

editorial

uses of research

Rebecca Roberts puts this issue in perspective.

Research and statistics can provide valuable insight into the harm caused by some types of crime and appropriate responses to it. As some of the articles in this issue of CJM illustrate, the construction of knowledge based on research evidence must, at times, be approached with considerable caution. Some argue that the broader political agenda on criminal justice influences the breadth and depth of criminological research commissioned and is at risk of focusing narrowly on particular types of crimes and methodologies. This has a direct impact on the ability of politicians and the public to have a wide-ranging and well-informed debate on how to address problems within society and brings into question how 'evidence-based' current policy developments are.

The initial optimism engendered by New Labour's claims to support 'evidence-based policy making' when it first came to power in 1997 was, **Tim Hope** argues, short lived due to an "incompatibility between the ideology of evidence-based policy and the natural inclination of the political process to want to secure the best outcomes". Drawing on his experience of a Home Office funded evaluation of the Reducing Burglary Initiative, Hope is worried that officials and politicians can be tempted to be selective in their choice of the evidence used to illustrate success of programmes thus resulting in the exclusion of some

data and the simplification or misrepresentation of others. **Reece Walters** offers a provocative account of the Home Office's influence on research agendas, and calls on self-respecting criminologists to refuse the Home Office shilling.

One development of the 'what works' agenda is the growth of 'crime science'. **Loraine Gelsthorpe** and **Gilly Sharpe** argue that this, and the increased focus on quantitative methods, reflects 'in part an abandonment of the search for the causes of crime in favour of focusing on strategies to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour, and to 'control' rather than 'correct' offending'. In contrast, **Gloria Laycock** discusses the merits of exploring the established sciences and the benefits they can bring to encourage 'evidence-led' policy.

Scepticism also exists about 'experimental' studies and **Nick Tilley** outlines his concerns, proposing instead an approach of realistic evaluation. **Maggie Blyth** describes the Youth Justice 'effective practice' approach, which is becoming more widely adopted and aims to disseminate relevant research to practitioners.

There are considerable dangers in uncritically accepting research of 'expert' evidence. The debatable nature of research findings, their interpretation and dissemination are clearly illustrated in a further selection of articles. **Roy Carr-Hill** illustrates the danger and ease of misrepresenting statistics

and measures of probability, and gives examples of what can happen when things go wrong. **Paul Marchant** questions the statistical methods used in a Home Office study which declared that increased street lighting has a direct influence on crime reduction. **Joe Schwartz** gives a critical account of claims made about the links between genetics and behaviour.

The intensification of the anti-social behaviour and 'respect' agenda will undoubtedly result in a cranking up of the measures already in place, along with the introduction of new interventions. However, the evidence to support such an escalation is questionable. **Judy Nixon** considers the conflicting evidence on the impact of ASBOs and calls for urgently needed research in light of concerns identified by the European Human Rights Commissioner on their scope, the ease with which they can be obtained, the use of naming and shaming, and, the consequences of breaches.

Conventional criminological study focuses largely on particular types of crime. **Steve Tombs** and **Dave Whyte** argue that "demands for 'policy-relevant research' have narrowed the scope for asking politically sensitive research questions, or for focusing upon more fundamental or long term issues". Researching crimes of the powerless is far easier than scrutinizing those of the powerful. **Paddy Hillyard** suggests a broadening of focus, beyond crime and criminology. He points to the many harms which result in considerable injury, death and loss, yet fall outside conventional legal and criminological classifications – and therefore beyond the scope of current research agendas. Hillyard favours a social harm (or 'zemiological') approach, the benefits of

which would include a better understanding of the physical, emotional and financial harms experienced by people during their lives, their causes and potential social policy responses.

The potential of a social harm approach is illustrated by **Danny Dorling**. He explores the relationship between murder and poverty, and then broadens the scope to mortality and poverty rates. The correlations are somewhat striking and are attributed by Dorling to 'systemic delinquency' – the uncaring and negligent tendencies underlying social harm, most of which is preventable, yet largely ignored.

A commitment to a sound and well researched evidence base is key to understanding social problems and devising effective and appropriate policy solutions. Most researchers, politicians and policy-makers would claim to support this commitment, yet – as illustrated in this issue – there is mounting concern about the trajectories of current research agendas and the associated policies they initiate and support. Part of the solution could lie in attempting to garner a firm consensus about the meaning of 'evidence-based policy' but this will only take us so far. The solutions to crime, social harm and injustice may lie outside the confines of traditional criminological inquiry. ■

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