Book Review


Introduction

Twentieth century criminology was distinguished by a cultural and local immediacy (Leavitt, 1990). This trend has recently been reversed, as a number of university departments now offer courses in comparative criminology and international researchers are producing an impressive body of cross cultural scholarship on the problem of crime and its solution. *Juvenile Justice Systems: An International Comparison* falls in line with this trend, offering a collection of eight previously unpublished essays that together provide a glimpse into the juvenile justice systems of Canada (Lorne Bertrand, Joanne Paetsch, and Nicholas Bala), the United States (Howard Snyder), England and Wales (John Graham), Scotland (Maureen Buist and Stewart Asquith), Northern Ireland (David O’Mahony), Ireland (Kieran O’Dwyer), New Zealand (Gabrielle Maxwell and Allison Morris), and Australia (Ian O’Connor, Kathleen Daly, and Lyn Hinds). The editors suggest that the book offers “a comparative study of how the world’s predominantly English speaking jurisdictions respond to juveniles who have violated the law” (p. 1). This goal is delightfully achieved throughout the edition.

*Juvenile Justice Systems* is the final product of research activities supported by the Donner Canadian Foundation and principally carried out by the anthology’s editors. While investigating the juvenile justice systems of the nations first hand, the editors identified local experts who could usefully contribute to the collection. A definite strength of the volume is the contribution of an internationally renowned group of scholars – Bala, Daly, Morris, and Snyder, to name but a few. In the final stages of the work, contributors were brought together in Ottawa in May 1998 for a conference on juvenile delinquency and crime policy co-sponsored by the Canadian Department of Justice and the Donner Foundation. The result is an excellent overview and analysis of juvenile justice responses that academics, teachers, students, policy makers and practitioners will want to add to their collections on the subject.

Contents: The format

If in recent years considerable support for comparative study has emerged, there has been equal divergence among scholars regarding the methods involved in comparing
justice systems and crime policies (Beirne, 1993; Nelken, 1994; Reichel, 1994; Sztompka, 1990). In their introduction to *Juvenile Justice Systems*, the editors introduce the reader to the pitfalls and promises of comparative criminology. To circumvent the methodological shortcomings of comparative criminology, the editors standardized the data provided by the contributors. With some minor variation, each chapter opens with country-specific profiles that include such information as demographic and socio-economic characteristics, social policy issues concerning children and youth and, where available, trends in juvenile offending behaviour. An effort was made by the authors to include statistics that go beyond rates of reported crime to the results of victimization, and self-report studies.

The third section of each chapter, of greatest interest to those seeking insight into recent innovations in youth justice, details each country’s legislation, programmes, issues, and advances. For example, Maureen Buist and Stewart Asquith’s discussion of the Children’s Hearing System will be as enlightening to juvenile justice policy makers as it is intriguing to academics interested in juvenile justice policy. Moreover, some contributors take the opportunity to engage critically with recent innovations and current trends in juvenile justice policy in their countries. Kieran O’Dwyer, example, does not argue whether or not Ireland’s recent Children’s Act (2001) is sound in its initiatives but, rather, directs his gaze toward the potential failure of the Act that could result from poor funding and a dearth of personnel to administer its provisions.

Readers will be interested in examining, in the editors’ words, “the different attitudes and approaches to rights for adolescents in the countries” (p. 9). Although this discussion takes a backseat to juvenile justice policy and youth crime statistics, several authors make reference to how the rights of youth are understood, and contested, in their respective countries, allowing readers to “consider the advantages and disadvantages of the differing approaches” (p. 9).

The collection’s format of offering a number of distinct but interrelated readings is one of its greatest strengths. Although individual authors rarely draw comparisons to other countries – the editors nicely summarize the similarities in the introduction and conclusion – the format allows readers to explore juvenile justice policy in each country individually, to compare two or more countries across a range of signifiers, or take a transnational method where all countries are examined together (Winterdyk, 1997; Kohn, 1989). As Winterdyk (1997) and Kohn (1989) suggest, each approach may produce different theoretical and substantive insight.

**Contents: The contribution**

Comparative studies of crime and criminality usually come in three varieties (Nelken 1994). First, they are often aimed at contributing to, and further developing, a discipline’s theoretical traditions. Second, they investigate disparate modes of governing crime, thereby affording policy makers a slightly different lens through which to view their own juvenile justice practices. The third approach, which is of considerable interest to policy makers and academics, involves the immediate practical or policy relevance that may be uncovered by a comparison of one’s own juvenile justice system.