

Writing an Official History of the Criminal Justice System

Paul Rock

London School of Economics

The Prime Minister has announced recently the appointment of David Downes, Tim Newburn and Paul Rock of the LSE to write an official history of the criminal justice system. They will examine the significant changes in the criminal justice system in the 40 years leading up to the late 1990s. The history will also cover criminal justice policies, the courts and penal policy.

According to Paul Rock:

The period we will be looking at started with immense official confidence about our capacity to deal with crime through, for example, rehabilitation and therapy. In the 1970s this turned to radical pessimism, with a rebound of optimism in confidence in the 1990s. While many governments claim the successes in crime reduction are the result of their policies, in actual fact, nobody quite knows why there have been these peaks and troughs. Interestingly, the public refuses to believe that crime is going down.

The official history will analyse a number of themes. For example, the transformation in the way policy is made including the shift away from a heavy reliance on official expertise to an increased focus on allaying public fears about crime. This is reflected in the fact that crime has become increasingly politicized as an issue and has become more important in election campaigns since the 1970s. Other themes will include “hybridization” - the fact that criminal justice is no longer just the preserve of official agencies but is delivered as a collaboration between those agencies and non-governmental organizations. Globalisation and the importance of, for example, international directives will also be looked at.

One of the great attractions of this study is that the rule whereby official papers are not publicly disclosed for 30 years will be waived for us. Oral history will also be an important source given the advent of the paperless office towards the end of the period we will be looking at.

The government’s official history programme, which is run by the Cabinet Office, is intended to provide authoritative histories on important events in British history and be a reliable source for historians in advance of the records being available in The National Archives. The histories are also meant to be a fund of experience for future government use.