

Predicting the future in uncertain times

Rebecca Roberts argues that predicting the future can be a risky business.

We are told that the British coalition government will continue with the previous administration's concern with 'early intervention' and a greater use of technology in the prediction and analysis of risk. David S Wall, guest editor of the themed section, introduces the topic of 'pre-crime', picking up on the science fiction film, 'Minority Report'. He offers a warning against the dangers and limitations of predictive approaches to crime reduction and the tendency towards 'social sorting'.

In summary of the pre-crime section, Wall says, 'each article's message is one of the risks associated with the uncritical acceptance of the anticipatory logic'. Such concerns are not without foundation highlighted by the increasing number of press reports, such as that in *The Observer* (25/07/10) with the headline: 'Police set to use software that can predict crimes: Minority Report computer trials raise prospect of sci-fi detectives nabbing crooks'. Describing recent developments in 'predictive analytics', it is reported that these new technologies have received significant investment such as the \$11bn spent over four years by IBM. At one level, the use of 'flags' on computer systems are hardly new, but as a growth area and one that may be increasingly relied upon by police forces in a bid to cut paperwork, such technology may lead to 'a generation who are innocent only until predicted guilty' (ibid). As this issue of *cjm* and previous editions of the publication illustrate, a wholesale acceptance of early intervention, prediction and risk based analysis is itself 'risky' given the potential to exacerbate and escalate injustice, rather than address it.

In the context of severe spending cuts, austere times are likely to lead to even more austere interventions. For people working in practice such issues will be particularly pertinent. We feature a number of articles offering insight from practitioners working within the system. The first is an article from **Sara Redgewell** who describes her experience of nursing in a women's prison and some of the challenges of caring in a secure environment. **David Jones** continues this theme, drawing on his time as a consultant psychotherapist working in two different settings – a NHS Medium Secure Unit and HMP Grendon. In light of reports that funding is to be drastically cut, Jones reflects on the annual costs of £200,000 per patient and £40,000 per prisoner and considers the strengths and weaknesses of providing therapeutic regimes in health and prison environments. **Mike Guilfoyle** reflects on 20 years as a probation officer, and still holds dear the 'old school' approach of treating 'offenders' as people first. We are keen to receive more commentary and discussion from people working on the

frontline in criminal justice, and welcome proposals for articles on critical practice and policy. The forthcoming launch of CCJS' new Works for Freedom website in autumn 2010 will further act as an online space for people working to meet people's needs.

As part of the 'debating' section, we focus on the thorny issue of drugs in prison, and specifically the provision of methadone and whether it is a pathway to recovery or chemical cosh. **Neil McKeganey, Mark Johnson, Marcus Roberts** and **Michael Wheatley** offer short contributions to the discussion and one which will continue amid the increasing emphasis on abstinence and recovery. **Gareth Norris** describes recent developments in the use of animated sequences and multimedia applications in the presentation of evidence in legal settings.

We also explore the topic of masculinity as a form of structural violence. **Paul Crawshaw, Alex Scott-Samuel** and **Debbi Stanistreet** identify such a phenomenon as a major source of harm in most societies. They argue that dominant forms of masculinity act as a process which 'plays an important role in the perpetuation of forms of structural violence which continue to construct inequity and disadvantage in health and wellbeing'. Whilst the challenge of overcoming such forms of violence should not be underestimated, the authors highlight some potential areas for reform as shown by international examples.

Richard Garside looks at recent political debate about prisons and the prevailing optimism that spending cuts will lead to a scaling back of criminal justice. He is sceptical that significant reductions will ensue, arguing that government is likely to miss the opportunity to bring about radical reform.

While government promises to reverse restrictions on civil liberties and the collection and holding of personal data, such an expansion of 'liberty' may not reach all sections of the population. At a time of growing unemployment and further retrenchment of the welfare net, levels of social distress will inevitably increase. Ongoing governmental focus on what is described as 'early intervention' may amount to little more than the people most vulnerable to the vagaries of the economic downturn finding themselves more tightly monitored and controlled. Predicting the future is risky business and should be done on a sound evidence base guided by strong principles of equality, fairness and justice. ■

Rebecca Roberts is Senior Policy Associate at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and Managing Editor of *cjm*.
