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# Community justice in Australia: Developing knowledge, skills and values for working with offenders in the community [Book review]

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# Community justice in Australia: Developing knowledge, skills and values for working with offenders in the community

Brian Stout

Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, 2017

ISBN 978-1-74331-888-1, pp. 302, paperback, NZD55.00

**C**ommunity Justice in Australia is an excellent and accessible book that provides a helpful description of community justice in Australia as well as covering research, theory and practice skills relating to community justice more generally. This seems essential reading for those involved in criminal justice in Australia, particularly those working to address offending behaviour. It has wider relevance, as the Australian context will be of interest to an international audience, particularly in relation to innovations and topics concerning the indigenous population. However, its relevance goes beyond this, as the book includes a number of sections that engage with contemporary research and theory on criminal and community justice which will be of interest to academics, practitioners and policy makers around the world.

The book opens with a helpful overview of definitions of *community justice*. In my view, *community* is a term that is often used to make certain policies or interventions seem more positive, friendly or palatable. In the Scottish context in which I am based, this is exemplified by Community Payback Orders replacing most forms of community sentences, and by the recent Community Justice (Scotland) Act 2016. My take is that references to community justice often really mean *criminal justice in the community* where *community* is shorthand for *not in prison*.

As Stout explains, community justice is much more than simply those activities that occur outside of prisons, and involves real engagement with community dimensions,

community engagement in the development and operation of responses to crime, as well as broadening into notions of social justice.

The book touches on many issues that are interesting, inspiring and, at times, scary. I was interested in the various definitions of imprisonment given in legislation in New South Wales, which included forms of restriction in the community (p. 34). In my mind, these stretched the notion of prison in ways that could be particularly misleading to the public. The Koori Courts constitute an indigenous version of a justice response that was particularly interesting (p. 43), involving less formal settings and including indigenous elders, making the process more culturally appropriate and demonstrating more successful outcomes. The Collingwood Neighbourhood Justice Centre in Melbourne was also a vision of justice that could be replicated in other jurisdictions (p. 44). It seems to take a holistic approach to responding to crime, aiming to be proactive, involving citizens and aiming to focus on community dimensions related to crime. I was shocked to see that boot camps were used relatively recently and endorsed by the Australian Government, given that the evidence is that these are generally ineffective at addressing offending behaviour and can even increase offending rates (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005).

A key issue that came up throughout the book related to the situation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. This raised concerns about the criminal justice response,

particularly due to the over-representation of people from these backgrounds who are drawn into the criminal justice system or imprisoned. It was helpful to view this from a community justice standpoint, including how responses could consider indigenous concerns and perspectives. The critique of restorative justice was particularly interesting, as this is often seen as a way of bringing back indigenous responses to crime, or responding to offending in culturally appropriate ways, yet this is not necessarily the case. Moreover, the evidence presented by Stout suggested that the restorative justice responses tended not to reduce re-offending, which departs from evidence in some other jurisdictions and meta-analyses (e.g., Strang, Sherman, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, & Ariel, 2013).

The book includes a great, critical discussion regarding notions of risk and risk assessment, which would be of interest to criminal justice practitioners anywhere. The discussion on *pro-social management* was particularly interesting to me, and involved the argument that the management of community justice services ought to mirror some of the ways in which such services engage with service users, treating colleagues with respect and working constructively towards resolutions. The final chapter on practice skills is particularly

good, illustrated with a case study and bringing together evidence and theory on effective practice skills. Again, this chapter will have relevance to community justice practitioners in any jurisdiction.

I would have liked the book to move beyond current practice, and to have developed a vision for what community justice *could* be. This would be more than good quality criminal justice in the community, but rather co-produced community justice that embodies a high level of engagement and partnership, and that engages with the issues of risk aversion, indigenous rights, and equality that are touched on at various points throughout the book.

Overall, this is an excellent and comprehensive book, clearly essential reading for community justice practitioners in Australia, but with relevance to those working in the field in any jurisdiction around the world.

### References

- Latessa, E. J., & Lowenkamp, C. (2005). What works in reducing recidivism. *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, 3, 521–535.
- Strang, H., Sherman, L. W., Mayo-Wilson, E., Woods, D., & Ariel, B. (2013). *Restorative justice conferencing (RJC) using face-to-face meetings of offenders and victims: Effects on offender recidivism and victim satisfaction. A systematic review*. The Campbell Collaboration. doi:10.4073/csr.2013.12

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