

Law and Order in Australia – Rhetoric and Reality, Don Weatherburn, Federation Press, 2004, ISBN 1 86287 532 4

The author describes his aim in writing this book in the preface as being to ‘fill some of the major gaps between what the experts know about crime and what intelligent and responsible Australian policy-makers, administrators and citizens need to know’. The mission of the book is to persuade readers of the virtue and efficacy of an evidence-based approach to crime control rather than one driven by punitive impulses and short-term political calculation. It seems to me that Don Weatherburn succeeds admirably in achieving his goal.

The book is informed by an extensive and discerning knowledge of the empirical research evidence concerning crime patterns and trends and what works with respect to the prevention and control of crime. Although Australian in focus it reflects Weatherburn’s familiarity with the international literature and developments. Its clear structure and fluent style make it ideal for the interested general reader, and no less so for administrators, policy makers, politicians and academics.

It is about as comprehensive in its coverage as one could expect of a book with its goal and target audience. In the first three chapters it examines the nature and scale of Australia’s crime problem, assesses (in a rather withering fashion) the rationality of current responses, and provides an incisive overview of what we know about the causes of crime (or at least those types of crime that routinely come to the attention of the criminal justice system). This is followed by an assessment of the role in turn of the police and criminal sanctions in controlling and preventing crime. The spotlight is then put on prevention measures, both those that are effective in reducing criminal opportunities and those that may reduce the flow of motivated offenders. The final chapter examines some of the strategic policy issues posed by the attempt to develop a more rational strategy for the prevention and control of crime in Australia.

Weatherburn makes a powerful case for a less criminal justice-centred approach to crime prevention whilst recognising the continuing important role of criminal justice agencies and their potential to prevent and control crime more effectively. For those sceptical or fatalistic about more effective crime reduction policies the arguments, the evidence and the many telling examples of workable prevention measures presented in the book amount to a highly persuasive case that the knowledge exists for governments to do a whole lot better and perhaps to live up more closely to their own depressingly repetitive electoral rhetoric concerning the need to take crime seriously. Detailed endnotes do not intrude on the essential arguments and the flow of the book but provide plentiful sources and additional reading for those who want to follow them up.

Apart from the quite comprehensive and coherent tour through the evidence of what works in crime prevention and control, there are telling criticisms of existing crime prevention arrangements and strategies in Australia, a very useful discussion of the impediments to more effective policies (p 162–71) and the clarification of how the adoption of a more rational approach would play out in terms of the division of responsibilities in a federal political system. The attention to both the detail of crime prevention measures and the policy framework and instruments needed to implement them represents a substantial advance over much existing crime prevention thinking and practice in Australia, with its

well-intentioned but often woolly emphasis on 'community' crime prevention, local committees, community safety audits and short-term projects. Responsibility is commonly devolved downwards, to local government or community organisations, that lack the resources, the access to necessary information, the skills base and the political 'clout' with mainstream government agencies to be really effective. The problems to be tackled are often not defined with clarity, precision or a sense of what is feasible, goals are not well-defined and outcomes are uncertain.

It might be said, however, in response to this clear-sighted analysis that present policies or something like them is what might be expected in a political landscape that oscillates between neo-conservatism and neo-liberalism, between tapping the punitive popular nerve with ever bolder claims on behalf of tough state crime control policies (zero tolerance, mandatory sentencing, and so on) and seeking to 'downsize' government by redistributing responsibilities for security to individuals, households, communities and local authorities. The neo-conservative dimension is a reminder of the continuing validity of Emile Durkheim's argument over a hundred years ago that the community reaction to crime is often governed less by a desire to do something about offenders (prevent, deter, reform, etc) than to do something for itself, to passionately dissociate itself from the crime and all that it represents by way of a violation of the collective life of the community.

These considerations do not invalidate the approach of this book or its appeal to rational, evidence-based crime control policies, but they suggest there are layers of complexity to crime control which ensure that it is unlikely to ever be simply transparent to knowledge or the evidence.

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