Reviews

Understanding Crime Prevention: Social Control, Risk and Late Modernity

by Gordon Hughes

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Reviewed by Roger Hopkins Burke

A few years ago this reviewer was about to give a lecture introducing criminological theory to a group of mature postgraduate students who had considerable experience working in the security industry. One of the students observed cynically to a colleague that they were now going to 'find out what to do about crime'. The implication was clear: What could an academic criminologist living in his metaphorical ivory tower tell those in the frontline about the *practical* fight against crime? Criminologists had been seen to propose many varied, apparently incompatible and sometimes impractical solutions to an ever -increasing crime problem for many years without any visible success. A cynic might observe that the numbers of books that offer explanations of crime and criminal behaviour had grown accordingly on the shelves of academia in direct proportion to the ever -increasing crime figures. Indeed, one of their own number had influentially noted that 'nothing works' ¹; an observation that had been seized upon eagerly at the British Home Office during the 1980s ² and had subsequently become official orthodoxy. This new 'administrative criminology' ³ had supposedly signalled an end to grandiose projects to change and rehabilitate criminals. The emphasis was now on reducing the opportunity to offend while catching and incarcerating those who still managed to transgress.

The advent of the new situational crime prevention revolution also found a new and 'useful' role for academic criminologists. They could be employed in assessing and evaluating the success of usually small-scale pragmatic crime prevention initiatives. Criminological theories that sought the causes of crime were now invariably dismissed by the denizens of the new orthodoxy as academic posturing without practical application for criminal justice or private security professionals. In this context, it was hardly surprising that the value of an academic seeking to explain crime and criminal behaviour should be questioned.

Gordon Hughes, in this excellent introduction to 'understanding crime prevention', manages to locate the apparently—but inaccurately described—atheoretical situational crime prevention in the context of the wider criminological project of which it is very much a part. The book commences with 'mapping the terrain', an attempt to move the study of crime prevention away from the now dominant technical and practical orientation towards a much wider sociological understanding of the issues. The second chapter presents the key tenets of the classical school of criminology, with its origins in the eighteenth century but whose central notion of the rational choosing individual is so central to contemporary crime prevention initiatives. The following chapter focuses on the various variants of positivism and its central notion that criminals are in some way ~~different~~

from other people, can be located and in some way changed. Moreover, it is shown how these ideas became embedded in the institutional practices of the modern state during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The fourth chapter examines the main elements in both the theory and practice of crime control in contemporary (post-)industrial societies. There is an exploration of the historical roots of the crime prevention discourse around the Home Office's 'administrative criminology' in Britain and the techniques of target hardening and surveillance developed in the USA. Significantly that discussion is located in the 'politico-ideological' context in which it came to prominence. Developing that theme, the following chapter critically examines the concept and practice of multi-agency crime prevention that have come very much to the fore in both policy and academic circles in the UK in recent years, with a comprehensive examination of the burgeoning body of research conducted in this area.

The sixth chapter considers the uses of the notion of 'community' that have been put forward by the proponents of different variants of 'communitarianism'. Conservatives have emphasised the 'remoralisation of society', while more radical variants have sought the basis of a community-based local crime prevention with a corresponding local democratic political control. This is followed by a consideration of the possible futures for crime control. Three possible models are examined. First, there is the quite disturbing notion of 'fortress cities', where the wealthy and powerful hide behind sophisticated security systems and private armies of security guards protecting them from impoverished, socially-excluded citizens living in crime-rampant ghettos: a model epitomised by contemporary Los Angeles in Mike Davis's excellent study (for those of you who think that this is the stuff of science fiction).⁴ Second, there is the model of 'high trust' societies and authoritarian communitarianism epitomised by low crime societies such as Japan and Singapore, where the trade-off is a severe restriction on personal liberty. Finally, there are the possibilities offered by more radical notions of democratically controlled 'inclusive' safe cities.

This is a quite a splendid book—a thorough introduction to crime prevention aimed at students, professionals and informed laypersons alike. It is written in an accessible, readable style that deals with the main issues while at the same time avoiding the over-intellectualisation and verbosity of other books in this area. I recommend it to you.

Roger Hopkins Burke
Nottingham Crime Research Unit
Nottingham Trent University

Notes

- 1 Martinson, R. (1974) 'What Works?—Questions and Answers About Prison Reform'. *The Public Interest*. Vol. 35: 22–54.
- 2 Clarke, R.V.G. and Mayhew, P. (eds) (1980) *Designing Out Crime*. London: HMSO.
- 3 Young, J. (1994) 'Incessant Chatter: Recent Paradigms in Criminology'. In Maguire, M., Morgan R. and Reiner R. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- 4 Davis, M. (1990) *The City of Quartz: Evacuating the Future in Los Angeles*. London: Verso.