



Crime and criminal justice research at the University of Sydney

Research brief 5

At the University of Sydney we're conducting exciting research into diverse crime and criminal justice issues.

This is the fifth in a series of briefing papers showcasing some of our projects and introducing you to our research staff. It looks at the work we're doing in young offenders and detention, economics and crime, drug addiction and emotion.

Evaluating risk of young offenders in detention

Understanding the security risks juvenile detainees pose while in custody is important for maintaining the good order of juvenile justice centres. Classification instruments now routinely attempt to assess such risks – but how accurate are they?

At any one time there are between 250 and 300 young people detained in NSW. Each young person entering a juvenile justice centre is assessed according to their security risks. Classifying a young person's security risk helps staff decide where they will be accommodated, their ability to participate in programs, and their ability to be granted leave from custody. In NSW, young people are classified using the Objective Detainee Classification System (ODCS). However, after 12 years of operation, is the ODCS still the best approach to classifying young people in detention?

Dr Garner Clancey (University of Sydney Law School) and **Dr Roman Marchant** (University of Sydney's Centre for Translational Data Science) were commissioned by Juvenile Justice NSW to determine if the ODCS is still fit-for-purpose. They are using a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to review the ODCS, including focus groups and interviews with Juvenile Justice staff, and are reviewing the current policy and procedure documents that inform how young people are classified. They are also conducting exploratory data and trend analyses of the ODCS's administrative datasets by using sophisticated statistical modelling techniques. Their findings will inform how Juvenile Justice NSW continues to classify its young offenders, and identify any areas for improvement.

Find out more about Dr Clancey and his work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/law/about/people/profiles/garner.clancey.php>

Find out more about Dr Marchant and his work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/engineering/people/roman.marchant.php>

Using economics to understand crime (Part 2)

Spotlight on Dr Kevin Schnepel

Dr Kevin Schnepel is a lecturer from Sydney University's School of Economics who applies his extensive skills in economics to critically examine criminal justice issues. His particular interest involves investigating causes of criminal offending and antisocial behaviour.

Recently, he estimated the impact of employment opportunities on recidivism over a 15 year period for 1.7 million offenders released from a California prison. He found a significant association between reductions in recidivism with opportunities for construction and manufacturing jobs, but not jobs with low wage employment opportunities such as in retail and food services, or even positions that require higher education. These findings are more pronounced with people aged 35–45 years old, and those with drug offences.

Kevin is currently part of a study to understand the long term effects of the 2001 heroin shortage, a phenomenon which resulted in drugs being more unaffordable and harder to obtain. The project will evaluate the impact of the shortage, using more than 20 years of administrative data from criminal justice and health agencies in NSW, and a sample of more than 10,000 individuals known to have used heroin between 1994 and 2001, either through being arrested for heroin possession or through their drug treatment history. The study will look at the effects across a wide variety of outcomes including mortality, hospital admissions, methadone prescriptions, incarceration, property and violent crime, and substitution to other drugs. The results will provide insight into whether major disruptions to illicit drug markets affect users' overall health and criminality.

Find out more about Dr Schnepel and his work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/arts/economics/staff/profiles/kevin.schnepel.php>

Treating drug addictions... with cannabis?

The Lambert Initiative and its research into addiction treatment using cannabis

The Lambert Initiative is an Australian first in the field of medicinal cannabinoids – both in its breadth and depth of research innovation. Its aims are to advance cannabinoid-based treatments in mainstream medicine. The Initiative is based in the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Centre.

Professor Iain McGregor, Associate Professor Jonathon Arnold, Associate Professor David Allsop and Associate Professor Jennifer Cornish – who is partnering from Macquarie University – are leading a team of researchers from the Institute into whether cannabinoids can help in the treatment of addiction to other drugs such as alcohol, opiates and methamphetamine.

There are anecdotal reports supporting this idea, and the ability of cannabinoids such as cannabidiol to reduce anxiety, prevent seizures and treat psychotic behaviour may be relevant in addiction medicine. Promisingly, initial research by the team has found that cannabidiol strongly inhibits the intravenous self-administration of methamphetamine in rats (an animal model that models 'ice' addiction in humans).

The study team also plans to examine whether cannabidiol, or cannabidiol-containing hemp extracts, may be a useful adjunct in the treatment of alcohol withdrawal, where anxiety and seizures are prominent symptoms. Discussions regarding the feasibility of such a study are under way with leading clinical researchers in the addictions field.

The team is also keen to recruit PHD students to work on this project.

Learn more about the Lambert Initiative for Cannabinoid Therapeutics and its work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/lambert/>

Learn more about the current study:

<http://sydney.edu.au/lambert/our-research/addiction/novel-cannabinoids-for-addiction.html>

Learn more about PhD opportunities to join the research team:

<http://sydney.edu.au/research/opportunities/opportunities/2220>

Exploring the role of emotion in contemporary law

Does emotion have a place in law making? What can we learn from studying the role of emotions in law over time?

Emotion has not always been considered an important area of study in law. However, understanding its role in legal decision making can broaden our understanding of the law and how it operates, particularly over time.

Dr Kimberley-Joy Knight is an historian and postdoctoral research fellow with the Sydney branch of the Centre for the History of Emotions based at Sydney University. She also co-convenes an international and interdisciplinary research network on the History of Law and Emotions. Kimberley's research highlights that emotions and rational thought in law cannot be clearly delineated. Despite this, emotion's role in how law is interpreted and practiced is often downplayed. Part of this is attributed to the perceived shift from passionate, cruel and emotional forms of justice exercised in the Middle Ages to a more cool, rational and civilised law-making process. As a result, dispassionate law making may signify a more 'civilised' society.

Paradoxically, Kimberley's work highlights while law-making evokes perceptions of cool and rational thinking, decisions are often made based on judgements of a person's demeanour or suffering. For example, victims may be judged on whether they fit the perceived mould of how a victim should act on the stand, and the perceived emotional suffering of a person can influence how compensation in tort law is determined. In addition, a person's emotional state at the time of offending – such as acting 'in the heat of the moment' – can influence sentencing decisions. Kimberley, with her collaborators, is particularly interested in making use of the work on Law and Emotions in the field of Continuing Professional Development for practising lawyers.

Find out more about Dr Knight and her work:

<http://sydney.edu.au/arts/staff/profiles/kimberley.knight.php>

For more information on these or other crime and criminal justice work at the University of Sydney, contact Dr Garner Clancey: garner.clancey@sydney.edu.au



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