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Title	Community and the Problem of Crime
Type	Article
URL	https://clok.uclan.ac.uk/13514/
DOI	https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-12-2015-0041
Date	2016
Citation	Kirby, Stuart (2016) Community and the Problem of Crime. Safer Communities, 15 (2). pp. 121-123. ISSN 1757-8043
Creators	Kirby, Stuart

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work.
https://doi.org/10.1108/SC-12-2015-0041

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Book Review: Community and the problem of crime.

Journal:	*Safer Communities*
Manuscript ID	SC-12-2015-0041
Manuscript Type:	Book Review

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Karen Evans: Community and the problem of crime (2016)
Routledge: Abingdon
ISBN 978-0-415-74855-1(hbk)
ISBN 978-1-315-79654-3 (ebk)
193 pages
£90

This was a book I eagerly awaited. It relates to the ubiquitous subject of community and crime - an area that has lacked thorough analysis in the academic literature. As such, the book has no immediate rival and will be of interest to a wide range of academics, students, policy makers and practitioners. The book has an extremely credible author in Karen Evans who, prior to becoming a full time academic, gained experience as a Community Safety Co-ordinator during the mid 90's. The book also benefits from a long gestation period as it has emerged from a University module she designed in 2003 and continues to teach today.

Overall the book lives up to expectation. It is extremely well researched, well written, and will undoubtedly be a critical first choice text for those interested in the subject. However, prior to spending £90 (rrp), it is important the reader understands the perspective from which it is written. The author, in her introduction, clearly explains it provides a more nuanced critical perspective, being "…less about what community is or is not and more about how the state uses the term 'community' to confer rights upon some groups and to exclude others from exercising those rights". She goes on to say, "This is not a book about crime prevention either……It is a book, however, which questions the ways in which the concept of community has been utilised within agendas of crime control and how perspectives forged in the West have gone global". Once this distinction is recognised the reader can settle down to an excellent book that is constantly instructive and insightful.

As well as the wealth of content contained within the book I found it an enjoyable read. From the outset the author presents an overview as to what the ensuing chapters will bring. This immediately starts to tease out some of the overarching issues, including: the lack of consensus surrounding a definition of community; misapplication of the label; and the positive and negative impact 'community' can bring. I found the earlier chapters particularly interesting and informative. Highlighting human life as fundamentally gregarious the first chapter explores the evolution and perception of communal living. Using a collection of commentators that range from Durkheim and Weber to the Chicago School the author illustrates how analysts have described the changes to urban life, highlighting the political and social fragmentation that can precipitate stigmatisation and exclusion. The reader is transported through time, exploring the onset of urbanisation and late modernity where community bonds at geographic level weakened, and individualisation emerged. Here the author introduces the importance of virtual communities that transcend physical space.

The second chapter recognises the complex relationships that lead to our understanding of crime, notably the state (CJS), offenders, victims, and the

community. An overview is then provided as to the role of the community, within crime control strategies, since the 18th Century. It is from here that the balance in favour of a critical criminological perspective starts to emerge more strongly. For example whilst just over half a page is dedicated to an explanation of situational crime prevention (which misses some central principles, such as reducing provocation and removing excuses), there are three pages devoted to its criticisms. It concludes by arguing the techniques may simply increase our sense of fear and foreboding, rather than improving our security. Whilst an interesting and thorough analysis, commentators from a positivist criminological perspective would undoubtedly argue there is significant evidence to show SCP techniques have reduced recorded crime - car crime being a good example[1].

The next few chapters are crammed further with interesting research (from inside and outside the field of criminology), and thought-provoking analysis. Chapter 3 explores 'disorderly communities', investigating the concepts of underclass, social disorganisation, fear of crime and broken windows theory. Chapter 4 logically continues in relation to how those problem communities can potentially be re-constructed into socially ordered places. This shows how historic and political commentary has influenced policy, describing ideas such as: garden cities, urban planning, de-industrialization, renewal, regeneration and gentrification. Social implications are discussed, as are the unintended consequences of these policies, across a range of countries. Chapter 5 continues by examining the differences between, and within, place-based communities. It explains how cities fragment as a result of many different factors (labour, class, race), leading to complex social relationships, on which inclusion / exclusion as well as individuals prospects are often predicated.

Chapter 6 looks at 'suspect communities', specifically minority groups, across time and place. This exploration extends our understanding of global inequality, with the author examining specific groups from a number of perspectives. This includes how minority groups can be stigmatised, creating tensions at local and national level, leading to a variety of ramifications, including urban disorder. Similar to the previous sections the text is continually producing fascinating insights – for instance here we are told the concept of ghetto was originally formed in history to separate Jewish communities from other parts of the city. Chapter 7 continues by discussing how communities are policed. This is a useful and logical chapter, although some who specialise in the area of community policing may be disappointed to find some recent developments haven't been covered. For example, no mention is made of the Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy, which hastened a joint UK Home Office / police project on 'Reassurance Policing'[2]. This attempted to put residents at the heart of

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[1] Van Dijk, J.(2012) Closing the doors (Stockholm symposium prize winners lecture), downloaded 28/12/15 at http://www.criminologysymposium.com /download/ 18.4dfe0028139b9a0cf4080001575/TUE13,+van+Dijk+Jan.pdf

[2] Innes, M. (2006), 'Reassurance and the new community policing', *Policing & Society*, 16 (2):95-98.

crime control, which (following academic evaluation) advanced the national roll out of Neighbourhood Policing. Further the section on Problem Oriented Policing is limited and does not fully capture its principles, unfortunately also misidentifying its originator (Herman Goldstein)[3]. The book concludes with chapter 8, which summarises the key issues. It explores the limitations of 'community' as an organising concept and points out both the positive aspects and exclusionary effects that 'community' can generate. The author concludes neatly, providing the reader with five lessons that have emerged from the text.

Of course every critic is influenced by his or her academic bias, but from my perspective this book has been very simple to review. Just in case there is any doubt, let me be clear – this review is overwhelmingly positive. As previously mentioned I feel it is important to point out that prospective purchasers should be aware that the author approaches the subject from a critical criminology perspective. Further, that in my opinion, there are some minor gaps and inaccuracies. Having mentioned these matters my conscience is clear to fill my summary with superlatives. This is a really important book that fills a gap in the market in relation to a pervasive subject. The author has provided an original, compelling, and well-researched academic text, which is presented in a very engaging format.

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[3] Goldstein, H. (1979) 'Improving Policing: A Problem Oriented Approach', *Crime and delinquency,* 25: 236-258