Trauma-Informed Practice and the Criminal Justice System: A Systematic Narrative Review

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Summary: Enthusiasm for trauma-informed practice has grown exponentially in the last two decades. The concept was coined by Harris and Fallot (2001), and rather than provide treatment, this approach aims to ensure that all services are trauma-aware, safe, compassionate and respectful (Levenson and Willis, 2019). Given the prevalence of trauma experiences among the justice-involved population (Bellis *et al.*, 2014; Olafson *et al.*, 2018; Levenson and Willis, 2019; Ford *et al.*, 2019), local and international criminal justice agencies have sought to integrate trauma-informed practice into service provision. This paper highlights key themes from a systematic narrative review of the international criminal justice research on trauma-informed practice in the criminal justice system. All included studies focused on justice-involved women and young people, both girls and boys, but none of the studies involved justice-involved men. Five key themes were identified. Firstly, recognising trauma was important to support recovery and avoid re-traumatisation. Secondly, safety was a central consideration for justice-involved women, young people and for staff. Thirdly, trauma was experienced in abusive relationships, but healthy relationships supported recovery. Fourthly, gender-responsive, trauma-informed and flexible services, including programmes, had positive benefits for women. Finally, where practitioners were committed to trauma-informed practice, they were important mediators for its integration into organisational practices.

Keywords: Trauma-informed practice, criminal justice, justice-involved women, justice-involved young people, probation, PBNI.

Introduction

The recent interest in trauma-informed practice has materialised from the seminal Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study by Felitti *et al.* (1998), which established an evidence base for a range of personal and social

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determinants that impact on wellbeing in the longer term (Bellis *et al.*, 2019). Locally, Northern Ireland has high levels of mental illness, suicide rates and poverty (O'Neill *et al.*, 2015). Ferry *et al.* (2014) reported a substantial proportion of the population as impacted by chronic trauma exposure, associated with the colloquially termed 'Troubles'. Dalsklev *et al.* (2019) found Troubles-related trauma significantly predicted reoffending for those with previous violent convictions. Given Northern Ireland's unique legacy of the 'Troubles', with the associated fallout of transgenerational trauma and the international literature confirming the disproportionate prevalence of trauma among the justice-involved population, arguably, criminal justice practitioners in Northern Ireland are likely to be interfacing regularly with individuals affected by trauma exposure.

The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, which is made up of key statutory, community and voluntary partner organisations, commissioned a rapid evidence review to explore the international literature. This review by Bunting *et al.* (2018) concluded that trauma-informed practice held potential for the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. They proposed that this could be achieved through a commitment to thoughtful planning, resources and ongoing review, suggesting it could be beneficial not only for individuals but for their extended networks, communities and society. Building upon Bunting *et al.*'s (2018) work, this systematic narrative review explores the specific components of trauma-informed practice within international criminal justice settings. Branson *et al.* (2017) suggest that trauma-informed practice needs to be uniquely tailored to individual systems, so this review has been a driver for the implementation of trauma-informed practice in PBNI.

Despite the international interest and plethora of literature, trauma-informed practice is an evolving concept that lacks a coherent conceptualisation (Champine *et al.* 2019). A systematic review by Branson *et al.* (2017) found relative consensus on the core domains of trauma-informed practice but a lack of agreement on the specific practices and policies within the justice system. In the USA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which is at the forefront of advancing trauma-informed practice, recognises three core elements: realising the prevalence of trauma; recognising the impact of trauma on both recipients and providers of services; and incorporating this knowledge in responses (SAMSHA, 2014). Trauma-informed practice is a person-centred and whole-system approach, which differs from trauma-focused interventions that target underlying trauma. The key difference is that it does not directly address trauma but

adopts a universal approach to promote safety, trustworthiness, support, collaboration, choice and empowerment, whilst recognising cultural, historical and gender issues (SAMSHA, 2014). This is thought to benefit everyone, not only those with trauma histories (Pate and Geekie, 2021).

Services that fail to recognise trauma can negatively impact on outcomes for service-users and can be experienced as retraumatising (Sweeney *et al.*, 2018). McCartan (2020, p. 10) suggests that trauma-informed approaches contextualise offending within an individual's lived experience of trauma, as opposed to being 'over-sympathetic'. According to Levenson and Willis (2019), this facilitates an understanding of offending behaviour that provides a strengths-based framework to deliver interventions to maximise self-determination and personal ownership of change. However, the justice system is a challenging setting for trauma-informed practice, and there is debate about its legitimacy (Petrillo, 2021), not least due to the correctional nature of the system itself. It has attracted some criticism due to the lack of emphasis on tangible practice (Hanson and Lang, 2016; Becker-Blease, 2017) and was described by Sweeney *et al.* (2018) as a fuzzy and complex concept. Specific to criminal justice, Miller and Najavits (2012, p. 2), suggest that its implementation requires an understanding of criminal justice priorities which have their 'own unique challenges, strengths, culture, and needs'. Nonetheless, they conclude that the practice can support the development of pro-social coping skills, safer environments, improved staff morale, and better outcomes for justice-involved individuals in custody.

Method

The aim of this review was to examine the international empirical evidence on the efficacy of trauma-informed practice within justice settings and to consider how this may translate to PBNI practice. The objectives were to explore the available primary evidence relating to trauma-informed practice in justice settings; to establish whether the evidence base for trauma-informed practice in justice settings was sufficiently robust; and to consider what could have application from the research to offer insights for the integration of trauma-informed practice in PBNI.

A systematic narrative review was chosen as it employs a rigorous and explicit methodology to identify, critically appraise and synthesise findings from empirical research (Taylor *et al.*, 2015). This approach is widely accepted as the 'gold standard of evidence for practice' (Killick and Taylor, 2009 p. 214).

Search Strategy

In July 2020, three databases, PsycINFO, Criminal Justice Abstracts and Social Care Online, were systematically searched using two concept groups — 'trauma-informed' and 'criminal justice'. Retrieved articles (n=261) were mined against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with 17 studies selected for their relevance to trauma-informed practice in justice settings. Information was extracted, and the articles were quality appraised. A thematic analysis was employed to identify and report on the identified patterns across the papers (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A structured narrative synthesis, focusing on the relational aspects between the studies (Popay *et al.*, 2006), was utilised to report on the findings.

Inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed empirical research within justice settings, where trauma-informed practice was referenced in the title, abstract or keywords. A date range was considered but ultimately not imposed, to avoid arbitrary bias, and only grey literature was excluded to ensure that studies met the peer-review standard.

Limitations

This review adopted an established systematic approach to minimise bias, but limitations were observed. Primarily, the challenge of defining trauma-informed practice and the nuances of language across jurisdictions may have resulted in relevant articles being missed by the search terms employed. The review was limited to peer-reviewed studies indexed on three databases, and relevant articles could have been filtered out where trauma-informed practice was absent from the titles, keywords and abstracts. Human error and subjectivity may have influenced data collection, data extraction and synthesis. The heterogeneity of the studies provided breadth for analysis, but methodological limitations, including small sample size and low statistical power, were observed. Quantitative studies on trauma-focused programmes collectively demonstrated their value but offered limited insights into the practical reality of implementing trauma-informed practice as a universal concept. By their nature, there was a lack of generalisability across the qualitative studies, but despite the limitations, this review highlighted that trauma-informed practice has potential within criminal justice settings.

Findings

The study characteristics

Of the 17 studies included, 14 were conducted in North America (13 in the USA and 1 in Canada), 2 were conducted in the UK and 1 in Ireland. Included papers were published between 2012 and 2020. They focused on women and young people, together with staff in criminal justice provisions. There were no studies that included adult males.

Five dominant and interrelated themes were identified in this synthesis: trauma exposure; safety; relationships and supports; interventions and services; philosophy and organisational culture. Most studies identified factors across a number of themes.

Trauma exposure

Prevalence of trauma exposure

The prevalence of trauma among justice-involved women and young people was mentioned in all included papers. Seven studies specifically reported this as a key finding. In a secondary analysis of 277 justice-involved women, Messina *et al.*'s (2014) study found that all had diagnoses of co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse issues, profoundly impacting their emotional wellbeing. Saxena *et al.* (2016) established on average 2.7 trauma events per woman in a secondary analysis of 193 justice-involved females with substance issues. Kennedy and Mennike's (2018) qualitative study of 113 female prisoners found a link between high levels of abuse and offending. Although trauma exposure was not a focus of Matheson *et al.*'s (2015) study of 31 females released from prison with substance abuse issues, participants disclosed extensive trauma histories connected to substance abuse and poor mental health. Fedock *et al.*'s (2019) survey of 26 women serving life sentences found at least one trauma exposure, either in childhood or through intimate partner abuse. Likewise, Dermody *et al.* (2018), in an Irish mixed-methods study, established high levels of childhood adversity and intimate partner abuse for 24 women availing of homeless, probation and/or drug treatment services.

Similarly, Olfason *et al.*'s (2018) survey of 69 young people in custody identified that all had disclosed on average 10–11 traumatic episodes, most commonly an imprisoned family member or community violence. Although girls were underrepresented (n=11), those participating reported higher incidences of sexual abuse.

Recognition of trauma

Several studies highlighted the importance of recognising trauma and its impact for service-users, even where they were not specifically trained in this respect (Matheson *et al.*, 2015; Maschi and Schwalbe, 2012). In a qualitative study of 24 Juvenile Probation Officers, Anderson and Walerych (2019) found that officers were attuned to the trauma experienced by girls on probation, identifying this as an offending pathway and querying the appropriateness of processing traumatised girls within the criminal justice system, instead of using diversionary options. Conversely, Cox's (2018) study of 75 staff in seven residential juvenile facilities found that ignoring young people's trauma facilitated a focus on risk assessment, and staff struggled to view offending within the context of earlier traumatic experiences. Ezell *et al.* (2018) and Holloway *et al.* (2018) both highlighted that whilst trauma was recognised in probation assessments of young people, this rarely translated into case-planning and service delivery.

Trauma and the criminal justice system

Many women in Kennedy and Mennike's (2018) study felt further victimised by the judicial system, with sentencing epitomising systemic failures in recognising their victimisation and protective needs. Prison reactivated their unresolved trauma and was experienced as traumagenic. In a similar study, Matheson *et al.* (2015) concluded that screening was critical at intake and pre-release to avoid misdiagnosis and inappropriate or failed treatment. Findings differed where staff had engaged in training on trauma-informed practice. In Walden and Allen's (2019) mixed-method study of 40 Juvenile Correctional Officers, staff contextualised young people's behaviour as trauma-impacted or developmental, responding sensitively with emotional regulating techniques to enable young people to learn healthy coping mechanisms.

Hodge and Yoder's (2017) survey of 7,073 pre- and post-adjudicated young people in juvenile facilities found that those with abuse histories experienced harsher staff controls. Findings indicated that staff misinterpreted trauma-triggering behaviours and responded punitively, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle. They surmised controlled suppression of emotions interfered with healing and could have been experienced as retraumatising.

Safety

Themes of safety, both physical and emotional, featured in most studies, and 13 explored this within the context of peer relations, intimate partners and staff experiences in residential settings.

Safety and young people

Comparing perceptions of safety for young people and staff, Elwyn *et al.* (2015) examined the impact of a trauma-informed organisational change model in a secure facility for girls over four years. Findings revealed reduction in physical restraints, isolation strategies, and incidents of misconduct. Both girls and staff reported being and feeling safer.

In Cox's (2018) study, boys in facilities undergoing a period of penal reform also felt safer but, interestingly, staff felt less safe. Reported incidents of violence actually reduced in keeping with the boys' views, but staff perceived violent episodes as going unreported to keep official numbers down. Cox (2018) considered that staff's perceptions were influenced by job insecurity, influx of 'hard to place' young people, cultural resistance to reforms, and adjusting away from bootcamp-type facilities.

In Olfason *et al.*'s (2018) study of young people in six facilities undergoing trauma-focused work, staff were also trained in trauma-informed practice. Young people and staff worked collaboratively to implement de-escalation strategies, with units becoming safer for both. In Walden and Allen's (2019) study in a short-term detention facility for young people, staff efforts to promote emotional safety were observed in their everyday interactions with the young people. Like Olfason *et al.* (2018), staff recognised and validated emotions, remaining firm but engaged, and endeavoured to connect with young people through common interests.

Safety and women

In Messina *et al.*'s (2014) study, women who received trauma-informed and gender-responsive treatment in prison showed significant improvements in trauma symptomology. However, in Matheson *et al.*'s (2015) study, traumatised women struggled to adapt to prison, experiencing shared spaces as unpredictable and unsafe.

In Bailey *et al.*'s (2020) qualitative study, the language of safety was a key component for practitioners supporting women experiencing substance

abuse, interpersonal violence and post-traumatic stress disorder in the UK. Practitioners prioritised the establishment of physical safety, then emotional safety. A range of strategies was used with women to help manage emotions, symptoms and cravings. Where women were still dealing with safety concerns, practitioners were clear that it was unsafe to commence trauma-focused work, highlighting the need for an individualised approach. In Dermody et al.'s (2018) study, the qualities of a trauma-informed service were critical, with women rating criminal justice staff less favourably than other services.

In the included studies, trauma-informed practice was premised on prioritising safety. Some studies demonstrated that it could be safely implemented with justice-involved individuals; however, staff commitment to the approach was important.

Relationships

The importance of relationships was identified as a theme for women and girls. These were experienced within the context of intimate partnerships, peers and staff relations. How trauma-informed practice relates to these relationships was considered in some studies.

Peer relationships

The evidence suggests that the quality and type of relationships are fundamental to trauma-informed approaches. In Kennedy and Mennike's (2018) study, for women in prison who experienced abuse, pro-social relations that were encouraging and hopeful were necessary learning tools that enabled women to move on from abuse, yet confiding in peers in group settings posed emotional and social risks because trust and confidentiality were difficult to establish. These women experienced that their need to talk was confounded by their fear of talking. Although women in this study felt uneasy processing their experiences with peers within prison, the importance of peer relations emerged in Olfason et al.'s (2018) study. In this trauma-informed juvenile justice setting, processing trauma in facilitated groups fostered peer support and group cohesion. The authors concluded that groupwork harnessed peer support for young people to process their experiences. However, girls were significantly unrepresented in this study, and it could not be concluded that processing trauma for girls in group settings was safe or appropriate, given their higher incidences of sexual trauma.

Family relationships

In Ezell *et al.*'s (2018) study, researchers noted a tension in staff's perceptions of their role with young people's family. Some worked with caregivers to educate them about the impact of trauma and its association with offending, observing benefits for the young people when family were on board. Other staff felt a professional discomfort probing into families' lives or making connections to trauma, preferring instead to model good behaviour, and to source mentoring and other pro-social activities for young people. Significantly, all staff, irrespective of their approach, felt ill-equipped to discuss trauma and its impact. Holloway *et al.*'s (2018) survey of 147 Juvenile Probation Officers in the United States, recognised dysfunctional family and peer relations as risk factors for reoffending. Whilst family circumstances were scored high or medium risk by most Probation Officers and identified as a target on case plans, trauma was not.

Relationships with staff

Studies reinforce the primacy of staff/service-user relationships for effective trauma-informed practice. In Walden and Allen's (2019) study, staff developed their own style and approaches to their routine tasks that incorporated ways to build rapport with young people. They used opportunities to model behaviour, promote rights-based information, and educate young people about expectations. Rehabilitative approaches developed trusting relationships and meaningful discussions with young people. Likewise, Bailey *et al.* (2020) concluded that offering women choice, flexibility and advocacy were key to building therapeutic alliances and establishing trust. How relationships were experienced was an important component for these justice-involved women and young people. Where trauma-informed practice was implemented, healthy relationships and social networks were important channels to process trauma and develop healthy strategies.

Interventions and service provision

Trauma-focused programmes and gender-responsive services

Four studies examined trauma-informed practice within the context of trauma-focused and gender-responsive groupwork programmes for women. Kubiak *et al.*'s (2016) randomised control trial compared a trauma-informed and gender-responsive violence programme to treatment-as-usual for 35 women serving

time for violence. On release, women who completed the trauma-focused programme interfaced significantly less with authorities, with much lower rearrest rates. However, the small sample (n=35) limited the generalisability of this finding. Similarly, Fedock *et al.*'s (2019) survey of life-sentenced women (n=26) who completed the same named programme in Kubiak *et al.*'s (2016) study found significant positive outcomes for all participants on some anger measures. Whilst the sample size precludes generalisation, it offers exploratory insights.

Messina *et al.*'s (2014) secondary analysis of another trauma-informed and gender-responsive programme found that justice-involved women's symptoms of co-occurring PTSD and substance abuse improved, indicating that both conditions could be treated simultaneously. Although high use of methamphetamine in the sample cannot translate into generalisations for all forms of substance abuse, the researchers concluded that justice-involved women needed services to address their trauma, including trauma education and coping skills. Likewise, Saxena *et al.*'s (2016) secondary analysis of trauma-informed and gender-responsive programmes in a larger sample of women with co-occurring PTSD and substance abuse (n=193) found that those receiving throughcare from prison to community fared better than those who received treatment alone in either environment. The researchers concluded that throughcare moderated the impact of trauma on PTSD and substance abuse, especially for women with severe symptoms. They postulated that appropriate supports could help mediate against relapse and reoffending post-release.

Olfason *et al.* (2018) examined a trauma-focused programme in six juvenile justice facilities and observed significant reductions in trauma-related symptoms for young people, together with reduced numbers of adverse incidents, where high rates featured previously. The researchers considered that the length of stay for each young person varied in the facilities and the lack of control group limited the generalisability of the findings.

Service provision

Gaps in services were identified in a number of studies. In Matheson *et al.*'s (2015) study, female prisoners articulated a strong desire for trauma-focused support, yet this was unavailable in prison. Similarly, in Kennedy and Mennike's (2018) study, women consistently asked for relevant and timely services, and these specialist services were either absent or preserved for

those with a formal diagnosis. They called for throughcare supports to assist them in transitioning into the community, recognised as beneficial for women with complex needs in Saxena *et al.*'s (2016) study. This study established that most women in the trauma-focused group were not referred to treatment by their Parole Officers once in the community. They posited that referrals could have enhanced the continuity of care for these women, many of whom independently sought treatment. In Dermody *et al.* (2018), women identified lack of facilities for detoxification and counselling. Some avoided services because they feared they could lose custody of their children, or inadequate childcare prevented their attendance at services.

The need for collaboration across agencies was discussed in several studies. In Dermody *et al.* (2018), women wanted services to work together; Anderson and Walerych's (2019) research further identified no joined-up response and a lack of adequate services. Ezell *et al.* (2018) concluded that trauma-informed practice needed wider buy-in from across the community and government to endorse a comprehensive trauma-informed system. Participating practitioners described resistance from other stakeholders who rejected trauma-informed approaches as faddish, which created a barrier to collaborative working. This resulted in fragmented provision and a lack of amenable and high-quality services in local communities. The findings in Bailey *et al.* (2020) concurred that poor service integration and referral pathways were problematic, highlighting difficulties with short-term funding projects that resulted in long waitlists and a revolving-door syndrome.

Philosophy and organisational culture

The philosophy and ethos of an organisation were linked to how trauma-informed practice was perceived and implemented in some studies which considered how staff interpreted their roles within the rehabilitation/retribution binary of criminal justice systems.

In Ezell *et al.* (2018), a small minority of staff felt it inappropriate and intrusive to explore trauma, describing it as outside their role. However, most staff demonstrated an ideological affinity for trauma-informed practice, which provided a lens to understand behaviour and prompted therapeutic responses, similar to Probation staff in Maschi and Schwalbe's (2012) findings. Ezell *et al.* (2018) observed that a minority of staff experienced a tension in shifting from the punitive orientation of the justice system towards trauma-informed practice. Staff who supported trauma-informed practice hypothesised that time, training

and documented evidence of positive outcomes were necessary factors in engendering a philosophical shift.

In Cox's (2018) study, staff protested about penal reforms designed to integrate trauma-informed practice into juvenile facilities. They perceived that safety, structure and discipline were jeopardised as a consequence of these changes. These staff framed young people's behaviour as criminal and negated the impact of trauma on them, and they struggled to manage behaviours without overt control measures, like restraints. Despite this, some staff were observed in daily interactions treating young people in ways that aligned with trauma-informed practice, and were invested in supporting them to improve their life chances, revealing a contradiction between verbalised attitudes and practice.

In Olfason *et al.* (2018), staff described a cultural shift away from punitiveness. This was reflected in the statements by young people and the findings that concluded trauma-informed practice could be implemented into complex juvenile justice settings.

Collectively, these studies offer some insights into the importance of frontline culture on the integration of trauma-informed practice.

Discussion

Few rigorous empirical studies documenting the practicalities of trauma-informed practice within criminal justice settings emerged. None of the studies provided a comprehensive insight into the review focus but, in varying degrees, they added a piece to the puzzle (Killick and Taylor, 2009). Most studies were USA-based, where the penal landscape differs substantially from Northern Ireland. With a rapid carceral expansion, more Americans are imprisoned, and for longer, than anywhere in the western world, described by Phelps (2017) as mass incarceration. As evidence of the extent of justice surveillance and monitoring, in 2018, one in 58 people in the USA was on probation (Office of Justice Programs, 2020), compared to one in 453 people in Northern Ireland (PBNI, 2020; NISRA, 2020), a trend referred to as mass probation (Phelps, 2017). Therefore, caution is required in extrapolating findings from this review, given the cultural, political, demographic and environmental differences between countries.

Four USA studies (Maschi and Schwalbe, 2012; Holloway *et al.*, 2018; Ezell *et al.*, 2018; Anderson and Walerych, 2019) explored community-based criminal justice settings, including juvenile probation, with different findings. Maturity

levels and developmental stages of justice-involved young people may limit the relevance of findings to the adult-focused nature of many probation services.

The importance of recognising trauma, seeing and hearing it, rather than avoiding or misinterpreting it, clearly emerged in the studies. The promotion of safety was emphasised as a core element in reducing trauma. This reinforced criminal justice staff as potentially important mediators for recognising and responding to trauma in ways that supported growth. In residential facilities, safe relationships characterised by care and warmth, promoted emotional regulation and processed trauma. How much of this could be translated to the hypermasculine environments of male prisons (Vaswani and Paul, 2019), or community-based probation settings, remains to be seen.

All the studies in this review were solely focused on justice-involved women and young people, with no empirical research on men, as the most overrepresented sub-population involved with the criminal justice system. In Northern Ireland, men comprise 95 per cent of the prison population (NIPS, 2019) and 90 per cent of PBNI's caseload (PBNI, 2020). Inasmuch as this review affirmed the importance of gender-responsive and trauma-informed services for women, it is important to recognise that men may have different needs in terms of their experience and manifestation of trauma (Grant, 2019; Levenson and Willis, 2019). It is reasonable to argue they also require gender-responsive services. Any findings from this review need to be cautiously interpreted for their applicability to justice-involved men.

In this review, an ethos of trauma-informed practice evidences a move away from punitiveness towards rehabilitation. Considering the enduring conflict between probation's care, protection and control functions (Doran and Cooper, 2008), these findings highlighted the challenge of translating trauma-informed concepts into tangible and meaningful practice in complex criminal justice settings. Cox (2018) and Ezell *et al.* (2018) highlighted that where wider political reforms and staff attitudes were incompatible, implementing trauma-informed practice was hampered. As this review highlighted, services must be ready before real change can be effected (Kusmaul *et al.*, 2015), pointing to the significance of organisational culture as a change mechanism. Training for staff did not emerge as a clear theme. Lack of skills to deliver trauma-informed practice was briefly mentioned in one study, and seven studies mentioned in their conclusions that training was important (Messina *et al.*, 2014; Matheson *et al.*, 2015; Hodge and Yoder, 2017; Walden and Allen, 2019; Olfason *et al.*, 2018; Dermody *et al.*, 2018; Bailey *et al.*, 2020).

Only one study briefly mentioned vicarious trauma and the need to support staff engaged in trauma-informed practice (Elwyn *et al.*, 2015). This is despite the literature documenting the emotionally demanding nature of work and the potential impact of compassion fatigue and burnout on practitioners' capacity to sustain practice in a trauma-informed way (Vaswani and Paul, 2019; Grant 2019).

Trauma-informed practice is premised on Harris and Fallot's (2001) concepts of 'safety first' and 'do no harm' but, as this review highlighted, the justice system itself can be experienced as traumagenic, placing individuals at risk of further trauma through harsh practices, as seen in Matheson *et al.* (2015), Hodge and Yoder (2017), and Kennedy and Mennike (2018). Recognising that contact with the justice system itself could be experienced as retraumatising echoes Durnescu's (2011) thematic analysis of the pains of probation. Some statutory probation functions require a nuanced approach, with trauma-informed practice, such as risk assessment, compulsory attendance, mandated programmes, limits to travel, curfew, enforcement of court orders, recall to custody and public protection priorities. Further research is needed to understand how these functions are compatible with trauma-informed practice.

While some themes emerged in the included studies, there remains a gap in the evidence base about the application of trauma-informed practice and its utility within criminal justice settings. Levenson and Willis (2019, p. 484) write that trauma-informed practice 'does not lend itself to the rigidly prescribed conditions required for research replicability'. Instead, it requires critical thinking that is individualised, and is 'not a product that is packaged, tested, and delivered in a standardised fashion' (ibid., p. 485).

Dowden and Andrews' (2004) meta-analysis highlighted five key skills that were effective for Probation Officers, namely appropriate use of authority, problem-solving, pro-social modelling, use of community resources and a positive interpersonal relationship. The parallels to trauma-informed practice are evident. Whilst philosophically, trauma-informed practice has an appeal to the traditional probation mandate of 'advise, assist and befriend' (McCartan, 2020), this review considered that trauma-informed practice does not necessarily mean that completely new approaches or interventions are needed (Grant, 2019); rather it offers a way of interpreting behaviour through the lens of trauma.

Conclusion

Whilst trauma-informed practice has occupied a central position of discourse for over a decade (Becker-Blease, 2017), the literature focuses on theory and principles rather than tangible practice (Johnson, 2017). This systematic narrative review revealed a limited but exploratory evidence base for trauma-informed practice in the justice system. The prioritisation of safety for service-users and staff was a critical factor in any trauma-informed practice approach. Attuned services and positive relationships were key mechanisms of support. Organisational culture and staff commitment were drivers for trauma-informed practice within criminal justice settings.

Findings from this review were based primarily on research in the USA with justice-involved women and young people. Translating the findings into work with men requires a careful interpretation. This review found no research on trauma-informed practice with adult men, yet men dominate the justice-involved population. Like many statutory settings engaging with individuals who have experienced polyvictimisation through the lifespan, the challenge for criminal justice organisations appears to be one of definition in terms of what trauma-informed practice means, and operationalisation with regard to how this is implemented in a systematic manner. Ultimately, as Berliner and Kolko (2016) comment, trauma-informed practices must yield positive outcomes for individuals. Future research that is gender-sensitive and specific to the needs of men subject to probation supervision could provide a nuanced understanding of what trauma-informed practice looks like for Probation practitioners. If trauma-informed practice is to have longevity, documented evidence of positive outcomes could build upon the evolving evidence base to support its continued implementation in criminal justice settings.

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