



# What is crime?

Rebecca Roberts and Will McMahon explore hidden and ignored crimes and harms.

*We all have commonsense ideas about what crime is. Splashed on the front pages of newspapers and a daily staple of TV, literary, and film entertainment—crime stories are big news and big business. Murder, theft, and assault might be some of the first things that to come to mind when posed the question ‘what is crime?’. However, usually it is the most visible and obvious crimes that receive the most attention. Many harms and injustices which are widespread and can result in deadly consequences seem to gain comparatively less interest.*

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies’ *What is crime?* initiative seeks to shed light on hidden or ignored harms and crimes, and stimulate discussion and debate about why some ‘crimes’ and not others are deemed worthy of policy, media, and political concern. Inequalities in harmful experiences according to ethnicity, age, class and gender reveal a range of direct and indirect, visible and invisible, public and private harms. Criminal justice policy tends to place particular emphasis on particular problems such as theft and violence on the streets. However, Stephen Box (1983) argued that ‘maybe what is stuffed into our consciousness as the crime problem is perhaps an illusion, a trick to deflect our attention away from other, even more serious crimes and victimising behaviours which objectively cause the vast bulk of avoidable death, injury, and deprivation’. *What is crime?* attempts to explore whether such a diversion exists and look at a variety of harms caused in different areas of modern life—for example, violent events caused by businesses and the state, financial hardships brought about by

corporations and the environmental impact of pollution. Poverty, for example, injures, hurts and kills, yet rarely seems to provoke political and public outrage.

The *What is crime?* project aims to stimulate debate about what crime is, what it is not and who gets to decide. Funded by The Wates Foundation from 2008 to 2009, this initiative will feature a series of research and policy briefing papers, a national photography competition, parliamentary events and a series of lectures that together will focus on the themes of financial harm, violence, and environmental harm.

## Decriminalisation of death and injury at work

The first policy briefing paper ‘A crisis of enforcement: The decriminalisation of death and injury at work’ (Tombs and Whyte, 2008) was launched in June 2008 in the House of Commons chaired by Katy Clark MP. The briefing argues that fatalities and injuries caused through work are far more prevalent than the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) currently reports. The authors, Professor Steve Tombs and Dr Dave Whyte, found that more than 80 per cent of officially recorded work-related fatalities are filtered out from the HSE’s headline figure and remain buried in other categories in the official data.

After re-assessing the scale of the harms caused, Tombs and Whyte conclude that being a victim of a work-related fatality or injury is far more likely than experiencing conventionally defined and measured violence and homicide. ‘A crisis of enforcement’ drew replies from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including the Health and Safety Executive itself.

## How do you picture crime, harm, and injustice?

In September 2008 we launched the *What is crime?* photography competition. The aim is to shed light on hidden or ignored harms through images that sum up what crime, harm and injustice mean to competition entrants through the different categories of violence, financial harm and environmental harm. Rather than the usual law and order images of police, prison and judges, we are inviting entries which stimulate thinking about harm, injustice and crime.

The aim of the competition is to encourage a wide-ranging public discussion and debate about what is criminal, what is harmful and how society responds. Rather than using words, the competition aims to challenge thinking through photographs. The entries will be judged on whether they inspire the judges and challenge thinking on what is harmful, unjust or criminal. The deadline for entries will be in March 2009, so **cjm** readers will still have plenty of time to get snapping.

Members of the public, students, campaigners, amateur or professional photographers, are invited to submit photographs which represent alternative views on harm and injustice. This will culminate in the judging and prize giving for the photography competition and an exhibition that will showcase many of the entries in Summer 2009. ■

More details of the *What is crime?* project and the competition, prizes, and judges can be found at [www.whatiscrime.org.uk](http://www.whatiscrime.org.uk)

---

**Rebecca Roberts** is Senior Policy Associate and **Will McMahon** is Policy Director at the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

---

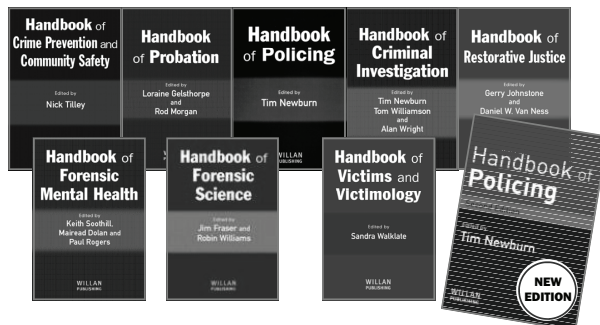
## References

- Box, S. (1983), *Power, Crime, and Mystification*, London: Routledge
- Tombs, S. and Whyte, D. (2008), *A crisis of enforcement: The decriminalisation of death an injury at work*. London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. [www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/acrisisofenforcement.html](http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/acrisisofenforcement.html) (accessed 13 September 2008).

# New Books from WILLAN PUBLISHING



## Handbooks Series



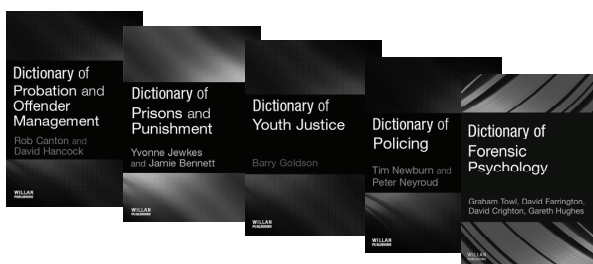
Prices from: £31.50 – £34.99 PBK/ £85.00 HBK

Each of these Handbooks provides a comprehensive and authoritative reference book to major aspects of criminology and criminal justice.

- Provides in-depth analysis of the background, theory and practice of each subject.
- Contributors to the books are drawn from both practitioners in the field and academics.
- Fundamental reading for practitioners, academics and students studying the particular aspect of criminal justice.

**New for 2008** *Handbook of Forensic Mental Health* and *Handbook of Forensic Science*  
\*\*New Edition of *Handbook of Policing*\*\*

## Dictionaries Series



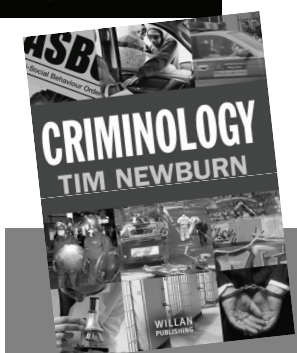
Prices from: £22.99 – £24.99 PBK/ £55.00 HBK

These dictionaries cover every key field of criminal justice and the criminal justice system, designed to meet the needs of both students and practitioners.

- Essential terms, concepts, ideas, institutions, legal and organizational arrangements, methods and practices and relevant legislative provisions.
- Essential source of reference for recent changes in the criminal justice system.
- Entries contributed by both academics and practitioners.
- Edited by leading authorities in each field.

**New for 2008** *Dictionary of Youth Justice*, *Dictionary of Policing* and *Dictionary of Forensic Psychology*

### Also Available



## CRIMINOLOGY TIM NEWBURN (LSE)

Published: August 2007  
£31.99 (pbk) / ISBN 9781843922841  
£85.00 (hbk) / ISBN 9781843922858  
Size: 264x193mm, 1046pp

This is a comprehensive text covering all the areas found in 'criminology' and 'criminal justice' courses. It provides the basis of study for undergraduate students of criminology and others who need a foundation knowledge of criminology. Written by one of the UK's leading criminologists, it is the essential book on this subject.

*'At last a truly comprehensive, accessible yet authoritative introductory textbook for students of criminology in the UK and beyond written by one of our outstanding criminologists. Given its clarity, breadth and depth, it has the potential to become the 'must have' book for every undergraduate student and teacher of criminology. Put bluntly it puts all other introductory criminology textbooks in the shade.'*

**Professor Gordon Hughes** (Cardiff University)

To find out more about all of our titles or to place an order please visit -  
**[www.willanpublishing.co.uk](http://www.willanpublishing.co.uk)**

Alternatively contact us by - Email: [info@willanpublishing.com](mailto:info@willanpublishing.com)  
Telephone: 01884 849085. Fax: 01884 840251.

Post: Willan Publishing, Culmcott House, Mill Street, Uffculme, Devon EX15 3AT.



**WINNER**  
Academic and  
Professional Publisher  
of the Year 2008