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Review of *Crime Prevention at a Crossroads**

by

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Book: *Crime Prevention at a Crossroads*

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INTRODUCTION AND STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Crime Prevention at a Crossroads is a book edited by Steven P. Lab that brings together a diverse group of articles centering on crime prevention. The articles are organized so that the reader will be exposed to the history of crime prevention, some of its pertinent issues, and a number of ideas concerning the path the field of crime prevention needs to take in the future. Lab provides a one-page introduction to each chapter in an attempt to provide a smooth transition from chapter to chapter.

The book begins with an introductory article by Steven Lab, in which he reviews the history of crime prevention strategies, and touches on some of the issues facing crime prevention today. Lab states that although the term "crime prevention" is relatively new, many of the techniques and strategies used to prevent crime are age old. Lab notes that the trend today is back towards reliance on the general citizenry, and away from the police, courts, and corrections as the sole providers of crime prevention.

Lab stresses that there are five challenges for crime prevention in the future: theoretical competition, program implementation, political reality, poor evaluation, and displacement and diffusion. Accordingly, most crime prevention programs are based on bits and pieces of a number of theories, and encounter a sizeable gap

between theory and practice. For example, the theory behind neighborhood watch programs can never be achieved with only two percent of the residents in a community participating. Moreover, Lab argues that the policies today tend to focus on the immediate symptoms (crime and victimization) rather than the root problems (poverty, inequality and powerlessness).

Lab further contends that prevention programs have typically suffered from poor evaluation in which the outcomes and impacts of the programs have been ignored. He states that crime prevention has now come to a crossroads and that we must decide the next path to take, and this path must be based on an informed choice. He states that the chapters in this book will present a number of different paths that we should consider. **[End page 130]**

REVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In Chapter Two, Ronald Clarke and Ross Homel revise Clarke's original list of 12 techniques of situational prevention to include ideas of alternative research performed on the topic. Specifically, they expand on their techniques to include the guilt, shame, and embarrassment that take place when one commits a crime. Thus, they add elements from social control and neutralization theory in their revision.

Similarly, in the third chapter, author Marcus Felson attempts to link together Hirschi's control theory with the General Theory of Crime. He does so by proposing a communications compromise using an ordinal scale to show that when people's own self control decreases, their likelihood of responding to the control of others will also decrease. Felson concludes that most people do not compel the toughest crime prevention measures and can be controlled through simpler, less costly techniques. Although well written and interesting, this article tends to drift away from the general themes of the book, and from the rest of the chapters.

Paul and Patricia Brantingham team to bring the reader back to the main theme of crime prevention strategies in Chapter Four. Moreover, their article also concentrates on a facet of crime that crime prevention strategies have often neglected: fear of crime. The authors stress that crime prevention strategies must focus on methods that bring down both crime and fear of crime, noting that the two are not interchangeable. For instance, the authors use

strategic lighting as an example, arguing that good lighting may decrease fear of crime, while at the same time increasing some types of crime. They suggest that drug dealer's desire well lit places for better awareness of the location of police, while a thief needs light to see what he or she is doing. While such claims are certainly debatable, the authors do well in questioning prevention strategies that have always been accepted at face value.

Chapter Five continues the theme of challenging long held assumptions as Ralph Taylor criticizes prior research suggesting that incivilities are a key factor in predicting people's fear of crime. He selected a stratified sample of 24 small commercial centers in St. Paul, Minnesota, and interviewed merchants and local residents about their perceptions of the incivilities in their area. In a nutshell, Taylor found that incivilities were secondary in influencing people's fear of crime. Rather, a person's perceived incivilities and the differences between victimization within neighborhoods were more significant factors.

Taylor suggests that we should focus less on trying to bring down actual incivilities, and more on increasing communication and trust between residents in close proximity to each other, which, in turn, will bring down the perceived incivilities. Taylor's ideas are partly in line with those researching social disorganization theory today. Indeed, a number of previous researchers have also noted that people who perceive their areas to have high crime and incivilities tend to keep more to themselves **[End page 131]** and have less involvement and stake in their community ([Greenberg, 1985](#); [LaGrange, Ferraro, and Supancic, 1992](#); [Taylor and Covington, 1993](#); [Skogan, 1986](#)). On the other hand, Taylor's ideas are in direct contrast with those of social disorganization theorists, who have always assumed a strong correlation between actual and perceived incivilities.

Dennis Polumbo, Jennifer Ferguson and Judy Stein are the authors of the book's sixth chapter, which examines the conditions necessary for successful community crime prevention. Polumbo, et al., examined two projects in Arizona to better understand some of these conditions. First, they examined Project Intervention, a life quality improvement project intended to assist residents with housing assistance, job training, and substance abuse education. In order to examine this project, the authors interviewed 72 people in the six cities in the study, including project directors, coordinators,

program clients, and police officers. The authors found that Project Intervention had some success because it focused on multifaceted crime prevention programs rather than focusing only on one issue. Moreover, in the cities where the program was most successful, residents felt a much stronger sense of community cohesion.

The second project that the authors examined was the Community Partnership of Phoenix. Rather than focusing on rendering services to the communities, this project attempted to prevent crime via the use of community empowerment. In other words, the community is allowed to identify the factors causing problems in their neighborhood. This community assessment is then followed by, or in conjunction with, forums on the subjects and steering committee meetings to discuss the assessment. In order to assess this project, the authors of this study conducted interviews with forum participants and attended the forums and steering committee meetings.

The authors found that several factors were critical in order for a community participation project to be successful. The first factor is that the community members must have a strong belief in what they are doing, and must be in agreement about the goals of the project. The second factor is that the community must be involved. For instance, a problem hindering the success of this project was that there was sparse involvement by community members, probably because of poor advertisement of the program by organizers. The authors conclude the chapter by making several conclusions and recommendations for community crime prevention.

Chapters Seven and Eight turn their attention to a specific type of crime prevention: crime prevention in schools. First, Chapter Seven focuses on the victimization and crime prevention on college campuses. In undertaking this study, the authors, Bonnie Fisher, John Sloan, Francis Cullen, and Chunmeng Lu performed a random sample of 3,472 undergraduate and graduate students in 1993. As to the occurrence and type of crimes on campus, they found that students most commonly experienced theft, with 11 percent of students reporting being a victim of larceny. Moreover, most on-campus victimizations were in the students' living quarters and in a classroom building. Specifically, personal and violent crimes were more likely to take **[End page 132]** place in the students' living quarters, while theft was more likely to occur in the classroom buildings.

As far as crime prevention efforts, the authors found that the students rarely were involved in any measures to prevent crime. The most common types of crime prevention methods offered to students on campus included the placement of security guards in their residence, card key access, and deadbolt locks. The study found that few schools offered crime watch programs or self-defense programs, with schools generally offering after dark on-campus escort services and emergency telephones.

While Fisher, et al.'s study focused on crime on college campuses, Steven Lab and Richard Clarke examined victimization patterns of in-school victimization of junior and senior high school students. They surveyed 11,085 students in grades seven through twelve in Lucas County, Ohio, and found that forty percent of the student body had been victims of theft at school, while, respectively, 13 and 12 percent had been assaulted and robbed. Moreover, they found fear of crime to be high in their sample, with it predictably being highest among seventh and eighth graders and lowest for 11th and 12th graders.

Lab and Clark suggest that the manner in which students react to their victimization is usually inappropriate, and that we need to encourage students to prevent crime in more productive manners. For instance, students must be encouraged not to skip school or carry weapons in avoidance of crime victimization. Also, limits must be placed on law and order approaches such as searches and metal detection devices. Such efforts are counterproductive to the objectives of school, and may negatively impact the learning experience of students. Rather, crime prevention efforts centering on alternative strategies such as student and parent involvement must be encouraged.

In Chapter Nine, Tim Hope offers yet another recommendation for better crime prevention, this one focusing on aggregate level solutions. Hope focuses on the destructive force that economic inequality, poverty, an overabundance of rental housing, and problematic demographic structures (single parent families, etc) have on a community. He argues that the problems are generally community wide, and that social change is necessary in order to achieve any resolution. He offers a few ideas on how to combat problems at the macro level, such as the welfare solution, and structural change.

The book concludes with a chapter by Paul Lavrakas concerning the ability, or lack thereof, of crime prevention efforts to compete with "get tough" strategies in the political arena. Lavrakas argues that get tough strategies make extremely good political tools for politicians when dealing with the uninformed public. But, he also contends that part of the problem is that the politicians themselves are uninformed on the subject of crime. Indeed, the reviewer of this book has often thought of surveying politicians about their knowledge of basic criminological and criminal justice theory and policy, with the idea that crucial criminal justice decisions are often made by those with little knowledge on the subject area. **[End page 133]**

Lavrakas argues that one manner in which we can change the current system is through the media. Specifically, the media must become more educated on criminal justice issues, and must move beyond its focus on crime and crime prevention as a tool to sell papers/programs. In other words, they must move beyond the catchy stories of crime in "cold blood" and get tough strategies used to combat crime. Lavrakas considers these stories as "lazy journalism." Moreover, this coverage causes the general public to get a skewed view of the strategies available to politicians, and allows politicians to continue to use reactive measures to their political advantage. Lavrakas concludes by suggesting that scholars must take a more active role in changing the existing system, particularly in the education of the media on crime and crime prevention.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the pros and cons of this book, it should be recognized that the individual chapters are well written, and they appear to have been examined with much scrutiny before they were placed in this book. Indeed, each chapter provides an argument or research that is based on clear theoretical underpinnings and a thorough review of the literature. Perhaps the main drawback of the book is that the chapters could have been organized or brought together a little better. Perhaps two or three chapters could have been brought together in sections according to themes such as environmental crime prevention, crime prevention in schools, prevention of fear of crime, etc. Instead, the chapters are loosely placed together, and tend to jump around from topic to topic.

Looking at the book as a whole, it certainly brings some topics to the forefront that have generally been neglected in basic crime prevention books. Thus, it is definitely a worthy read for a researcher, particularly one interested in crime prevention. The book probably would be more appropriate for a graduate than undergraduate course. This is primarily because it is edited, and assumes that the reader has some pre-existing background with crime prevention literature. On the other hand, the chapters in the book are concisely written and most of them provide a review of their topic area in the beginning of the chapter. Thus, it could also be recommended for advanced undergraduate criminology and criminal justice students.

ENDNOTE

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