

Book Review

Youth Gangs and Community Intervention: Research, Practice and Evidence

Edited by: Robert J. Chaskin

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Youth Gangs and Community Intervention: Research, Practice and Evidence is an edited collection of ten scholarly articles that serves as an excellent introduction to the field of youth gang research and community policing concerns within the sociologically informed tradition of cultural criminology. The text is edited by sociologist Robert Chaskin, who is an Associate Professor at The University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration. It features a collection of articles that range in topic from critical analyses of the “suppression” approach to crime control, which involves re-active forms of policing and punishment of gang related activities and individuals, to “community” based approaches which emphasize the pro-active efficacy of intervening on youth gang subcultures in a way that offers reorientation, direction and life-chance alternatives.

In addition to serving as an introduction it offers new knowledge on this important topic of study within criminology, in particular it examines the dual role played by ‘suppression’ and ‘community-based’ techniques of crime control and prevention. It is important to note that the topic of study is of relevance beyond academic criminology and remains an ongoing concern within urban life and the pressing societal conditions and challenges facing North American urban life entering the next millennium. It is also important to note that such areas of policing the public realm have taken on new significance in a post 9/11 age where the security mandate of the state in its anti-terror practices has re-defined various deviantized groups as terrorists and as such has placed the role of policing in an entirely new context.

The book emerged out of a series of papers delivered at The University of Chicago in honour of eminent social work scholar and activist Irving A. Spergel, whose work on youth-gang research and policy is remarkable. In that regard the book honours the line of inquiry developed by Spergel in

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exploring the promise and role of community intervention in youth gang study and social practice. The book is primarily a response to, and an extension of the sociological models put forth by Irving A. Spergel, however it has much more to offer than simply being an otherwise fine extension of this particular tradition of youth gang research.

In terms of its usefulness, its quality and significance this book does well on many counts. In its presentation of new information and new studies on the sociology of youth gang studies it provides the reader with contemporary findings that are highly relevant in their focus on community based forms of crime control intervention. This 'community intervention focus' has been of such significance with policing practice and studies that it has now come to occupy its own status as a paradigm within academic and professional criminology. This volume exemplifies the community policing tradition quite well and serves as an excellent entry into this field of study, and to Spergel's work as well.

Youth Gangs and Community Intervention: Research, Practice and Evidence, additionally provides the reader with an excellent introductory referencing of many principal thinkers on gang studies from the classical American tradition in sociology. A number of the papers include critical commentaries and evaluations of popularized theories about gang formations and the reality of crime rates – a highly politicized aspect of criminological sociology that often forms a part of the public realm in terms of social policy and public discourse. I was pleased to see in the article "An Examination of the Role of CeaseFire, the Chicago Police, Project Safe Neighborhoods, and Displacement in the Reduction in Homicide in Chicago in 2004", authored by Ransford *et al.*, that critical attention had been paid, if only briefly, to the widely held idea popularized in *Freakonomics* (2005), that abortion rates had a direct effect on crime rates. In this sense and many others the text is timely, relevant and in tune with the larger discourses that pervade the youth-crime-gang field of study within sociological criminology. Another important point of focus throughout the text is the detailed attention given to defining and giving numerous examples of what is actually meant by "community". The term 'community' has become a buzz-word in many criminological circles and beyond. In a time when ethnic and national identities are once again becoming the focus of a re-charged identity politics in North America and abroad it is important to specifically define what this term means and how it is relevant to real-world actualities. Spergel's own article, 'Community Gang Programs: Theory, Models, and Effectiveness, explores the vicissitudes of community in terms of 'social intervention – mobilization- opportunities provision' and more. The theme of a community-based approach is also emphasized in the article by Butts and Gouvis Roman and almost all of the articles feature community intervention approaches in their analyses of the problem of urban street gangs. What is less apparent in the book is a critique of what the contributors refer to as 'suppression' techniques. Although the theme is addressed in so far as it is compared to community intervention strategies there is no clearly delineated critique of the new forms of social control that have formed part of the para-militarization of urban policing in the post 9/11 era. In such a context policing street crime has in many cases become conflated with policing terrorism and this has taken place with noticeable consequences to those individuals and groups deemed to be a social threat who have now come to be re-defined as 'terroristic'. Certainly there is mention of the STEP Act but not any detailed discussion of 'suppression' techniques of crime control in terms of the intensification of the repressive state apparatus. That the book is missing this socially repressive element of the crime-law&order-safety-security nexus is not necessarily a fault with the book, since the book delineates its own explicit area of inquiry which is sound and focused on the theme of its title.

Another reason that this book is important is that it continues to explore the possibilities of the

forms of community intervention that are possible and necessary to create new realities for the many youth who become gangsterized before they have a chance at a more promising life. Clearly suppression techniques (and other repressive practices) will not do in a society where opportunities are scarce and life chances are unequal. We need to push the boundaries of the social imagination to dream up and implement new policies and practices that offer real change rather than mere hope, and offer direct pathways to new lives rather than further challenges. The extent to which this is possible depends on the formation of new social institutions that fill the gap that exists in a society of destroyed families, possessive individualistic social values and ever expanding social hierarchies of wealth, race and class. It is these new social institutions, yet to be envisaged and realized, that will offer a real alternative to those youth who are at risk of becoming criminalized and processed as expendable persons. Books such as *Youth Gangs and Community Intervention: Research, Practice and Evidence*, may yet help push the boundaries in this effort by encouraging a critical discourse of new possibilities and enabling social realities.