

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jane B. Sprott and **Anthony N. Doob**, *Justice for Girls? Stability and Change in the Youth Justice Systems*. Adolescent Development and Legal Policy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 232 pp. \$US 37.50 hardcover (978-0-226-77004-8)

Sprott and Doob aim to use female juvenile offending as “a lens through which one can better observe, and thus, understand” the youth justice systems of the United States and Canada. The purpose of this comparative approach is to help in unravelling the puzzle of girls, juvenile crime and the criminal justice system. Virtually all literature on juvenile offending focuses on male participation in juvenile offending behaviour. This inattention to females is attributed to their limited involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour. The results of official figures and self-report surveys consistently show that males are more likely to engage in offending behaviour than females. Thus data and analyses about girls in the juvenile justice system are both overdue and welcome.

The authors provide an important two-country study of juvenile crime and juvenile justice and specifically examine the very different ways in boys and girls are treated in both juvenile justice systems. The juvenile justice systems in the US and Canada were both created at the same time with much the same goals, namely to resolve juvenile offending issues away from the adult system. Both countries had little focus on gender issues when developing their juvenile justice systems; however both have developed practices that have resulted in differential treatment for boys and girls. The historical analysis of the origins of juvenile justice in both countries is one of the many strengths of this book. The book provides a detailed and illuminating history of the development of the juvenile courts in the US and Canada in which many myths regarding the origins of their juvenile courts are set straight. For example, the view that the first juvenile court opened in Chicago in 1899 is more complex than is often described. Separate hearings for children had been taking place in Massachusetts since 1870, New York since 1877 and Philadelphia since 1893. Sprott and Doob also clarify that the Supreme Court cases of *Kent* and *Gault* did not represent the first time that concerns were expressed about due-process issues. Such concerns were actually expressed as early as the first juvenile courts.

The book argues that the explosion of crime involving young girls anticipated since the 1960s did not happen. Acknowledging the difficulties in comparing rates of offending between girls and boys, Sprott and Dood find that girls' involvement in crime and violence has not changed substantially in 20 years. When girls are in court they are more likely to have been involved in the least serious forms of offending. Females are not involved in violent offences to the same extent as males and female offending is not considered as threatening as male offending. This gender difference in juvenile offending has been well documented by self-report data, victim surveys and police and court records. However, Sprott and Doob focus on the fact that girls make up a large percentage of juvenile delinquents and custody cases tried for non-criminal behaviour, such as sexual immorality, referred to as status offenses. As a result, Sprott and Doob argue, girls are being punished for behaviour and actions considered normal and acceptable for boys. This explanation of female youth offending contrasts subtly with Steffensmeier et al ("An Assessment of Recent Trends in Girls' Violence Using Diverse Longitudinal Sources: Is the Gender Gap Closing?" *Criminology*, 43(2), 2005) who concluded that although girls' behaviour had not changed, society's response has changed significantly in that definitions of violence have been broadened to include minor incidents which girls are relatively more likely to commit, and there has been increased policing of violence in the private settings (for example, home, school) where girls' violence is more likely to occur, and decreased tolerance within families and in society more broadly towards adolescent girls. Sprott and Doob argue that in both the US and Canada young people are being incarcerated for 'normal' youthful behaviour and that these status offenses are being used disproportionately with girls, thus pushing girls into the justice system.

Sprott and Doob provide a unique transnational comparative assessment of the youth justice system's response to female offending in order to assess whether there are shared histories between the two jurisdictions. By studying the way in which both systems treat boys and girls differently, the authors aim to study the conflicting purposes of each system. This book will benefit scholars of juvenile offending and those who work in the juvenile justice system not just in the US and Canada. The book will be particularly pertinent to countries such as England where although there has been no rise in the number of girls committing offences, nevertheless more girls are entering the youth justice system and more girls are also being convicted at a younger age.

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