Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS


In recent years there have been a number of books on firearms, violence, and gun control. This book, the most recent of these, is the best so far.

Although the primary audience is scholarly criminologists, Kleck also hoped to reach a “general non-scholar audience.” (p. xv.) Unfortunately, the book is too long, too expensive ($59.95), and too technical for such an audience. Although some of the technical material is placed in appendices, general audiences are frequently confronted by material for more sophisticated readers. For instance:

All three dependent variable were binary, so some form of probit was generally used to estimate equations. Ordinary least square (OLS) regression was used for primary screening... before applying the more computationally expensive maximum likelihood estimation technique. (pp. 177-78)

Part I of the book covers some of the ideology, politics, and propaganda involved in the controversy, the ownership and use of guns, and specialized types of weapons and ammunition. After examining the available evidence, Kleck debunks the current assault rifle/weapon scare and concludes that they are rarely used by criminals (including drug dealers and gangs), are almost never used to kill law enforcement officers, and that most semiautomatics cannot be easily converted to fully automatic fire.

In Part II, he discusses guns and self-defense, violent crime, suicide, and accidents. After reviewing the literature and presenting the results of his own statistical analysis, Kleck concludes that “the assumption that general gun availability positively affects the frequency and average seriousness of violent crimes is not supported.” (p. 203) He also notes that we need to assess the net gains or losses

of gun control policies and take into account the possible detrimental effects of weapon substitution and lessening the possible crime control benefits of general gun ownership.2

The third part of the book deals with types of gun regulation, public opinion, and the impact of gun control on violence. Kleck concludes that only a few gun laws under certain circumstances appear to have any significant impact on violent crime. There is also a preliminary analysis of the effects of Florida’s 1987 liberalized permit-to-carry law. Contrary to expectations, the state was not flooded with applications. In Dade County, the most violent county in the state, a six-fold increase in the number of permits did not result in a single known case of a permittee committing an act of violence during a three-month period.

Although Kleck shows how much of the thinking about gun control is superficial, simplistic and not supported by good evidence, and is obviously skeptical about the effects of gun control, he concludes that the available evidence does support the possible effectiveness of certain types of firearms laws. While opposing controls aimed at the general population, he supports federal strategies aimed at high risk population segments such as those convicted of a felony or any violent crime. Kleck recommends a federal “instant records check” for all gun buyers, but opposes a waiting period (as in the “Brady Bill”) as having “no measurable value.” (p. 434) Also supported are federal laws requiring that all private gun transfers be routed through a licensed dealer.

Although the book is heavy reading, there are some points that are made in humorous fashion. After noting that Britain’s rates of non-gun homicide, including killings with hands and feet, are also lower than the U.S. rates, Kleck points out that no one has been foolish enough to infer that these lower non-gun rates are attributable to the “British having fewer hands and feet than Americans . . . .” (p. 190) In discussing the theory that the “gun lobby” thwarts the will of the people, he notes that there is much support among Americans for banning boxing, and that “[p]erhaps the powerful boxing lobby ‘thwarted the will of the people.’” (p. 366) The sarcasm illustrates Kleck’s contention that there is not much “wisdom” in the conventional wisdom used to support most gun control proposals.

It is obvious that a tremendous amount of work was put into

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this book. In addition to providing comprehensive and valuable critique and synthesis of the existing literature, it also contains the results of some of the best (and previously unpublished) original empirical research. Among these are city-level, cross-sectional studies of the relationship between gun ownership on the one hand, and violent crime rates, suicides and fatal gun accidents on the other. The 170 largest cities were covered for the years 1979-1981. Five indicators of gun ownership were used and there were 37 control variables. No prior study has utilized so many indicators or controls.

Additionally, there are numerous tables and an extremely valuable twenty-eight page list of references. (pp. 477-505) This book will be the new starting point for everyone interested in the topic.

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WOMEN, PRISON, AND CRIME. BY Jocelyn M. Pollock-Byrne.

Pollock-Byrne begins her book with a question, "why another book on women's prisons?" (p.ix) The diffidence, though, is misplaced. The problem of female crime and female imprisonment lies at the core of the feminist challenge to traditional criminology. It is now conceded that crime is predominantly a male preserve, a phenomenon which demands further explanation. So does the flipside of this "new" insight: how do we account for the apparent absence of women from crime? Implicit in this question is a challenge to answer the pragmatic policy concern: what should we do with the relatively small number of women filling up our prisons. Pollock-Byrne's book dealing with the development of female criminality, the history of women's prisons, analysis of women prisoners and how they are treated, the roles of correctional staff, and legal issues confronting women, therefore, warrants attention.

Understandably this text, designed for beginners, shies away from offering solutions, concentrating instead on identifying the research data and the policy questions requiring more considered thought. The author's aim is to gather in the various threads of writing on these topics and weave together a "cohesive, comprehensive tapestry describing women's prisons today and the women who live and work within their walls." (p. ix) The handiwork is informed by the feminist critique of previous criminological endeavors and adheres to the basic principles of feminist analysis in orienting research to fill this theoretical and policy lacuna. The difficulty, however, is that there are inherent paradoxes in the application of feminist principles to the issue of female crime and imprisonment which still elude consistent approach.

As always with gender issues, there has, and continues to be, confusion between social and biological explanations for "female behavior." Traditional criminology regarded women as more submissive by nature, their crimes, when they did commit them, marked by their weakness and sexuality, yet hidden through their natural proclivity for deceit. The crimes of women were thought to lack the creative daring of their male counterparts.

Yet, as Pollock-Byrne argues, more recent theories of the socio-economic causes of crime have scarcely displaced the prejudice.
The stereotype has changed little; the recognition that the crimes that women commit are a direct outcome of their more limited resources and opportunities is just a socio-economic analog of biological determinants. Yet “female” crimes such as shoplifting, forgery, and passing bad checks, as well as involvement in drug and alcohol-related crime, present different implications for both the treatment of women in the criminal justice system and, more broadly, in the political arena. At the very least, it requires greater attention to the issue of income support and security for women and, even if they are jailed, the development programs which increase their economic independence upon release. Such “innovations” have been lacking. As a matter of practice, women have been incarcerated in greater numbers. Further, once inside, “treatment” programs tend “to be disorganized, fragmented, and without clear direction.” (p. 32)

It is unlikely, however, that recent feminist theoretical endeavors trying to account for why women do not commit crime will be of much assistance. Feminist interest in the “socialization” or social control of women as a possible crime prevention strategy is potentially counterproductive for female felons. If women are usually able to desist from crime and are “successfully” deterred from offending behavior, there is little hope for changing the time-honored stereotype of the female prisoner as a curiosity and an affront to “good” womanhood. Indeed, it may well further entrench discrimination in the sentencing of women by the courts.

Nor is this theory helpful for improving the prospects of better programs and services for women inside prisons. A crude application of social control theory lends itself to programs which perpetuate gender stereotypes. Sewing, cosmetology and other limited vocational opportunities for female inmates can be rationalized on the grounds that “femaleness” and the cultivation of “good” woman models is the road to minimizing recidivism.

Pollock-Byrne is not insensitive to the dilemmas which social control theory presents. However, her own feminist approach, at least in part, exacerbates the potential for gender stereotyping. Throughout, the focus of the book is, quite properly, on emphasizing the importance of understanding women’s own experience of imprisonment in order to accommodate their own perceptions of their needs. Here, as elsewhere, there is the problem of how far to take this notion and to what extent should we legitimize “false consciousness.” There is no doubt need for better gynecological and obstetric services for women prisoners (p. 178) and, because an increasing number of inmates are mothers, for programs that help women learn better parenting skills or that enhance visitation time with
their children. (p. 94) From here though, it could be but a short step to re-casting “just deserts” punishment for female offenders as “rehabilitation” aimed at arresting the perpetuation of the next generation of the “dangerous criminal class.” There are unconscious shades of this in Pollock-Byrne’s own concluding line of the book where she exhorts,

Corrections should punish wrongdoing, but it is even more important to help women offenders be strong, productive, and healthy so they can encourage their children (if they have them) to be the same. (p. 189)

Linking women’s fate to that of their children may be realistic but perilous. It means that women are viewed first as mothers and only second as defendants deserving fair treatment and “just” sentencing. The question is whether their status as mothers should be allowed to determine the fate of women in the criminal justice system. For example, would substance-abusing mothers be sentenced to longer or shorter prison terms compared to their childless sisters?

The imprisonment of women has always been problematic for both male decision-makers and the feminist movement. It is appropriate, therefore, to redirect research endeavors to focus on the subjective impact of imprisonment for women and men. In one of the best chapters of the book, Pollock-Byrne discusses the richness of female sub-cultural adaptations to prison life. Although research has been dominated by prurient curiosity in female homosexuality within institutions (p. 130), the patterns she and others have observed are far more complex and interesting. The relationships of women in prison, according to Pollock-Byrne,

Seem[ed] to be defined as either familial or connubial; women formed pseudofamilies, with parental and sibling roles in an extended family system, or they entered lesbian liaisons, sometimes formalized by marriages, complete with mock ministers and marriage certificates. (p. 143)

The matrix becomes even more illuminating when Pollock-Byrne discusses her own research on female correctional staff and inmate relationships. Women prisoners seem to demand more correctional staff, and female officers, in turn, interact and “maternalize” their roles in dealings with their charges. Good feminist analysis of this sort highlights the inadequacies of continuing to use outdated male inmate codes to measure prisonization (p. 132) and one-dimensional models to understand relationships between the guards and the guarded.

Here too though, there are dangers. Pollock-Byrne’s careful
readings of the research literature could, implicitly, be read as providing evidence of some innate quality of female offending behavior and adaptation to prisoners and female officers alike. It is of little avail to protest that these “differences” between male and female prisoners and their warders are due to socialization rather than biology. For policy-makers, the subtlety may well be lost. Without theory, the description is open to manipulation from any pragmatic policy which is in vogue. At one extreme, it could be used to justify a return to mixed-sex prisons or, alternatively, for highly gender-segregated models of custodial care where men watch men and women are confined to watching other women. Single sex prisons and equal employment opportunities for female correctional staff are recently-won battles. There is always the problem, however, that without good theory, all “victories” may well be temporary. This is but one example of the unease which plagues all feminist researchers and activists. In this complex arena there is always a nagging suspicion that our efforts, may be misguided. Pollock-Byrne correctly asks,

Has current litigation, focused on equal protection, served the best interests of female prisoners, or has it engendered the few beneficial aspects of the different philosophy that seemed uniquely to characterize the prison for women. (pp. 5-6)

The history of the women’s movement in female prison reform cast the die of this ambivalence.

The women who championed the cause of female prisoners were not the equivalent of women’s rights advocates. Rather, they believed that women had a special and unique ability to help their “fallen sisters” achieve the purity that all women should possess. (p. 43)

These early reformers won important concessions, not the least of which was shelter for women from continued sexual exploitation without and within “male” prisons. At the same time, the legacy of these “humanitarian” endeavors has been more vigorous control over work, training, religion, routine, manners, and surveillance of female prisoners. (p. 46) The subtleties of social control of women within prisons continue to confound researchers and policymakers.

The personal costs of this benevolence are well documented in the literature. Women are regarded as more difficult to handle, they “go off” more often than men and engage in more violent self-destructiveness and madness than men. (p. 87) Women seem to do “harder time.” This, of course, despite the seemingly nicer ambience of female prisons. It seems to count for little that women’s prisons are typically more homey with cells like rooms, curtains and bedspreads standard issue, and more flexibility in uniform and dress
codes. Pollock-Byrne documents, but does not explain, the paradox.

Foucault, though, would have little trouble accounting for this benevolence. The human face of prison reform could simply be seen as merely an example of self-preservation of the prison as a viable institution. It is clear that chivalry would not long tolerate women being left in appalling conditions, yet every incremental “reform” increases the appeal of what most of us regard as an unsatisfactory sentencing option, particularly for women. Feminists are perennially caught in, on the one hand, their pursuit of justice and humanitarian treatment of the individual offender and, on the other, their championing of more general political objectives for female offenders and women in general. Pollock-Byrne’s book documents these dilemmas but understandably fails to answer them. Feminist theory and practice, accordingly, is still challenged by the problem of women who commit crimes and what we do about them.

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