

Guest Editorial

Community safety politics and policy in Europe

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This special issue brings together contributions from across Europe on policy and political rhetoric on community safety. This issue differs from the usual structure for the journal by including a combination of four articles and three shorter commentaries. The articles cover experiences in Scotland (Bannister *et al*), Spain (i Brunet and Basanta), Rome and London (Lucianetti) and a cross-European study of school safety (Moore *et al*). For the three shorter commentaries, community safety policy and politics in Britain (Millie), Germany (Matt) and France (Mucchielli) are considered. Two key themes dominate the contributions. In the first instance, the importance of politics in dictating the direction of crime prevention policy and practice is clearly evident in each of the countries studied. Second, there has been a shift in rhetoric in a number of European countries from top-down governance of community safety issues to bottom-up local control.

Politics and Community Safety in Europe

Countries across the European Union hold quite different community safety priorities – characteristic of policy divergence (Hughes, 2007). Yet, alongside divergence there is also convergence, where different nations learn from each other through processes of policy transfer (for example, Jones and Newburn, 2006). Sometimes countries just borrow elements of community safety language from other nations, and not necessarily the precise policies. One such example is the spread of ‘anti-social behaviour’ (ASB) as a policy priority from Britain to other European countries – notably the Netherlands. Politically, ASB is seen as an important area for focus, and maybe for vote winning gain. The politics of ASB in Britain is considered by Andrew Millie. In her contribution, Livia Lucianetti explores community safety convergence and divergence comparing the cities of Rome and London. At first glance these cities may not have much in common, yet their recent political history is similar in that they had left-wing city leadership replaced by conservative. The change in politics led

to quite different community safety policy in Rome, with a shift to greater emphasis on the symbolic and emotive talk of ‘zero tolerance’. In London, the shift was characterised by continuity in emphasising both control and prevention (although the London Mayor Boris Johnson can be also guilty of grandiose gesturing). The importance of politics on community safety practice should not be underestimated, and in the cases of Rome and London, city politics is as important as national.

Both local and national politics are important in the development of community safety policy in Spain. In their contribution, Amadeu Recasens i Brunet and Anabel Rodríguez Basanta track developments in Spanish community safety, with particular focus on Barcelona. They note that Spanish policies are strongly influenced by political history, especially the difficulties of the transition from the Franco totalitarian regime in the 1970s/1980s and the social, economic and territorial conflicts of the 1980s.

Politics is clearly important in the development of community safety policy and practice in France. Laurent Mucchielli provides the example of increasing interest in CCTV. This growth was politically fuelled, especially since Sarkozy became President in 2007. For Mucchielli, no attempt was made to learn from the experiences of other countries, following ‘a naïve fantasy ... the idea that the use of technology guarantees progress, which inevitably improves our quality of life’.

Politics can also have an impact on the (in)effective spread of community safety knowledge. With new political leadership, local and national community safety priorities change, as do the structures that are in place to deliver these priorities. The result can be that knowledge is lost as practitioners are shifted to new roles and new departments. In their contribution, Jon Bannister, Rob Croudace, Jon Pickering and Claire Lightowler look at recent community safety capacity building and knowledge mobilisation activity in Scotland. They note that the outcomes and sustainability of such activity are ‘subject to the very same challenges that provoked its establishment’, including short-term funding, staff turnover, delays and political uncertainty.

Shifting Rhetoric from Top-Down to Bottom-Up Governance

As noted, a number of European countries showed evidence of a shift in rhetoric from top-down to bottom-up governance of community safety issues. For instance, developments in community safety in Germany are discussed by Eduard Matt. Although the federal structure to Germany makes a coherent community safety policy difficult, steps have been taken towards cross-governmental cooperation on crime prevention. Yet, alongside this, Matt highlights increasing involvement among the voluntary sectors, and greater emphasis on the local area and local communities.

Greater emphasis on the local is also evidenced in Andrew Millie’s piece on ASB. Drawing on the British government’s ‘Big Society’ project, the Home

Secretary is quoted as claiming '[t]he solution to your community's problems will not come from officials sitting in the Home Office working on the latest national action plan', instead, 'the people who are closest to the problem need to be driving the solution'. The difficulties of including all perspectives are highlighted by Millie (a truly 'big society' approach), rather than only those with sufficient social and political capital.

In their article, Stephen Moore, Rachel Maclean and Tom Jefford report on a cross-European study of student safety to and from school. Evidence is provided that a significant minority of school children suffer from ASB in this 'land in-between' the comparative perceived safety of home and school. Yet, Moore *et al* also highlight that for most school children safety is not an issue. These children displayed 'surprisingly high levels of self-confidence and security'. The key was the existence of friendship groups. Moore *et al* call for less emphasis on policing solutions, and greater emphasis on self-policing – perhaps an ultimate in bottom-up governance of community safety?

This special European-focused issue suggests then that there are both common themes to community safety policies in Europe – in particular the shift from central direction to greater local autonomy – and also clear cultural and political differences between the countries covered. Academics and policy makers therefore need to be cautious in making generalisations regarding policy developments in Europe, as local political cultures strongly influence the implementation and outcome of apparently similar initiatives. The articles in the journal suggest the need for more detailed comparisons between countries (such as Lucianetti's in this issue), which might highlight the specific factors influencing policy makers in the different countries.

References

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