

scottish justice matters

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POVERTY, INEQUALITY AND JUSTICE



THE UNDESERVING?

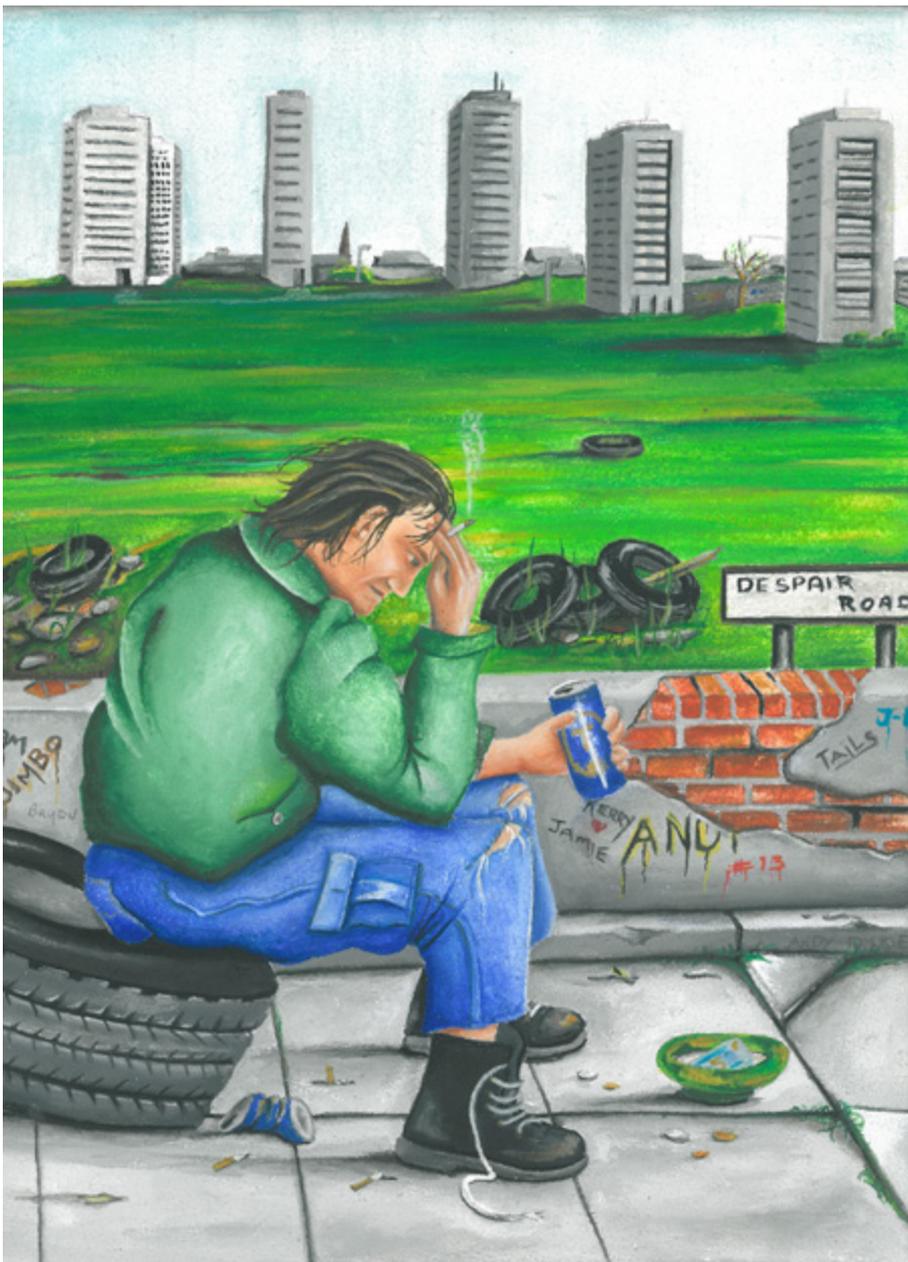
Colin Webster takes a close look at the impact of poverty on young men's criminality

POVERTY IS often the 'elephant in the room' in discussions of crime. Discussants can feel that it is a too obvious and simplistic explanation for crime. In any case most people who are poor are law abiding. Therefore, poverty's link with crime is ignored or perceived as weak. And yet, this link is strengthened by early experiences of childhood poverty, and the intensity and duration of poverty experiences, inducing insecurity and anxiety among those who suffer. What is certain is that living in poverty makes offending and being the victim of a property or violent crime much more likely (Webster and Kingston, 2014).

Some young men, and women equally, are more likely to suffer poverty than other groups, particularly those who are single, childless and not supported by their families. Here we focus on single young men living in poor areas. More readily likely to offend than similarly placed young women, they have suffered the most rising hardship since the 2008 recession. Not only do they increasingly (and unsuccessfully) compete for the same types of low-level service jobs as young women, they suffer a declining male wage, and derive little or no benefit from in-work and family tax credits (Sissons and Jones, 2012).

Focusing on Scotland for a moment, the prison population contains disproportionate numbers of people who have lived in the poorest areas. Inequalities in deaths due to assault in Scotland exceed those in other countries and are greater than for other causes of death in Scotland. The death rate due to assault among men living in the poorest areas was 32 times that of those living in the least poor areas (Leyland and Dundas, 2010). Increases in murder in Britain as a whole over recent decades are mostly murders of younger, poorer men, while richer areas have experienced opposite trends of low and declining murder rates. This increase occurred alongside dramatic increases in inequality and poverty, leaving a legacy of violence.

Illustration: Andrew from HMP Greenock



The adverse impact of poverty on violent crime is repeated in relation to property crime. Forty-two percent of all burglaries happened to 1% of all homes in England and Wales, principally those belonging to the poor and/or single parents (Budd, 2001). If inequality in the UK was reduced to the average seen in the developed countries, a more equal UK could expect 37% fewer people being imprisoned each year saving £1 billion, and 33% fewer murders each year, saving £678 million (The Equality Trust, 2011). Violence alone costs the Scottish economy £3 billion each year in healthcare, law enforcement and lost productivity (Leyland and Dundas, 2010).

Government education, welfare, housing and labour market reforms over decades have systematically worsened the social and economic conditions of poor, single young men in particular (Kingston and Webster, 2015). By impoverishing a group already prone to criminalisation, reforms have pushed young men into the margins of the licit and illicit economy - a major source of long-term, growing crime trends. Modest improvements in their employment situation from the mid-1990s, and relatively muted increases in their poverty in the first few years following the 2008 recession, compared to previous recessions, partly ensured that crime continued to decline. Subsequent austerity policies however, have again marginalised this group. Since then, young single men living in poor areas have seen the most rising hardship.

By impoverishing a group already prone to criminalisation, reforms have pushed young men into the margins of the licit and illicit economy

There has been a long-term real decline in male youth wages, unemployment benefit (now Jobseeker's Allowance) and housing support, accompanied by coercive employment, training and education measures. Blame for growing youth poverty was placed on the failure of their families to support young people. By lowering their income support and raising their contributions to family rent costs, independent living for this group became difficult if not impossible (Kingston and Webster, 2015).

This long-term pattern continues under the English government's 'austerity' programme. The scale and severity of sanctions placed on unemployed under 25s leading to suspension of benefit, is mirrored by the withdrawal of support for more than 100,000 unemployed 18-25 year olds in England who had previously been guaranteed new jobs paying at least national minimum wage. The Education Maintenance Allowance, which was particularly successful in encouraging poor boys living in urban areas to stay at school or college was abolished*. Entitlement to housing benefit is to be removed from all 18 to

21 year olds, and the same group will have to claim a youth allowance, with strict conditions of eligibility. Adding insult to injury, the so-called 'living wage' is restricted to those over 25.

Since the 2008 recession the group seeing the most dramatic rises in poverty and worklessness are young single adults without children, living alone. In neglecting and worsening the poverty of unemployed and underemployed single young men into young adulthood, successive governments have chosen to treat unfavourably a group deemed the most 'undeserving' of the 'undeserving poor'. In disrupting their routes to independence, poor young men's criminal involvement was most likely hastened and encouraged. By impoverishing an age, gender and class group most at risk of being crime-prone, it is more likely they find 'solutions' to their poverty in crime. Overall, in implementing increasingly punitive welfare and work policies targeting poor young men, policy is revealed to be not only counterproductive but malign.

Commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to review international evidence about whether and in what ways poverty influences crime, this author presented the evidence to, and consulted with, Scottish people living in poverty. These meetings were organised by the Poverty Alliance (Scotland). The Findings are part of JRF's report "Reducing poverty in the UK: a collection of evidence reviews", available to download at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/reducing-poverty-uk-collection-evidence-reviews>

*For information on the EMA in Scotland see: www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/Browse/Lifelong-learning/EMAtrend

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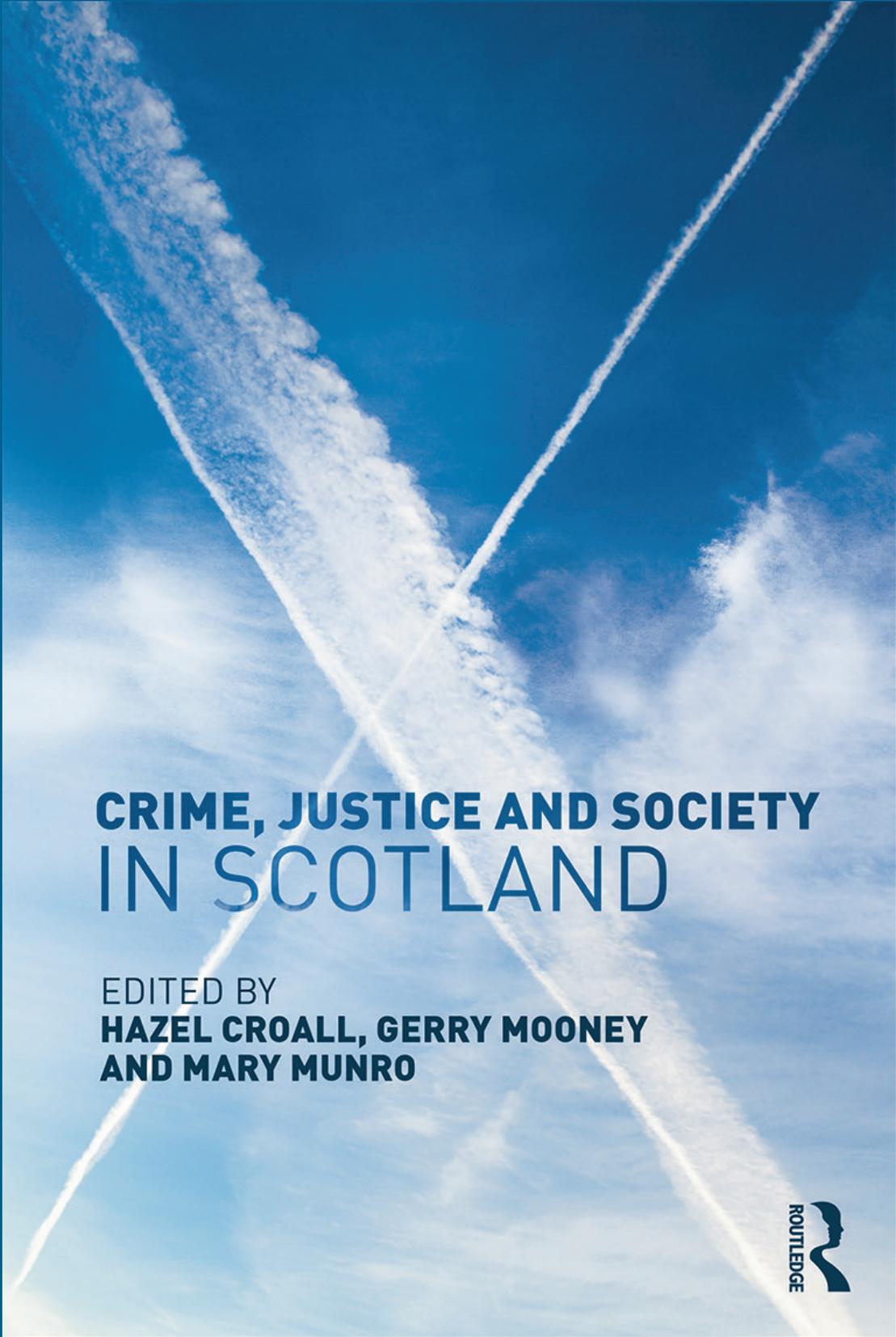
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