

## BOOK REVIEW

### Understanding Crime and Social Policy

Emma Wincup  
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Sarah Brooks-Wilson\*  
University of York

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*Understanding Crime and Social Policy* is a recent addition to the popular Policy Press series, within which a broad range of social issues, policies and practices is examined. This book would be suitable for those interested in crime or social policy, in both an academic or professional context. In terms of scope, the accessible language and lack of jargon provide the potential for this book to be widely received. As this breadth does not compromise on content, this book can also be considered suitable for those wanting to develop their knowledge and ideas further.

The first half of the book cements the connection between crime and social policy by exploring how and why the areas have converged, before discussing broader influences on the policy-making process. The changing landscape of policy delivery is then considered in terms of its ability to shape outcomes. The second half of the book then relates these ideas to three case studies, substantiating key arguments through an examination of policies relating to prisoner resettlement, 'problem' drug use, and 'troubled families'.

The introductory chapter starts by setting out important points that provide a context for the remainder of the book. In particular, the importance of crime and social policy as a joint consideration is asserted, while the fluid and contested nature of crime is outlined. Readers are also invited to consider how power differentials can have an impact on crime policy-making, and whether different social groups can be disproportionately affected.

Chapter two is concerned with the growing convergence between crime and social policy. After highlighting the fluidity of crime definitions, arguments are laid out in connection with the criminalisation of lower levels of disorder, with questions raised about whether some social groups face increased behavioural regulation, as improved detection of illicit activities inadvertently widens the net over those previously ignored but now brought into the criminal justice system. An examination of penalty notices or 'on-the-spot' fines advances the discussion further, raising important questions about accountability and transparency. The connection that is made between 'low level'

penalties and the pre-emptive treatment of different groups is particularly interesting, as it allows readers to undertake ethical reflections about the accountability of these swiftly delivered disposals.

Chapter three provides a comprehensive overview of the groups involved in influencing crime policy, thus challenging dominant assumptions about politicians being exclusively positioned at the policy-making helm. Exploring within and beyond Westminster, this chapter starts by examining civil servants, the House of Lords, policy advisors, campaigning groups and think tanks. The discussion then moves beyond the usual policymaking suspects by exploring the transfer of policies from other jurisdictions, and how research evidence can be injected into the policy-making cycle. The chapter ends by considering how traditionally non-core groups can be instrumental in shaping policy, with the public, the media and scandalous events all providing final pieces in the production of this broad policy-making patchwork.

The aim of chapter four is to contextualise a changing political backdrop, with the fragmentation of criminal justice delivery providing a particular focus. Initially, the involvement of a growing range of actors is acknowledged, with varied operations (such as public, private and voluntary) described as being delivered across a broader range of areas including education, health and housing. Readers are introduced to notions of effective, measured and restructured criminal justice delivery through managerialism, before considering partnership working in more detail at both strategic and delivery levels. The marketisation of crime control is then discussed, with a shift in focus meaning that reoffending rates can be prioritised over important areas such as employment and education. This chapter closes by describing how more recently some non-governmental groups have enjoyed an elevated status in the delivery of core services, through the Big Society agenda.

Changing direction in chapter five, the book then applies these processes and contexts to three clearly defined policy areas. This more empirical part of the book starts by illustrating complexities that can be found within a fragmented prisoner resettlement sector, with marketisation usefully revisited as a way of describing shortcomings in service measurement. Readers are then drawn back to social policy, with prison leavers described as one of the most socially excluded populations. The heterogeneity of this group brings the emphasis on narrow re-offending targets into question, with barriers in housing and employment used to illustrate the breadth and complexity of problems that prison leavers can experience.

Chapter six draws upon the discussions set out in chapter three, demonstrating how complexities can arise in drug policy design and reform when different groups are involved. In particular, it becomes apparent how policy responses to multi-faceted problems can be subject to much disagreement, with 'problem' drug use contrasted through legal, medical, health and social lenses. As a result, it is illustrated how confusing reforms can sometimes ensue, raising questions about whether diverse policy-making perspectives can ever be properly reconciled.

In chapter seven, the focus returns to some of the points set out in chapter two, with an examination of universal and targeted sanctions against 'troubled families'. In particular, policy responses to 'risky' family structures and youth criminality are explored, with questions raised about the legitimacy of some strategies. Through the Troubled Families programme, a range of family-based indicators are described as directing social policy interventions through coercive local 'troubleshooting' activities. However, such interventions are noted as having the potential to be severely undermined by an evidence-base that lacks rigour, alluding to some of the discussions of chapter three. The chapter closes by illustrating how comprehensive support can

again be impeded through an overemphasis on narrow targets, such as crime reduction.

Fittingly for a volume that discusses the impact of extraneous variables, the concluding chapter avoids making specific policy recommendations. Instead, key themes are drawn back together, with neo-liberal behavioural regulation cogently connected to agendas on crime and anti-social behaviour. Such a closure is useful in demonstrating how complex crime policy-making processes have affected 'traditional' areas of social policy areas, such as worklessness.

In terms of structure, the second half of this book is successful in illuminating some of the more theoretical explanations that are provided in the first. Not only does this substantiate the points that are being made, but it also demonstrates how the ideas can be applied, thus encouraging readers in this same direction. Despite the issues associated with this volume being presented in a somewhat static paper format, a springboard into the dynamic digital realm is provided through online recommendations in each chapter. Such a move assures the longevity of this book by allowing readers to develop ongoing and up to date engagement with the range of areas covered.

The importance of this book can be suggested as secured through its successful cementing of two key policy areas that are more often found apart. This value is further enhanced through the rigorous challenging of dominant assumptions while leading readers through a very complex policy-making landscape. Whether developing ideas further or exploring these topics for the first time, readers should find useful explanatory potential within this book.

\* Correspondence address: Sarah Brooks-Wilson, Research Centre for the Social Sciences, 6 Innovation Close, University of York, Heslington, York, YO10 5ZF. Email: [sarah.brooks-wilson@york.ac.uk](mailto:sarah.brooks-wilson@york.ac.uk)