Life Beyond Crime: What Do Those at Risk of Offending, Prisoners and Ex-offenders Need to Learn?

edited by Paul Crane
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Reviewed by David Dorson

This is a book in which more than 50 people from many different backgrounds in the UK give their answers to the question in the title about what those who have been in prison or are at risk of committing a crime need to learn. I return below later to the problems in that title. The contributors come from many different backgrounds. Some have been prisoners themselves. A few are academics. The largest group is people from the voluntary sector who have provided programs or services to prisoners or ex-prisoners.

Not surprisingly, the contributions also vary a great deal. Almost all are quite brief – as short as one page, an average of five, and the longest at 11 pages. While this approach has the virtue of allowing many people to express an opinion, it has the problem that the positions are not expressed in much depth.

Another result of so many independent contributions is that the same ideas come up repeatedly. By the time I had read 20 or so, I was tiring of the repetition. Many contributions tell the reader that the target group needs more formal education, more qualifications, better interpersonal skills, better anger management, stronger family ties, and so on. All quite likely true but also trite. None of this tells us anything we already did not know. The key question might be not so much what people need to learn, but what can we do that would help people learn those things and apply their learning. That is not discussed much less.

Many of the contributions are testimonials to the programs the authors run – employment skills, arts, group therapy or gardening. These programs seem interesting and promising, but anyone who knows the history of criminal justice knows that we have decades of promising experiments and pilot projects which are acclaimed as successful, then never scaled up, and in most cases abandoned when the 'special' funding or energy of volunteers runs out. This appears to be true in the UK; it is certainly true in Canada and the United States.

To be sure, we can and should learn about how to improve public services through experimentation, but there is no instance in which experimentation

alone, without systematic change, has led to a significant and lasting improvement. In that sense, one can find this book depressing rather than encouraging. It seems that we know a lot about what we could do to make things better, we just are not willing to do it in a lasting way. Apparently, we prefer to stay with he same failed practices. As Nick Moss writes, "We wouldn't just be pointing to the good works of an exhausted few, struggling to keep going in the face of institutions that keep on failing". In making that comment I do not mean to denigrate in any way the effort, energy, and enthusiasm of many of the contributors, who have clearly put plenty of sweat equity into their efforts and deserve a better fate.

A problem with this book is, as suggested at the start, the lumping together of those "at risk of offending, prisoners and ex-offenders" as a single group that presumably all have similar needs – even though the introduction, by Gerard Lemos, reminds the reader that this is not likely to be true. Despite that caution, while a few of the contributors take issue with this vast simplification, it still pervades the whole book.

Yes, many prisoners have, for example, substance abuse issues or mental health challenges – but many do not. Many prisoners have low levels of education or come from very difficult backgrounds, but a considerable number do not. When we treat any large group as homogeneous, we will necessarily condemn a large proportion to receiving services or treatments that are not appropriate to them and are quite likely to be counterproductive. I saw many prisoners forced into doing school programs because they could not produce a high school completion certificate; many of them either did not need this program or were quite unwilling to put any effort into it.

Not surprisingly given the approach of the book, most of the contributions focus on the individuals and how they need to change. Indeed, that view is implicit in the title of the book. Yet most of those who study criminal justice take the view that social factors are at least as important as individual ones. The biases so embedded in our legal and criminal justice systems lead to some kinds of people being much more subject to criminal sanction than others, largely unrelated to the actual harm done to other people. This point is mentioned very briefly in the introduction, but not much after that.

We will never make significant progress if we approach these issues from the standpoint that the onus for change rests mostly on the people who are caught up in the system. To take just one example, the life-long negative effects of criminal records on people's ability to get housing or employment

is a gigantic risk factor yet these sanctions seem to be getting worse rather than better. There is a saying in the training literature that it is pointless to send a changed person back into an unchanged environment, yet that is what our prison system does.

It is worth mentioning a few of the chapters that do take a very different stance. Peter Dawson writes well about learning, Corin Morgan-Armstrong about families, Claire O'Sullivan about high security prisons, and Jane Slater about sex offences – a group who are especially vilified and stigmatized despite much better than average post-prison outcomes.

I commend the sponsors, editors, and contributors for their work; they clearly all have good intentions and many of them are doing some great work. Unfortunately, it is hard to see how all those individual projects or this book will help make the system one that actually does work to reduce crime and help people lead better lives.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

David Dorson is the pen name of someone who previously served a sentence in a federal penitentiary in Canada. He writes about this experience in *Lawyers' Daily* (www.thelawyersdaily.ca).