2005


Matthew T. Theriot  
*University of Tennessee*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

**Recommended Citation**
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol32/iss3/15

While the juvenile justice system was developed to provide a more therapeutic and nurturing response to adolescent delinquency, young offenders increasingly are being transferred from the juvenile courts and prosecuted as adults. Clearly, the public has embraced the myth of the dangerous juvenile superpredator and legal policies have been changed accordingly, further blurring the line between juvenile delinquent and adult offender. For these minors, their criminal act alone dictates their status as an adult to the exclusion of factors like age, developmental level, intellectual abilities, and life experience. Perhaps there is no better example of this misguided policy than the juvenile sex offender. Despite increasing evidence that these youthful offenders are dissimilar to their adult counterparts, legal responses to adolescent sex offending remain derivative of policies for adult sex offenders. These legal strategies assume the young offenders to be dangerous deviants, ignore the developmental aspects of their unlawful conduct, and fail to properly assess need and risk.

Beginning with the first chapter, it is clear that Franklin Zimring aims to provide a comprehensive and thorough critique of these assumptions that have previously absent from the literature. In illustration of the misguided legal actions that have marked legal responses to adolescent sexual offending, he reviews three disturbing cases and the troubling legal reactions that followed. The cases include a 10-year-old boy caught mostly nude with his younger sister and a female cousin, the reported kidnapping and rape by seven male middle school students of a 12-year-old learning disabled girl, and an especially disturbing Idaho statute that fails to meaningfully differentiate between adult and juvenile sex offenders. This statute, as Zimring notes, allows that adolescents caught in consensual sexual activity with a same-age partner or even adolescents caught masturbating alone could technically be forced to register as a sex offender.

Chapters 2–4 then address the scope, nature, and characteristics of sex offending in the United States. Chapter two reviews the laws, arrest and incarceration trends, and policy changes per-
taining to general sexual misconduct in the United States through the past 30 years. This chapter also gives the reader an orientation to legal terms, definitions, and official sex offender classifications thus making the book accessible to lay persons as well as legal scholars and academics. The next chapter (chapter 3) then moves to focus expressly on sex crimes by juveniles while chapter four considers varied approaches to juvenile sex offender treatment.

These latter two chapters are perhaps the most interesting and important in the book. While chapters one and two set the tone for the book and give background on American sex offending, Chapters 3-4 give a much needed injection of critical scrutiny to the current discourse about legal responses to juvenile sexual offending. For example, chapter 3 does not simply review prevalence estimates and annual arrest data but rather offers an insightful appraisal of the strengths and limitations of the various methods used to measure sex crimes by juveniles. Likewise, Zimring's extended critique of the National Adolescent Perpetrator Network's revised report of the National Task Force on Juvenile Sex Offending (published in 1993) is a remarkable example of the insight that can be gained from a thoughtful and judicious approach to policy analysis. Despite the report's popularity and influence, Zimring notes numerous omissions and misguided recommendations. For example, the report advocates for the extended tracking and registration of juvenile sex offenders. Such an erroneous directive assumes that these offenders pose a long-term risk for sexual reoffending though there is growing evidence that juvenile sex offenders pose a bigger risk for nonsexual reoffending than for any further sexual delinquency.

The second part of the book moves the discussion into the juvenile court. Chapter 5 chronicles the historical response to sexual offending in juvenile courts and concludes by describing current responses and contexts. Chapter 6 outlines juvenile court reforms that are needed in the face of growing evidence about juvenile sex offenders and offending. This chapter also poses three key questions to be considered in any reform efforts. Specifically, what are the risks for reoffending for different types of juvenile sex offenders? What characteristics are associated with higher rates of reoffending? And, what impact does sex offender treatment have on sexual reoffending among juveniles? Finally, chapter 7 sheds
light on controversial topics affecting legal policies for juvenile sex offenders, including mandatory sex offender registration and community notification requirements.

Two consistent themes in the final section of the book (especially in chapter 6) are the pressing need for empirical research that will bridge the gaps in juvenile sex offender knowledge and the importance of reforming existing policies and developing new policies that are reflective of these research advances. In fact, the repeated push throughout the book for more and better empirical research, and the incorporation of this research in policy development, is one of the great contributions of this remarkable work. Clearly, legal responses to crime are often driven more by public or political pressures than by sound scientific research. As Zimring demonstrates, this is certainly true of juvenile sex offenders. Yet, by giving directions for future research, outlining proposals for reforms in the juvenile court, and repeatedly modeling thoughtful, critical policy analysis, the author shows why such misguided responses are no longer acceptable. Franklin Zimring is one of the preeminent legal scholars in the United States today and this exceptional, meticulous book shows why such status is so richly deserved.

Matthew T. Theriot
The University of Tennessee


This volume of readings by two pre-eminent international authors, M.C. Terry Hokenstad and James Midgley, incorporates a splendid collection of ideas from the contributions of leading thinkers in the field of global social work and social welfare. Superbly conceptualized and excellently executed, this collection challenges the reader to view familiar issues with global lenses. An introductory chapter by Hokenstad and Midgley brings the collection together well and sets the reader's expectations for the feast that follows. Seven chapters from well-known contributors review topics central to social work and social welfare such as