

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Williams, Monica**, *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma: Community Activism, Safety, and Social Justice*. New York: New York University Press, 2018, pp. 276. \$30.00 USD paper, (9781479836499).

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**T**he criminal justice system faces a fundamental contradiction. It apprehends, adjudicates and punishes individuals for past acts. In doing so, it looks backwards. However, there is a public expectation that the justice system will also look forward to prevent future harmful acts.

In *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma*, Monica Williams highlights one problem arising from the Janus-faced expectations of the criminal justice system. Utilizing open-ended interviews with community activists and observing public meetings, she examines the difficulties in finding a place to live for those who have been convicted of offences sufficiently heinous as to be designated as a Sexually Violent Predator (SVP) under California law. If a proportionate response to past acts precludes permanent incapacitation through execution or lifetime incarceration, where can people whose very existence causes fear in others live when they have completed their term of punishment?

Williams' book is based on three case studies of community resistance to the residential placement of people designated as SVPs. She argues that the designation of people with the label of "Sexually Violent Predator" serves to create fear amongst potential neighbours. Williams argues that attempts to prevent the arrival of the SVP into a neighbourhood are a legitimate attempt assert some measure of control over their community. Finally, she argues the form of community response will be influenced by the community's existing relationship with legal and political authority.

The book illustrates both the weaknesses and strengths of a comparative case study method. On the one hand, there are problems of generalizability. Williams makes broad generalizations from single cases she describes as unique. At the same time, she offers a wealth of detail about these specific cases and communities. This provides vivid and compelling explorations of dilemmas faced in housing those who are feared. For example, she argues that the imposition of strict conditions of release and surveillance on SVPs had the effect of increasing the fears of those in communities chosen to host SVPs rather than providing reassurances

about their safety. Electronic monitoring and an active, visible police presence around the SVP's residence provided neighbours with a powerful confirmation of the danger posed by the individual.

Williams has an eye for detail and is determined and resourceful in gathering ethnographic data. Her appendix on locating and cultivating key respondents would make an excellent reading for a research methods class. That said, *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma* is a frustrating book to read. The problems arise from problems of theory and definition.

The book purports to be about the problems facing people defined as sexual offenders. However, the book is specifically about people designated as SVP's, which is a category that is both legalized and medicalized. It consists of people who have completed their sentence for designated offences, but are involuntarily transferred to the mental health system following a risk assessment. Williams uses the terms "sexual offender" and "SVP" interchangeably – sometimes in the same sentence. Williams indicates there are about 120,000 sexual offenders living in Californian communities. From the book, it is not clear how large the population of SVPs is. Case numbers are inconsistent. However, the total number of SVPs living in the California communities appears to be fewer than a hundred.

This conflation of categories has implications in Williams' examination of community response in the three case studies. She treats the demographics and political structure of the community as the only independent variables determining the response to an SVP's placement. The perception of danger and risk embodied in the SVP is portrayed as a product of the legal labelling process without regard to offence history or notoriety. One policy prescription is replacing word-based categorizations with a numeric ranking system. However, since the process of placing SVPs includes public identification of the individual, community response could be influenced by the SVP's record, in addition to the nature of the community. Indeed, in one case, Williams' respondents suggested that their opposition was generated by a previous "spectacular" failure of a previous placement. The nature of this previous failure was not revealed.

Another problem arises in Williams' treatment of the role of violence in opposing placement. She presents violent vigilante action and community-based civic activism as contradictory, mutually-exclusive options. This ignores the possibility that vigilante action can be *a form of* collective civic activism. More serious is the treatment of the threat of violence as a tool used to oppose SVP placements. The quotes from Williams' respondents are laden with the threat of violence made in a predictive ("someone will shoot him") or serious/jocular manner. Wil-

liam's categorical schema precludes analysis of the *instrumental* use of the threat or prediction of violence. For example, in the only case study in which the SVP placement was prevented, the landlord reneged on the lease agreement after receiving threats of arson. Williams' categorical schema causes her to conclude this was an example of successful political mobilization against county and state decision makers.

In choosing case studies, Williams focused exclusively on cases where there was opposition to an SVP's placement. This focus means that the book misses critical insights into situations where placement is not contested. An examination of an uncontroversial placement would have significantly strengthened the book. In summary, *The Sex Offender Housing Dilemma* is a bit disappointing. Williams' eye for detail and determination produces a wealth of descriptive detail. At the same time, the imprecision of her categories and theoretical limitations produced a book that is more useful as a data source than a source of explanation.

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