

The ill at ease or the uneasy fit? Mapping knowledge onto policy onto practice within a political maelstrom

Betsy Stanko laces the contributions of this section together and encourages us to continue to take the opportunity to influence policy and practice.

Criminal justice policy is continuously undergoing change, and these days, rapid change at that. Those who study crime and criminal justice bemoan what they believe and see to be 'ill informed' decisions of politicians and civil servants. Indeed it is not unusual to see sparks fly at conferences and seminars when researchers condemn policy decisions and policy makers show irritation at the naiveté of those who comment on policy but take no responsibility for its delivery or outcome. This issue of *cjm* addresses the angst of public criminologies (see also Chancer and McLaughlin 2007), and the debate about how to find a constructive way of creating a dialogue between policy makers and research knowledge.

Inevitably the debate in this issues focuses on two critical contributions to criminologists' angst: relevance and influence. As **Loader and Sparks** argue, many criminologists want to be both a part of the conversation of and about policy and a part of building the better (a better) public life. But the fear of Loader and Sparks is that the discipline of criminology has been sidelined, no longer relevant in a global penal discourse led perhaps more by 'events' and the media as by evidence based policy. We might

well ask what is it we would like to influence, and do we have the information and the knowledge which will provide a solid basis for moving in one direction or another? **O'Brien** asks whether criminologists really have the tools to challenge contemporary directions. He sums up this dilemma by posing a challenge to us: research is far more likely to be funded when it asks: 'given the system we have, how do we change the outcomes?' and far less likely to be funded when it asks: 'given the outcomes we have, how do we change the system?'

For many years as an academic criminologist, I found myself trying to be both a part of the conversation about change and a part of influencing change. I've even won an award for influencing criminal justice. In recognition of my work on violence against women, I have been honoured by the American Society of Criminology for doing both in 1996, bestowing me with the August Vollmer Award for my contributions to criminal justice practice. As Director of the ESRC's Violence Research Programme (1997-2002), my job was to create a conversation with policy makers and practitioners about the 20 research projects funded under the programme. What I learned during these five years was that I also had to influence to change

the conversations of researchers as well. For example, in the four feedback conversations held across the UK to discuss the findings from the programme, researchers and practitioners in the audience would inevitably turn to discussions of what we could not know about 'hidden' violence. The entire stance of the debate was coloured by a view that findings about what people believed to be 'hidden' violence could not be made transparent. How could we as researchers influence policy using the findings of the research if we still believed we can never 'really' know about a phenomenon in order to properly advise government?

So we may wish to converse and influence policy, but we don't always know how to do so. **Heidensohn** shares her personal experience and personal commitment in influencing policy. She tells us that in the late 1960s, she began her journey in engaging with policy and policy makers to help change. Initially disappointed that her efforts to influence the Home Office staff were unsuccessful, she humbly accounts for a life time of effort in policy. She reminds us that change does not come rapidly, nor is it on the heels of an outstanding theoretical breakthrough. Heidensohn's account is a testimony to something that might be difficult for many of us, patience. Changing our policy rhetoric and cultivating our personal networks is one way of increasing our influence.

Morgan pleads with criminologists to 'reopen the dialogue between senior policy makers and the academic research community'. There is, I feel, an urgency to do so, as he suggests that there is a 'policy making crisis in Whitehall' and it is 'not helped by many criminologists ... standing, jeering or publicly silent, on the sidelines'. Walters advocates staying clear of government-led dialogues, but I disagree with **Walters**. I chose to enter the heart of policy and criminal justice practice, because I felt continuous conversation can only be offered to an institution from the inside. I can attest to the key relevance of research to decision making at the highest policy levels.

This does not mean that I agree with all decisions that are made, and does not mean that my discussions about better ways of doing are robust. In doing my job though, I rarely draw first on the details of my colleagues work, but instead use a systematic approach to knowledge building within an institution and within a system that does have spaces receptive to change. As a very wise senior police officer once advised me, work with the people who support you in talking to those who do not. And **Solesbury** (this issue) encourages us to think carefully and clearly about the timing of influence, as opportunity does arise. He sagely reminds us that 'Policy changes for reasons other than the discovery of new knowledge'.

Ryan observes too that the realm of experts in commentary about penal policy has changed. Aided by new technologies, blogs and 'populist drift of recent governments' echo the immediacy of individuals' voices responding to events and policy, rather than the considered and evidence-based views of penal lobby groups. He advises to lobby and engage with policy at the local level. Influencing practitioners, rather than policy makers, is also suggested by **Dunn**. He uses three examples of research on victims to ask what influence this research has on criminal justice policy. He advises researchers to find practitioner partners, in a collaboration which pushes for policy to be more 'person-centred'. **Hopkinson** wonders whether local Youth Offending Teams are serving their clients well, and

raises questions about practice that needs to find a way of challenging policy.

But it is not just the lobbying or victim groups that sometimes feel excluded from the policy process. **Berry** reflects on her time as the Chair of the Police Federation, representing a powerful group of frontline practitioners in the criminal justice system. She too laments that there has been 'a dogged attitude by this government to appear to consult whilst pushing ahead with their own agenda'. And yet her experiences of being able to influence policy are far more varied, showing that even a lobbying group such as the Police Federation notes a change in the landscape that is policy making.

So how might one set up an approach to a dialogue between academics and policy makers? **Burman** talks about the new possibilities of the collaboration between the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research. This cross university and cross disciplinary model of research is unique in the UK, and demonstrates in the spirit of Solebury's call to seize opportunity, a point in time where it is possible to build a more open, informed public debate about crime and criminal justice. In reflecting on the first six years in the US of the American Society of Criminology's journal *Criminology and Public Policy* **Clear** and **Frost** wrestle with the ways in which policy commentary can and should be written. There is a tension, they suggest, in being accessible to non-experts and at the same time

persuasive to their peers. This continues to be a challenge.

So I return to dilemmas raised earlier. What is it we – as researchers, practitioners, policy makers – are trying to do in the 'conversation about crime and criminal justice'? Our debates about governance, well-being of people and places, and democracy dovetail with how we challenge crime, criminality, and ultimately harm. If researchers feel they have a contribution to making things better, then it is up to you to find the clearest way to articulate what you are saying and why. Find the networks, the voices, the policy makers and indeed the politicians to influence. Standing outside with a megaphone may work sometimes – as Solesbury says, perhaps the time is right for this kind of intervention. But most of the authors here urge involvement, patience, rigour of thought and clarity of message. None of these are easy. But as Chancer and McLaughlin state in their special issue of *Theoretical Criminology* in 2007, the stakes are high. We might just as well continue to take the opportunity to engage as, with knowledge, comes responsibility. ■

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References

- Chancer, L. and McLaughlin, E. (2007) 'Public criminologies: Diverse perspectives on academia and policy' *Theoretical Criminology*, 11, pp.155-73.