

Reducing Reoffending: Social Work and Community Justice in Scotland
Fergus McNeill and Bill Whyte

Cullompton, Devon: Willan Publishing, 2007

In the introduction to their book, McNeill and Whyte observe that 'Scotland is an intriguing place to be and an intriguing place to study' (p.1). Despite being constitutionally part of the UK, Scotland has its own legal system and, following devolution in 1999, responsibility for policy-making across a wide range of policy areas. Scotland also has a distinctive approach to the assessment and supervision of offenders, with these tasks remaining the responsibility of generically trained social workers. It has managed to resist, to a degree, the punitive thrust of policy and practice that tends to characterise English-speaking countries (including other parts of the UK) while recent organisational changes offer an opportunity for criminal justice social work services to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of community justice.

Although taking Scottish policy and practice its starting point, and drawing where appropriate upon Scottish research to support its developing arguments, *Reducing Reoffending* is more ambitious in scope. At one level it provides a historical and contemporary account of criminal justice social work in Scotland that will, of itself, be of interest to readers who are relatively unfamiliar its policy context, organisational arrangements and penal practices. In this regard it is engaging and informative, if somewhat selective in its emphasis (for example, there is little reference to recent developments such drug treatment and testing orders and specialist problem-solving courts).

The book's key contribution, however, lies in the linkages drawn between theory, research and practice to produce a framework for practice aimed at supporting offender desistance and enhancing community justice through the development of human and social capital. Effective practice with offenders, it is argued, does not reside exclusively in the use of structured programmes. Instead, it is likely to require engagement with families, work aimed at developing relationships and accessing opportunities for 'generative' activities (such as employment, volunteering and other activities) and community engagement and development aimed at facilitating offender re-integration. As McNeill and Whyte conclude (p.189), 'if desistance requires social capital, then services to support desistance need community support – and that means engaging much more directly and meaningfully with communities than has hitherto been the case.'

A key challenge therefore resides in engaging and mobilising communities as to enhance offenders' social capital, promote their re-integration and enable them to make a meaningful contribution to society. McNeill and Whyte express hope that the recent creation in Scotland of Community Justice Authorities to facilitate strategic planning of services across statutory voluntary agencies may offer new opportunities in this regard. Equally, however, they acknowledge that the public need to be persuaded both that social work services can deal with offenders effectively and that doing so contributes positively to the well-being of communities. This requires a receptive social and political environment of a kind that is increasingly elusive in correctionally-focused neo-liberal states.

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