interplay between penology, criminology, somatotyping, politics, prison physical culture and the enactment of the legal ban on prison weight lifting in 1994.

Working from a critical socio-historical perspective this study intends to add to the limited knowledge of prison physical culture, research on physical activity in correctional facilities and attitudes toward the corporeal experience of those confined to prison. My study has been guided by the following research questions: 1) how have historical perceptions of the muscular criminal body developed, and in turn, influenced penal policy over time? In particular, what have been the influences of body profiling and somatotyping on the role of inmate’s weight lifting in prisons? 2) in light of this, how can we better understand the reasoning behind the enactment of the 1994 weight lifting ban placed on prison physical culture within the United States? 3) what have been the effects of the weight lifting ban on contemporary prison physical culture?

This study is an interdisciplinary project which utilizes qualitative methodologies in the collection and analysis of documents and resources from kinesiology, criminology, anthropometry, and penology. Critical discourse analysis framed by Gee (1999, 2006) and Foucauldian perspectives on discipline, punishment and power provide the framework for my analysis of prison physical culture over time and place.