Book Review

Criminal Violence: Patterns, Causes, and Prevention (2nd edn)

Marc Reidel and Wayne Welsh

New York, NY, Oxford University Press, 2007, 400 pp., \$37.95

ISBN: 0195332482

Security Journal (2009) 22, 172–173. doi:10.1057/palgrave.sj.8350085

At the beginning of their book, Marc Reidel and Wayne Welsh explain that they have never been able to find one textbook that was sufficient to use as a primer for their violence classes. The authors, subsequently, set out to write a book that would remedy this problem for the community of criminology educators. The result is a comprehensive work that discusses, in some way, nearly every major type of violence present in our society today.

At the outset, Reidel and Welsh show good recognition of the fact that, both in definition and reporting, criminal violence has not been accurately portrayed. Though there is little question that murder is criminal violence that will unfailingly be reported, there are several instances where the criminal nature of the violence is in question. The authors do a good job of outlining these differences, making sure to note that a clear distinction between the two does not always exist.

Additionally, Reidel and Welsh point out the shortcomings of the criminal justice system in accurately collecting data on violent episodes. The various tools used within the criminal justice system to collect data on crime are insufficient when it comes to capturing data on every type of violence. Justice system data on violence are, consequently, predisposed to being incomplete. Despite changes over the past 30 years in the way in which the criminal justice system collects data on violence, there is still, according to Reidel and Welsh, room for improvement.

One major contribution of the book is the discussion of theory and its application to violent episodes. Though criminologists readily understand that there are various theories that might explain a single criminal event, few have taken the time to elucidate the various explanations for violence. It is important for students to understand that violence does not take place simply because a person is “crazy.” Individualistic theories are not the lone explanation for the occurrence of violence, and this section goes a long way at laying out the relevant principles of each theory to be considered.

If this book has any shortcomings, it is in the discussion of violence in an historical context. The authors explain that “it is important to understand the history of violence” (p. 35), but do not necessarily offer a complete look at our violent history. At a minimum, the student reader should be educated of the political, governmental, and rebellious violence we have so easily taken for granted. This country, and the law that has governed its citizens, were founded in a culture of violence. A discussion of violence during time periods including the Reconstruction, the era of Industrialization, and the Civil Rights movement would be a nice addition to the text.

The greatest contribution of this book is the compilation of information on various types of violence in one succinct text. For each type of violent event, the authors take the time to discuss the definitions, trends, and explanations of the crime. This tripartite approach to the exploration of violence offers students a reference that, to this point, has been unavailable. One criticism could be that the book is not as detailed as some of the topical books available on violence. In keeping with the goal of any principal textbook, this book does, however, give the reader a good overview of various violent transactions.

Finally, Reidel and Welsh do a nice job of discussing the prevention and punishment options to curtailing violence. They aptly suggest that no approach will ensure the elimination of violence, but are fair to point out the successful programming to date. In the end, they conclude that “violence prevention must strive for an appropriate balance between punishment and prevention” (p. 351), and that further research is needed to determine the risk factors associated with violent episodes. They do not offer any solutions, but lay out in detail the possibilities that lie ahead.

An educator could gather a group of books that would adequately cover all of the relevant violence topics to be covered in one semester. This textbook eliminates the need for such a search, offering teachers and students alike a comprehensive text that more than adequately covers the dynamic and diverse topic of violence in our society.

Patrick N. McGrain
Criminal Justice Program,
Department of Social Science,
DeSales University,
Center Valley, PA, USA