

# Scholar Spotlight Award

**Amy Lansing, Ph.D.**



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## About Amy Lansing

Amy Lansing, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor, University of California, San Diego

Director, Cognitive and Neurobehavioral Studies in Aggression, Coping, Trauma and Stress Research Program

Amy Lansing, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at University of California, San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine and an adjunct professor in the Sociology Department, Division of Criminology at San Diego State University. She is also the director of the *Cognitive and Neurobehavioral Studies in Aggression, Coping, Trauma and Stress (CNS-Acts)* research program at UCSD. She holds a Doctorate in Clinical Psychology, with specializations in Neuropsychology, Developmental Trauma, Behavioral Neurology and Forensic Epidemiology.

Her *National Institute of Child and Human Development* and *National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities* funded translational research program is dedicated to understanding the neurobehavioral underpinnings of high-risk behaviors and functional impairment in underserved and vulnerable populations, such as juvenile delinquents and maltreated youth. This program integrates neuroscience technologies (imaging, genetics), mental health services (treatment for trauma spectrum and

drug/alcohol disorders; interventions for violence and impulsivity reduction), neuropsychology, criminology and public policy issues (health disparities, HIV/STD risk). Her research at CNS-Acts examines both the neurobehavioral profiles associated with trauma and the treatment of trauma in a variety of populations (e.g., active duty military; individuals with trauma, substance abuse, cognitive deficits and/or head injuries; maltreated youth, adolescent delinquents).

She is on her second term as one of the court-appointed commissioners on the *San Diego County Juvenile Justice Commission* where her work focuses on improving the conditions of secure and non-secure facilities as well as the academic issues, cognitive deficits and unmet mental health needs of youth who are Wards of the Juvenile Court (Child Welfare and Delinquency). She was also a committee member of the *Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA)* committee in San Diego County (California). She worked on facilitating compliance to Federal Standards, providing information about gold standard assessments, training that is culturally sensitive and detecting maltreatment between inmates or between officers and inmates.

Dr. Lansing is a board member of *Humane Smarts*, a non-profit organization that seeks to enrich the minds of young people in San Diego County through a variety of community engagement (e.g., inner city gardening), artistic (e.g., inner city art walls) and academic (internet-

based learning and scholastic tools) experiences. She has been an Independent Evaluator for the *Board of Prison Terms* in California, conducting Mentally Disordered Offender evaluations to determine if identified adult inmates are required to receive mental health treatment as a condition of parole according to Penal Code Sections 2960 et. Seq. (“MDO Law”).

She is also part of the *San Diego Community High Risk Youth Workgroup*, which is a grassroots community-based organization in collaboration with San Diego Police Department and San Diego Probation designed to reduce prostitution and pimping in high-risk youth and young adults and provide economic alternatives to vulnerable groups.

## Q&A

***CIM: What has been the most rewarding aspect of your work in the juvenile justice system?***

AL: Working with these resilient youth has absolutely been the most rewarding aspect of my work. While I understand that not everyone holds the view that delinquents are resilient, the obstacles they negotiate on a daily basis are staggering. The youth involved in our studies have been notably open in sharing their experiences - what has happened to them (victimization), what they have done (perpetration) and the struggles they face every day. This has been a very humbling experience, and one that has profoundly had an impact on every facet of my life.

***CIM: What has been the greatest challenge to bringing about change your various social justice endeavors?***

AL: Fluctuations in public opinion, political stances, and funding opportunities related to individuals with criminal engagement, cognitive deficits and mental health needs pose an enormous challenge to the continuity of any work directed at social change. These shifts in perspectives can have devastating results for engaging the public, continuity of much-needed services and funding research designed to elucidate and address the needs of vulnerable populations.

*CIM: What message or exhortation would you like to give to your readers?*

AL: Focusing on behavior - essentially the label of delinquency - is an oversimplification. While some delinquent behaviors are relatively normative during adolescence (e.g., skipping class), minimizing the issues at play for youth who are persistently engaged in criminal activities makes it easier to simply lock them up, rather than deal with the underlying causes of their behavior. While it is critical to instill a sense of personal responsibility, persistently delinquent youth disproportionately have severe trauma exposure, serious mental health issues, neurological problems and cognitive deficits. These youth also disproportionately come from underperforming school systems, impoverished communities and unstable home environments. There really are very few choices available to them. While the issues are very complex, this should not prevent us from moving forward and working together to improve the lives and living conditions of the most vulnerable portions of our society. It really does cost more to continue on the path of incarcerating large segments of the population than to actually address the underlying social injustice issues that contribute to the behavior that seems to capture the public's - and policy makers' - attention.