

Walter S DeKeseredy (2000), Women, Crime and the Canadian Criminal Justice System, Anderson Publishing, Cincinnati, ISBN 0-87084-894-1

At a legal conference in the early 1980s, I was asked to introduce a plenary speaker, Walter DeKeseredy from Carleton. To the excruciating embarrassment of most everyone in the room, I repeatedly mangled the pronunciation of his last name ('Deckerdy,' 'Decksedy,' 'Deckeresedy'). I was mortified, but it didn't seem to bother Walter at all. He just smiled and delivered a great talk, revealing himself as a focused man, an excellent scholar with a social conscience and a sense of humour, who is unfailingly collegial.

In the nearly two decades since, I've frequently met up with Walter at conferences and as a visitor to his classroom. I have great respect for him and for his work, and *Women, Crime and the Canadian Criminal Justice System* will be the text in my next term's course on women and criminal justice, as other of his work has been required reading in my classes over the years. Among other benefits of directing students to his work is that his approach (and his maleness) makes it easier for male students to grasp a feminist analysis of violence against women. Female students likewise value his work, for itself and because it gets the guys to sit up and take notice.

For the study of women, crime and the Canadian criminal justice system, this efficiently comprehensive new text is ideal, replete with abundant tables that facilitate easy grasp of the thorough statistical data that informs and is informed by DeKeseredy's qualitative analyses. Boxed anecdotes and commentary on significant cases, statutes or issues gleaned from media and other sources, provide 'hot topic' examples of theory application. While focused primarily on Canada, DeKeseredy's research and analysis is relevant internationally. (He also makes clear, however, that there are national differences, and that, in particular, one cannot always generalise 'North America.')

In addition to the well-designed, highly readable text, the package comes with an Instructor's Guide, complete with glossary, examinations and discussion questions, all of which are contained on a computer disk which is also included. The text is dynamic and student-centred, his examples are entertaining, and he is compelling in showing the uses of theory in debates on sensitive issues such as capital punishment. While accessible, and appropriate as an introductory text, it is in no way simplistic, and would be of value to graduate students.

DeKeseredy's previous work has notably included groundbreaking empirical research and leading-edge theory-making on violence against women and the men who commit it (see References below). In this most recent book, he focuses on girls and women as victims but also as girls and women who have offended. These offenders have an even higher rate of prior sexual and other abuse than women in the general population. He makes this connection, effectively contextualising women who offend as women who have been violently offended. He similarly addresses other social and structural elements in the criminalisation process which put a lie to 'bad seed' theories.

In his reviews of theories which explain crime and punishment in gendered terms, and as a critical left realist, his observations are consistent with and buttress feminist analyses. Just as he concerns himself with gender, so does he examine racism and class discrimination, and the ways these three statuses are interlocked to produce severe over-representation of Black and Hispanic women in U.S. prisons, and Native and Black women in Canada. The Foreword by Meda Chesney-Lind is strong testimony to the value of this work for seasoned as well as budding scholars.

As both a fact-finder and a critical thinker, DeKeseredy first casts light on the crimes themselves. In Chapter One he covers both sensationalised and other murder by women, who constitute 13 percent of murder suspects (often against an abusive spouse), (p 5). He discusses assault by women which, like murder, declined in the 1990s, to approximately one in twelve incidents. Some women commit violent assault, just as some kill; more common assaultive behaviours by women are pushing, shoving and slapping, as well as punching, with women not usually initiating the violence (p 16). Similarly, women rarely engage in robbery; when they do, they 'typically do so with men, rarely carry weapons, and often play a secondary role in the crime' (p 18). DeKeseredy shows that women are also significantly less involved in illegal drugs than are men, and use drugs differently. Rarely convicted of white-collar crime, crimes of theft under \$5,000 (Can.) (usually the stolen goods are worth much less than that) haven't declined, and there have been increased charges for bad cheques and welfare fraud. Women have constituted approximately one third of all theft charges during the 1990s.

This is the first Canadian text on women and criminal justice to give equal time to girls and women. In Chapter Two, he confronts media-constructed myths about contemporary teen violence based on school shootings and other anomalous, violent murders by teens. DeKeseredy supports his assertions with abundant data while at the same time explaining the analytic pitfalls of using statistics uncritically. For example, in regard to the presumption of radical increases in murders by girls in the mid-1990s, he points out that in Canada in 1993, three girls under age 18 were convicted of homicide, in 1995 there were 12, and in 1996 three again (p 43). Because the base numbers are so low, any fluctuation at all radically alters the percentage; the rise (400 percent), which is a blip, is always reported vigorously, whereas the press never mentions the invariable drop (400 percent) the following year. Although, like women, girls commit significantly less crime than their male peers, they showed 'a small, steady increase in the number of girls charged for non-sexual assault from 1992 to 1996' (p 45). At the same time, DeKeseredy observes the greater likelihood of 'police officers, teachers, and the general public taking a more punitive approach to incidents that were previously dealt with informally, such as schoolyard fights and bullying' (p 45). He similarly contextualises street youth gangs with perspective on the poverty, youth unemployment and violence in the home that characterises the life experience of 'young offenders.'

Throughout the text, DeKeseredy refers to theory and the interpretation of data. In Chapter Three he compresses and critically reviews a wide array of these theories through the history of the discipline. Here he not only covers those theories that are specific to women, or to gender, but the greater number of prominent criminological theories which are presented as 'gender-blind.' As he illustrates, to be blind to difference is to prevent equity. At the same time, he offers a substantive critique of the essentialism of early radical feminism, and demonstrates the value of masculinities studies as a way of understanding gender in the context of crimes by men.

Chapter Four is a discussion of the criminal justice system itself, with a strong section on the ways by which government and the media manipulate public endorsement of harsher punishment for youth in Canada. DeKeseredy follows women's and girls' processes from the court and sentencing to prison, making a strong case for a re-thinking of penalty and carceral responses to social problems. This ability to focus on the particular within the broader penal and social landscape is one of the consistent strengths of this text. For example, in his discussion of reasons for increased incarceration of girls, he speaks to increased prosecutions for 'assault' by girls in incidents which would formerly have been treated as an 'incurability' problem (p 116), requiring home, school and community involvement rather than carceral solutions. He gives a good structuralist account of why prison populations are increasing while crime is decreasing, and the ways that First Nations people in Canada continue to be colonised by the state. He sees that this 200-year experiment is of benefit only to those who are dependent for their livelihood on the prison industrial complex, and those with a political stake in sustaining the hegemony of penal ideology.

In his final chapter (Five), DeKeseredy shows that a penal system is counter-productive when it ignores victims, and brutalises the few already-marginalised lawbreakers who are convicted and incarcerated. Solution-oriented, DeKeseredy points to means by which the incremental building and transformation of 'community,' as a collectivity of reciprocal care and responsibility, is an antidote against harmful actions by or against its members, including harmful actions by the state against scapegoated offenders.

In the mid-1990s, five new prisons for women opened in Canada. In promoting 'new directions,' DeKeseredy remarks that 'If money has not been too tight to build five new Canadian regional correctional facilities for women, then money can be found for [progressive alternatives]' (p 129). Women's and girls' involvement in illegal activity appears to be significantly related to violence by men at home and in dating situations; poverty; and, unemployment. Thus, in looking to new approaches, he focuses on reducing these structural problems rather than on women's specific offences or ways to improve prison. His very practical and detailed strategies for working against violence, poverty and unemployment are based on building community while eliminating gender inequalities.

DeKeseredy arrives at progressive interpretations through conscientious examination of undisputed facts, the reported life experience of his subjects, thorough knowledge of the relevant literature, and his own inclusive regard for his species. Instructors will want the whole package, with exam questions on disk all ready to print out. Anyone interested in women, crime and punishment who values solid and reliable research, an abundance of data, thorough documentation, a succinct review of a century of theory, well-informed analysis written clearly, and an exceptionally readable format with useful study and teaching aides, will find this text engaging.

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