

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MARTIN STEPHENSON, *Young People and Offending: Education, Youth Justice and Social Inclusion*. London: Willan Publishing, 2007, x + 271 p., index.

In this volume Martin Stephenson examines the impact of formal schooling on youth delinquency and offending. He explores the potential of schools to influence delinquency, and the relationship of educational characteristics with offending. Stephenson's own ideological position is that to date much of the research conducted on young offenders ignores structural factors. In an attempt to address the more typical focus on young people's individual characteristics, deficiencies and behaviour, Stephenson broadens his reach to examine a range of topics: the historical evolution of youth justice in the United Kingdom, the creation of the concept "juvenile delinquency," the role of academic underachievement, custodial education, social exclusion, and what policies "work" in relation to young offenders. He provides a historical perspective on youth offending, closely investigating the emergence and current workings of educational, youth justice, and social welfare institutions such as schools and residential care homes. He also explores many debates in the field, charting the often murky creation of concepts such as detachment and social exclusion, weighing their worth and usefulness in terms of explaining empirical trends.

The strengths of *Young People and Offending* are many. One strong point is the author's attention to definitions of crime and delinquency, and how researchers have typically collected and analyzed data in the field. He includes a thorough discussion of definitions and the operationalization of concepts, and the nature of evidence upon which criminologists rely in examining youth crime. This emphasis on data collection, precision in the treatment of evidence; and moreover, the focus on establishing causal relationships between variables is laudable. Stephenson's attempts at precision in defining concepts provide the book with clarity. He discusses correlations between variables with a sharp focus, and does an excellent job of sifting through a voluminous criminology literature to disentangle essential research questions, carefully measuring the quality of evidence along the way.

Stephenson also offers a valuable long-range view of entrenched debates within criminology. He looks at delinquency as far back as the 1700s to shed light on how debates about punishment/rehabilitation resonate with historical debates in Britain about the nature of children, and parents' status as members of either the "deserving" or "undeserving" poor. The author's

discussion of a variety of social institutions reaches back through history to their organizational origins, providing a helpful sequence of events that illuminates the current institutional infrastructure facing young people as they become involved with the criminal justice system.

Stephenson's broad overview of theories of delinquency provides an effective primer on the relevant theoretical debates. He takes an interdisciplinary approach to the issue of schooling and offending, incorporating theories from educational psychology and sociology to explain offending. He skilfully points the reader to relevant studies in the literature without belabouring ideas. While he does include a literature review that extends beyond the UK experience, a more thorough treatment of controversies in the literature would have strengthened this text.

While Canadians are surely accustomed to reading books that discuss societies other than our own, Stephenson vainly attempts to make his book easily accessible to readers unfamiliar with British acronyms and lingo. He does provide a short "glossary" in the first few pages of the book of the full names for the 22 acronyms used throughout the text. The author literally spells out some acronyms (i.e., "ADHD" as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and "FE" as "further education"). But the glossary is not so helpful for terms which are not self-evident and which are insufficiently explained in the text, such as "Local Authority Secure Children's Home" (LASCH). Knowing only that "YOT" refers to a "Youth Offending Team" does not enlighten foreign readers very much. Readers who are unfamiliar with the particularities of the British context may have some difficulties trying to piece together the larger context, significance, or role of these bodies or organizations in youth offending.

Despite his attention to detail elsewhere, Stephenson struggles to offer a clear definition of "social exclusion," the subject of an entire chapter and a key concept for his text. He successfully outlines the wide-ranging use of the term "social exclusion," the difficulties with defining it, and the limitations of the term, but then moves on without providing his own definition. As well, there appear to be editing oversights in places. For example, in chapter two he begins a discussion of four agencies: social welfare, criminal justice, education, and health services. After discussing the first three, the chapter shifts to another subtopic, and health services for youth does not re-emerge. In my opinion, the text can sometimes be a bit uneven because Stephenson relies too heavily on direct quotations. The last third of the book concentrates on policies in the United Kingdom, which may not be easily generalized to other countries.

Young People and Offending is clearly intended for British readers, and has little Canadian content. It contains a fair amount of discussion of British legislation and its predicted effects on youth delinquency. Stephenson pays close attention to New Labour's policy reforms, including a discussion of what "works" in youth delinquency, and social policies with respect to social inclusion. Those in the field of crime policy will find

much of this work to be of interest, including a chapter on the attitudes of youth, the public and various stakeholders in the criminal justice system.

However, the text incorporates relatively little general sociological theory, and it is located primarily within the criminological literature rather than the sociology of education. This is particularly evident, for instance, in his discussion of the influence of schools on offending; he examines a host of theories and evidence to answer the question of how schools do or do not influence students' offending behaviour or criminal activity, but does not engage with general sociological theories of schooling, nor does he rely on the broader sociological literature about modern societies. Despite these reservations, this book is still an excellent resource for scholars of youth crime and schooling. At times a clear sense of direction seems to be missing. Perhaps the summaries at the end of each chapter would have been more helpful, if they had been placed at the beginning of each chapter. But overall, this is a valuable text which provides a wealth of information about young people, schooling, and the criminal justice system. It is a cohesive and well-researched text, and is of substantial importance to Canadian criminologists, educators, and sociologists.

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