Youth Justice

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A Risky Business? Research, Policy, Governmentality and Youth Offending[1]

Derrick Armstrong

Correspondence: Professor Derrick Armstrong, School of Education, The University of Sheffield, 388 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2JA. Email: d.j.armstrong@sheffield.ac.uk

Abstract

Media hyperbole about children and crime, along with electoral politics, may well reflect a configuration of personal anxieties, competing social values and public policy options. In this article, I will argue that it is a configuration that represents a crisis of governance far more than a crisis of 'youth'. However, the research community is far from blameless in the propagation of 'myths' about children and crime and has shown itself to be far too willing to become yet another mechanism of governmentality rather than maintaining critical distance from the administrative policies of the state and thereby contributing to a wider public debate on policy. This article is divided into four parts. First, it will briefly review recent trends in youth offending and consider the contradiction that seems to be exposed between offending rates and criminal justice policies. Second, it will explore how research on young people and 'risk' has contributed to the growth of a crime prevention industry focused on children, the construction of deviance and early intervention policies. Third, this dominant 'risk factor' paradigm is critiqued, along with the discourses of crime that are implicit within it. Finally, an alternative approach to researching children and 'risk' is proposed.

Trends and Contradictions: Youth Crime and the Management of Crime

That children commit crime may be worrying to us on many different levels. It challenges our belief in childhood innocence – and, perhaps, some fundamental beliefs about the possibility of a 'good society'. It generates fear of lawlessness and of the effects of a breakdown in socialisation. It questions the quality of our services for children, our support for parents and our investment in future generations. Yet, it is also evident from the many self-report studies that have been undertaken that most young people are not involved in crime (Armstrong et al., in press; Communities that Care, 2002; Flood-Page et al., 2000; MORI, 2001, 2002, 2003). The Home Office *Youth Lifestyles* survey (covering the period 1998–9), for instance, found that 33 per cent of males aged 15–16 admitted committing at least one crime within the last 12 months, with the percentage of females in the same age group who admitted offending being predictably much lower (Flood-Page, 2000). The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales Youth Survey for 2003 (MORI, 2003) found that 26 per cent of 11–16 year olds in mainstream schools admitted committing an offence in the last 12 months, although some children, such as those excluded from school (60 per cent of whom reported offending in the last twelve months) were far more likely to report offending

during this period than others (MORI, 2003). For those who do commit offences, the evidence from both reconviction and self-report studies has consistently indicated that the great majority 'grow out' of it (MORI, 2003). Moreover, of those who do report offending a much smaller proportion report coming into contact with the criminal justice system. The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales Survey for 2003 found that 21 per cent of offenders in mainstream schools say that they have been caught by the police at least once (MORI, 2003).

The evidence on children and crime would seem to contradict popular perceptions, or at least the representation of popular perception by the media. Indeed, if one were to consider fear of crime from a young person's point of view, what might be most worrying, if perhaps ironic, about crime statistics is that young people are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime than are those in the adult population (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Home Office, 2002). Yet, as Nacro (2001) have argued, British public perceptions tend to overstate the extent of crime attributable to young people: whilst 28 per cent believe that young people are responsible for more than half of all offences and a further 55 per cent believe that responsibility for crime is shared equally between adults and children, in fact during 1999, 76 per cent of detected crime was committed by persons over the age of 18, and those over 21 were responsible for almost 60 per cent. Furthermore, to set these findings in their proper context, trend data from the British Crime Survey shows quite clearly that offending by young people is actually declining, and significantly so at that. After a period of unparalleled increase in crime worldwide during the 1970s and 1980s, between 1992 and 1999 the number of 10–17 year olds convicted or cautioned for an indictable offence in the UK fell from 143,400 to 120,400, while for those under 21 years of age the decline over the same period was from 278,900 to 208,700 (Home Office, 2000). This decline in youth crime reflected a similar decrease in crime overall, both in the UK and in many other parts of the world during the same period (Young, 1999). In case one should think that this decline in the crime rate might indicate a detection failure rather than any real decrease, it is worth noting that the British Crime Survey for the year 2000 also shows a decrease in victimisation of 15 per cent during the period 1995 to 1999. Thus, if less people are reporting victimisation it is reasonable to suppose that less crime is being committed (Home Office, 2000).

It might be argued that changes in the youth crime rate have been brought about, or at least influenced, by the policies and actions of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales which was given a statutory duty with regard to the prevention of offending by children and young people. On the other hand, the trend of decline was clearly evident before the YJB was set up in 1998 by the Crime and Disorder Act. Whatever the merits or otherwise of particular policies, it is far from easy to disentangle the possible causes that lie behind social trends and therefore the impact of particular policies. In practice it is likely that the causal relationship between different factors impacting upon social trends, such as the trend in youth crime, is going to be extremely complex. Regardless, of this, there would appear to be some fairly sound grounds for optimism.

Yet it is hard to escape the conclusion that in the UK, as in some other parts of the world, any optimism about youth offending trends must be tempered by the presence of an extraordinary contradiction. At the very time that youth crime is seen to be so

dramatically falling there has been both a heightened profile given to the problem of youth crime and a significant increase in the use of custodial sentencing as a means of dealing with this declining problem. As Goldson (1997: 79) has shown, whereas throughout the 1980s the dominant policy trend was one of 'decarceration', since 1993 the policy agenda has been characterised by:

> *. . . conditions of 'moral panic' within which policy and practice has been refocused upon punishment, retribution and the wholesale incarceration of children.*

Goldson identifies a combination of short-term political populism and media hype as responsible for this sudden change in policy. This 'moral panic' about children out of control was accompanied both by a plethora of policy initiatives focused on interventions with children 'at risk' and an increase in the use of custody as a method of dealing with the 'problem' of youth crime. Thus, in the UK since 1992, custodial sentencing of young people has almost doubled while the level of detected youth crime has fallen by 16 per cent (Nacro, 2001). Similarly, the use of custody for adults aged 18–20 has risen – 18,000 in 1999, compared with 17,000 in 1998 and 15,800 in 1997 (ibid.). The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales has also reported a rise in the number of young people reporting some form of punishment being given as a consequence of being caught. Of the young people who reported committing a crime in the 2001 Youth Survey, 22 per cent of those in mainstream schools and 12 per cent of those who had been excluded from school said that nothing had happened as a consequence of being caught. In 2003, the percentages reporting that 'nothing happened' as a result of being caught had fallen to 9 per cent and 3 per cent respectively (MORI, 2003).

In the second part of this paper I want to unpack this contradiction by turning to look at some of the major influences on policy in this area over recent years and in particular at how a new industry of early intervention based upon an ideology of 'risk' has become a tool of governmentality in the lives of young people, their families and their schools, in some of our most deprived communities.

Risk Factors and the Governance of Problem Children, Families and Communities

Risk-focused prevention became very important in criminology in the 1990s (Farrington, 1999). It is argued that the offending behaviour of young people correlates highly with risk factors that are found in certain domains of the child's experience – dysfunctionalities within or in relation to the family, school, community and the peer group of delinquent individuals (Hawkins et al., 1992), as well as in the personalities or genetic make-up of certain children (Farrington, 1994; Rutter et al., 1998). If this is so, it is argued, early interventions focused upon correcting these deficiencies are likely to reduce the offending outcomes that they are often associated with. For example, if a particular risk factor such as poor parental supervision can be identified as a key factor in the life experience of offenders, then interventions such as parental management training that seek to improve parental supervision will, it is suggested, lead to a reduction in offending.

The most influential study on the identification of risk factors related to criminality is *The Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development*. This is a longitudinal study of 411 working class males born in London in 1953 (Farrington, 1995). The original sample has been followed up periodically from the age of eight onwards and from the evidence ascertained a number of risk factors appear to correlate highly with offending. These risk factors include low family income, large family size, poor housing, low intelligence, parental problem behaviour. Thus, one of the researchers leading this study has argued:

> *A substantial minority of 63 boys [from the 411] had a combination of at least three of the five predictive items. Almost half of this group [less than 32] became juvenile delinquents compared with only a fifth [83] among the sample as a whole.*

> (West, 1982: 30)

This research has been extremely influential in reorienting thinking about youth crime in favour of a focus upon those psychogenic antecedents of criminal behaviour which are believed to lie in the immediate social environment of the child (rather than in the structural characteristics of society itself). This approach has come to have a major influence on the policies of governments and is integral to crime reduction strategies in the UK, USA and elsewhere (Graham, 1998; Graham and Bowling, 1995; Utting, 1996). In the UK, this approach has found particular favour in the Youth Crime Prevention Strategy of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2001).

The Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (Children and Young People's Unit, undated) has developed a two-track youth crime prevention strategy. Whilst Track 2 focuses on post-crime interventions the focus of Track 1 is upon pre-crime prevention and the reduction of risks. It promotes the desirability of what it calls 'a relatively prescriptive approach' of assessment and intervention. This strand of the programme identifies three objectives:

- To identify 'high risk' young people (mainly aged 8 to 13 years) and their families based on 'risk factor' assessment, *before the young person enters the youth justice system*.
- To exchange multi-agency 'risk factor' information about young people who are at 'high risk' of turning to anti-social behaviour or criminality.
- To undertake a 'risk factor' assessment in two phases *before the young person enters the youth justice system*:

    (a) where a child or young person between 8 and 13 years has come to the attention of an agency, voluntary sector body or individual because of a specific act or event and is identified as having key 'risk factors'; or

    [w]here any of the statutory agencies, based on the research findings that identify potential 'high risk' young people (8 to 13 years), have reasonable cause to suspect that a young person is at 'high risk' of turning to crime and disorder, (without a specific incident or event occurring) it will be the responsibility of the main agency that has contact with the young person to ensure an initial multi-agency risk assessment is undertaken. (Children and Young People's Unit, ibid.)

> *(b) Where an initial 'risk factor' assessment shows the young person to be 'high risk', a more detailed assessment will be undertaken. This initial assessment will be undertaken using a standard assessment tool (mini-ASSET or similar) by a multi-agency panel established by the Youth Offending Team (Children and Young People's Unit, ibid.).*

The risk factor model seems, therefore, to have provided a two-fold legitimation of the intervention of the State in the governance of children, families, schools and communities who are deemed to be potentially problematic. On the one hand, risk factors have offered a simplistic crime management system which, because it denies any social structural contribution to the construction and reproduction of offending behaviour, can focus its attention not on the causes of crime but rather on a policy of containment through the morality of 'blame'. On the other hand, the model is used to justify a whole paraphernalia of surveillance and intervention based on the assumption that youth crime is an outcome of dysfunctional individuals and communities and that these individuals can be identified through an assessment process determined by experts (Kelly, 2001; O'Malley, 1992; Rose and Miller, 1992; Stenson and Edwards, 2003; Stenson and Watt, 1999).

Nikolas Rose (1999: 134) has described this process as one in which: 'The soul of the young person has become the object of government through expertise'. Rose argues that twentieth century concerns over young people have been the results of moral panics in which certain persons have symbolised a wider range of social anxieties about threats to social order. Yet these moral panics have not been benign in their effects:

> *The apparently inexorable growth of welfare surveillance over the families of the working class had arisen from an alignment between the aspirations of the professionals, the political concerns of the authorities, and the social anxieties of the powerful.*

(Rose, 1999: 125)

Such regulation, however, has not been confined to the troublesome. As important, are the consequences of establishing criteria for 'normality' based upon a supposed scientific knowledge of the pathological or abnormal for maintaining the self-regulation of family life. These processes of governmentality, it is argued, are embedded in the valuation of academic and professional judgements that masquerade as expertise. It is a masquerade because their science is decontextualised from the contested beliefs and values which give meaning and relevance to particular representations of normality and social order. Yet, the notion of 'risk' supports an anti-welfare rhetoric (Culpitt, 1999) that legitimises the redistribution of social resources into a privatised world of individual responsibility and risk management. It is a language that has 'replac[ed] need as the core principle of social policy formation and welfare delivery' (Kemshall, 2002: 1).

Understanding the rise of the risk factor paradigm within the context of the specific concerns of governmentality to which administrative criminology poses solutions is of utmost importance. It is in these circumstances that certain claims for academic knowledge have gained legitimacy in their policy applications. Moreover, it is through the very social decontextualisation of this knowledge in a pseudo science of 'risk' that

the professionalism of criminology, as a governmental project counterfactual to the evidence, has been possible. To explore this thesis further, it will be necessary to look more specifically at the assumptions underpinning the risk factor paradigm in the criminology of childhood.

What is Risk? Prediction, Reductionism and Methodological Individualism

The Cambridge study (Farrington, 1989, 1992, 1995; West, 1982; West and Farrington, 1977) is among the most complete studies of the relationship between risk and offending in that it considered a wide variety of risk factors. For example, out of a possible 150 potential risk factors measured, Farrington (1992) identified 39 that were statistically significantly indicative of future offending. Farrington et al. (1996) argued, on the basis of the patterns of criminality among their sample, that these factors were predictors of crime and could lead to outcomes, such as unemployment, which were in turn further predictors of criminal activity. Yet, this sounds all too easy. As Farrington (1999) acknowledges, while the factors which correlate with future offending are well known, the causal links between these factors and future offending are much less clear. It is not known, for instance, if some factors are more important than others. Nor is the literature clear about whether some combinations are more important or not. Farrington (1999: 8) reports:

> . . . *a problem of the risk factor paradigm is to determine which risk factors are causes and which are merely markers or correlated with causes. It is also important to establish processes or developmental pathways that intervene between risk factors and outcomes, and to bridge the gap between risk factor research and more complex explanatory theories.*

It is clear from the evidence of those committed to this perspective that one cannot 'read off' offending behaviour from risk factors. Research into risk factors remains highly problematic; it is empirically very limited and theoretically ill-defined. The numbers involved in the Cambridge study, for instance, are small, entirely male and predominantly white (only 12 non-white children being included in the original sample) from one small traditional working class community in the East End of London. As many authors have previously argued, despite its claims about statistical significance, the validity of making predictions of offending on the basis of this study, or from those like it, is highly questionable (Bessant et al., 2003; Goldson, 1999; Muncie, 2004; Muncie and Hughes, 2002; Pitts, 2003). Indeed, as even one of the lead researchers in the Cambridge study made clear:

> *A majority of the juvenile delinquents, 53 in fact, did not belong to the high risk group and would not have been predicted.*
>
> (West, 1982: 30)

In other words, whatever the predictive power of the risk factor model might be it could not predict the offending of the majority of actual offenders (Katz, 1988). Moreover, as West (1982) further acknowledged, less than half of those who had a combination of three of the five risk factors identified in the study became offenders.

At best, the risk factor research has been able to account for a statistically significant proportion of the variance in respect of the antecedents correlating with offending.

A recent report produced for the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (Loeber et al., 2003) which reviewed evidence worldwide on the relationship between early identification of risk factors and offending conceded that:

> *Although the majority of child delinquents have a history of disruptive behaviour, such as aggressive, inattentive, or sensation-seeking behaviour in the pre-school period – the majority of preschoolers with such problems do not go on to become offenders.*
>
> (Loeber et al., 2003: 5)

And as the authors later in the article accept:

> *A critical question from a scientific and policy standpoint concerning child delinquency is: 'How early can we tell?' It is difficult, however, to obtain a clear answer to this question. For example, many children engage in problem behaviors of a relatively minor nature, but only for a short period. Few tools are available to distinguish those youth who will continue with behaviors that may lead them to become child delinquents.*
>
> (Loeber et al., 2003: 8)

It seems that this research takes us so far and no further in understanding risk. It might, as West (1982: 148) suggested, be taken as stating the obvious:

> *The group most likely to spawn delinquents are those ... who combine poverty, family disharmony and anti-social deviance.*

Such a view would seem to entail the equally obvious, but not insignificant, implication that:

> *I have long thought that more might be achieved by giving money to the needy with a minimum of formality than spending money on welfare administration and complex assessments of eligibility.*
>
> (West, 1982: 147)

In other words, a redistributive politics rather than a social policy of intervention 'to improve the poor'.

A second problem that characterises the risk factor model is an implicit reductionism. Thus, the literature in this field is heavily dominated by biological and psychological models of risk that have placed the individual young person at the centre of the risk matrix. Michael Rutter, for instance, in a recent book on young people and crime, speculates that the increased amount of androgens within males, together with differences in their serotonin metabolic levels, play a significant role in their committing more crime (Rutter et al., 1998). He makes this claim despite acknowledging that there is a lack of evidence to support his theory. This is an obvious example of bio-reductionism. The psycho-reductionism of the risk factor paradigm has also been extensively critiqued (see for example, Bessant et al., 2003; Pitts, 2003). More recently, however, the risk-factor paradigm has been given a new lease of life by social context theorists who have focused upon the causal mechanisms linking contextual features of communities to individual acts of offending (Wikstrom, 1998, 2004; Wikstrom and

Loeber, 2000). At first sight, this latter line of research promises to move away from individualised, reductionist notions of risk by focusing upon causal mechanisms operating within the community. As Wikstrom and Sampson (2003: 119) acknowledge:

> *Research on individual risk factors has largely failed to specify in any detail the causal mechanisms that link the risk factors to acts of crime and pathways in criminality.*

Wikstrom (2004) proposes a non-deterministic approach in which the main mechanisms that link individuals and settings to actions lie in the way that individuals perceive alternatives and in the process of choice itself, what he calls the 'situational mechanism'. The key individual mechanisms are conceptualised as 'morality' and 'self-control'. The key causal mechanisms lying within settings are conceptualised as (perceived) 'temptations', 'provocations' and 'deterrence'. Crime outcomes are understood to reside not in individuals or settings but rather in the propensies of individuals who come into contact with particular settings. Causality is a construct of the relationship between individual and setting. The reductionism of this model is three-fold. First, there is a reduction of the individual to a set of psychological traits or moral propensities that, although ill-defined, appear to lie within an abstracted domain of decision-making. Most interestingly, Wikstrom and Sampson (2003: 122–3) argue that:

> *To explain acts of crime we do not necessarily need to be concerned with questions about why an act is considered a crime, and whether (morally) it is right or wrong that the particular act is criminalized.*

Yet, the reasons why particular acts are criminalised or not are themselves part of a social context that not only frames individual choices but is part of the process by which the social world is individually and collectively negotiated and contested. For example, individuals may break rules precisely because the action is prohibited by law as was the case with Sikhs who refused to wear protective helmets when riding motorcycles, or protesters who refused to pay the poll-tax. In these cases (illegal) action is given meaning not by a propensity to rule-breaking behaviour *per se* but by a political challenge to the power of the state to establish and enforce these specific rules. Moreover, behaviours that are sanctioned, at some point in time at least, occurred before laws were enacted to make that behaviour unlawful. The law itself is an active force contesting and regulating certain forms of behaviour that at one time existed unregulated. The reasons for criminalising certain behaviours have specificity in the social world, and in the relations of power, within society. By criminalising behaviour the law situates the act every bit as much as does the moral choice of the individual to breach that law. Therefore it is meaningless to talk of criminal behaviour without such behaviour being situated in a broader social theory that seeks to explain the dialectical relationship between the social acts of individuals and social processes (including negotiation, power, legitimacy).

A second type of reductionism evident in this model is the reduction of social life to the rather narrow and abstract conceptualisation of community. Society is undoubtedly more complicated than a set of geographical communities. In our ever-more globalised world even these communities are likely to be deeply nested in

each other. For example, the lives of very few young people are situated in a world where there is no television, but the latter gives young people entry to a wider 'moral' as well as cultural universe than that of their geographical neighbourhood. Disentangling these nested communities to locate the causes of crime is likely to lead us little further than dreams of a positivistic utopia. More worryingly, in terms of the involvement of academia in the governmentality project is a very postmodern focus upon the collapse of social communities into a welter of individual and privatised pathologies. The focus of the investigation into the causes of crime becomes the relationship between the amoral individual within the context of dysfunctional communities.

Crime and its Discourses

A fundamental problem that the risk factor research tends to gloss over without too much concern is the problem of definition. Biological, psychosocial and environmental explanations of criminality are not neutral scientific accounts in the way that they might have us believe. They do not simply report 'risk' but construct it through the categories that are used to describe it. As such, biological and psychosocial theories of 'risk' have a negative stigmatising effect, especially within crime reduction approaches, because they focus on antecedent categories of 'risk' – in other words, they make moral judgments about the propensity of the poor to criminality. They have the potential to stigmatise people rather than to value individuals and their abilities. Most worryingly, when the link between risk factors and such social markers as ethnic group or gender are not adequately explained, it leaves open the possibility of defining ethnic group or gender as a risk factor in itself.

The fact that very commonsensical notions of 'risk' are presented as if they are unproblematic, highlights the way in which these understandings are embedded in belief systems and values that have their own historical specificity. As Deborah Lupton (1999: 29) has argued:

> *A risk is never fully objective or knowable outside of belief systems and moral positions: what we measure, identify and manage as risks are always constituted via pre-existing knowledge and discourses.*

Foucault (1991) maintained that this relationship between the representation of reality and the actions that follow is a relationship between power and knowledge. Power is articulated in the context of discourses about knowledge. Thus, the situating of the psychology of risk within administrative criminology is neither accident nor the outcome of dispassionate science. It forms a policy/knowledge context in three respects. First, insofar as those researchers constructing the category of risk do so by reference to personal and social values located in their own belief systems and in the context of their own professional and social interests. Second, insofar as these beliefs are reified as objective measures of truth through the discourses of power that are embodied in the notion of an 'objective scientific truth' by which human social relations can be adequately revealed. Third, insofar as this 'knowledge' articulates with the political interests of government and opinion formers in the media and elsewhere.

The illusion of objectivity disguises the power of (academic) professional 'knowledge' to make assertions about 'normality', 'criminality', 'risk', 'family life', 'community values', and so on, that are more properly located in a public debate about social values, citizenship, and the politics of social inclusion and exclusion in our society. It closes down debate about the role of researchers in relation to public policy and their accountability in respect of the manufacture of social policies that are by their very nature political. In this respect the illusion of a value free research (of evidence-based policy) is the illusion of a depoliticised technical rationality (Habermas, 1971).

What is lacking in these accounts is: firstly, any sense of the significance of historically located, cultural and social forms in relation to the construction and negotiation of individual identities (as 'normal' or 'abnormal'); and, secondly, any discussion of the way in which social power is a factor, not only in the construction of 'risk' within society but also in the theorisation of 'risk' by social scientists themselves. 'Legitimacy is conferred almost exclusively on analysis at the individual level' (Susser, 1998: 1). It is perhaps not surprising in this context that the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales Strategy can approvingly employ a two-line, unsubstantiated, quotation from the psychiatrist Michael Rutter to dismiss extensive evidence (starting from but by no means confined to the seminal work of Albert Cohen, 1955) concerning the complex relationship between sub-cultural formations, youth offending and the negotiation and contestation of youth identities. Thus, Rutter writes:

> *The notion that much crime is culturally normal and unassociated with the usual risk factors has ceased to have any currency as a general theory.*
>
> (Quoted by Children and Young People's Unit undated: 1)

The classical sub-cultural theory of the 1950s and 1960s has been much more extensively and sympathetically critiqued (from both postmodernist and Marxist reframings of sub-cultural perspectives in the work of theorists and researchers such as Bourgois, 2003; Brake, 1985; Cashmore and Troyna, 1982; Cohen, 1997; Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1988; McRobbie, 1991; and, Willis, 1977, 1990, among many others). This is a literature that appears no longer to be considered relevant to the policy discourse on youth offending. Rather, assessment of 'risks' located in assumptions about 'individual', 'family', 'social class', and 'cultural' deficits are substituted for analysis and critique of the power relations that underpin such assessments. In this way, the representation of certain behaviours solely in terms of individual, or micro-social dysfunctionalism both obliterates from public view the social and cultural upheavals of the last 20 years and dismisses any attempt to understand the relationships between processes of social change and identity formation in young people.

Is a New Research Agenda Needed?

Research (and policy) in respect of youth offending has come to be largely based on the superficial data provided by statistical correlations between risks and offending. So much so, that the bizarre situation is found in which offending is represented as a symptom of risk, meriting little investigation in its own right.

   The American sociologist, Albert Cohen, as long ago as 1955 identified the problem for researchers and policy makers and pointed to its solution:

> *We need more full and detailed data on the delinquent action itself. We need to know more about the frequency, the variety, the sequences and the spacing of delinquency in the child's history; about the 'spirit', the 'quality', the 'emotional tone' of the delinquent action; about the circumstances, events and activities which provide the context preceding, accompanying and following the delinquent act; and above all we need to know more about the collective or individual nature of the delinquent act and how delinquency varies in the individual and group situations.*

(Cohen, 1955: 173)

Risk and risk-taking can be understood as negotiated processes, yet criminological studies of risk have largely ignored the ways in which young people negotiate and interact within their social worlds. They largely underplay the importance of culture and context. This has resulted in an almost total absence in the risk literature of any consideration of the social construction of risk. Yet, children's management of social exclusion, for example, may impact on the types of risk they are willing to take. 'Being "different" may bring with it more substantial and immediate risks that have everyday consequences for young people's lives' (France, 2000). To seriously engage with the perspectives of young people there is need for new approaches to the study of risk and offending and the significance these have in the life-courses of young people. In particular, such research should explore the pathways of children and young people in different contexts, looking at how 'risk' and 'resilience' to risk are constructed and understood by young people themselves. This involves working toward new forms of theorisation which give central attention to:

1. The voices of young people.
2. The meaning and significance of 'risk' and 'protective' factors to both children and their families.
3. The impact of constructions of 'risk' and 'protection' on how children and young people negotiate pathways into and out of crime.
4. The eco-systemic relationship between different aspects of children's experience.
5. The processes of resistance to criminal pathways.
6. The impact of interactions with formal and informal social structures, institutions and processes upon the lives of children and young people.

Such an approach would involve a focus on the biographical experiences of individuals and the social construction of behaviour; consideration of how children understand and explain their own behaviour; and, exploration of the geographical, social, cultural and historical worlds in which the lives of children are given meaning. It follows from this approach that an engagement with issues of policy and practice cannot be conceptualised in functionalist terms as seeking the causes of pathological behaviour and providing the evidence for interventionist solutions that manage or reduce risks.

The distinctiveness of this research agenda, therefore, lies in three areas: theoretical; methodological; and, in relation to its engagement with policy and practice.

Theoretical

Critiquing the 'risk factor' paradigm and locating the theorisation of young people's offending within the socio-historical and cultural contexts of their lives means abandoning the simplistic idea that the causes of crime lie within the personal and social pathologies of young people and that these can be identified using correlational statistics, thus informing crime reduction intervention strategies. It is necessary to examine the experiences of young people, including the social processes of criminalisation to which they are exposed and within which context they negotiate their identities and pathways through life. This approach requires us to consider how policy and practice interventions with young people themselves are constituent parts of the social negotiation of 'risk' in the lives of young people and, as such, may operate to impose on them the label of deviance in particular situations as well as also socialising young people into accepting certain pathways that are then labelled deviant.

Methodological

Once the 'risk factor' paradigm is theoretically problematised, in the manner described above, its naïve scientific-realist assumptions about the identification of relationships between 'risk' and offending through the use of probabilistic statistics becomes untenable. The relationship between these variables is not open to statistical 'proof' or 'disproof', for the reason that the relationships upon which they are hypothesised are themselves invalid. For this methodology to be valid, we are forced to make assumptions and contestable judgments about the meanings that particular social experiences have for different children. The complex experiences of everyday life are reified into 'objective', naturalistic categories as if the relationship between different variables (family conflict, conflictual attitudes, poverty, for example) has meaning independent of the ways in which they are constructed in the historical, cultural, institutional and inter-personal negotiated interactions of everyday life. A more appropriate methodological approach would be one focused upon the broader context of children's lives in which 'diversity' becomes an analytical tool for examining the relationship between the personal and the social. In other words, an approach that does not simply look at differences between children as categorical descriptors (ethnicity, gender, social class), but rather one that explores the construction and meaning of diversity through identities of childhood and youth (ethnicity, gender, class, normality and deviance) that are negotiated, produced, constrained and/or empowered through social, institutional and other forms of symbolic order in society. Such a methodology entails a need for multidisciplinary conversations between researchers focusing on pathways as social processes which are dynamic and interactive as well as structural and personal and which map the geographical, social, cultural and historical spaces of the lives of different children. It is a methodology orientated toward exploring the relationship between individual understandings of subjectivity through the unique biographical experiences of individuals and their social construction and rationalisation

of behaviour and consideration of how these narratives structure understandings of selfhood.

Policy

Criminological research in this field is heavily policy driven and focused upon providing 'solutions' to the 'problems' of youth criminality. The nature of 'risk' is under-theorised and the policy agenda which follows is frequently taken as 'unproblematic'. In particular, there is limited critical engagement with the ways in which public policy itself constructs 'risk' in the lives of young people and with the ways in which 'risk taking' may articulate an involvement by young people in the arena of public policy. This has led to a view of young people as passive, to be treated by interventions which aim to change their behaviour. By contrast, youth crime can be approached as a social phenomenon (rather than as an individual deficit to be cured by interventions with children and families) which has specific socio-historical characteristics and significance at any given time. Therefore, to understand crime it is necessary to go beyond specific acts or categories of deviance and, instead, to understand the society and the processes of social life which give meaning to our experience. At present much research and policy is not concerned with causes but with probabilities, not with justice but with minimising harm. Characterised by what Jock Young (1999) has called 'distancing', it simply calculates risk:

> *. . . explaining crime or deviancy in a way which denies that it has any relationship with the core values and structure of society.*

> (Young, 1999: 113)

This raises very important issues about the relationship between research and policy and necessitates serious critical rethinking of the incorporation of research into the project of governmentality. It is pure idealism to think that research has a role in directing policy. The move away from the notion of 'evidence based policy' towards that of 'evidence informed policy' is recognition of this. Research forms part and only part of the context in which policy is formulated. Moreover, research is not neutral in this process. It is often commissioned for specific purposes, to address specific policy concerns, as well as being interpreted and used selectively in the service of particular policy agendas. The incorporation of professional academics into the governmentality project creates its own self-delusions within the academic community. The idea that empirical research can offer technical, scientifically-founded evidence of anything, independent of any theoretical and socio-historical context, is highly problematic. In other words, what questions to ask, by what methods we seek to explore them and how we choose to interpret our results are all matters of debate. Similarly, researchers cannot tell policy-makers/practitioners what the best course of action to take is because the notion of a 'best course of action' is value laden and dependent upon assumptions about shared belief systems and shared objectives. This is not to say that researchers cannot usefully contribute to such debates, but it is important to put research into perspective, just as it is important to keep in mind that policy is rarely objectively rational, either in its conception or in its execution (Goldson, 2001).

Research does have an important role to play in contributing to debates about policy and practice and in adding perspectives which sometimes illustrate the complexity of our world and at other times cut through and expose the arbitrariness and/or inconsistencies in policy and/or practice. For this reason, the engagement between researchers, policy makers, practitioners should take place within the wider forum of public, democratic debate, rather than within the narrow confines and cosy relationships of governmentality that undermine the democratic process.

Conclusion

Crime has become a normal part of everyday life. The declining crime rate is irrelevant to this because the fear of crime is what strips us of our moral sensitivity. While crime is understood in terms of 'risks', our concern is with limiting risk rather than understanding and changing the world in which we live. The idea of risk encourages what the novelist J G Ballard in his novel *Cocaine Nights* called the 'ultimate crime-based society', 'where everyone is criminal and no one is aware of the fact' (1996: 304).

We are propelled into complicity with a crime-based society because of our collective inability to confront as a moral and political issue the ways in which crime is legitimised as public policy. The incarceration of so many children in our prison system at a time when youth crime is falling is evidence of that lack of public morality. In these circumstances, public policy and governance are driven by fears which reflect a deeper unease about what is happening to our world and the position of each and every one of us in relation to it. The individualisation of social issues as the personal problems or 'risk factors' of individuals becomes the antipathy of what social democracy stands for. The management of risk becomes the management of public fears.

In this article, I have argued that domination of the research and policy agendas in youth crime by a discourse of 'risk', and its assessment and surveillance by interventions into the family and community life of the poor, is part of a wider process of governmentality which has placed the individual within a disciplinary nexus of risk which incorporates and also regulates the families, schools and communities of the poor. It is a nexus that has also incorporated parts of the academic community and provided space for the advancement of its professional self-interests through the dominance of technical-rationalist ideologies which support the procedures of governmentality. Yet, the a-theoretical language of 'risk' is hidden beneath a plethora of correlations that in themselves tell us little about the socio-historical nature, meaning and significance of crime and its discourses in these times in which we are now living. It has been argued that a new research agenda is needed that will engage critically with the experiences and perspectives of young people in different contexts, looking at how 'risk' and 'resilience' to risk are constructed and understood by young people themselves. To do this is to reject simplistic functionalist perspectives on crime which view it merely as a product of personal or social pathology. Instead researchers need to consider the broader social position of young people in today's society and their interaction with processes of social change. This requires a perspective on young people's offending that is contextualised in the politics of governmentality; that is, in the management and regulation of 'normality' and in forms of resistance that both make and challenge 'abnormality'.

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