

Where's the harm in it?

Will McMahon and Rebecca Roberts look at death, injury, and deprivation through a social harm lens.

In 2007, the Centre for Crime Justice Studies launched the Harm and Society project with the aim of stimulating debate about the limitations of criminal justice and promoting alternative perspectives on social harm and social policy. The Harm and Society project strives to understand and explore 'socially mediated harms' – those harms that result from the way that society and social and economic relations are organised (Pemberton, 2007). Key to this is a focus on documenting, assessing, and disseminating data, research, and analysis relating to the experience of injustice and the study of the social conditions that lead to significant death, injury, trauma, and deprivation.

Our interest in 'social harm' was initially sparked by the work of Paddy Hillyard, Christina Pantazis, Dave Gordon, Steve Tombs and Simon Pemberton (Hillyard *et al.*, 2004). In collaboration with them, CCJS produced an edited version of some of their work in what has now become the project's foundational document 'Criminal Obsessions: Why harm matters more than crime' (Hillyard *et al.*, 2005). This provided inspiration for what we hope is a novel and fresh way of thinking about the nature, causes and solutions of social problems.

So, what does a 'social harm' perspective cover? As you will see from some of the examples below, it can be used to investigate a range of experiences, conditions, and problems. As a newly emerging area of study, it is far from prescriptive and has a wide range of potential areas of enquiry.

The work of Professor Danny Dorling provides an excellent illustration of a 'social harm' approach (*ibid*). A human geographer, much of his work has involved mapping different kinds of harm. Dorling's analysis of UK homicide rates is worth a mention here. Between January 1981 and December 2000, just over 13,000 people were murdered in Britain, an average of 1.8 per day. During that period, the overall murder rate rose steadily, reflecting a longer-term trend where murder rates have more than doubled since figures were first recorded in 1967.

However, what is significant is that for most of the population, the trend has actually been moving in the opposite direction. For females of almost all ages and for young boys and older men, the likelihood of being murdered has either dropped or remained stable over the 20 years leading up to the year 2000. But for males between 5 and 59, and in particularly those of working age, the risk of being murdered has risen so dramatically that it outweighs the reductions experienced by the rest of society.

Put simply, what Dorling's work shows is that the rise in murder in Britain between 1981 and 2000 has been concentrated almost exclusively in men of working age living in the poorest parts of the country. So, popular attempts to explain rising levels of violence in society – such as increased gun ownership or drug use – cannot account for this strong correlation between poverty and the risk of being murdered. Dorling argues that

For murder rates to rise in particular places, and for a particular group of people living there, life in general has to be made more difficult to live, people have to be made to feel more worthless . . . The lives of men born since 1964 have polarized, and the polarization, inequality, curtailed opportunities and hopelessness have bred fear, violence and murder.

It is also possible that this feeling of worthlessness, of being at the bottom of a pile in an increasingly unequal society, has led to an externalisation of the anger, anxiety, or depression that may accompany it. It is also reflected in the increasing rates of mental health problems and in particular of suicide in young men during the 1980s when labour market conditions began to improve. Recent research on suicide shows that it was those young men who were unable to access the labour market, when others around them did so, that had a greater propensity to commit suicide (Crawford and Prince, 1999). If one is unemployed alongside millions of others, then the structural causation is clear – the intense self doubt produced by being poor in an 'opportunity society' with rising employment can lead to one turning the anger produced by despair onto one's self as well as outwards against others. This is important because the suicide rate annually outstrips the homicide rate by three to one in the UK.

So, the evidence suggested to us that levels of harm in society may be connected to general shifts in economic and social well-being. Our interest in this approach was reinforced by the work of those exploring inequalities in health, such as that of epidemiologist, Professor Richard Wilkinson. His recent book, 'The Impact of Inequality' (Wilkinson, 2005) draws attention to the striking correlation between measures of inequality and harmful experiences such as violence, ill-health, anxiety, insecurity, trust, and incivility. Wilkinson argues (p.54) that

although trust, involvement in community life, homicide and hostility differ widely, we cannot

plausibly regard these measures as completely independent of each other. It is much more likely that that they are all different measures of underlying variations in the quality of social relationships. The fact that they are all related to inequality indicates a general shift in the tenor of social relations associated with larger or smaller differences in income.

Wilkinson notes (p.47) that 'There have now been over fifty studies showing a clear tendency for violence to be more common in societies where income differences are larger.' Homicide is at one end of this continuum. At the other end are, for example, work place or school bullying and neighbour intimidation and the issues of tolerance that are the product of life in the infinitely more complex 'opportunity society'.

Both Dorling and Wilkinson's work highlight the negative consequences of increasing inequality and polarisation – in both a domestic and global context. In particular, it points away from the individualised and narrowly focused 'risk factor' and 'pathological' perspectives which have come to dominate much thinking in this area. A social harm approach, therefore, can draw on a range of disciplines, from human geography and epidemiology to others such as gender studies, political economy, and work which explores the experience and drivers of other harms such as poverty and racism.

In addition to thinking about 'murder', there are many people harmed or killed by predictable and/or preventable events in society. For example, we were struck, back in November 2007 by a report from the All Party Parliamentary Thrombosis Group. In the conclusion of the report, it drew attention to 'the chilling statistic' that over 10,700 hospital patients may have died over a 7-month period as a result of NHS Trusts' failure to implement a key recommendation given by Sir Liam Donaldson, the government's chief medical officer, in April 2007. The cost of implementing the recommendation, a blood-thinning jab costing just £1 a day – would have saved their lives – yet just one-third of hospitals implemented the guideline. For a miniscule sum in the NHS Trust's budgets – which in the last financial year reportedly returned a surplus of around £2billion – tens of thousands of people lost loved ones.

Similarly, every year, tens of thousands of people die early, and many more are seriously injured in Britain by social harms that are the result of acts of omission or commission and are in the main predictable and preventable. For example, it is estimated that 25,000 pensioners have their lives cut short because they are unable to heat their homes properly; air pollution alone accounts for another 10,000 citizens meeting an untimely death.

All of these deaths put the homicide statistics into perspective and represent just the tip of social harms experienced in contemporary society. In particular, this raises questions about why society, in its current formation, somehow fails to acknowledge, prevent, or rectify such harms, instead resorting to indifference,

apathy, tolerance, or a simple acceptance of the apparent inevitability of these events.

Many academics have attempted to document and highlight some of the economic and social processes behind a range of harms, for example, Dr Basia Spalek, in her work documenting the tragic consequences of the Farepak collapse, the Maxwell scandal, and the closure of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International. Professor Steve Tombs and Dr Dave Whyte are well known in the UK for their work on the impact of failures in health and safety, and Professor Reece Walters has recently published work exploring environmental harm.

Upon reviewing research in areas such as public health, social policy, education, and children's studies, we notice that harm is, unsurprisingly, of concern to a range of academic and policy disciplines. The abundance of existing work, however, is often narrowly focused within disciplines, rather than looking across for linkages elsewhere. As a result, the focus is often atomised within particular areas of enquiry and consequently fails to develop comprehensive cross-disciplinary understandings of the social harms people experience throughout their lives. It is here that we are in favour of refracting this wide breadth of knowledge through a 'social harm lens' to develop a more general understanding of the social processes creating and mediating them.

Developing a comprehensive understanding is a central concern of Harm and Society. Our aim is to scope and analyse social harm by drawing on a range of academic disciplines. Crucially, however, it is also essential to listen to, consult with and draw upon the perspectives and experiences of those people facing socially mediated harms and the practitioners working alongside them. In taking forward CCJS's concern with 'social justice', we are keen to develop policy discussion about the level of social harm in society and what might be done to reduce it.

Will McMahon is Policy Director and **Rebecca Roberts** is Senior Policy Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Both work on a range of policy projects, including Harm and Society. For more information about the Harm and Society project, visit <http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/harmandsocproject.html>

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