

Criminologists Address Criminal Justice Policy Issues

By Christopher A. Innes

Author's Note: *The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the policies of the National Institute of Corrections. The author wishes to thank Donna Ledbetter for her editorial assistance with this article.*

Corrections practitioners sometimes believe that researchers do not have a serious interest in practical issues concerning policy and practice. To counter this belief, the American Society of Criminology (ASC) has made a concerted effort to find constructive ways for research to inform policy. The organization produces a scholarly journal that highlights and debates the effects of criminology on policy issues. And this year it published a collection of policy proposals and response essays from leading criminologists.

A scholarly, peer-reviewed journal, *Criminology and Public Policy* was started with initial support from the National Institute of Justice in 2001. It prints short policy papers and commentaries and is one of the official publications that ASC distributes to its membership.¹ Published quarterly, the journal is interdisciplinary and devoted to policy discussions of the application of criminology research findings to criminal justice policy and practice. The main purpose of the journal is to strengthen the role of research findings in the formulation of crime and justice policy by publishing empirically based, policy-focused articles.

For the first time ever, the proceedings of an ASC annual meeting have been published in book form. Criminology and criminal justice policy was the theme at last month's ASC annual meeting and offered attendees the opportunity to present and debate a number of policy proposals. The policy proposals and response essays were edited by Natasha Frost, Joshua

Freilich, and Todd Clear, the immediate past president of ASC. The collection was published as *Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice Policy: Policy Proposals from the American Society of Criminology Conference*.² In his forward, Clear wrote, "No doubt there will be controversy about some of these essays — policy work provokes strong opinion. But I hope there will be no disagreement that by moving the ASC and its academic tradition squarely into the policy arena, both the field of criminology and the real world of crime and justice practice will benefit." Practitioners in corrections no doubt share the same hope.

The book represents an excellent resource for practitioners who want to get up-to-date quickly on available policy research.

In developing the program for its 2009 conference, ASC asked those interested in submitting policy proposals to provide an abstract for an essay that would put the policy recommendation "front and center." From these abstracts, it selected 23 to be written as full essays and then recruited 30 others to write response essays. The writers are some of the most prominent scholars working in their fields. The book is not light reading, but the individual essays and responses cover their topics thoroughly, are not overly technical, and are only a few pages each. Together, they represent an excellent resource for practitioners who want to get

up-to-date quickly on available policy research.

In one of the early essays in the book — and certainly the one with the best title — "Criminologists Should Stop Whining About Their Impact on Policy and Practice," author Charles Welford says he finds troubling "the relatively uncritical way in which the call for more impact of criminology on public policy and practice is made" and worries "that there may be too much influence rather than too little." Practitioners may wonder, given today's constant emphasis on evidence-based practice, how researchers can wonder if they have enough influence on policy. Welford's article is followed by two responses, from Thomas Blomberg, the new editor of *Criminology and Public Policy*, and from Richard Rosenfeld.

Rosenfeld, the incoming president of ASC, provides a thoughtful reply to the "too much whining" question. He asks, "What kind of impact *should* criminology have on criminal justice policy and practice?" and then contrasts two perspectives on the question. One is the "what works" orientation we hear so much about. Another, according to Rosenfeld, is "...the role of criminology in, to use what now seems a quaint phrase, *raising the level of public debate*. Let's call this the "consciousness-raising" orientation to criminology's influence on policy (another old-fashioned expression)." For practitioners who are used to receiving lectures about what "research shows," it is interesting to read what researchers have to say about the use of research when they are debating the issues among themselves.

Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice Policy is organized around eight policy areas. The first area is on general justice policy and includes

discussions on how long criminal records should be used to make decisions in such areas as employment, voting eligibility, economic disparity of sanctions and the use of information technologies. Other essay topics include drug and alcohol policy, immigration, policing policy, and juvenile justice. There are five separate essays and responses on various issues concerning terrorism, including one on inmate radicalization.

The book includes discussion of other correctional policy as well. Authors Faye Taxman and Liz Ressler argue for a change in corrections' mission to address public health. They write that "it is now incumbent that we recognize that correctional agencies must be transformed to be service providers with a primary goal to concurrently address public health and safety goals. Public health is public safety." In a second essay, author Douglas Thomson provides a very compact overview on mass incarceration and the role of the courts; author James Austin offers a thoughtful response. Finally, author William Oliver argues for a greater emphasis on reentry planning to both facilitate family reunification and reduce family conflict, including incidents of domestic violence. Like other response essays in this volume, the discussions by authors Joanne Belknap and Johanna Christian demonstrate a concrete and practical response to this important issue.

ENDNOTES

¹ Past issues and individual articles from *Criminology and Public Policy* are available for sale (\$40 per issue; \$10 for an article reprint) from the American Society of Criminology Web site at www.asc41.com/reprints.html.

² *Contemporary Issues in Criminal Justice Policy: Policy Proposals from the American Society of Criminology Conference* is available online through Wadsworth/Cengage Learning for \$32.99.

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