Child and Youth Misbehaviour in South Africa

Christiaan Bezuidenhout and Sandra Joubert (eds), Van Schaik 2003, pp 217 soft cover

According to the preface this work has three main objectives, namely (1) to highlight the young person as a human being, (2) to focus on 'misbehaviours' by children, including likely reasons for and potential methods of preventing it, and (3) explaining the current legal and policy situation of children in South Africa. Regarding the last-mentioned objective, the focus is clearly not on children in general, but on child offenders in particular.

In order to cover these objectives the ten contributors deal with the following topics in the various chapters: a basic introduction, including some reference to terminological difficulties, such as the difference between child and youth and problems with the term 'juvenile delinquency'; a historical look at young offenders, from antiquity to the experiences with reform schools from the recent past; an overview of the nature of the misbehaviour that children engage in and the extent thereof; the factors giving rise to the risk of children getting involved with crime (the so-called 'criminogenic risk factors'); traditional and more contemporary theoretical explanations for youth misconduct; a specific focus on female youth misbehaviour; views on how youth misbehaviour can be prevented in South Africa; the influence of youthfulness on the criminal law and criminal procedure; and finally, current practices and future prospects with respect to a number of policy issues regarding youthful offenders, including diversion, a number of sentences and legal representation.

The book is clearly aimed at tertiary students. Each chapter starts with a number of 'objectives' – things that the learner should be enabled to do or understand in the course of the chapter. In most instances this a followed by a brief list of keywords. This list is of doubtful usefulness. The conclusion of each chapter is followed by a number of 'critical questions' and a bibliography. All these features confirm the focus on students. However, practitioners in the field of youth offending will find much useful information in the book, especially with respect to the factors that lead to youth offending. It is, unfortunately, somewhat thin on the legal side. Sentencing of young offenders is, for example, covered in two pages (although various aspects of sentencing are also covered elsewhere). It means that this book will be of little use in that respect to legal practitioners, apart from stating some of the most basic of principles. It does not equip the legal practitioner with the finer details of the trial and sentencing process – for that sources specialising in criminal procedure and sentencing would have to be consulted. Having said that, it is still recommended reading for anybody involved in the criminal justice process, especially with respect to youthful offenders.

The book is well-edited and I did not find any mistakes, although careful scrutiny might expose some. Overall, it constitutes a neat package.

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