

Youth Justice: Ideas, Policy, Practice. 3rd Edition

Roger Smith (2014)

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This revised volume is extensively developed from the last edition and continues to be a comprehensive and challenging review of Youth Justice in the United Kingdom. For anyone wanting to develop an understanding of how practice and policy has developed in recent decades the book is invaluable. It also considers the current situation and encourages a future focused approach, raising questions about what next for policy makers and practitioners alike.

Beginning with the 1980s and 1990s the author looks at the impact of New Labour and a policy approach that significantly increased the numbers of young people being drawn into the Youth Justice System. By the end of the volume the cyclical nature of changes in youth justice and the influence, not just of changing values and understandings, but also of changing fiscal climates, are seen very clearly. One exemplification of this are the patterns of change in rates of youth custody, increasing in the 1990s from a previous low level, but more recently once again reducing although not to previous lows.

The book considers the rise in the number of young people being drawn into the criminal justice net and looks at the Anti-Social Behaviour Order among other developments. The impact of changes in policing policy and legislation are considered, as are less obvious strands for example the impact of local authority performance indicators and the more recent impact of the Sentencing Council. Practice on the ground is also part of the analysis with a consideration of youth offending teams and their ability to provide targeted alternatives to custody.

The role of the Youth Justice Board and the extent to which it is able to influence and steer an independent position separate from government and other interests is explored and linked to the nature of youth offending teams. The processes that were part of the implementation of policy within those teams are considered, including ASSET, the tool used to assess young offenders. The difficulties and limitation of the tool are well covered, although the author could perhaps have paid more attention to the limitations of assessment prior to its inception. It also does not include a consideration of a significant recent revision of ASSET – ASSET

Plus - designed to take into account changing understandings and attempting to address some of the critiques. It would have been interesting if these changes had been far enough along at the time of writing for the author to analyse their likely impact.

I found the chapter on theorising Youth Justice particularly interesting and thought provoking. The exploration of the limits of an approach rooted in risk factors and different understandings of the impact of adolescent transitions is very useful. It is perhaps unfair to note that this discussion does not consider in any depth research around maturity and its implications not just for youth justice but for young adults in the criminal justice system¹. It would have been interesting however to extend some of this discussion to that broader set of transitions. The author is rightly concerned about a tendency to see young people merely as offenders, but does not then pay as much attention as he might to changing thinking that recognises this and seeks to look for a more strengths based positive approach to working with young people who have offended.

There is an interesting chapter on the consumer view, including a consideration of victims and of the experiences of black and minority ethnic groups. The author avoids simplistic conclusions, as he does throughout the book, leaving the reader to think about the evidence and challenges for themselves. I was struck by the difference between the perception of minority communities of the police and their perception of the criminal justice system as a whole, which brings home the subtleties of the system and the interaction of communities with different aspects of that system. The author is encouraging of the reader to be to be very careful in attributing meaning to a complex range of findings while continuing to take on and think about the challenges.

The final chapter is an excellent bringing together of key issues and themes and a challenge to all readers to apply what has been discussed to a consideration of future practice. The book would be a useful source for academics, policy makers and practitioners and it would be difficult to read it without having your own thinking challenged and developed. The author in the final chapter encourages voluntarism and a minimalist approach and it is here that the gaps already identified in the areas mentioned before felt apparent once again. No one volume could cover everything that might be relevant and important, but it does suffer from a lack of attention to developing thinking in practice about strengths based approaches and the processes of desistance from offending. This would potentially have further increased its relevance to practitioners and it would have been interesting to see these developments, often greeted with enthusiasm, examined in a critical way, as the author does so well in relation to a very wide range of other issues. The volume as a whole is well worth its third edition.

¹ Prior, D. et al (2011) Maturity young adults and criminal justice: A literature review, University of Birmingham