People, Place and Policy (2024): 18(1), pp. 62-65. DOI: 10.3351/ppp.2023.9665257456

Book review

Against Youth Violence: A Social Harm Perspective

Luke Billingham and Keir Irwin-Rogers
Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2022, 300 pages, £28.99 (pb)
ISBN 978-1529214062

Ute Krenzer* and Katharina Swirak*
University College Cork, Republic of Ireland

Against Youth Violence – A Social Harm Perspective by Luke Billingham and Keir Irwin-Rogers is a welcome addition to the critical social harm literature (Hillyard and Tombs, 2008; Canning and Tombs, 2021) and offers an urgently necessary counter-narrative to some of the more narrowly conceived and supposedly 'evidence-based' research on young people and violence. The authors' self-stated aim of their joint venture, is to reflect upon the multi-dimensional harms that young people are exposed to in modern Great Britain and in doing so, they follow in the tradition of social scientists who have successfully resisted individualising and oversimplifying explanations of violence and social harm (Currie, 2016; Gilligan, 1997). While both authors assert that an "explanation is not exoneration" (p. 1), they emphasise early on in the book that only an understanding of the connections between harms that ultimately belittle, demean, and disempower children and young people, can lead to a reduction in violence. A broadened perspective, as delivered by Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, emphasises social context and individual behaviour in tandem. Cleverly laid out, each chapter in the book poses a different question which is clearly addressed before drawing their overall conclusions. As the authors state in their introductory chapter, this book is not aimed at solely critiquing the current state of society in Great Britain, rather, it could be regarded as a 'health check' of contemporary themes relevant to young people's lives in the Global North more generally. As such, the book has a far wider intellectual reach than its geographical focus.

Chapter 1 provides the reader with a comprehensive examination of interpersonal physical violence amongst young people in the UK, attending, in detail to the question as to how much young people de facto engage in violent acts. Carefully determining the degree of violence while also aspiring to answer questions regarding violence progressions and data comparability related to violence carried out by adults is seen as important by the authors to create a workable overview and perspective for the chapters that follow. Billingham and Irwin-Rogers do caution, however, that, as pointed out before by others, figures, and statistics in (criminological) research, must be taken with a 'pinch of salt'. Data sources, such as crime recorded by police, hospital admission data or crime survey data can fall prey to underreporting and high rates of non-response amongst other issues, therefore being subject to limitations and shortcomings. On page 33, however, follows an explanation of why the authors, nevertheless, regard their utilised data sources as valid:

Copyright: © 2024, Author(s). This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

> *Despite this, it is important not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. It is better to attempt to shed some light on key aspects and trends associated with certain forms of interpersonal violence that are most pertinent in the context of this book, than to shy away from the task altogether due to its potential enormity and the many data imperfections and limitations.*

Chapter 2 then lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book. Here the authors supply a definition of ‘social harm’ (especially relating to young people) as used within the book. Using a review of the literature, the concept’s development over the years is illustrated. The aim underpinning Chapter 2 is to create a meaningful way to think about ‘social harm’ when discussing children and young people and to highlight that the concept of ‘crime’ has its limitations. As the authors state: “…, there are many things that affect children and young people’s lives in significant and lasting ways that are not considered ‘crime’” (p. 39). A move away from the category of ‘crime’ towards a social harm perspective, as adopted by Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, is circling around “…something that compromises human flourishing in a manner that could have been prevented” (p. 43). Delivering a conceptualisation of ‘social harm’ as put forward by the authors, arguably also aids a practice-oriented approach when working with children and young people.

The rich concept of ‘mattering’, and any person’s need to matter somehow and to someone is presented in Chapter 3. ‘Mattering’ as a concept was introduced by Morris Rosenberg (Elliott et al., 2004: 339). Using a psycho-social approach, which combines the ‘internal’ desire of ‘mattering’ with the constraints of young people’s social, economic and political worlds, this chapter is particularly relevant to ‘transdisciplinary’ debates which try to understand young people and violence. Picking up on their previous paper in 2021, explanations of feeling personal (in)significance, alienation and lack of hope serve to construct a framework for gaining insights into a young person’s reasoning for using violence against themselves or others. Of importance is that in the authors’ framework, structural factors which diminish an individual’s sense of mattering, are connected to an individual’s sense of self, behaviours and beliefs. Mattering matters. If a feeling of (non)mattering persists, violence may be the result in the quest to gain social significance and to experience whether “we are really in this world” (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2021: 1227). However, as the authors propose, a complex concept such as ‘mattering’ should also acknowledge that the meaning of mattering to an individual varies by culture and that an individual’s inner world can very well be pervaded by individual struggles and anxieties. Lastly, global processes and social change destabilise the quest for significance and undermine a young person’s effort to feel ‘consequential’. “It would be foolhardy to generalize about the effects of these changes across Britain, let alone across the globe, but it is clear that, for some, the sense of significance and influence that they gained from being known, appreciated and recognized within their community has been subject to considerable erosion” (p. 71).

Chapter 4 combines and utilises the two concepts of ‘social harm’ and ‘mattering’ to examine how social harm and mattering affect young people in modern Great Britain. The authors investigate not only the scale but also the type of social harms affecting a young person’s sense of mattering by introducing case studies into the discussion and giving young people a voice. An emphasis is placed on structural harms such as poverty and inequality, declining welfare supports, or inadequate housing conditions, acting as “downward pressure on the lives of young people” (p. 115), with the authors suggesting that addressing pressing structural harms can foster the betterment of young people’s lives.

Chapter 5 then delves deeper again and serves as an explanatory chapter where previously established considerations are taken further into an overarching framework.

© 2024 The Author
Journal Compilation © 2024 PPP

Working with Currie's (2016: 89) statement that "adverse social conditions (that) predictably breed violence", associations are made to the realities of "harsh societies" (Currie, 2016: 93), where societal problems, economic conditions, and social and penal policies "are deeply intertwined and tend to reinforce one another" (Currie, 2016: 46). A young person's emotions, thoughts, and sense of mattering, in the context of broader structural harms, are examined, and how defying (non)mattering and insignificance can motivate a young person to act violently. As an explanation, the authors deliver an account of the various purposes of violence and consult psychological literature to present a psycho-social understanding of the issue, linking structural harms, mattering and violence.

In Chapter 6, Billingham and Irwin-Rogers turn to what the authors believe to be harmful responses to 'youth violence'. The authors acknowledge that violence between young people is real and poses a problem. However, by scrutinising three themes in particular, they turn the focus again on structural constraints and social context: the vilification of young people by media influencers or persistent "Victorian demonologies" (p. 159) and "colonial ideas" (p. 162); the disproportionate punishment and control of young persons as fruitless and damaging; and the inclination to resort to 'child-saving' initiatives, which include programmes such as invasive surveillance and supervision. The authors' short walk through history, highlighting the 'demonization' of young persons in media and other discourses, while simultaneously neglecting discussions around structural harms, leads to considerations of how methods of vilification are strengthened by a disciplinary state approach and how certain actors, charities and the voluntary sector, use such methods and the anguish of young people to their advantage in order to encourage donations and gather support for their own financial gain.

In the concluding chapter, the reader finds not only a brief summary of the central arguments made by the authors but a plea for institutional reforms. A what-if scenario of "2030: a near- future dystopia" (p. 206) paints a picture of gated communities, food banks and heightened levels of inequality with wealthy families having become richer, whereas marginalised people have progressively less. The reader cannot shake the thought that the 2030 scenario is already upon us. This is followed by "specific suggestions of the economic, political and social changes that our young people need" (p. 202) for a safer and fairer Great Britain to be delivered. The authors complete their book by highlighting the two social changes needed side by side for the betterment of young people's lives: reducing inequalities relating to the four R's ('recognition', 'redistribution of resources', 'risk' and '(State) retribution') and providing a caring and nurturing environment in which children can thrive.

Overall, Billingham's and Irwin-Roger's combination of a psycho-social approach with the social harms perspective makes for a really thought-provoking, empathetic and sophisticated read and will be useful to practitioners, academics, policymakers and students alike. The authors manage to convey to their readers the complexity of analysis necessary to understanding youth violence. Importantly, they also manage to explain how individually perceived feelings and emotions leading to violence are situated in social contexts for which society at large is responsible. In conclusion, this is an excellent read for anyone genuinely interested in making our world a better place.

*Correspondence address: Ute Krenzer, Department of Sociology & Criminology, University College Cork, Republic of Ireland. Email: ukrenzer@ucc.ie / Dr Katharina Swirak, Department of Sociology & Criminology, University College Cork, Republic of Ireland. Email: k.swirak@ucc.ie

© 2024 The Author
Journal Compilation © 2024 PPP

References

Billingham, L. and Irwin-Rogers, K. (2021) The terrifying abyss of insignificance: Marginalisation, mattering and violence between young people. *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*, 11, 5, 1222–1249. Available at: https://opo.iisj.net/index.php/osls/article/view/1185 [Accessed: 21/01/2022].

Canning, V. and Tombs, S. (2021) *From Social Harm to Zemiology: A Critical Introduction*. Abingdon: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.

Currie, E. (2016) *The Roots of Danger.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Elliott, G., Kao, S. and Grant, A. (2004) Mattering: Empirical Validation of a Social-Psychological Concept. *Self and Identity*, 3, 4, 339-354. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13576500444000119

Gilligan, J. (1997) *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic*. New York: Vintage Books.

Hillyard, P. and Tombs, S. (2008) Beyond criminology. In: Dorling, D., Gordon, D., Hillyard, P., Pantazis, C., Pemberton, S. and Tombs, S. (eds) *Criminal obsessions: Why harm matters more than crime* (2nd edn). London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. pp. 6-23. Available at: https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:ba62580b-78ee-4726-ac39-78ca220e5c8d/download_file?file_format=application%2Fpdf&safe_filename=Criminal_obsessions.pdf&type_of_work=Book [Accessed: 10/01/2023].

© 2024 The Author
Journal Compilation © 2024 PPP