

Applying Social Policy to Criminal Justice Practice

OVERVIEW

This practice brief is for criminal justice practitioners who want to improve the way that the criminal justice system works. It calls for attention to be paid to the two key ways in which social policy and criminal justice practice are fundamentally linked, something that is not always evident to practitioners, policy makers and other interested parties.

A good example of the first link can be seen in the principal probation assessment tool currently in use in England (OASys), which focuses on economic and social characteristics such as accommodation, education, training and employment, lifestyles and associates, relationships, and drug and alcohol misuse. These issues are core aspects of social policy, thus emphasising the interconnection between social policy and criminal justice practice.

This then means that attention to social policy issues is a prerequisite for improvements to criminal justice practice. Criminal justice practice must move away from a narrow emphasis on crime and criminality, to a wider focus that attends to the social policy needs of individuals, groups and communities.

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CONTEXT

Even if you have only a passing interest in criminal justice issues, you are unlikely not to have noticed that there are problems within all areas of the criminal justice system (CJS) and criminal justice practice that are impacting wider society. There is a prevailing sense of crisis affecting all aspects of the CJS: the police, the CPS, the courts and the probation system.

Improving criminal justice practice is of concern to all of us, as even if we do not actually experience crime ourselves, improving criminal justice outcomes benefits not just those who are the victims of crimes, but all society.

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What Every Practitioner Should Know



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PUBLISHING WITH A PURPOSE



FINDINGS

Applying the following ten key social policy emphases can create the conditions that improve criminal justice practice:

- Recognise that criminal justice practice service users have social policy needs – this involves dealing with the welfare issues that a service user might have while in contact with the CJS.
- Focus on social security, not just security – criminal justice practice should not merely focus on physical security but must also incorporate social security.
- Work towards less punitive practice – criminal justice practitioners should use their powers of discretion to shape and effectively change how a policy is enacted at street level.
- Focus on the structural rather than individual causes of disadvantage and crime – criminal justice practice should locate the primary cause of crime within society's structure.
- Destigmatise service users and clients – practice should acknowledge that service users and clients have an array of skills that can enable them to attain wider inclusion in society.
- Adopt a universal rather than selective approach to criminal justice practice – practice should offer services that are universal in order to provide opportunities for the primary prevention of crime.
- Approach crime as a public health issue – practice that understands crime as a public health issue can allow public health interventions to be used to reduce crime.
- Deal with crime in a multi-agency way – practice should put in place measures to prevent, improve and support people that draw on evidence and work in a multidisciplinary way.

- Focus on primary upstream rather than secondary downstream interventions – practice should put in place measures to prevent crime happening in the first place, rather than after a crime has happened.
- Be optimistic that practice can effect change – practice should be positive about its ability to make a real difference to the lives of many people, and to contribute significantly to the development of society.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- Attention to social policy issues is a prerequisite for improvements to criminal justice practice. This means that improvements within criminal justice practice require a move away from a narrow focus on crime and criminality to a wider application that attends to the social policy needs of individuals, groups and communities. This makes the book of particular relevance to both criminal justice practitioners and policy makers.
- Improving criminal justice practice is desirable because even if we do not actually experience crime ourselves, improving criminal justice outcomes benefits all of us.
- Criminal justice is something that affects us not only directly, but also indirectly. As an example of this, consider the rise in cybercrimes, particularly those related to sexual images such as revenge porn. Someone who is a victim of revenge porn is a direct victim of the crime, but there are also indirect victims, most obviously friends and family. If the crime affects the victim's health and wellbeing, limiting their participation in their community, then the crime has a wider effect on society.
- We can also rationalise the improvement of criminal justice outcomes from a purely financial perspective, as £41 billion spent on public order and safety represents a spend of £112 million every day for a year.