

# editorial

## causes of crime

**Richard Garside and Kevin Stenson put the issue in context.**

For at least two centuries criminologists have speculated about the causes of crime. The great Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, considered by many to be the father of modern criminology, speculated on the relative impact of everything — from law and government, jaw size and skull shape, to climate and rainfall — on the propensity of individuals to commit crime.

Government policy too has been informed by a desire to tackle crime's causes. But it is worth reminding ourselves that while talk of tackling the causes of crime is seemingly an ever-present part of the current political discourse on crime, law and order, this particular way of framing the problem is relatively new.

Also relatively recent is the ever increasing influence of the mass media in framing public understanding of crime causation. This phenomenon, especially the increasing demonisation of offenders, is explored in this issue by Yvonne Jewkes. Tony Blair first used one of the formative soundbites of New Labour, "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime," in a radio interview in January 1993. As David Downes points out in his article, the slogan was created partly to regain the political initiative following a string of election defeats. On those terms it was a huge success. The former Shadow Home Secretary, Oliver Letwin, has described it as 'the single most effective soundbite of recent times.' But more than just a soundbite, the focus on causes

implied a distinctive set of perspectives on crime and policies to tackle it.

So what are the causes of crime? As the scope and breadth of the articles in this issue makes clear, there is no easy answer to this question.

One set of answers explores the links between crime and social exclusion. Yet, exclusion can be understood in different ways. Caroline Metcalf and Kevin Stenson point to the dangers, in response to Treasury driven policies, of translating the notion of causes into the narrower notion of risk, to be assessed and measured by standardised risk models. These prioritise certain

### ***A focus on social exclusion as a key driver of crime raises as many questions as it answers***

individual psychological explanations, often the inability of offenders and their families to reason and empathise in normal ways, and promote interventions that address offenders' faulty reasoning. Nevertheless, exclusion has been the mainstream of current government policy on the causes of crime, and a number of articles in this issue explore other elements of this debate. Rowland Atkinson and John Flint examine the link between social housing and crime. Marcus Roberts probes the association of drug and alcohol misuse and crime. Marian FitzGerald critiques the difficult question of ethnicity and crime and the extent to which crime among minority youth is the result not so much of their ethnic characteristics

but of social deprivation and poor school attainment.

Much of the public concern about minority involvement in crime has concerned gun culture and gangs. Diane Curry discusses innovative work with black prisoners helping them to explore these issues. On the other hand Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young emphasise the importance of defining gangs more precisely, differentiating them from broader notions of subculture, and avoiding sensationalised media depictions of these phenomena.

But as the articles in this issue also make clear, a focus on social exclusion as a key driver of crime raises as many questions as it answers. As David Downes points out, the crime/social exclusion policy agenda has tended to displace from discussion some of the broader questions of the structural roots of crime. Corporate crime is regularly overlooked in mainstream discussion about crime and its causes, an omission addressed

by Steve Tombs in his article on the causes of corporate crime. Richard Garside also examines some of these structural issues in his article on economic trends and crime rates. Adam Edwards argues that the explanation of the shifting forms of organised crime must focus on the links between labour markets, housing tenure patterns and law enforcement interventions. Other structural questions are examined by Mike Sutton and David Simmonds in their article on a market reduction approach to burglary and theft; and by John Carr in his analysis of the role of the internet in increasing the market for child pornography. As both sets of authors point out, a motivated offender can only commit crime if the appropriate means

to do so are available.

The focus on social exclusion as a cause of crime can be at the expense of the consideration of gender. Simon Winlow examines the causal links between masculinity and crime, while Kate Painter and David Farrington summarise recent research showing a marked difference in the way brothers and sisters responded to similar risk factors for offending.

Some of the psychological roots of crime can be underplayed in social exclusion-based analysis. Nadia Wager focuses on the biological approach in looking at research on attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder, ADHD.

Understanding crime and its causes, therefore, is a complex matter. And it is worth asking why it matters that we develop a nuanced understanding of the causes of crime if simple solutions work. If burglary can be prevented by turning a house into a fortress, who cares if the burglar is stealing to fund a drugs habit?

There is a certain commonsensical appeal to this response, but as Marcus Roberts argues, "It is... important not to fixate exclusively on the proximate triggers for criminality and to lose sight of the bigger picture."

As a critical discipline, criminology needs to assert the importance of understanding the complexity of the causes of crime, and to use this understanding to challenge political agendas where necessary.

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