

# Book review

**Nina Schuller and Chris Fox review *The Economic Dimensions of Crime*, by N G Fielding, A Clarke and R Witt. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd (2000).**

**I**s there a relationship between unemployment and crime? How do economic models of crime relate to the 'criminologies of everyday life' such as 'Rational Choice' theory, that are central to British criminological debate? How do we place a cost on crime and the criminal justice system? This timely volume pulls together a collection of essays which portray the increasing sophistication and divergence of the approach (which is growing in popularity in the current global economic climate). The book moves us from a reductive economic approach pioneered in the late 60s, to one that takes account of the wider social and economic processes that generate and shape crime.

The first part of this book shows how an economic model of crime has been developed and refined. We begin with Gary Becker's seminal article written in 1968 calling for the reconsideration of the classical economic approach in criminology, in the face of what he perceives to be weaknesses of the prevalent sociological approaches of the period. His approach suggests that criminality is an occupational choice and that individuals will weigh up the pros and cons to decide whether they can financially benefit from the criminal act. One of the great appeals of the economic approach is the claim that it is 'value free', and so avoids the politics of other theories by neither centring on individual pathologies or controversial social issues. This does allow Becker and others to both evaluate the crimes of the poor and the crimes of the rich within the same economic framework and it would seem logical to apply this approach to 'illegitimate' markets/white collar crime, where such behaviour follows established business practice (Gambetta and Reuter address this in Chapter Four). The development of the economic model since Becker's 1968 article, together with some of its potential applications, is outlined by Dnes, and Pyle. The first part of the book concludes with Farrell, Chamard, Clark and Pease's explication of the links between the

economic model of crime and the 'criminologies of everyday life' such as 'Rational Choice' theory and 'Routine Activities' theory that will perhaps be more familiar to criminologists.

The second part of the book focuses on the links between crime and the labour market, showing that the link between unemployment and crime is far from straightforward. Obstacles to demonstrating this link range from the conceptual (understanding which way any causal link that exists between unemployment and crime might run) to the more practical (how to accurately measure crime and unemployment rates). The conclusion to be drawn is that any link that exists between unemployment and crime is probably weak and varies according to the type of crime studied (property or expressive). One problem seems to be that while economic theories of crime focus on the choices of individuals, much of the research that has been undertaken uses aggregated data to examine macro-economic trends (as explained by Clarke, Fielding and Witt). However, there is plenty of evidence that more recent studies are addressing some of these issues. Thus, essays by Witte and Tauchen, and Prein and Seus, recognise the limitations of statistical analysis, and make use of ethnographic research, which allows them to then include variables which would be difficult to evaluate through a purely economic model. These variables include gender, local area, age, level of education and intelligence, specific crime types. Not surprisingly this reveals that the correlation between employment, poverty, and crime can depend on these variables (and it is difficult to prove a one-way causal link). This then leads us back to the difficult social and pathological issues which the economic model was trying to avoid, particularly the impact that perceived economic status and labelling have on offending behaviour (see Prein and Seus). Interestingly, Field finds that there is only a weak link between crime and employment, and that there is a

stronger correlation between crime and consumption. Essentially his findings show greater levels of property crime during periods of low consumption, and greater levels of violent crime during periods of high consumption.

The final chapters explore the issue of costing crime, both to the victim and the criminal justice system. Shapland's essay on auditing the criminal justice system and Lynch, Clear and Rasmussen's essay on modelling the costs of crime will be of great interest to the practitioner. Shapland shows that the costs of the criminal justice system in Milton Keynes came to over £16 million for 1993/94, resulting in an average cost per offence of £595.

The first section of *The Economic Dimensions of Crime* provides an excellent introduction to some of the theoretical issues raised by the economic model of crime and shows how the model might fit with the use of Rational Choice theory and Routine Activity theory in criminology. At this time of rapid change within both the criminal justice system and the crime reduction field, it will be of particular interest to those grappling with either the issue of partnership working or cost-effectiveness analysis. The development of strategy and the delivery of services through partnership is well established throughout the criminal justice system and crime reduction field. There is plenty of evidence in the second part of this book to demonstrate the importance of considering the links between crime, poverty and the labour market either when developing crime prevention strategies or when working with offenders. Partnerships that include a wide range of service providers will be well placed to take this work forward. At the moment parts of the criminal justice system and community safety field are coming to terms with a Best Value approach which, amongst other things, emphasises the importance of cost-effectiveness. Similarly practitioners and researchers involved in the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme or Youth Justice pilots will be aware of the emphasis within those programmes and initiatives on cost-analysis. The third part of this book will be of particular interest to all those involved with these issues. It will encourage practitioners to think about issues of cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit analysis in a more holistic way, be they the costs of prevention or of the criminal justice system.

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