Book Review

Using social science to reduce violent offending

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This book is ambitious in scope. Indeed, it aims to address: *What truly works in reducing violent offending*. Given the complexities of factors known to influence violent behaviour, and the even more complexities of their interactions, this is no small task. That said, the editors are eminently qualified to tackle such an ambitious project, contributing as they have to some of the key works in this field, and the contributors are an impressive list of major researchers that offer the reader confidence in their positions.

The main criticisms of many books written by academics yet aimed at those ‘working at the coalface’ is that important considerations are missed, ideas are not readily translated into action and the academic language and assumptions can alienate. The editors of this book have made a very conscious effort to avoid these problems. Specifically, during the development stage, the editors (and most of the contributors) held a 2-day conference during which the aims and scope and ideas to be presented in the book were communicated to individuals working within the criminal justice system at a variety of levels as well as victim advocates and offenders. What took place was an interaction of ideas between all the groups that served to inform the structure and content of the resulting publication. This unusual step is praiseworthy and eminently useful, and the resulting book benefits as a consequence.

Each chapter offers a distillation of the relevant literature and findings using summaries and directed analysis followed by a section specifically directed towards the implications of current work for application in practice and policy. The book is subdivided into four sections: (i) Defining the Problem: Crime, Incarceration and Recidivism in the United States; (ii) Targeting Contextual Contributions to the Problem; (iii) Improving our Approach to Individual Offenders and the ambitious (iv) A Way Forward, and although the focus is primarily on the US experience, UK contributors and findings from countries outside the United States mean that this book is by no means US-centric.

The first section shows changes in violent crime incarceration rates in the United States along with some interesting suggestions about alternative explanations for various peaks and troughs in crime figures (for example, the incarceration of one group of violent drug-dealing offenders resulting in the vacuum being filled by even more violent replacements). The effects of prison on crime figures are examined, and in Clive Hollin’s chapter, a history of incarceration and correctional action is presented, which puts current trends into perspective and provides an expansive series of references to work for the interested reader.

The second section discusses a selection of factors linked with increasing the risk of violent offending, including the use of violent media. Longitudinal studies are highlighted and focused on, and the emphasis is generally placed on rigorous methodological approaches.

Tyler and Rankin's chapter offers some particularly interesting philosophical questions arising the distinction between instrumental approaches to offenders (incarceration and punishment) versus a value system (instill positive and prosocial values).

In the third section, The Risk-Needs-Responsivity (RNR) approach to the assessment and treatment of offenders is presented in more detail. This RNR approach runs through the earlier part of the book, but takes centre stage here. Put simply, the argument presented is that a 'one size fits all' approach to offending and offenders will not and has not worked. So far so polemic. However, there is argument and evidence offered throughout, meaning that while this book has undoubtedly a pro-RNR stance – this position is well argued and defended using evidence and evaluation. Turner and Petersilia's chapter, does buck the trend slightly, and presents more analysis demonstrating some drawbacks of the RNR approach – and the book is all the better for it.

Finally, the book offers a way forward, with James McGuire calling for a rejection of gut reaction to offending (punishment and incarceration), a more considered examination of the implication of prison for offenders and a move to alternative RNR responses. The final chapter asks 'What if Psychology Redesigned the Criminal Justice System?', in a very positive and thought provoking end to a very well put together book.

This book is a really useful read for those working in the field, an excellent resource for students in forensic psychology, criminology and sociology, and entertaining enough to be read for pleasure for those curious about why the deterrent of locking people up doesn't seem to reduce crime figures.

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