editorial

violence, harm and society

Will McMahon and **Zoe Davies** put this issue in context.

Despite a substantial evidence base, little informed discussion takes place in the media and in political debate about the root causes of violent behaviour, the forms it takes and the related harms that it causes. In fact most discussion is dominated by the extreme, high profile cases that capture the public imagination. In late 2006 five women were killed in Suffolk in the course of six weeks; on average, in the same period, twelve women will have been killed by their partners – an unending series of killings, if not by a serial killer (Home Office, 2006). There is a question of what we focus on and why. In this issue we attempt to broaden our understanding of violence and harm as a concept by exploring it on an individual, social and global level.

Neller and Fabian argue that most people who experience traumatic events do not commit future acts of violence. However, research has found that those individuals, most often male, who commit very harmful or violent acts have often been the victims of very traumatic experiences during their childhood or adolescence (Boswell, 1996). There is no credible evidence for the alternative explanation – that perpetrators are simply 'evil' – which is often given in the media.

Liz Lovell and Kathy Evans throw light on the gross contradiction that exists in our society where children are demonised for committing low level harms whilst the adults who have neglected and abused them are rarely held to account. These contradictory policies can only result in compounding the child's view that they are worthless, powerless and living in a contradictory and confusing world.

That government policy can play a role in re-traumatising victims of serious harm is reflected in Blumenthal's discussion of how violence is communicated. He argues that the way the penal system inflicts shame on known offenders "is a repetition of the shaming experience which the individual sought to rid himself from through violence." It is unsurprising then, as Edgar shows, that bullying is employed by some young inmates as a strategy for self-protection.

For some, the cold impersonal security of the prison cell is reminiscent of the lack of care they received in the past. In the United States, Blumenthal notes, prison is sometimes referred to as 'concrete mamma'. Within many of the UK's high security prisons are those assessed as suffering from 'dangerous and severe personality disorder' a label which Martin Kettle argues is a "brand" and that, in fact, "there is no such thing". This is a striking conclusion coming from the head of the special units, including the exemplary DSPD unit, at HMP Whitemoor.

There are serious questions to be asked about the Government's use of risk analysis as a tool. Terry Grange reminds us that "we can never promise absolute safety", and Nash suggests that acceptance of sentencing on the basis of possible future offences is starting to infiltrate criminal justice. This direction of travel, and the information systems that accompany it, have disturbing implications, yet go mostly unchallenged in political debate. At the beginning of 2007, for the first time, the number of those incarcerated by 'indeterminate sentences' was greater than those sentenced to less than a year. Is this not cause for concern?

Much of the public gaze is directed to the violence and harm of the supposed 'other' – a small group of 'dangerous' individuals dealt with by criminal justice and who are thought to be the main source of serious violence in society. Ruggerio redirects our gaze to violence at a global level committed by states and other warring parties. As the body count mounts in Iraq, Ruggerio points to the failure of society to contemplate or consider 'war' in discussions of violence and questions this perverse absence. In his powerful article he alludes to the idea that we find our own reflection in that which we call terrorism.

On the theme of war, Scraton cites practitioners in Belfast and Derry who argue that the British Government is guilty of 'institutional neglect' in response to the traumatic consequences of armed conflict for children and young people. These consequences are manifested in the troubled and troubling behaviour of these victims of war who are regulated through punitive systems rather than cared for by mental health services. Once again, the victim of violence and harm is re-traumatised. At its most extreme, Deborah Coles reveals, such negligence has led to the death of 29 children in penal custody since 1990. Their case files revealed the "institutional and psychological violence inflicted by the State on children and young people".

This issue of CJM attempts to explore the root causes, meanings and responses to violence. In doing so it perhaps asks more questions than it answers. However, we hope to encourage a more holistic debate that considers harm and violence as an epidemic with public health solutions rather than a matter of individual deficit to which criminal justice is the only response. Betsy Stanko offers us a lead. She suggests that we should begin by challenging the attitudes whereby "we as a civilised society are prepared to tolerate more violence in some places and towards some individuals more than others. We are not equally at risk to violence." Is it not in exploring this unequal exposure to violence and harm that we might find solutions to it?

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References

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