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Editorial

This year we enter a new era of the *Irish Probation Journal*. Last year's edition looked back on all we have achieved as a journal over twenty-one years. Now we look forward to the future of the Journal and how we continue our commitment to showcasing research, reflective practice, and innovation in probation on the island of Ireland.

In a new development, the editorial committee has agreed a theme for the 2025 Journal. From now on, we will continue to take a thematic approach to our annual journal, with a smaller and more focused number of articles from practitioners and academics aligned to our agreed theme.

This year's theme of 'community' lies at the very heart of probation's work. 'Community' can mean many things in probation. It can refer to the peer supports given to both practitioners and those we work with in helping foster an environment that is focused on promoting rehabilitation and supporting desistance. It can be the local communities where those under supervision live and work, in which maintaining community engagement and support while enhancing community safety is at the forefront of probation practice. It can be community-based organisations or specialised support services, where probationers can work with others to understand themselves better and to work towards future desistance.

The articles included in this edition span a wide range of experiences from both the academic and practice perspectives. They reflect how community can take different forms, while demonstrating the importance communities play in individuals' reintegration and desistance journeys. Some interactions can be direct, like the use of Community Service Orders, through which individuals may engage in reparative justice through physically contributing and giving back to their communities. Mental health supports – be they working directly with individuals or information sharing through innovative methods such as podcasts – create their own, smaller communities of support, which can greatly improve people's mental wellbeing and self-awareness. For practitioners, continuing to engage with research and learning helps to

encourage more inclusive practices. Through working with probationers in the community to improve their physical, social and emotional wellbeing, probation aims to restore relationships and create safer, more inclusive and supportive communities.

The first article of this issue sets out our theme in the context of probation across the island of Ireland. Written by Amanda Stewart, Chief Executive of PBNI, and Mark Wilson, former Director of the Probation Service, this article provides insights into the work that both services do with and in communities, in order to reduce harm and foster safer communities.

In our special edition last year, we did not publish the Martin Tansey Lecture from 2024. This year, we have both the 2024 and 2025 lectures. Not only do both these lectures fit with the theme of this year's journal, but they also provide different perspectives on women in the criminal justice system, as both perpetrators and victims of crime. The 2024 lecture, delivered by Professor Maggie O'Neill, demonstrates how women are a minority within the perpetrators of crime, offend for different reasons and behave differently from men when they do commit crime. Women who engage with the criminal justice system as perpetrators have complex interactions as they are also often victims, often non-violent, and often have children or other family who depend on them for care. This article highlights the work still to do regarding supporting women in their desistance journeys, particularly in relation to these additional needs and responsibilities.

The 2025 lecture, delivered by Dr Stephanie O'Keeffe, focused on the newly established agency 'Cuan', which is dedicated to tackling and reducing domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This article discusses the current understanding of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland and the actions being taken by Cuan and partner organisations to reduce this type of violence in our communities.

Continuing the focus on women, the next article, by Leona Tate, provides practice-based insights into current strategy and practices to implement restorative justice principles and provide a trauma-informed approach to help women to understand their offending behaviour and reduce recidivism. This article discusses current strategies and approaches that may inform the increased use of gender-responsive practice in probation work.

The importance of expanding how understanding mental health practices can be better communicated and integrated into probation is discussed in the following two articles. Brigeen Mullan's article reflects on her experiences as a facilitator of a PBNI pilot programme, which introduced participants

to mindfulness, and the positive impact a small group of participants experienced as a result.

The next article explores the potential use of mental health podcasts within probation practice. Sally Condon and Dr Sharon Lambert show that there is potential benefit in using mental health podcasts with probationers as an accessible way to help improve their own understanding of the mental health challenges they face.

Dr Colm Walsh and colleagues discuss the importance of understanding how to tackle violent crime from a public health perspective, and outline how the public health for violence prevention (PH-VP) model has emerged as a leading paradigm that has helped to facilitate community coalitions around a common goal.

Encouraging the increased use of community service and reducing short prison sentences is a key objective of probation in both jurisdictions. Professor Nicola Carr and Dr Niamh Maguire provide a summary of the use of community service orders in Ireland, including how they have been used to date and judicial perspectives on their implementation and impact.

Across the island of Ireland, housing has become an increasingly pressing issue, which has had very significant impacts on probationers. Gail McGreevy and Stephen Hamilton present findings from a PBNI survey of Probation Officers, to explore issues faced by those under supervision, in relation to housing and accommodation.

Bringing the focus back to desistance, Gillian Montgomery's article discusses how probation can contribute to reducing reoffending in the context of a new Programme for Government in Northern Ireland, and the academic framework of desistance. She outlines PBNI's current contribution to desistance, its operating context and the opportunities for PBNI to contribute further to reducing adult reoffending in light of this new strategic approach.

The importance of inclusion and representation is highlighted in the article about the new Probation Service Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU). This article by Rachel Lillis, Adam Spollen and Jane Mulcahy explains how current strategy is being implemented by SIRU to ensure a consistent and coherent approach, leading to better outcomes for everyone engaged with the service.

We have two very different, yet interesting and topical, book reviews. The first is of *Becoming a Social Work Manager* by Angie Bartoli. Combining management theory and practical advice for success, this book provides a valuable and accessible resource for social work managers, Area Managers

and Senior Probation Officers in the probation context. Both the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Probation Service are rooted in the social work profession, reflective of our respective ethos, value and knowledge base. This review by Collette Lattimore emphasises the important role our management teams play in creating an empowering, compassionate culture, where both staff and, through them, those we work with have the best opportunity to succeed.

The second book review attends to a very topical issue in contemporary society. Dermot Griffin's recently published book, *Sentencing Serious Sex Offenders – How Judges Decide When Discretion is Wide*, explores sentencing decision-making in such serious matters. Daragh Bailey outlines the role of judicial discretion and the various factors that influence sentencing decisions. Given public interest and media commentary in respect of many sentencing decisions, this is an important and informative read.

Finally, the editorial committee would like to thank all those who have contributed to this year's publication, and acknowledge their commitment to sharing knowledge, creating awareness and generating debate on topical issues. Next year, 2026, will see a very exciting development. The *Irish Probation Journal* will commence a series of editions led by a guest editor – an academic from the field of criminology, social work or a related field. To our readers, we want to extend thanks to you all for continuing to support the *Irish Probation Journal*, and we hope you enjoy this edition of the Journal.

Editorial Committee

Working with and in Communities – Insights from Probation on the Island of Ireland

Amanda Stewart and Mark Wilson*

Summary: This article, co-authored by the Chief Executive of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Amanda Stewart, and the Director of the Probation Service, Mark Wilson (retired September 2025), sets out their reflections and insights on how both organisations work *in* and *with* communities to prevent reoffending and rehabilitate and reintegrate those serving community sentences and those subject to licence in the community. Community is at the heart of probation practice, and this article considers in detail what that means. Individuals subject to probation are part of communities and even when they receive custodial sentences, in most cases, they will eventually return to those communities. Many of the people under probation supervision have highly complex needs and require a broad range of support and assistance if they are to make better choices for themselves and their communities. The strong ties that have been developed with voluntary and community partners enable support for individuals to be provided at a local level. Those ties also facilitate consistency and structure in the lives of those who have offended, after the statutory services have completed their role. Effective engagement with communities to help raise awareness and understanding of the impact of probation and respond to community concerns is essential, too. Our statutory and community partnerships provide a forum to enable this engagement to take place but undoubtedly there is much more to do. Better and more meaningful engagement with all communities, including those harder-to-reach communities, will lead to enhanced community confidence in the role of probation to change lives and help build safer streets, towns and neighbourhoods for all.

Keywords: Probation, community, communities, partnership, reoffending, Ireland, Northern Ireland, engagement, voluntary sector, statutory.

Introduction

We all want and deserve to live in communities where we feel safe and are safe. Within the wider justice system, terminology such as ‘community safety’, ‘community justice’, ‘community policing’ and ‘community partnerships’ is

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widely used. Within a probation setting in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, the strategic context for delivering services is very much underpinned by our commitment to working within 'communities'. The Probation Service commits to: 'Changing Lives in our Communities for Safer Futures' (Probation Service, 2024a) and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland aims to: 'Change Lives for Safer Communities' (PBNI, 2023). With similar aims, both organisations' strategic plans set out the desire to work collaboratively and effectively across government, with community and voluntary partners, to contribute to safer communities. Both organisations maintain a similar value base, including acting respectfully and compassionately, and ensuring accountability and transparency, as well as holding the belief that people have the capacity to change. This article considers what the delivery of probation services with and in communities looks like in 2025 and beyond, including how we work collaboratively with communities and are accountable as public servants to the public. It further considers the challenges in continuing to deliver services with a meaningful presence in, and real engagement with, citizens in local communities and the issues they face.

This article provides background to the work of both probation services. It considers what we mean by 'community' and the changing nature of communities north and south, and how probation services may consider adapting and developing in light of those changes. It also considers the community partnerships that are available to probation to assist engagement with citizens, and the effectiveness of those fora. Finally, it considers community sentences and how community perceptions of probation shape and influence our policy and operating environment.

Probation on the island of Ireland

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland

The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) is a non-departmental public body within the Department of Justice. Established in 1982,¹ PBNI's devolved identity as an 'arm's length' organisation has enabled it to establish its own purpose and priorities and devise a set of strategic aims and objectives. This arm's length status means that the probation service is held accountable by a community-based Board comprising up to thirteen members who are appointed on a three-year basis by the Minister of Justice. The Board has a range of mandatory functions set out in legislation, including

¹ The Probation Board (Northern Ireland) Order, 1982, available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1982/713>

securing the maintenance of an adequate and efficient probation service (PBNI, 2025a).

Probation in Northern Ireland is a central part of the criminal justice system and works to address the causes of offending, to help prevent people from coming back into the system, thus protecting the public from harm caused by reoffending. The services it provides enable individuals to change their behaviour, which in turn reduces the likelihood of reoffending, reduces the numbers of victims, and makes communities safer. It is primarily responsible for the management of people on probation (those serving a community sentence or who have been released from prison subject to licence) and for preparing pre-sentence reports for judges and magistrates in the courts, to enable them to choose the most appropriate sentence. Probation staff also work in prisons, preparing people for release into the community, and we provide an information service for victims of crime, as well as restorative interventions, where appropriate. The service also provides a range of funding to voluntary and community groups to assist the delivery of services in the community.

Probation Officers in Northern Ireland are registered by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council because they are qualified social workers. They develop respectful and honest relationships with individuals who offend, as well as promoting the rights of victims (O'Rourke *et al.*, 2025). The operating environment for PBNI has changed over time. For example, the development of probation practice has evolved, from a commitment to assist, advise and befriend, to evidence-based work in assessing and managing risk and interventions, focused on changing behaviours that contribute to reoffending. The age profile of those under supervision has changed, and we now deal with adults, an increasing number of whom are in the older 30–39 age bracket (PBNI, 2025a). Those we work with also have increasingly complex needs. At the same time, we have enhanced oversight and accountability structures and a challenging financial environment (Hansard, 2024). All of these factors have changed the operating focus of our work.

Collaborative working has also developed significantly over recent years. This has happened partly because of the legislative requirements, including the introduction of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland), 2011, which established Policing and Community Safety Partnerships.² The functions of PCSPs and DPCSPs set out in the Act include the requirement to make arrangements for

2 Under this legislation, each District Council in Northern Ireland established a Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP). Belfast City Council also established four District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (DPCSPs) to mirror the Belfast City policing districts of North, South, East and West Belfast.

obtaining the co-operation of the public with the police in preventing crime and enhancing community safety in each local district. The collaborative nature of probation's work has also developed because of a very clear strategic direction at leadership level with PBNi to enhance and create new partnerships to enable us to deliver the most effective services.

The Probation Service

The Probation Service is part of the Department of Justice and plays a vital role in making our communities safer by working to reduce reoffending, resulting in fewer victims of crime.

The Probation Service provides a unique contribution through the management and rehabilitation of people referred to the Service by the courts or on release from custody, supporting positive change and enhancing community safety (Probation Service, 2024a). The Service contributes to this by ensuring that court-ordered supervision is implemented in a way that protects the public, holds people to account and supports rehabilitation. Further, it delivers effective interventions with individuals subject to community sanctions, to reduce the risks associated with offending and support their rehabilitation and reintegration. Finally, it delivers opportunities for people to make good on the harm caused by crime, through reparation work and restorative justice. Its work is informed through strategic alignment and collaboration with a range of organisations from statutory, voluntary and community settings. As part of the Department of Justice, its priorities and goals are clearly aligned to the Department of Justice *Statement of Strategy 2024–2026*, the *Youth Justice Strategy 2021–27*, the *Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Policy 2022–24* and the Department of Justice *Policy Paper on Restorative Justice 2023*. Likewise, its objectives and aims support the work of the newly established statutory agency, Cuan, in delivering *Zero Tolerance: The Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based Violence 2022–26*. Equally, the Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, 2024 has, amongst a range of other developments, enabled the national roll-out of the Community Safety Partnership model, a model that is welcomed by the Service.

As in Northern Ireland, probation practice is guided and informed by social work values. While it is not compulsory for Probation Officers to be registered as social workers with CORU (the Health and Social Care Professionals Council), most are qualified social workers. At the core of what probation staff do across all work is to: motivate service-users to change, to

help them increase their ability to change, and to facilitate improved opportunities for change. Probation Officers do this through the development of positive professional relationships, within clear role boundaries, and using skills and interventions based on those shown by research to be effective. These, in turn, are founded on social work training and national and international standards of good practice, including, for example, the Council of Europe Probation Rules (2010). While those we work with are, in the main, those who have committed criminal offences, a central focus for probation work is the impact of offending on victims, and the needs, rights and position of victims of crime. Our work would be one dimensional if we focused only on the individual who has offended. In doing what we do, we need to be conscious of, and seek to repair where possible, the broken relationship between the person convicted of offending, victim(s) and the community.

In short, probation on the island of Ireland seeks to reduce reoffending, prevent further victims, promote rehabilitation, support reintegration and facilitate social inclusion.

Shared vision and shared challenges

At a strategic level, both probation organisations share similar aims, visions and values, and operate within comparable contexts. PBNI's *Corporate Plan* (2023) has four strategic priorities and outcomes. The first outcome focuses on supporting our people, through a positive and inclusive working environment, to deliver an effective and stable probation service. The second outcome is working towards a safer community, through the delivery of high-quality, effective probation services. The third outcome relates to having a probation service that is sustainable, adaptable and prepared for future challenges; and the fourth outcome focuses on developing partnerships to help make communities safer. Likewise, the Probation Service's *Statement of Strategy* is developed around five pillars, two of which focus on enhancing community safety and building collaboration and engagement. The other three pillars are empowering staff, enabling social inclusion and futureproofing the service.

Reflecting societal changes, the operating environment for both organisations has changed in recent years, with the complexity of risk and need presenting. More people are presenting with poor mental health, addictions and trauma-related matters (PBNI, 2025a). There is also an increase in those on supervision who are unable to access appropriate and

sustainable housing (PBNi, 2023; Hansard, 2024; Probation Service, 2024b). Probation Officers in the Republic of Ireland have observed a similar increase in housing support needs within their caseloads. We have seen changes in our caseloads, including an increase in the numbers of people who have committed serious offences, including domestic abuse and sexual offending, as well as in the types of crime and opportunities to commit crime, including online offending.

Every service-user we work with is part of a community, and even when they receive custodial sentences, they will eventually return to the community. As outlined, many of those under supervision have a range of needs and may require a broad range of support and assistance if they are to make better choices for themselves and their communities. Strong ties with communities are therefore essential if we are to assist those people subject to supervision to make the choice to change their lives and become rehabilitated and reintegrated fully into society.

This means that, more than ever, there is a need for collaboration, and probation services cannot be delivered in isolation. That partnership working is critical with justice partners but there is also a need for significant investment in developing our partnerships with community and voluntary sectors, as well as tapping into the potential of the informal resource network (e.g. family and kinship ties, community leaders and volunteers) available throughout communities on the island of Ireland.

With over thirty-five community-based offices nationwide, the Probation Service is a national service on a larger scale than PBNi, which currently operates out of eighteen community-based offices. A challenge for the future is how best to physically deliver services in a way that is efficient and effective and best uses resources to connect with local communities.

Before we consider some of these issues in more detail, we want to consider first what we mean by working with the community, and the definition of community.

What do we mean by probation working with ‘the community’?

The term ‘community’ and the consideration of a community in which an individual resides often invokes thoughts of the geographic location, or physical composition, of a particular locality. It is also likely to invoke thoughts of the social fabric of a particular locality, the people who reside there and how they may interact or influence each other. The former carries considerable

importance for the work of probation practitioners. For example, the physical composition of a locality can include prosocial opportunities an individual may access, or in the context of the ever-increasing challenges presented by homelessness, it may or may not provide the very foundation from which someone can move forward. It is, however, the latter which will be the focus of this article – the people who comprise communities and how they relate to one another.

A recent report notes that, as social beings, our sense of community can be a powerful tool for improving health and wellbeing and strengthening our resilience in difficult times, and indeed, for many, the pandemic proved this theory (Permanent TSB and Kantar, 2022).

The authors of the book *The Connected Community* (Russell and McKnight) are proponents of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), which is a community development approach that focuses on identifying and mobilising a community's existing assets, skills and passions, rather than focusing on problems and needs. The book emphasises that communities are built from the inside out, driven by relationships and the connections between people. The authors assert that our disconnection from 'people and place' diminishes our quality of life, and they demonstrate, through a range of examples and stories, how neighbours can work together in their own area to connect with one another and create healthier and safer communities (Russell and McKnight, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic was a perfect reminder of the importance of connections within communities and how isolation and loneliness can provide a perfect storm, which impacts upon wellbeing and mental health and exacerbates issues with addictions. During the period when social distancing restrictions were in place, probation staff reported on how their role changed to one of providing support, helping service-users to cope with loneliness and enforced isolation. One Probation Officer reflected during the pandemic:

'I need to have conversations about the usual concerns, how they are feeling and if they are taking their medication, if required. Now, with the COVID-19 lockdown, we have an added responsibility to supervision. My conversations have been extended to address each client's role and responsibility in protecting each other from the spread of infection, and the added issues the impact of enforced isolation and loneliness has had on them.'

(O'Neill and McGreevy, 2020)

For those on probation supervision, many are facing myriad challenges, which may include tackling poor mental health, addictions, isolation, homelessness or unstable housing, lack of employment and education, navigating the criminal justice system, and dealing with the stigma and shame of having offended. Whilst for some individuals, their community, people and influences in their life may have negatively shaped their experience, and therefore there is a need for them to 'break' from these communities in order to desist from crime, we would assert that it is also the case that a sense of belonging, having purpose and meaning in life and being embedded within a community can be an overwhelmingly positive experience and assist a person on their journey of desistance (Maguire and Carr, 2024).

As people working in the field of probation, understanding the influence of people within communities with whom those we supervise engage, both positively and negatively, is a crucial part of how we affect positive change.

For example, systems theory (Friedman and Allen, 2011) provides a framework for understanding how individuals are affected by – and interact with – their environments. It is not just about the person; it is about the relationships, roles, and structures around them. This holistic view is essential for assessing people's needs and planning interventions to facilitate change.

McNeill and Maruna (2008), drawing on the findings of desistance studies, reflect on the community, social and personal contexts that exist to help facilitate change, and cite Farrall (2002), who states that; 'social circumstances and relationships with others are both the object of the intervention and the medium through which ... change can be achieved'. McNeill and Maruna (2008) reflect that desistance-supporting interventions need to respect and foster agency and reflexivity; be based on legitimate and respectful relationships; and also focus on social capital (opportunities) and human capital (motivations and capacities).

Understanding the communities from which our service-users come is, arguably, a critical element of our work if we are to help effect change. Whilst our staff often come from and live in local communities, it is important to consider whether our organisation and staff really reflect the communities that we serve. Both jurisdictions have seen significant community changes, particularly as a result of increased ethnic diversity (NISRA, 2025a; CSO, 2025). As demographics in communities change and shift and we see more newcomer communities, it is a fair assertion that the make-up of our staff does not necessarily reflect the diversity now apparent in many of our local communities. For example, within PBNi, monitoring information held internally (December

2022) indicates that the PBNl workforce ethnicity is made up of 98 per cent white, 0.5 per cent black, 0.5 per cent mixed race and 1 per cent not disclosed.

Within Northern Ireland, there is also the additional issue of separated communities, which is rooted in political and historical factors where some remain segregated along religious lines. For example, most of those living in social housing, particularly in Belfast, are not living in shared communities, but rather are living in housing that is predominately one religion. This has an added dimension in that during forty years of the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland, services, including probation services, were sited at locations to facilitate safety and security to either side of the community, for those using these services. These services are often still at the same locations, and it has been a huge challenge to facilitate society moving away from having almost every service located on a very local level. Speaking in the NI Assembly in March 2025, MLA Eoin Tennyson commented that:

'...90 per cent of social housing remains segregated; peace walls divide communities; and paramilitary organisations continue to exert a toxic influence. This is a society where, for too many, community background still dictates where you go to school, what street you live on, the football teams that you can support, the sports that you can play, the services that you access and what your political views should be. Not only is that anathema to the vision of the truly shared future that the people of Northern Ireland signed up to in 1998 but it comes at a huge financial cost.'

(Hansard, 2025)

Recognising the diversity of communities, and the challenges faced within many communities, how do we harness the potential that exists within these areas to help create a safer environment and how do we develop our ability to engage meaningfully with people to truly support desistance?

Probation's partnership with communities through community development

For both probation organisations, a key priority is to work with our network of community-and-voluntary-based organisations to further develop and deliver dynamic services that are responsive to the needs of modern probation service. Probation's reach into communities only goes so far and, by and large, both organisations are '9–5 services' that work with people only

for a designated period of time as determined by the courts. It is therefore critical that there is a network of community and voluntary organisations who can assist probation's aims and continue to work with people after probation services have ended for individuals.

In the Probation Service there is a long history of valuing being present in and linking with communities. This enables the Service to understand and be responsive to local needs, to be more integrated with the community's responses to its needs, be better networked with statutory and community partners and, ultimately, to assist those referred to us to reintegrate and lead more productive lives. The Service supports 60 community-based organisations, including circa €17.5 million in funding annually (Probation Service, 2024b). While not universally spread, the projects, which worked with a total of 4,500 people in 2024, complement the work of Probation Officers by forming strong purposeful relations, creating a community with positive, consistent support, and a belief in the person's capacity for change – instilling a sense of hope that is often a prerequisite to change. The work of the community-based organisations brings a responsive dynamism and resilience that is greatly valued. A community-based connection is a change-enabler that, more often than not, goes beyond the period of probation contact.

Likewise in Northern Ireland, the community and voluntary sector has traditionally played a strong role, with organisations such as NIACRO (Fulton et al., 2021) working closely with probation services. Fulton et al. recognise that NIACRO's contribution to building safer and peaceful communities in Northern Ireland is its very grounding in those communities and the fact that it was amongst the first organisations to give voice to the concept of justice reinvestment or decentralising justice investments from state institutions to community-building initiatives. The Probation Order (1982), which remains the main legislative instrument in respect of probation in Northern Ireland, sets out that one of the main functions of the Board is to enter arrangements with voluntary organisations to provide services to assist in the supervision of those subject to probation. As well as providing community grants to local organisations to assist with the provision of community service placements, PBNi has a number of partnerships with community and voluntary organisations, for example through 'Aspire' (Ritchie and McGreevy, 2019), which is a collaborative project led by PBNi and delivered in conjunction with NIACRO. Aspire aims to reduce criminality and risk-taking behaviour in young men aged 16–30 who are marginalised from communities and at risk of becoming involved in paramilitarism. Similarly, probation in Northern Ireland provides

funding to Women's Aid to assist in the development of interventions to tackle domestic abuse. The Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP) is an innovative programme designed for adult males who have demonstrated the potential to be abusive in intimate partner relationships, and whose children are assessed by Social Services to be at risk. Funding is provided to Women's Aid to assist in the delivery of this intervention.

Aside from the funding arrangements that exist, probation also has essential partnerships in place with the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland to provide 'approved accommodation'. These premises are managed by community and voluntary organisations, including Extern, the Simon Community and the Council of Social Witness, Presbyterian Church in Ireland. Approved premises act as a transition or halfway house between prison and settlement in the community for people leaving custody who are assessed as high risk. They have two main roles: to help rehabilitate and resettle some of the most serious offenders leaving custody; and to make sure that the public are protected in the offenders' early months in the community. Having a home in a community when you leave prison is a key determinant for successful rehabilitation and preventing further offending, yet the location and use of approved premises also poses real and genuine concerns within local communities. Engagement with communities in areas where approved premises are located is essential in trying to ensure that we can listen to concerns and provide information and reassurance to local communities. In recent months, probation staff, alongside colleagues in policing and the voluntary and community organisation that runs one approved accommodation have been holding a series of local engagements with politicians and residents to try to ensure that the local community is better informed. These engagements and local relationships undoubtedly help build confidence and, at the same time, support residents in approved accommodation to settle and integrate better within the local community. The issue of community concerns in respect of the housing of individuals who have offended is a long-standing problem that has been the subject of much public discussion and debate. Thompson (2014) highlighted the critical importance of building community confidence in order to reintegrate these individuals back into the community, and the issue remains as contentious today.

The importance of collaboration with community and voluntary organisations to assist in the delivery of probation services is vital. As noted earlier, probation services across the island work with individuals for a

designated period of time. When those statutory services that are provided end, it is essential that there is support provided to individuals from within the wider community and voluntary sector. In both jurisdictions, the expertise and experience within the community and voluntary sector are of a high standard and valued, as evidenced by the efforts that have been made in both jurisdictions to protect funding for this sector, in the face of budget pressures.

We understand that in order to support sustainable change and reduce reoffending, we must also target the underlying causes of crime. For this reason, we will continue to build capacity in the area of social inclusion and play our part in helping individuals to overcome inequalities, by challenging stigmatisation and removing barriers to participation in society. We will continue to leverage the innovation, skills and expertise of the community-based organisations we fund, benefitting from their unique perspective in support of achieving our shared aims.

While the link between the community and voluntary sector and probation is well documented, the role of volunteerism within the work of probation in both jurisdictions is underdeveloped. Many of the probation services' collaborative partners make use of volunteers, particularly in mentoring roles. For example, Le Chéile is a mentoring programme for young persons engaged with the criminal justice system and their parents, and CoSA, Circles of Support and Accountability, supports those who have histories of sexual offending. Many other jurisdictions do make use of volunteers successfully within probation. The CoPPER (Cooperation to Promote a European Volunteering Programme in Probation Services) project, co-ordinated by the Confederation of European Probation, of which the Probation Service is a partner, aims to enhance community involvement in probation by training volunteers to support probationers. This involves providing informal support, advice and guidance to individuals on probation, ultimately facilitating their social reintegration. While at the early stages, there is real potential in taking this approach.

Both probation services recognise and acknowledge the important role that the community plays in working with people who have committed offences, supporting their rehabilitation, reintegration and engagement in a positive lifestyle. Providing opportunities for community members to engage with us is an important feature of our work. This includes creating opportunities for volunteering and the provision of community service placements. In recognising the unique 'value added' that volunteerism brings work and, more importantly, the positive influence and impact that this can

have on the lives of service-users, there remains untapped potential in communities throughout the island of Ireland. This is an area which merits further attention and may assist in ensuring that those who work with service-users are more reflective of the community within which they live. In turn, this links to how probation services harness the expertise of people who have lived experience of the justice system to assist others to desist from crime.

Rooted in the belief that social inclusion factors such as addiction, poor mental health, and homelessness can be responded to more effectively through a revised and structured approach, the Probation Service has established a Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU) to oversee the effective co-ordination and implementation of the Probation Service's work in these areas. This is a very deliberate response to an understanding and appreciation of the social context and the ways in which the above needs may interrelate and require complex and innovative solutions, rather than thinking of offender rehabilitation solely as individual treatment to reduce/remove criminogenic risk. The Unit aims to ensure that our work is aligned with wider social inclusion policy directions, in order to maximise opportunities to support reintegration and thereby reduce reoffending.

Statutory partnerships with and across communities

All who work in the criminal justice system share the goal of helping to create a safer and a fairer Ireland. While each organisation and agency within the criminal justice system brings its own unique contribution to the process, we multiply what each of us brings to the table when our energies are combined in a focused way. Interagency co-operation with our justice partners, particularly the courts, the prison service, the police and the youth justice service, is central to everything we do.

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs)

Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) are statutory bodies, which were established under the Justice Act (Northern Ireland), 2011, and were set up on 1 April 2012. They are funded jointly by the Policing Board for Northern Ireland and the Department of Justice. The overall purpose of PCSPs is to make communities safer. Their aim is to empower communities to develop solutions that will help to tackle crime, fear of crime and anti-social behaviour, alongside contributing to an increase in confidence in policing (Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, 2025).

Each of the eleven District Councils in Northern Ireland is required to establish a PCSP and each one consists of between eight and ten political members (councillors), who are appointed by the local council; and between seven and nine independent members. There are also representatives from seven public-sector organisations, including PBNI, who are designated to sit on the PCSP. Designated members are equal members of the partnerships and are expected to contribute actively alongside the political and independent members in all facets of work relating to community safety. The relevant responsibilities of the organisations represented by the designated members will also be recognised in the development and implementation of the PCSP action plan.

PCSPs provide a forum to support PBNI and other partner organisations to work with vulnerable people in reducing harm to communities caused by alcohol and substance misuse. They are uniquely positioned, with key partners represented to adopt a public health approach to criminal justice issues within local communities. Other areas where PCSPs have proven important and aligned to probation work are in actively supporting initiatives for victims of domestic abuse, including training for frontline professionals on risk and risk indicators for domestic abuse and domestic homicide.

Staff have reported that while there are benefits to being part of PCSPs, there is also frustration that many of the meetings tend to focus primarily on policing issues, with more general community safety issues having lower profile and less discussion.

In 2023, PBNI undertook an internal review of our role within PCSPs to consider how we best use the expertise of these partnerships. One area we are considering, which may be of value, is to have PCSPs commission services locally – for example, in the area of tackling addictions – which would allow members of the PCSP (statutory, elected, independent/community) to make referrals to a local service that is more responsive to local need. There are also opportunities for PBNI to use PCSPs to raise awareness and understanding of our role and we have offered all PCSPs presentations on key areas of our work, to generate greater awareness in probation's role. Whilst PCSPs have been in operation for over a decade, there remain opportunities to utilise these partnerships better to enhance community engagement.

Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs)

In Ireland, the Policing Security and Community Safety Act, 2024, which came into operation on 2 April 2025, placed Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs) on a statutory footing. Recognising that every community is different and has different problems and issues, each partnership will develop and implement a Local Community Safety Plan tailored to the specific needs of that area. Local Community Safety Partnerships (LCSPs) aim to prioritise the voice of local people in identifying and addressing community safety issues in collaboration with a broad range of relevant stakeholders, including local councillors, An Garda Síochána, community representatives, business and education representatives, local authorities and a range of statutory agencies, including Probation Service, which participates on a number of LCSPs.

The objective is to bring the relevant bodies together with communities in a collaborative manner, by focusing on the concerns identified and prioritised by local people. One particular example in which the Probation Service is collaborating, under the Dublin LCSP, is the 'Bridge Project', which offers an alternative to custody for adult male offenders. Collaborating with gardaí and youth workers, the project, funded by the Probation Service, targets anti-social behaviour among young people, facilitating connections with communities to deter involvement. Diversionary prosocial activities for young men have been put in place through the LCSP, which have proved beneficial.

In terms of further utilising these statutory partnerships, there remains an opportunity to use these fora to listen to community concerns and provide flexible and responsive community sentences, which can benefit the local community, particularly in respect of the sentencing option of community service.

Community sentences

Society, through government, for many centuries, has assigned the task of deciding the correct sentence for an offence to the judges in criminal courts. One of the sentencing options available to the courts is community sentences, which are sentences served in the community and are distinct from custodial sentences, which can be immediate or suspended. Community sentences can take a wide variety of forms and can be tailored around the individual. A range of studies and research has been conducted about the effectiveness of community sentencing. Of those people sentenced to a community sentence in Ireland in 2020, 27 per cent had reoffended within one year, compared to

41 per cent of people released from custody (CSO, 2024). In Northern Ireland, reoffending information shows that the rate of reoffending for adults sentenced to a community order was nearly half that of adults subject to a custodial sentence of less than twelve months. Whilst we cannot directly compare, the latest figures (those sentenced/released in 2021–22) show that 53 per cent of adults released from custody (having served less than twelve months) reoffended, whereas this was much lower for adults on a community sentence (NISRA, 2024).

A key reason why community sentences are more effective than short custodial sentences at reducing reoffending is that they allow people to retain contact with support networks and services which can help to address the factors contributing to their offending – maintenance of family ties, jobs, housing, and childcare responsibilities – which reduces the risk of reoffending.

Currently, community sentences fall short of their potential, in terms of their potential usage, and we would like to see an increase in the use of this sentencing option. To enable this to happen, there needs to be confidence in community sentencing, and that includes both judicial confidence and community confidence in probation services' capacity to deliver.

Evidence shows limited public understanding of sentencing, and despite falling crime rates, public attitudes toward crime continue to prioritise the importance of punishment and public protection. Findings from the NI Safe Community Survey (2019/20) (Campbell *et al.*, 2021) asked respondents what, in their opinion, would be the most important things the justice system could do to improve its public confidence rating. Respondents were most likely to cite 'tougher sentences' as one of the most important things that could be done to improve public confidence

Within community sentences, community service is one of the most visible and well understood areas of sentencing, and that may well be because it is visible within communities, communities can have a say in how and where it is conducted, and there is a form of reparation in terms of giving or paying back to local communities through this order. We have seen the reparative impact of community service through unpaid work completed in communities, in schools, sports grounds, tidy towns, graveyards and beaches.

In providing evidence to the House of Lords enquiry (Justice and Home Affairs Committee, 2023) on community sentencing, the Criminal Justice Alliance said that 'in Scotland there is legislative responsibility to consult specific people and organisations on the types of unpaid work activity that should be carried out in their area'. They recommended that 'Probation

should also develop more hyper-local partnerships by engaging with victims of crime and community groups to identify local needs'. They added: 'greater involvement of the voluntary and community sector in unpaid work placements would also be beneficial', pointing out that 'many voluntary and community sector organisations employ staff with lived experience of the criminal justice system in roles where engagement and rapport building is important' (Justice and Home Affairs Committee, 2023, p. 53).

This is an area where our statutory local community partnerships in both jurisdictions could be beneficial, both in terms of assisting to provide referrals to community placements and in highlighting and profiling the unpaid work completed in local communities.

Community Service Orders (CSOs) have been in use in Ireland since 1983 when the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act was passed. CSOs are a direct alternative sanction to a prison sentence of twelve months or less for persons aged 16 years and over. CSO hours can range from 40 to 240 hours, and failure to complete can result in the custodial sentence being imposed. In 2025, the Probation Service launched its *Community Service: New Directions Implementation Plan 2025–2027*. The goal of this plan is to deliver community service as a robust sanction, which is used consistently and with confidence by the judiciary across all courts nationally. At the heart of this implementation plan is the intention of working with those who receive CSOs, to reintegrate them back into their communities and to facilitate them in learning new skills that will assist in their desistance journey, while they are engaging in reparative work in their communities. The plan also aims to improve victim satisfaction levels and build public confidence in community-based sanctions (Probation Service, 2025)

As both services on the island of Ireland look at how best to increase the use of community service, there is no doubt that the involvement of local people within local communities must be a key element of the development of our approach.

There are also lessons to be learnt in respect of how we visibly demonstrate success and outcomes in respect of other forms of community sentencing. We have a challenge to explain and to raise areas within communities where community sentencing in all its forms can have a positive impact on individuals, families and communities.

Working to reduce further victimisation and repair harm

As previously stated, the work of probation would be one-dimensional if we focused only on those who commit offences. In doing what we do, we need to be conscious of, and seek to repair where possible, the broken relationship between individuals who have offended, victim(s) and the wider community. Probation does this in a number of ways. When preparing a pre-sanction assessment on a person, we assess, as part of that, the impact on the particular victim or victims, the person's understanding of that impact, and how we can help that individual to avoid creating more victims in the future. We also provide opportunities to people who have offended to make good the harm they have caused. This includes performance of community service, as well as a number of reparative and restorative interventions and programmes that probation delivers, both directly and indirectly, with community-based partners and agencies.

The Restorative Justice and Victim Services Unit (RJVSU) was established in September 2018, providing communication pathways through a single point of contact for victims of crime, as well as developing an integrated and consistent approach to restorative justice practice, provided directly or indirectly by the Probation Service. Similarly, within PBNi, statutory victim information schemes are in place (Montgomery, 2019) and a restorative justice strategy has been published, which refreshes our approach to working with community-based restorative justice organisations. Importantly, the strategy makes clear that restorative practice is not solely about the victim–perpetrator meeting, but can include repairing family relationships when the service-user is returning to the community, or managing difficulties. The wider reparative and restorative work with local communities must be a key part of our local engagement.

Conclusion – what does our work with communities look like in 2025 and beyond?

Whilst the nature and make-up of communities on the island have changed and evolved, the concept of communities made up of individuals who reside in a local area and how they interact and influence each other remains important to the work of probation. The pandemic reinforced the importance of connectivity and the value that positive social interaction brings. For those on probation who are already facing significant challenges, adversity and social exclusion, positive connections to local communities can bring a sense of belonging and constructively impact on their desistance journey.

It is critical therefore that we continue to ask the following questions. Are we sufficiently engaged with local communities? Are our strategies, policies and practices aligned with the clear direction to staff and stakeholders on why, how and with what outcome we should work with communities?

What we do know is that community engagement and reintegration is a two-way process. The individuals we work with must want to be part of the community, to see the value of contributing, and to be accountable for the harm they have caused. The members of the community must also be willing and have the resources to give that person the opportunity to participate and receive a second chance. Communities must be willing to engage in supporting desistance, and not simply be 'punishing communities' (McNeill, 2006).

If we want communities to provide that 'social capital' to assist the rehabilitation and reintegration of those we work with, we need to invest in community engagement. McNeill points to the challenges of community support for desistance and states that rather than being an excuse not to engage it should 'drive us to a recognition of the need for offender management agencies to re-engage with community education and community involvement and to seek ways and means, at the local level and at the national level, to challenge populist punitiveness'.

As we have identified, our work with community-based organisations and our funded partners can enable opportunities for change, supporting both the person and the community to engage with each other and highlighting the value of reintegration. For this reason, it is important that we continue to build capacity in the area of social inclusion, consider how we reach 'hard-to-reach' groups and individuals, in particular, and play our part in helping them to overcome inequalities by challenging stigmatisation and removing barriers to participation in society.

Likewise, opportunities exist through our statutory community partnerships for more effective local engagement and to raise awareness and explain the value that community sentences provide. There is an opportunity to change public perceptions about what effective sentencing is.

The development of all our strategic work, including our approach to restorative justice, service-user engagement and the use of our resources, including our estate and people, must consider the wider impact on communities and how it enhances our ability to engage with same.

The well-known adage that 'it takes a village to raise a child' is often used and denotes the importance of having a sense of collective responsibility, emphasising the importance of collaboration, shared values and a strong

sense of community. Likewise, probation services cannot work in isolation. We need the collective experience and expertise of a range of partners, and we need members of local communities to work with us to achieve our collective aim of creating safer streets and safer neighbourhoods.

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Women and the Criminal Justice System: Gender Matters*

Maggie O'Neill†

Summary: This article is based upon the 17th annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture and draws upon a long history of research with women who come into conflict with the law, who engage with the criminal justice system as victims, offenders or both. In keeping with Martin Tansey's life's work and the values he promoted that underpin independent criminal justice research, I highlight the importance of interdisciplinarity, participatory and creative methods for centring the voices of women and, thus, facilitating pathways to better knowledge and understanding, education, reintegration and social justice. In doing so, I call for more participatory and creative research from our research institutions that seek to make a difference not only by facilitating space for women's voices but by listening, paying attention to and working with criminal justice involved women towards transformative social change and justice for women.

Keywords: Criminal justice, women, gender, feminism, Open Clasp, participatory action research, creative methods.

Introduction

First, I want to briefly situate myself in the criminal justice landscape and I will then share the long history of research that sociologists, and criminologists in particular, have conducted on women, crime and justice, in order to outline what I call a *feminist criminological imagination* in this historical context. I understand feminism as the theory and practice of addressing sexual and social inequalities that has social justice at the centre. Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name, bell hooks, in a short book called *Feminism is for Everybody*, tells us that we should all be feminists, given that feminism seeks 'to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression.' Over the last three decades, my criminological research has focused on working with

* This paper comprises the revised text of the 17th annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Association for Criminal Justice, Research and Development (ACJRD) and delivered at the Criminal Courts of Justice.

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marginalised groups, sex workers, victims and survivors of gender-based violence, migrant women and girls, people forced to flee – caught in the asylum migration nexus, unaccompanied young people seeking asylum, children and young people in direct provision, young people involved in offending, and people incarcerated in prisons.

Criminology is frequently understood as the study of crime and criminal justice, and its methods are those of conventional social science, such as surveys and in-depth interviews and focus groups. In *Imaginative Criminology*, with Lizzie Seal, we argue that we also need more creative, cultural and phenomenological methodologies – creative applications of research that engage with lived lives, cultures and communities in order to promote social justice, using participatory action research, socially engaged, participatory arts and biographical methodologies (Seal and O'Neill, 2021, O'Neill and Seal 2012, O'Neill 2016, O'Neill 2010, O'Neill 2004). For example, a now fourteen-year collaboration with Catrina McHugh MBE and Open Clasp Theatre, who work with women involved in the criminal justice system as victims/survivors or both, has led to walking and theatre-based methods to seek and promote justice for women who are homeless, incarcerated in prison, who experience gender-based violence and coercive control. I will focus on the latter example in the final section of this article.

This paper is organised into three sections: 'Foundational work of Martin Tansey, Gerry McNally and AJCRD', 'Women in the criminal justice system' and 'Gender matters: Feminist criminological imagination', an approach to working together that I define as actioning a feminist cultural criminological imagination.

1. Foundational work of Martin Tansey, Gerry McNally and AJCRD

There are three key aspects of this cultural criminological research that resonate with what I know about Martin Tansey,¹ Gerry McNally² and the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development's (ACJRD) ethos and values, namely: i) deep empirical research grounded in critical thinking to understand and analyse social issues or social problems or social complexities; ii) deep understanding of lived experience (for me accessed through

1 Martin Tansey joined the Probation and Welfare Service in 1965 where he served until his retirement in 2002, working tirelessly to bring government support and public recognition to the work of the Probation Service. Martin died in March 2007.

2 Gerry McNally joined the Probation Service in 1978 and retired as Assistant Director in 2024. He is a former President of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) and former editor of the *Irish Probation Journal*.

ethnographic, participatory and biographical methods), so that we may understand the relationship between lived experiences and broader social and cultural structures, processes and practices, and this, for C. Wright Mills, was the basis for the sociological imagination. For 'neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both' (Mills, 1970, p. 3) so that we are able 'to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (Mills, 1970, p. 6). This in turn gives rise to iii) purposeful knowledge – what we might call praxis – knowledge that is policy relevant, that might intervene in order to create change. That we put the knowledge we create in the service of *re-imagining* and working towards enacting alternative social futures, in ways that are more caring, inclusive and sustainable – underpinned by principles of fairness and justice.

How might we do this?

By working together in partnership across sociology and criminology departments, the relevant agencies and ACJRD. In the final section of the article, I will share with you two examples of *participatory imaginative criminology* that operationalise these three key aspects – but first, Gerry McNally's recent interview (O'Connor, 2024) in the journal.ie is very instructive in relation to these three points above. Gerry mentions the importance of partnership working to reduce offending and create safer and fairer communities and fewer victims through offender rehabilitation; and crucial to this is *facilitating positive change*. This, he states, is at the core of the work of the Probation Service, working 'with people in the criminal justice system not as individuals to isolate but as people to be included in communities':

'Your purpose as a probation officer is about helping people change their behaviour – that's the focus. So you are actually working for the betterment of the community and the betterment of the individual.'

(McNally in O'Connor, 2024)

Gerry references the *importance of critical thinking*, that we should not just follow routines, patterns or programmes/ideologies but constantly be critically reflecting on what we do, how and why we do it, and asking if there are better ways. As an example, Gerry talks about the routines we fall into, for example, through years of working in institutions, such as the probation, prison and university systems, and he shares that it took him a number of years to stop approaching cases in an institutionalised way and that 'the core

business of probation is in the community – it's about being enmeshed in the community, about being part of the community.' The core business is also about *changing lives*, showing people that there is a different way to live, giving hope and showing alternative routes or pathways supporting people, and providing the tools to achieve and live a different 'decent' life (see McNally in O'Connor, 2024).

In summary, Gerry's points here connect with my earlier point: i) the vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise; ii) the vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of institutions, environments and communities; iii) making interventions for social change, by imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways, for our collective social futures.

I use this framing to organise the rest of my article and, following feminist criminologist Pat Carlen (1983, 1988, 2010), this connects with an ontological belief about our social worlds that things can be different; that the task of criminology/social science is to account for social phenomena as well as to count them; and that part of our task is to investigate crime, law breaking and social responses and to 'imagine the "conditions" for them being otherwise' (Carlen, 2010, p. 1). Hence, we need imaginative criminology that is participatory, is connected to communities and that works with people where they are at.

What then do we know about women in the criminal justice system (CJS)?

2. Women in the criminal justice system

The research evidence shows us that women are prosecuted for summary offences, do not offend as much or as seriously as men, have shorter criminal careers, and are less likely to have a co-offender (Gelsthorpe, 2004; Quinlan, 2015). We know that poverty, trauma, childhood trauma, violence and abuse, poor mental health and addictions play a part in their life stories; that many are mothers and their pathways into crime are about economic need, coercive control, and chaotic lives, as well as difficult relationships with men – coercion and control (McHugh, 2013; Quinlan, 2015; O'Neill in Windle *et al.*, 2023; Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024; Baldwin, 2023; Seaman and Lynch, 2022; Grace *et al.*, 2022).

We know that a large number of committals are for non-violent offences and the majority of women are detained on short-term sentences (IPRT, no date, McHugh 2013; Quinlan 2015; O'Neill in Windle *et al.* 2022; Gibson-

Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024). Women are a minority of the prison population, and housed in prisons designed for men. In Ireland, women make up around 3.8 per cent of the prison population and are located in two female prisons: the Mountjoy Dóchas Centre and, until the recent opening of the new women's prison in Limerick, a female wing in Limerick Prison. In England and Wales, similarly, women in prison make up a minority, around 4 per cent, 'yet acts of self-harm are around five times more common among incarcerated women' (Walker, 2022, p. 87).

The Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT, no date) reports that since 2011 the rate of female prison committals continues to rise higher than for men. Moreover, 10 per cent of female committals are for non-payment of fines, which is more than double that of men (see also Quinlan, 2015). The average number of females in custody in 2022 was 173, a 17 per cent increase from the 2021 average of 144. The daily average number of female offenders in custody rose by 14 per cent in the ten-year period between 2012 and 2022. Committals under immigration increased to 117 in 2022 after a decrease of 65.2 per cent to 86 in 2021, from 247 in 2020. A growing concern is immigration-related committals.

The IPRT has expressed serious concerns about prison overcrowding for women in both Limerick and the Dóchas Centre, and remains focused upon working towards policy changes that offer alternatives to detention and imprisonment, including open-prison. Supported by independent research, the IPRT highlights the profound impact of imprisonment on women and their families, as well as the economic and social costs to society.

Despite evidence that short sentences profoundly disrupt women's and their families' lives, there is a lack of viable alternatives. It is impossible to not recognise that there are many missed opportunities to offer support. As pointed out by Baldwin, Elwood and Brown (2022), women could and should be supported at any number of points on their journey to prison – as a child and as an adult – instead, women are more often than not judged on their failures in their prescribed social roles.

(Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 2024, np)

Having been abused by her partner and forced to move 'things' for him, Mary was caught taking drugs into the prison. Out of fear of being murdered, Mary, who was pregnant with her second child, pleaded guilty. Despite mothering through adversity, she came under scrutiny when the

judge said, 'What kind of mother are you?' and told her that having her son put into care was his best chance of having a 'stable life'.

(Baldwin et al., 2022, p. 113)

Lucy's story of breaking the cycle was a 'mentally draining rollercoaster'. She had been through therapy, treatment centres, working with probation services and AA meetings but was consistently challenged and stuck in a cycle of relapsing, getting arrested, appearing in court, getting sentenced then released on either temporary release or community support scheme.

'Trying to pick myself back up again, trying to function with daily life signing on everyday with the gardai, going to limerick every week to sign on, attending meetings associated with staying out of prison in the city centre while needing to use public transport and inevitably meeting old acquaintances – while trying to stay away from people places and things to stay sober and also trying to meet my family's needs – eventually getting completely overwhelmed and the cycle slowly starts again with relapse etc.'

(Personal communication with Lucy, 2024)

As a project support worker said to Gibson-Feinblum and O'Neill, 'there is no crèche attached to AA meetings'.³

Criminological literature

In the criminological literature, women's voices and experiences are often silenced or forgotten in debates about the criminal justice system, with relatively little attention paid to the voices and experiences of women caught up in the CJS as suspects, defendants, prisoners and victims. Traditionally research has been undertaken on, rather than with, women.

The early criminological literature about women and crime is largely about men, in that criminological theory and practice was written and practised by men and focused on the crimes of men. The ideas and concepts were then used to explain the crimes and deviance, or 'double deviance', of women. Many of the early feminist criminologists, such as Freda Adler (1975), Carol Smart (1976), Frances Heidensohn (1985), Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988), Pat Carlen (1983) and Betsy Stanko (2013), counter the assumption

3 Gibson Feinblum and O'Neill created Feminist Walk 2 in Cork, in collaboration with local organisations, focusing upon – Containment, Confinement, Resistance, Solidarity and Justice for Women. Available at <https://www.feministwalkcork.ie/> (accessed 8 June 2025)

that criminological theories would simply just apply to women. They also worked to challenge the institutionalised patriarchy within criminological theory, criminal justice agencies,⁴ practice and policy.

Contemporary feminist criminologists Lynsey Black (2009, 2015, 2018, 2020), Christina Quinlan (2015), Vicky Seaman and Orla Lynch (2022), Windle *et al.* (2023) and the Irish Penal Reform Trust report, *Women in the Criminal Justice System*, edited by Liza Costello and based on research carried out by Christina Quinlan and Jane Mulcahy (IPRT, 2013), highlight that:

there are no open prisons for women or other gender-responsive community-based alternatives in Ireland. This is despite a wide body of research literature that shows women convicted of an offence have complex needs, and it now being widely accepted that a gender-specific approach is required for women in prison.

(IPRT, 2013, p. 2)

The IPRT (2013) report makes two key recommendations: 'that a non-custodial approach should be adopted for women offenders; and in the few cases where prison is necessary, the negative impact of imprisonment on the women and those they care for should be minimised'.

Despite research undertaken since in Ireland, Europe, UK and internationally, there is still a dearth of research into female crime and criminality relative to that of men. Smart (1976) argued, in *Women, Crime and Criminology*, that criminology must become more than the study of men if it is to facilitate better understanding and also transformation of societal practices. Then, twenty-four years later, Smart (1990) argued in a highly critical article that criminology had not improved, but had become an 'atavistic' endeavour in the social sciences, due to its continued focus on men and the failure to take up feminist analyses and for this analysis to inform practice. Understanding desistance is a case in point.

Based on a long history of research with women in prison and her own experience of incarceration, Baldwin states that 'women who come into contact with the CJS have rarely escaped traumatic experiences in their lives ... may have experienced trauma as an adult, as a child or both ... thus when

4 Seaman and Lynch draw upon a 2019 UN report that looked at women and discrimination in law and practice and found that 'institutions involved in decisions leading to the confinement of women (criminal, medical and psychiatric) are often dominated by men ... females are under represented, resulting in gender discrimination and over reliance on gender stereotypes' (UN Human Rights Council, 2019, p. 6, referenced in Seaman and Lynch, 2022, p. 41).

working with women in the CJS it would surely be neglectful not to acknowledge those experiences ... and imprisoned mothers experienced profound suffering concerning the loss of their children, their mother status and role' (Baldwin, 2023, p. 25) Hence it is important to listen to women to understand women's offending and desistance processes.

'As a mother, a woman in addiction and going in and out of prison, courts, having my court cases in the *evening echo* multiple times carries a different kind of shame. For years I walked around with my head down destroyed from the public shame that comes with being a mother in this situation. Along with the shame of looking in my children's eyes and promising it won't happen again when deep down I knew I couldn't guarantee that and eventually I would let them down again and destroy the hope they build up each time I came out of prison and try to do my very best only to become victim of the vicious cycle again. That feeling of shame that comes from leaving your children down over and over again it's indescribable – I don't have the words to explain.'

(Personal communication with Lucy, 2024)

Motherhood and parenting is challenging regardless of circumstances. However, for mothers like Lucy, who have experienced incarceration, negotiating a motherhood role can be a significant source of stress, especially combined with other existing stressors such as unstable accommodation, financial strain, mental health difficulties, and struggles with addiction or recovery (Seaman and Lynch, 2022).

3. Gender matters: Feminist criminological imagination

Given the weight of evidence discussed so far, we can, I hope, agree that gender is a crucial concern to any critical analysis of women in the CJS. Women do not commit as much crime as men, nor do they commit as much serious crime, yet as Kathleen Daly and Meda Chesney-Lind (1988) pointed out some time ago, the 'gender ratio problem' (why women commit less crime than men) and 'generalisability' problem (theories of male offending cannot be applied to women and girls) is not taken into account in most theorising, or even in most textbooks on criminology.⁵

⁵ Indeed, most textbooks (but not all) have a single chapter on gender and crime or feminist perspectives. There is a growing literature on women and crime.

The literature evidences that for women, crime is always stigmatised, they are defined as mad or bad, and almost always 'othered'. Research evidences that when women commit serious crime they are often treated more harshly than their male counterparts (Heidensohn and Gelsthorpe, 2007) despite the so-called 'chivalry thesis' (Pollack, 1950). The legal and cultural responses to violent and troubling women often develop along the following lines: 'make her abject from femininity and therefore monstrous'; she must then be rescued from abjection and recuperated into 'femininity'; and the 'feminine aspects of a woman's identity are stressed in order to neutralise her threat to the social order' (see O'Neill and Seal, 2012, chapters 3 and 4). For Pat Carlen (1988, 2022), 'analysis of women's lawbreaking and criminalization' is always in relation to 'the complex and concealed forms of oppression and social control which women are subject to.' Pat Carlen (1988) argued that where women are suffering poverty and have lost faith in the welfare system, they are more likely to commit crime, and women who transgress are subject to harsher controls both in the criminal justice system and more informally related to gender norms. That is, femininity, as described above, is regulated according to certain discourses, and criminal women, especially women who perpetrate violence, bring the edges of femininity into sharp relief, and this is what troubles society, a dangerous/troubling femininity.

When it comes to crimes against women – sexual and violent crimes – it is they who are pathologised, as much research (e.g. Carlen, 1985; Fennell, 1993; Hudson, 2006; Black, 2009, 2018; Seal and O'Neill, 2020; O'Neill and Seal, 2012; Baldwin, 2023; Grace *et al.*, 2022) and media analysis, such as Jane Gilmore's book and campaign, *Fixed It* (2019), highlights.

#FixedIt – Ireland

The Sexual Violence Centre Cork (SVCC), influenced by journalist Jane Gilmore's work and the centre's lifelong commitment to addressing sexual violence, runs a 'Fixed It-Ireland' Twitter campaign that challenges the mainstream media and social media to do better – by 'fixing' the headlines when women are pathologised or when media representations lead to 'victim blaming'.

The campaign is run on Twitter and Instagram, where we take inappropriate and incorrect headlines and 'fix' them, tagging the respective news source to ensure they see the new headline.

(SVCC website)

For example:

Irish Times: 'Gardaí are investigating claims that a 15-year-old girl was visiting hotel rooms in Dublin to have sex with men in exchange for cocaine'.

Fixed It: 'Gardaí are investigating claims that a 15-year-old girl was raped and exploited by men'.

Centring women's voices: Criminal women, voice, justice and recognition network

In a recent book co-authored by a group of researchers who formed the 'Criminal Women, Voice, Justice and Recognition Network',⁶ the chapters draw upon the authors' research on and with women in the criminal justice system, as well as their expertise in innovative participatory and inclusive methods. The book explores how gender and other intersecting social inequalities, poverty, class, race and, also, abuse and trauma impact heavily on women's lives and how this 'informs and directs the criminal justice and social responses to women's offending and victimisation'.

The book was, in part, a homage to Pat Carlen's pioneering book, published over thirty-six years ago, in 1985, *Criminal Women*. This was a pioneering early example of co-production, collaboration and respecting and valuing each of the women who had been in and out of prison, their stories and experiences. It gave us first-hand insight into their biographies and the relationship between lived experiences and broader social and cultural structures, processes and practices.

Lorraine Gelsthorpe writes in the end note to *Criminal Women: Gender Matters* (Grace et al., 2022) how the intervening years between 1985 and 2022 reflect two steps forward, three steps back in penal practice and policy for women. The authors wrote the book because women's voices and experiences are still so often silenced or marginalised in the criminal justice system. They wanted to remedy this by exploring through primary research:

how gender and other social divisions (including intersectional experiences of race, social class and age) exacerbate the oppression and social control of 'criminal' women and how this informs and directs the criminal justice and social responses to their offending and victimisation.

(Grace et al., 2022)

⁶ Following a conference that we were all present at either as hosts or speakers.

Hence, I argue, we need more biographical, narrative, intersectional and participatory approaches to conducting research with women in the criminal justice system, in order to advance knowledge, understanding and recognition of women's lives, and create space for their voices to be heard and, in turn, to influence policy and practice. It is important to work with women and through participatory and creative methods and, in the process, facilitate public scholarship on these important issues – gender matters when addressing the inequities for women in CJS. Creative approaches, such as walking methods and working with artists, theatre-makers and film-makers through performances such as *Rattle Snake* and *Sugar* (with women in CJS) can reach a wider audience, educate in creative ways, authentically centre women's voices and narratives and, in the process, change hearts and minds – in keeping with the three points:

1. The vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise – how we might do things differently;
2. The vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of environments and communities;
3. Making interventions for social change – imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways.

The importance of centring women's voice, using participatory methods so women can tell their stories in their own words, in order to envision and enact social justice, is shared in the following two examples.

Example 1: Rattle Snake – Addressing coercive control in intimate partner relations

In the context of the Domestic Violence Act of 2018,⁷ which instantiated in law the offence of coercive control,⁸ and the recent Garda *Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence* report (An Garda Síochána, 2022),⁹ as well as decades of research by feminist criminologists, we know that most 'women who are killed or sexually attacked are targeted by people they know and within a domestic violence setting' (Lally, 2022, np). Of all suspects in sexual

7 Coercive control was introduced as a criminal offence in Ireland on 1 January 2019, under Section 39 of the Domestic Violence Act, 2018.

8 In Northern Ireland, the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (NI), 2021 came into force in February 2022. This new legislation has brought controlling, coercive, emotional and psychological behaviour within the scope of the domestic abuse offence, and criminalises this behaviour.

9 And the introduction of the victim offender relationship field on PULSE in July 2021.

crimes recorded by the Garda last year, 98 per cent were male, while 2 per cent of perpetrators were female. Some 81 per cent of sex-crime victims were female and 19 per cent were male (An Garda Síochána, 2022, p. 8). Women's Aid's Annual Impact Report for 2022 details 31,229 contacts with its national and regional support services in that year. This equates to a 16 per cent increase in contacts compared to the previous year and the highest ever received by the organisation in its almost fifty-year history.

Rattle Snake

In 2015, the Policing and Crime Act in the UK instantiated in law the offence of coercive control. Open Clasp Theatre Company, based in Newcastle upon Tyne, was commissioned by myself and Nicole Westmarland, in a project funded by the Durham Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), to develop and deliver arts-based training to all frontline officers in County Durham, to facilitate better responses to sexual and domestic violence and coercive control.

The project was based on research identifying gaps in police understanding of coercive control, by Professor Nicole Westmarland and Kate Butterworth (Durham University), and the impact of participatory and arts-based research interventions centring women's voices, by myself. Facilitated by Westmarland, O'Neill and Butterworth, *Rattle Snake* was created by Open Clasp using participatory methods, listening to survivors of coercive control and sexual and domestic violence. Women's voices and experiences were central to the development of the script of the play. Women's voices were mediated by Catrina McHugh, an award-winning writer who co-founded Open Clasp Theatre Company in 1998, with the aim of 'Changing the World, One Play at a Time'.

Using arts-based methods and what we know from our research about the experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and coercive control, the play was created by Catrina McHugh, true to women's experiences, and was then used to train police officers in better responding to sexual and domestic violence and coercive control. The training had significant impact and, having successfully trained 398 officers from Durham, Open Clasp went on to train 1,000 officers in Cleveland, leaving a 'train the trainers' programme as a legacy of the work.

'*Rattle Snake* holds the voices of those who have survived coercive control and our aim is to make the best theatre we can to ensure those voices are heard. This play matters because we live in a world where there is a sense of entitlement to take away another person's liberty, to control and threaten.'

Catrina McHugh



Images: Keith Pattinson/*Open Clasp Theatre Company*



Open Clasp's Process

Working with women survivors, Catrina 'interviewed' (had conversations with) women and, based on these conversations and her readings of Evan Stark's (2007) research, wrote *Rattle Snake* (McHugh, 2017). Open Clasp produced the play, and it was directed by Charlotte Bennet, who described it as 'an epic tale based on real-life stories of women who have faced and survived coercive controlling domestic abuse.' The training, delivered by Open Clasp and supported by the research team, took place over three months. I attended all but one training session. Feedback from police officers at the Durham Police training sessions was excellent, with 98 per cent reporting that their knowledge of coercive control had improved as a result.

Impact – responses by police officers

'Very impactful!! It gave me a greater understanding of what life is like for the survivors/victims of coercive control and how this impacts their life as a whole.'

'I have a much greater understanding of the importance of safety planning because a "solution" is much harder to achieve – we need lots of support agencies working together. Great training! Learned a lot in one day.'

'The training gave a greater awareness of the ultimate consequence of Domestic Abuse. Powerful film where you felt the fear. Explored the best way to get narrative from a victim.'

'The course has opened my eyes. I now understand why victims don't report domestic violence.'

In the context of the Domestic Violence Act of 2018 and the new crime of Coercive Controlling Domestic Abuse in Ireland, we held a workshop in November 2019 at University College Cork, to share *Rattle Snake* with the Policing Authority, An Garda Síochána, Cork Prison Service and voluntary-sector organisations who support women fleeing domestic and sexual violence, including the Sexual Violence Centre Cork. Catrina shared the film of the performance, followed by a Q&A. The morning event was a success and all those attending requested that we run a further training session. This was made possible by funding from University College Cork, where Catrina led the workshop, using theatre methods, including image and playback theatre.¹⁰

The film of the performance is incredibly powerful. It demonstrates in detail how the character James uses coercive control to groom, and then psychologically subvert and destroy personal autonomy, by using force, threats and violence, and by isolating Suzy and then Jen from friends, family and neighbours, whilst performing 'good neighbour', 'father', 'stepfather', all the time ensuring that he is in control through commanding and compelling obedience, leading to conditions of 'unfreedom' and 'entrapment' (Stark, 2007, pp 205–29). What is viscerally apparent in the performance is the danger the women and their children are in.¹¹

Example 2: Sugar by Open Clasp

Using the same methodology described above, Open Clasp devised – with women in a Women's Direct Access Homelessness Service, women on probation attending a Women's Hub at West End Women and Girls Centre,

¹⁰ This led to a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) delivered by Maggie O'Neill, Joan Cronin and Catrina McHugh.

¹¹ A trailer for the film can be viewed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A22GSfvGdc> (accessed 26 May 2024).

and women in HM Prison Low Newton – a play made up of three separate performances, called *Sugar*.¹² *Sugar* tells the story of three women caught up in the criminal justice system, Tracey, Annie and Julie. Tracey is a character created in part in a ‘walkshop’ I led as part of Open Clasp’s residency at a Direct Access hostel for homeless women in Manchester, with Catrina and project workers.

Walking with Faye (not her real name) from the Direct Access hostel to her special place in the city affords a much better understanding of her biography, the trajectory of her life, of the child who experienced violence and coercive control in the home, the mother who left, the secure boarding school she was sent to for absconding, and the child who was invited into a car by a stranger and given £20, enough to buy batteries for her Walkman.



Images: *Topher McGrillis/Open Clasp Theatre Company*

Faye drew a map from the DA hostel to her special place, the park, through the areas where she works, the dark tunnels and passing cars,

12 A trailer for *Sugar* can be viewed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5llz845MIM> (accessed 26 May 2024).

past the special tree she touches for luck, the outreach organisation that offers support, care, comfort and practical necessities; and she talked about the split second decision she makes to step into a car with a stranger.... Faye shared something of ... the people she has lost, how life has passed her by and her fear of being alone.... We talked about her aspiration ... to live a good and happy life, against the tide of her life, a tide that comes towards her, over and underneath her, often taking her feet away from her.

(O'Neill and McHugh, 2017, p. 211)

Impact of arts-based research and outcomes

For the women involved in workshops with Open Clasp, sharing their stories can often be therapeutic. They have the chance to tell their story in their own words and to be listened to in ways that do not reproduce hierarchical structures or power relations. In sharing women's stories and experiences, in this case through ethnographic walking methods and interactive theatre and theatre-making, we can challenge myths and stereotypes and offer better understanding and knowledge, shared across the widest communities, that might challenge and change some of the 'othering' and stigma that marginalise homeless women and women involved in the criminal justice system. This is not without its challenges, ethical issues, and dilemmas (see O'Neill and McHugh, 2017).

Conclusion

The Criminal Women Voice, Justice and Recognition Network, myself and the Criminology colleagues across Ireland referenced in this article, and Open Clasp Theatre Company are committed to challenging and changing sexual and social inequalities and advocating for change in relation to women's experiences of coercive control and the criminal justice system.

Gender matters, first, by bringing into knowledge and recognition women's experiences of the criminal justice system – towards social justice for women. Second, through our separate and collaborative work, we have developed creative methods in action that have impact, that both demand and compel changes in the attitudes towards marginalised women, towards more just outcomes for women, based on connecting with, as Catrina McHugh says, 'the heartbeat' of their stories. Third, we seek to counter exclusionary processes and practices, underpinned by shared values and

principles of social justice, recognition of women's lived experiences, and a keen awareness of the struggle for recognition faced by women involved in the criminal justice system, women who experience poverty, homelessness, coercive control and violence.

We need to work together to create change, based on the three themes with which I began this paper: i) the vital importance of critical thinking and thinking otherwise; ii) the vital importance of engaging in lived lives in the context of institutions, environments and communities; iii) making interventions for social change by critically analysing, imagining and enacting alternative pathways in caring, inclusive and sustainable ways – for our collective social futures.¹³ It is very clear that as a society we need to address and stop the incarceration of women, particularly in the context of the research highlighted in this article. I leave the last words to Lucy:

'I'm now a few months down the road and everything we spoke of in that first meeting I have received and so much more. Having the support of Cork Alliance – through my key worker, group sessions and my one-to-one therapy has given me the confidence and the belief in myself that I needed in order to change my life and get really excited about my future and going back to college so that one day I can be in a position to give back the help that was so freely given to me.'

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13 An open letter by criminologists across Ireland, published in the *Irish Times*, led by Dr Ian Marder and colleagues at Maynooth University, underscores this message:

Research has demonstrated that sending someone to prison does not reduce their likelihood of reoffending, but can actually increase it. The State's own commissioned report on reoffending demonstrates how to reduce offending: by providing employment opportunities and drug treatment, ensuring treatment by justice actors is procedurally fair, and using community justice instead of prison sentences.

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Strategy to Tackle Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Ireland*

Stephanie O'Keeffe†

Summary: This paper, comprising the text of the 18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture, focuses on the implementation of a national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence in Ireland. In doing so, Dr Stephanie O'Keeffe provides some of her personal and professional reflections on these very topical and sensitive issues, as somebody who has experience in the development and implementation of whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategies to improve specific outcomes in a population. The second half of the paper discusses the challenges in tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the opportunities and solutions with promise.

Keywords: Domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV), national strategy, implementation, Cuan, prevalence, challenges, opportunities, solutions.

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in the area of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Thank you also to the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD) for the invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture and for the association's interest in this area of criminal justice policy and practice. One of the things I have learned about Martin Tansey was his commitment to public service, his commitment to evidence-based practice and his commitment to living a professional life full of support for his colleagues, accompanied by a vision for change. I have said this many times, but it truly is a privilege to be a public servant, having the opportunity to do meaningful, transformative work and improve the lives of citizens through evidence-based strategy and policy development. My whole career has been in public service and, since taking

* This paper comprises the revised text of the 18th annual Martin Tansey Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Criminal Courts of Justice (CCJ), Dublin on 1 May 2025.

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up the role of CEO of Cuan in February 2024, as a civil servant, working in a new statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice.

The lecture today is about implementation of national strategy to tackle domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV) in Ireland. I am going to give you my personal and professional reflections on that, as somebody who has experience in the development and implementation of whole-of-government, whole-of-society strategies to improve specific outcomes in a population. While, many years ago, I undertook a PhD in organisational decision-making in the area of rape and criminal investigations, and worked in the area of sexual health improvement for ten years, I am not an expert in DSGBV specifically. This lecture draws on my experience of strategy development, strategy implementation, monitoring and transformation, in and across large complex organisations and government departments. I also draw on what I have learned from the many experts in the area of DSGBV, since commencing this role.

To date, there have been three national strategies to tackle DSGBV, and to give you a spoiler alert at the very beginning: we would not have a third national strategy if we had solved the problem identified in the first. I'm going to speak a little about this.

Today's lecture will set out the background of Cuan and explain its statutory functions. From there, I'll talk about the three national strategies published to date; what they have in common and where there are points of differentiation. Next, I will talk about the prevalence of sexual violence over two decades, drawing on the findings from the *Sexual Assault in Ireland Survey* (SAVI), published in 2002 and the more recent, *2022 Sexual Violence Survey* (SVS), conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2022). These two surveys allow us to think about the challenges of successfully addressing the widespread issues of gender-based violence in Ireland and internationally. From here, I'll talk about new threats that have emerged in the area of DSGBV. I am going to set out opportunities and what I see as critical success factors that give us hope that it is possible to create conditions that prevent and protect women, children and other victims from sexual and domestic violence and will enable us to demonstrate that we can move the dial and make progress in this complex area. Finally, I will set out practical things everyone can do to play a part in ending this pandemic that kills women, damages children, destroys lives, wreaks havoc in families and communities and poses a threat to psychosocial, social and economic development in Irish society.

The establishment of Cuan

Cuan was established following the enactment of the Domestic Sexual and Gender Based Agency Act, 2023¹ and it is a statutory agency under the aegis of the Department of Justice. Cuan is an Irish word, meaning 'haven' or 'harbour' or 'place of shelter'. Cuan has a board and a staff complement of thirty-five. Its purpose is to drive Ireland's response to the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and the protection of all victims and survivors.²

Cuan's founding legislation sets out a range of statutory functions. Some of these functions were formerly delivered by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and by the Department of Justice. As a new entity, Cuan is working hard to establish and grow strong relationships and partnerships with both of these important partners in its work. Cuan's functions include delivering excellent services to victims of DSGBV, including delivering on the number of safe and accessible accommodation spaces available for those fleeing abuse, as well as ensuring that helpline and other supports are available to anyone requiring them. The majority of Cuan's c. €66 million budget is toward funding these services across the country.

Cuan also has functions that require it to develop service standards and monitoring systems to ensure adherence to best practice.

Cuan has functions relating to research and data to inform DSGBV policy development, strategy, monitoring and evaluation.

Cuan is required to lead on awareness-raising campaigns designed to reduce the incidence of DSGBV in Irish society, as well as ensuring that all victims know how to access the supports they require.

Cuan is responsible for co-ordinating all government actions set out in the third national strategy and reporting on their delivery to the Minister for Justice. Political oversight of the strategy is provided by the Cabinet Committee on Social Affairs and Equality. Oversight is also provided by a High-Level Oversight Board, chaired by the Secretaries General of the Department of Justice and the Department of An Taoiseach.

I want to draw your attention to two functions in the DSGBV Agency Act, 2023, that are particularly important for us to deliver. The first is that we are required to pay due regard to the diverse circumstances within the

¹ Available at <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2023/act/31/enacted/en/print.html> (accessed 29 July 2025)

² *Cuan, the Domestic Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency, Corporate Plan 2025–2027*, available at <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/cuan-corporate-plan-2025-2027.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2025)

population, which means that we really need to take an intersectional lens when thinking about who we are providing services to and how we scope our prevention work. We know that sex, gender, class, race and ability all interconnect in different ways to shape individual experiences, vulnerabilities and responses to DSGBV. The second is that we co-ordinate, oversee and provide advice and support to public service bodies in the implementation of their actions. Whole-of-government and whole-of-society strategies are, by their definition, complex and involve a large number of essential and necessary partners to deliver impacts. Developing Cuan in a way that targets support to delivery partners with mission-critical responsibilities will be a key competency to develop over time. We understand that delivering on these two statutory functions, in particular, will be key to our success, and their execution requires skill and strategy in giving effect to the work.

To reflect the functions of Cuan, set out in the Act, we have established teams to lead on the education and awareness-raising elements of our work: we have a service delivery and development team; and a strategic engagement team leading our strategy co-ordination and reporting functions with c.30 implementation partners. A research and data team leads on building a knowledge-generating programme of work to inform strategy implementation and evaluation. A corporate team leads on all finance, HR, organisation development and governance work. The corporate team works hand in glove with the services team, putting in place a robust data-collection system with funded services. We need to create capability to report and communicate the volume of services being delivered from state investment in this critical area. We need to be able to describe the cost for services and the demand for services across the country and work through a plan to develop these services over time. There are two important elements here – one practical, the other strategic. From a practical perspective, Cuan is investing considerable time in designing and developing a new system and processes/procedures to collect data from services and build reporting capability. This requires funded services to also invest time and expertise working with us. Secondly, we know that a very substantial proportion of people who experience DSGBV do not tell anyone, do not report and do not access services. This is changing and our work will quicken the pace of this change. As a result, we expect to see more disclosure, reporting and service requests for support, month on month, year on year. This is an inevitable and necessary consequence of progress and success – reducing shame and stigma; enabling environments that support victims and survivors; calling out criminal behaviours; and highlighting the

people behind the statistics. We need to have evidence and data-led service development plans to underpin this likely trajectory in service demand to meet strategic objectives in government strategy to 'protect' victims and survivors.

Cuan's approach to delivering its statutory functions is set out in our first *Corporate Plan 2025–2027*. This plan, developed with our Board and approved by the Minister for Justice, outlines our vision, values and objectives for combatting DSGBV in the years ahead. It is guided by the legislation and based on feedback from frontline service providers, civil society and Cuan's implementation partners. It can be read at www.gov.ie/cuan. Our *Corporate Plan* is not only ambitious – it is an essential blueprint for the transformation needed to eliminate domestic, sexual and gender-based violence from our society. Guided by this plan, our priority is to establish the structures and systems that will allow Cuan to fulfil our core statutory functions and, working with and through others, our focus is to drive real, lasting societal change.

Evolution of government strategy to combat DSGBV

Over the past fifteen years, Ireland has had three strategies to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (see Cosc, 2010, 2016; Government of Ireland, 2022). The first strategy was from 2010 to 2014 (Cosc, 2010). Some people may remember that there was an executive unit established in the Department of Justice called Cosc, which engaged in very significant levels of consultation, to develop the first strategy in 2010. It is important to reflect that a key focus of Government during these years was on national recovery following an unprecedented national economic emergency. There were minimal references to DSGBV in the 2011 Programme for Government, *Government for National Recovery*, and it did not reference the strategy published in 2010.

COSC also led the development of the second strategy, from 2016 to 2021. There were a lot of changes during that time period, including, for example, the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2015. This would have involved change for DSGBV services, moving from the health service to Tusla. The Department of Justice was undergoing extensive organisational change, most notably in response to the recommendations of the independent Effectiveness and Renewal Group (ERG), established by Government in 2018. Finally, the global pandemic in 2020 required a fundamental re-think of all elements of national strategy roll-out and brought with it a set of terrible global and national challenges. The Programme for

Partnership Government, published in 2016, referenced the Istanbul Convention and the second national strategy to combat DSGBV, in addition to specific actions relating to protecting children from sexual exploitation. The 2021 Programme for Government (*Our Shared Future*) had a section specific to DSGBV. Government committed to building on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and working with NGOs and services to develop the third *National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence*, placing a priority on prevention and reduction. Government also committed to conduct an audit of how responsibility for domestic sexual and gender-based violence is segmented across different government agencies, and to develop proposals to improve co-ordination and strategy implementation. The third national strategy was developed and published by the Department of Justice in 2022, following significant engagement with the sector, led by the Minister of Justice, Helen McEntee.

All three strategies were led by Ministers for Justice. The first strategy was published by Minister Dermot Ahern, the second by Minister Frances Fitzgerald, and the most recent one by Minister Helen McEntee, who prioritised this portfolio and led significant legislative reforms over the period. Political leadership and political sponsorship for whole-of-government strategies is an essential condition for success. It is widely acknowledged that Minister Helen McEntee was pioneering in championing the need for change, acknowledging DSGBV as an 'epidemic' and identifying actions for a more effective response in Ireland.

The current minister for Justice, Jim O'Callaghan, has also placed DSGBV as one of his top three priorities, thereby consolidating and further strengthening Ireland's political response in leading on these profoundly complex matters. The *Programme for Government 2025, Securing Ireland's Future*,³ has very strong commitments to addressing DSGBV. It states:

tackling the epidemic of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence will remain a major priority for the Government. We will invest in new refuge spaces, update the school curriculum, roll out training and make the criminal justice system more victim centred, in particular our Courts system.

3 Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/programme-for-government-2025-securing-irelands-future/> (accessed 29 July 2025).

Strategy content: compare and contrast

All three strategies say they take a 'whole-of-government approach'. It is clear that there was a very significant level of stakeholder engagement in the first, second and third strategy. The idea of having a victim-centred focus resonates across the three strategies, as does the emphasis on prevention. Interventions with perpetrators, particularly the language of accountability for perpetrators, are strong in the first and second strategy, and also feature in the third strategy. There is a commitment in all three strategies to data collection and research. Emphasis on legislative reform strengthens over time across the three strategies.

The first strategy focused on victim safety, perpetrator accountability and public awareness, and talked about the first ever co-ordinated response. The second strategy builds on that and talks about strengthening structures. It also talks about reducing societal tolerance, building the victim services, and clear perpetrator accountability. The second strategy references that it is getting ready for Ireland to be able to sign the Istanbul Convention. Following ratification of the Convention, the third strategy is focused on the Istanbul pillars of prevention, protection, prosecution and policy. There is more coherence in the third strategy, which encompasses the priorities set out in the first two strategies, but situates them in the context of the four Istanbul pillars.

A different approach to implementation planning can be seen across the three strategies. There are broad goals and actions in the first strategy; the second states that the action plan is a living document and therefore flexible. The third national strategy has two very detailed implementation plans, and a third and final implementation plan is in development by Cuan (*2025–2026 Zero Tolerance Implementation Plan*), working with all implementation partners. Monitoring and oversight seems to be limited in the first strategy. It gets stronger in the second, but it is still very agency-dependent. Oversight is much stronger in the third national strategy, which commits to having cabinet oversight, cabinet committee oversight and oversight from a High-Level Oversight Board, which is chaired by the Secretary General of the Department of the Taoiseach and the Secretary General of the Department of Justice.

The area of inclusivity and intersectionality deepens into the third strategy. It is reinforced in the DSGBV Agency Act, 2023. Funding has increased over time. There is no reference to additional money in the first strategy, to support implementation. The second strategy references a small number of resources. When the strategy was launched, it was clarified that there was an initial

€90,000 identified for a communications campaign. There was increased investment in services during COVID-19, as a result of heightened risk of domestic abuse. Funding has significantly increased for the third national strategy, with increased funding for DSGBV services and funding to increase emergency accommodation capacity for those fleeing domestic abuse.

To raise public awareness at the very beginning of the first strategy, the approach was to give small sums of money to lots of organisations to run campaigns; the second strategy then centralised this budget, and the first of the national campaigns was launched. This has been strengthened again in the third national strategy, with a robust approach to national campaign development, audience segmentation and evaluation.

None of the strategies have performance indicators or defined outcome measures. There is a theory of change in the back of the third national strategy, but it is not specific enough to be useful as a monitoring or evaluation tool. None of the strategies specify the main mechanisms by which strategy will be delivered at local level. Infrastructure for implementation from national to local and from local to national is not clearly specified.

As mentioned earlier, the first strategy was developed by an executive agency in the Department of Justice, as was the second strategy. The third strategy was developed by the Department of Justice and the strategy committed to establishing a dedicated statutory agency to co-ordinate and report on implementation. Feedback from the sector was that there was too much fragmentation, too much siloed working and clear opportunities to create a stronger synergy across the key implementation partners. This gave rise to the Department of Justice committing to a DSGBV Agency Act, 2023, and the establishment of Cuan in February 2024.

Progress and achievements

From my reading of these strategies, I can really see a very strong evolution. I can see evidence of strengthened governance and increased resourcing. In 2021, an audit of DSGBV structures⁴ was commissioned by the Department of Justice, in consultation with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and published in June 2021, to inform the third national strategy. The review discusses improvements in public awareness and attitudes. This finding is reinforced in other research. Just this morning [1 May 2025], the organisation One in Four published a research study on the

4 *Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: An Audit of Structures*, June 2021

prevalence of child sexual violence and abuse, using the CSO 2022 survey as well as some additional research they undertook, and it is really clear that the public is much more aware than previously about DSGBV – for example, the fact that most abuse and most violence is perpetrated by people known to the victim. We can see that knowledge and awareness have changed over time.

There has been a huge improvement in development of co-ordinated, interagency structures working on defined programmes of work, to address known issues – for example, ensuring that the voice of the child can be heard in family courts or managing high-risk sex-offenders. There have also been huge improvements in terms of policing policy and policing practice in this area, certainly since I did my PhD in the area of sexual violence over two decades ago. There have been seismic changes organisationally and professionally in how An Garda Síochána members are trained, with specialised units to lead on these kinds of crimes. In the area of domestic violence, operational policing response has also improved significantly, particularly DSGBV services reporting, since the pandemic. An Garda Síochána has prioritised this area of policing for improved response and, partly as a result of this, gardaí are now receiving more and more calls each year from victims/survivors seeking protection. When I visit services funded by Cuan, by and large, the services report that they have an excellent working relationship with local gardaí. The gardaí themselves have committed to further improving the frontline response, in response to reviews⁵ and feedback from services and victims/survivors.

The absence of measurement or data to support strategy evaluation is a limiting factor. How do we know if all of the work is having the desired effects? Where are we making inroads in terms of prevention? How do we know if there is effective access to justice and improved experience through the courts system for victims of DSGBV? There is more work to be done on data and measurement, but also on the local structures for delivery. We can have a strategy at a national level, but we also need to have a robust infrastructure for implementation at regional and local level.

Prevalence of DSGBV in Ireland, 2001–22

There are twenty-one years between the SAVI survey (data collected in 2001) undertaken by Professor Hannah McGee and colleagues in the Royal College

⁵ Garda Síochána Inspectorate (2024), *An Inspection of the Garda Síochána’s Approach to Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Victim Support*, Dublin: An Garda Síochána, available at <https://www.gsinsp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Garda-Inspectorate-Domestic-Abuse-Final-Inspection-Report-Web.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2025)

of Surgeons and commissioned by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (McGee et al., 2002) and the CSO *Sexual Violence Survey* (data was gathered as part of a commitment in the third national strategy in 2022). Both the SAVI and the CSO surveys are big population surveys on sexual violence; the CSO surveyed over 4,000 people and the SAVI surveyed over 3,000 people. Whilst there are important methodological caveats that caution against making comparisons across the two timepoints, the surveys seek to do the same thing (measure the prevalence of sexual violence) and they are supported by umpteen smaller surveys undertaken in the intervening years, all giving a general, composite picture of what we are dealing with.

Regarding the more recent CSO sexual violence survey (data collected 2022), the findings were shocking. For the whole population, 40 per cent of adults had experienced some form of sexual violence in their lifetime – that is 52 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men. A worrying finding in the 2022 data is that younger people reported higher levels of experience, compared to all other age groups (65 per cent of female 18–24-year-olds v. 52 per cent for all). There are multiple potential explanations for this, ranging from younger people being more likely to admit to experiencing SV, to actual increases in experience in recent years. Twenty years ago, prevalence levels were similar, with 42 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men reporting experience of some form of sexual violence in their lifetime.

If we look *only at experience of sexual intercourse during childhood*, including non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral sex, this was experienced by 7 per cent of girls (those aged under 17), and 2 per cent of boys. Twenty years ago, it was 6 per cent of girls and 3 per cent of boys. For all forms of sexual abuse during childhood, the figures are much larger. For example, CSO found that 29 per cent of the adult population had experienced some form of sexual violence as a child. Again, this was higher for 18–24-year-olds (40 per cent). For adults, the prevalence of *non-consensual sexual intercourse*, the most serious of sexual abuse crimes, the figure was 18 per cent of women and 3 per cent of men reported experiencing rape as an adult (those aged over 17). In SAVI, in 2001, it was 6 per cent and 1 per cent. Direct comparisons come with very significant caveats, but we can see how endemic sexual violence is in Irish society over twenty years.

In terms of disclosure, the question about whether the person had ever told anybody about the unwanted sexual experience before the survey, in 2022 only about half of women and a quarter of men had told anybody, and in 2001 it was 58 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men. So, effectively,

in 2022, half of adult women and more than a quarter of adult men reported some lifetime exposure to violence but almost half of the women and three-quarters of the men have not disclosed these experiences to anyone but the survey.

Domestic violence statistics

Cuan is progressing a survey on domestic violence with the Central Statistics Office (CSO), which will, for the first time, produce official statistics in Ireland on the prevalence of domestic abuse. We have just concluded a scoping study, examining data, data definitions and inclusion requirements. Generally, surveys undertaken over the years show that between 20 and 30 per cent of people report having experienced domestic abuse from an intimate partner.

The very first Dublin Women's Aid Survey (Women's Aid, 2020) reported that 1 in 5 women experienced domestic violence, and a more recent European survey (EIGE, 2025) stated that 35 per cent of women reported either psychological, physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner in Ireland. Women's Aid receives about 28,000 contacts per annum and that is increasing year on year (Women's Aid, 2024). We estimate that in 2025, through the 78 services it funds, Cuan will be supporting in the region of 44,000 individuals, men, women and children (86 per cent adults, 14 per cent children).

The Garda Síochána had 61,000 domestic violence-related contacts in 2024. That was a 9 per cent increase on the same period in 2023.

This is what Professor Hannah McGee, lead author of the SAVI survey, wrote in a column in the *Irish Times* in 2023 when the CSO data were published:

Sexual Violence is an iceberg, huge and hidden, and we need a serious National dialogue to figure out how to change it, because two decades later, much hard work, pain for many, a big financial investment by government and charities, do not seem to have brought about progress.... we need a wider sense of societal outrage about behaviours that are so common, so unacceptable and still so hidden – even after all the brave people who have spoken publicly at personal cost about these issues in the past few decades.

(McGee, 2023)

Herein lies what I see as the 'wicked' problem of DSGBV – prevention. Wicked problems, defined in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin

Webber, lack clarity in their articulation and they are subject to real-world constraints that prevent multiple and risk-free attempts at solving them. The problem of domestic sexual and gender-based violence has almost all the characteristics of wicked problems, including, for example, the fact that wicked problems can always be described as the symptom of other problems. While the persistent levels of DSGBV in Irish society are sobering, shocking and perplexing to many, it does require us to redouble our efforts to tackle the whole area of prevention effectively, and take a more strategic approach to formulating and defining the problem we are striving to solve, thereby supporting more effective solutions. Learning from progress in other public policy areas, also responding to wicked problems, is a good starting point.

New challenges in DSGBV

I am going to discuss changes leading to new threats in the whole area of sexual and domestic violence. I will touch briefly on technology, the impact of the manosphere and the threat of violent pornography.

The first change is technology. The internet, smart phones, social media apps, developments in AI, mean that one abusive act can become permanent, it can become scalable, and it can become global. Anybody who wants to hurt another human being and commit a criminal offence is able to find or create a community of like-minded people online. People with predatory behaviours have access to a much larger pool of potential victims online. Technology makes it easy to create and circulate abusive and criminal content.

Technology has shifted norms of interaction and communication, blurred realities between what is private and what is public, and very much de-personalises people, because people believe that is just *a person they see online*; it is not a *real person* to them. Technology also creates organised abuse and exploitation. Whether that is trafficking or the buying and selling of children or adults for sexual exploitation, technology is something that facilitates it, and it is an area into which An Garda Síochána has put a lot of investment, working with international agencies to detect and prosecute crimes of this nature. With regard to trauma, there is some evidence to suggest that emotional, psychological and social damage can be longer lasting and even more severe when it is online.

Shifting attitudes and the manosphere

It is also important for us to understand and validate new emerging data suggesting that younger males are moving towards more traditional views and there is a hardening of attitudes towards women and towards gender equality, and a belief in traditional rape myths (where there has been a lot of improvement in the population more generally). Recent omnibus data from the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre (DRCC, 2024) showed that 92 per cent – a majority of people – agree that even if you have given consent, you can change your mind at any time. However, a significant minority of younger men – 29 per cent aged 18–24 – believe that once you have consented, you can't change your mind.

Eurobarometer data released last year⁶ refers to data from Ireland from 2021, showing that 27 per cent of men in Ireland tend to agree or fully agree that women may over-exaggerate claims of abuse or rape. That is in comparison to 22 per cent, which is the EU average for men. In Ireland, 13 per cent of women agreed with that sentiment. Dublin's Women's Aid also launched research earlier in the year – an omnibus survey (Women's Aid and Core Research, 2024) which reported that most Irish men, 61 per cent, reject narrow, traditional views of masculinity, moving beyond the need for stoicism and dominance; however, traditional views persist, especially in digital spaces. Notably, 39 per cent of men in this survey agreed with more conventional notions of masculinity, such as the necessity for strength, emotional restraint, and being the primary economic provider. This group tended to be younger, with nearly 70 per cent of men in their twenties being influenced by figures such as Andrew Tate and Donald Trump. Half of those with traditional views – so around 18 per cent – disregard women's opinions and view sexism as exaggerated. These are smaller-scale surveys and it will be important to develop a research programme that supports robust measurement and reporting of potential trends and/or shifts in public attitudes.

Harms of pornography

Pornography online now is very different from what it used to be years ago, when magazines were a dominant form of distribution. Many scholars and academics warn that online pornography is not equivalent to a 'top-shelf' magazine. The adult content which parents may have accessed in their youth

⁶ Available at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3252> (accessed 29 July 2025)

could be considered 'quaint' in comparison to today's world of online pornography (Children's Commissioner UK, 2023). Depictions of degradation, sexual coercion, aggression and exploitation are commonplace and disproportionately targeted against teenage girls. According to recent studies, most pornography has some level of violence, whether that is hairpulling, slapping, spitting, strangulation, forceful anal sex and penetration of the mouth with women until they gag. Teen porn is a very popular genre. Studies report that violence is typically used against teenage girls more than adult women who feature in this content. The Sexual Exploitation and Research Centre (SERP) (Breslin and O'Connor, 2024) published a report reviewing research in this field. They point to a study that shows nine in ten scenes contain physical aggression where women are the targets of that aggression. Ninety-five per cent of the targets are shown to respond either neutrally or with pleasure towards that aggression, and there is a very strong consensus emerging at European levels of the dangers of pornography to children, men (especially young men) and women. Children's advocates, people who work with young people and others are extremely concerned about free, easy access children have to this content; how children are targeted with this content through social media apps; and the normalisation of sexual violence in online pornography, and the role that this plays in shaping children's understanding of sex and relationships. Pornography is seen as a cause and accelerant in the perpetration of violence against women, girls and boys by (predominantly) men and boys, and particularly in rising levels of cases where sexual violence is perpetrated by children on other children. This is something that DSGBV services, child protection services, and gardai are seeing more of.

Use of online pornography in Ireland is pervasive and highly gendered. The ESRI (Nolan and Smyth, 2024) analysed results from the longitudinal survey on children, *Growing up in Ireland*. The data were collected in 2018 when the young people were 20 years of age. They found that 64 per cent of young men and 13 per cent of young women reported using pornography. Men from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to use pornography than those from less advantaged backgrounds (75 per cent v. 50 per cent). Pornography use was lower among those with a religious affiliation and where there was greater parental monitoring in adolescence. There was no strong relationship between the provision of sex education at school and pornography use, although young people who were more reliant on the Internet or (in the case of men in particular) their friends, rather than

their parents, for information about sex in adolescence were significantly more likely to use pornography at age 20.

Harmful sexual behaviours are increasingly being shaped by the content and cultures that children are exposed to online, including pornography, misogynistic trolling and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images (Online Safety Commission UK, 2022).

An article by Faye Curran and Róisín Ingle in the *Irish Times* in March 2022 (Curran and Ingle, 2022) gives an indication of the direct connection between online pornography and how it is shaping harmful sexual behaviours. I read this article when it appeared in the paper and I was shocked, as were friends and family I discussed it with. The article is titled: 'There is a lot of choking: How the pandemic has changed sex for Generation Z'. In the article, the authors interviewed young people on their sex lives after the pandemic.

A woman who was 20 said,

'Porn is definitely where men got ideas such as choking women during sex, I just don't think they would have come up with that on their own. This is really strange to me. I like sex to be equal but a lot of sex I hear about from my friends is not equal.'

A man, aged 23, shares:

'The way most of the gay men I know, younger ones anyway, understand their sexuality and learn about it from an early age is largely through porn. I also learnt a lot from feminist conversations on Tumblr. As I grew up my sexuality and preferences were massively influenced by porn, they still are today.'

A woman, who is 22, said:

'I think choking during sex has been normalised. Internet culture has glamorised choking for a while as a kind of trend, I have never really partaken but then again, who am I to judge?'

Another man, 23, stated:

'One thing that is a big issue for me is pornography. Like a lot of my friends, I started watching it at maybe 13.'

It is clear from talking to colleagues in the prison and probation service and people working on providing programmes to men with a history of sexual violence that mainstream pornography plays a significant part in violent offending behaviour and directly impacts on psychosexual development (desire, arousal and orgasm, and how these interact with thoughts, feelings and behaviours).

Cuan has planned a significant portfolio of work, working with a breadth of partners, to address the harms of pornography. The final two years of implementation of *Zero Tolerance* will see tangible improvements in prevention and response, to address issues of major societal concern, such as pornography and the rise in online harms.

This is a very significant area requiring urgent action to protect children, women, boys and men from all associated harms. Civil society organisations, children's rights advocates, mental health professionals, educators, statutory agencies and DSGBV services will have a key role working together to address these harms.

Opportunities and solutions with promise

Notwithstanding the challenges and emergent threats in the whole area of DSGBV, there are many opportunities to accelerate progress in areas showing some improvement and new solutions for problems not yet solved. The establishment of Cuan by the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration as a mechanism to strengthen structures for implementation at national level is positive, as is strong and consistent political leadership and commitment from Government to make progress on the complex issues giving rise to DSGBV. Many years of work across government departments, statutory agencies, civil society organisations and DSGBV services have created the conditions in 2025 for best-in-class execution of Government strategy. The following list gives a sense of the breadth of actions committed to in the final implementation plan for *Zero Tolerance*, building on years of work to put in place the foundations to make this work possible.

A broad range of awareness and education initiatives is in place to interrogate the social and cultural norms that underpin and contribute to gender-based violence. Spanning schools, higher education, public transport, places of work, and notably online spaces, there is a broad range of initiatives to make our spaces safer, reducing opportunities for sexual and gender-based violence.

Specific actions set out in the final implementation plan for *Zero Tolerance* that are designed to address threats and maximise opportunities for impact include:

- Development of an evidence-based pornography literacy strategy spanning public awareness and education;
- Framework to address sexual violence and harassment in higher education;
- Provision of prevention, consent and healthy relationships education in schools and other settings;
- Work with sporting bodies to establish a zero-tolerance culture;
- Public awareness campaigns to change attitudes and prevent and reduce the incidence of DSGBV;
- Information and education initiatives on online safety;
- Supervision, monitoring and enforcement of age assurance requirements and other relevant measures, including content rating for regulated online services;
- Increasing the availability of public transport to make travel safer and more accessible for women and other vulnerable users.

There is also a range of measures included to ensure that those who experience DSGBV can access information and support services, such as:

- Preparatory work on the National Services Development Plan to ensure availability of accessible, high-quality, specialist and community-based DSGBV services across the state;
- Phased roll-out of service enhancements and supports to sexual violence services;
- Clinical supports to victim-survivors of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM);
- Implementation and expansion of the Barnahus model – a co-ordinated interagency response to support child victim-survivors of sexual violence;
- Progress work on the voice of the child in private and family law;
- Child-friendly information to explain family justice processes to children;
- Preparatory work to introduce Operation Encompass into the Irish system.

In addition, there are comprehensive training actions across the four pillars of the plan to upskill frontline professionals across the health and social care sector, DSGBV services, the judiciary, courts and other justice agencies.

An important development led by the Department and Minister for Justice is the creation of Community Safety Partnerships at each local authority level (Policing, Security and Community Safety Act, 2024). These Community Safety Partnerships are essentially creating a structure at local authority level, whereby all the local stakeholders come together to develop a community safety action plan. The partnerships will bring together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, local authorities and state services, such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE, to devise and implement the Local Community Safety Plans. These partnerships recognise that policing alone will not solve the issue of people feeling unsafe in their communities or in their homes.

The plans will detail how best the community can prevent crime and will reflect community priorities and local safety issues. The goal is to make communities safer for individuals, families, residents and businesses.

It is envisaged that every local authority area will have a Community Safety Partnership, with dedicated funding and staff, once the policy is rolled out nationally as part of reforms outlined by the Commission on the Future of Policing. It has been acknowledged that DSGBV needs to be a feature of community safety plans. I have great hope that these structures will provide an essential pathway for implementation of local actions to prevent DSGBV and other safety concerns, and will be a catalyst for change. Cuan is a part of the national steering group, supporting the roll-out of these partnerships, and Cuan will be supporting their development at local level in every way we can.

I would like to end by highlighting a recent campaign developed by Cuan in partnership with services and victims/survivors. The Hardest Stories campaign carries a message to victim-survivors that too many stories of DSGBV exist in our society and whenever they wish to share their story, they will be heard, and they will be supported.

In addition, this evergreen campaign is designed to mobilise the public into action by acknowledging that we all have an active role in creating zero tolerance of DSGBV in Irish society and can work towards the cultural and societal changes needed for a society free from DSGBV. Readers are asked to visit the campaign website, gov.ie/stories, where they are provided with information on how they can become an agent of change. This campaign is developed to respond to the evidence covered in this lecture, showing the

scale of non-disclosure of sexual and domestic violence in Ireland. It is time for us to hear the people behind the statistics and challenge cultural norms that create a sense of shame among victims and silence their voices. Here is how the campaign sets out how each person can play a part. Look up gov.ie/stories to find practical information such as:

- How to look out for red flags of DSGBV,
- How to support someone you are concerned about,
- What support there is for victims/survivors,
- How to turn your environment into a place of zero tolerance of DSGBV,
- How to reach out to those addressing DSGBV in all higher-level institutes for education in Ireland,
- How to use your voice to bring about change and advocate for victims-survivors,
- The importance of having consent conversations in our own lives,
- How to promote positive masculinity,
- Dispelling rape myths, and
- How to think intersectionality in terms of DSGBV.

You can find out more about the work of Cuan, the services it funds, progress reports on strategy implementation and its many partners on www.gov.ie/cuan. Thank you all for your interest and support. Thank you to the ACJRD for the invitation to deliver the 18th Annual Martin Tansey lecture on this important topic.

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Legislation

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- Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Act, 2023
- Domestic Violence Act, 2018

Restoring Justice, PBNI *Women Strategy* 2024–2029 in Action: Practitioner Reflections on the Impact of Trauma and Using Restorative Justice Practices

Leona Tate*

Summary: Whilst there is an increasing body of academic research that focuses on women's involvement within the criminal justice system (O'Neill, 2015), research focusing on females who offend remains less prevalent than published research about males who offend. Statistics published in 2024/25 by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), show that the number of males (3,692) on Probation's caseload far outweighs the number of females (464). Whilst trends show that, over the past five years, the numbers of female service-users supervised by PBNI have remained relatively consistent, with a small increase, the number of women entering custody has increased significantly. Indeed, Northern Ireland's female prison population has increased over the course of the past four years. The most recent statistics are from 2023/24, where there were ninety female prisoners, compared to 2019/20 where there were only seventy-four female prisoners (Department of Justice, 2024). These statistics of increasing committals of women to custody and an identified gap in research support the need for evidence-based practice through adopting gender-responsive practice. Such practices have a foundation in trauma-informed practice that can support increasing use of restorative justice practices – specifically, 'healing circles'.

Keywords: Gender-responsive principles, trauma, trauma-informed approaches, restorative justice, justice-involved women, female offending, recidivism.

Introduction

Women are less likely to be the focus of research in respect of their journey through the criminal justice system, mainly because they are less likely to commit an offence than men (Fitz-Gibbon and Walklate, 2018). However, the number of women who offend in Northern Ireland is rising (CJINI, 2021).

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According to PBNI (2025a), the number of female service-users has increased from 399 in 2016/2017 to 464 in 2024/25. While women and girls account for less than one fifth of arrests and court convictions, proportionally they are more likely than males to be imprisoned for theft and more likely to receive short prison sentences (CJINI, 2021).

Thirty per cent of women in custody lose their homes whilst in prison (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2024) and many do not have any accommodation arranged prior to their release (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). They are also more likely to be single parents and the main carers for children (Prison Reform Trust, 2011). Many also face substance misuse difficulties as well as having experienced intimate partner violence (O'Neill, 2015).

Caudy *et al.* (2018) completed a study on the effect of custodial and non-custodial sanctions on men and women and found that those in prison were at higher risk of reoffending than those on probation. This effect was found in both men and women but tended to be stronger for the latter, indicating that prison likely has a more negative influence on women in terms of recidivism when compared to their male counterparts (de Castro Rodrigues *et al.*, 2022). This reiterates the importance of implementing gender-responsive and trauma-informed principles for practice to support reducing recidivism and potential negative impacts felt by women, families and society upon release from custody.

The Criminal Justice Inspection on how the justice system in Northern Ireland treats females in conflict with the law noted,

gender responsiveness is not about a different standard being applied to police actions, prosecution decisions or probation practice because the defendant is a woman or a girl, it is about how criminal justice organisations take account and deliver services specific to women and girls to provide equitable outcomes.

(CJINI, 2021, p. 4)

It thus highlights, at a local level, the need for gender-responsive strategies and a call for key stakeholders to consider how to develop their practice appropriately.

To support practitioners effectively working with female service-users, PBNI has created a five-year *Women Strategy (2024–2029)* to inform and develop its current model of working with women within the service. PBNI's focus is on developing a gender-responsive service that is trauma informed, including developing and supporting staff in their service delivery (PBNI,

2025b). The new strategy aligns well with the proposed way of working explored in this article and parallels thoughts on best practice with women within the criminal justice system. PBNI recognises the need to improve its gender-responsive practice, including the importance of improving probation interventions, which in turn will meet gender-specific needs and improve rehabilitation outcomes (PBNI, 2025b).

As a practising professional who has experience of working with females who offend, I welcome this strategy. It recognises the work of Probation Officers within PBNI and it has a forward-looking focus to ensure that all PBNI staff practise within the same gender-responsive principles. This is particularly important given the pivotal role the agency has in supporting work both in custody and in the community. The strategy has outlined six key guiding principles to be the focus of implementation: Acknowledgement of Gender Differences, Strengths-based and Empowerment Orientated, Holistic Case Management, Relationship-Based Supervision, Community and Family Integration, and Collaboration with Community Resources, with a trauma-informed approach embedded in each of the guiding principles.

Women in the criminal justice system

Why women offend and the label attached

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) (2021) states that the types of offences women commit differ from those committed by men, but women are still less likely to offend. Women are less likely to commit violent, serious or organised crime; instead, they commit more acquisitive types of crime, such as thefts. The Inspectorate states that women are more likely to have mental health issues and to suffer from drug addictions, as well as being more likely to be victims of crime, with histories of violence and abuse. There is evidence that a number of women within the criminal justice system have committed offences because their partner had told them to, or coerced them to, often within the context of intimate partner abuse, and that the women have complied in an attempt to cease the abuse (Centre for Women's Justice, 2016). A study completed by Roberts (2019), further shows that some women engaged in offending behaviour in order to be committed to custody because of concerns regarding safety, financial pressures and to be at a distance from threats or abuse.

Delong and Reichart (2019) note that some women are involved in the criminal justice system due to their repeated victimisation in life and have

named this the 'victim-offender overlap'. Along with this overlap is the term double-deviancy, coined by Heidensohn in 1985. This refers to a woman being deviant in the sense that she is committing an offence, and also being deviant by breaking away from the social norms of the accepted 'stereotype' of females in the local community. Heidensohn considered how the role of a woman in society was changing with the increase in women committing crimes. She reports that the offending behaviour exhibited by women was affecting marriage and family life. Since this was not the norm for women previously, women were then labelled as deviant.

These negative feelings and views are echoed in the theorising of Becker's (1963) labelling theory. For example, if a woman feels that she is an 'embarrassment' to her family and society, or if she feels that she is already perceived a specific way, then she could be more likely to adopt this label and continue to commit offences in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ranaweera (2020) states that social labelling towards a woman can increase her offending behaviour as she is going against the gender norms imposed on her. This label is usually attached to 'female'-related offences, such as prostitution and/or abortion.

The stigma attached to a woman who has committed an offence adds to the shame she feels about being known to the justice system. A significant number of women state that they feel ashamed that they 'let themselves' end up at this point of their lives (Rutter and Barr, 2021). Women report concern that their families will 'turn their backs' on them when they find out about the offences, resulting in children needing social services interventions (Kincaid et al., 2019). O'Neill (2015) highlights the stigma that women experience because of having been in prison. All of the accounts from women in her research have a consistent theme in respect of feelings of shame and guilt, perceptions of being judged as a failure, which can serve to reinforce disadvantage, isolation and social exclusion (Corston, 2007).

Women supervised by Probation

PBNI (2025a) supervised 464 women in 2024, compared to 448 in 2020. PBNI notes that Probation Orders were the most likely form of sentencing in the year 2022/2023 (PBNI, 2023). However, PBNI's statistics do not specify between males and females. However, Shields and Cochran (2020) state that women were more likely to be sentenced to a Probation Order than their male counterparts.

Probation supervision is there primarily to address and manage risk in the community, but also fulfils the purpose of helping and supporting a woman by linking her with services and professionals who can provide further support, particularly upon her release from custody. In 2023, HMIP looked at the positive outcomes of women receiving community sentences, one of which is the importance of building a relationship with an identified professional. For example, if the Probation Officer both engaged the service-user and supported their desistance (through ensuring access to services such as training and employment, accommodation support and other relevant services) the sentence completion rate was 24 per cent higher and the reoffending rate was 14 per cent lower compared to those cases where the Inspectorate felt that the relationship was not as positive (HMIP, 2023).

Research by O'Neill (2011) also supports this finding, stating that 76 per cent of those women interviewed on probation supervision reported that their self-esteem and/or self-confidence had improved as a direct result of their engagement with PBNI. It also highlights the success of the Inspire Model within PBNI – which is gender informed and recognises and understands the role that gender plays in shaping a woman's experience and how this influences the pathway to offending, which differs from men. Started in Northern Ireland by PBNI in 2008, the Inspire Model was created to help manage women more effectively in the community. The purpose of having a women-only service was identified as an important element of the project in that women felt more comfortable, able to open up and discuss key elements of their offending behaviour and personal circumstances.

Despite any positives in respect of probation supervision of women in Northern Ireland, recent data show a higher rate of non-compliance with community orders by adult women compared to men, despite women being less likely to reoffend overall (CJINI, 2021).

The Prison Reform Trust (2022) notes that one of the reasons attributed to women not complying with community orders is that some women who are serving community-based sentences are also experiencing domestic violence, which can have an impact on their ability to comply with the order requirements. Principle four of the *Women Strategy* ensures focus by all staff on relationship-based supervision, ensuring recognition of the need to 'build trust-based, supportive relationships between Probation Officers and women ... the importance of relational support for women's rehabilitation' (PBNI, 2025b, p. 6).

It is important for organisations like PBNI to ensure that all their practitioners focus on fully understanding the reasons why women may not be able to

comply with community sentences and look at the individual's needs in a holistic way. For example, as mentioned above, women in the criminal justice system are more likely to be single parents, and women are more likely to experience domestic violence and are more likely to have negative outcomes from the likes of a custodial sentence. In this respect, it is important that practitioners not only take account of gender-responsive practice but also consider the impact of trauma and adversity experienced by women who have contact with criminal justice. Trauma-informed approaches are key to supporting women and an integral part of the *Women Strategy* (PBNI, 2025b) and the future focus of PBNI as it becomes a trauma-informed agency.

Adversity in childhood and offending

Most people who encounter the justice system have experienced a variety of traumas, commonly adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Scottish Government, 2018). Boullier and Blair (2018) describe adversity in childhood as 'potentially traumatic events, with lasting effects on health and well-being'. More specifically, Felitti *et al.* (1998) describe these trauma-inducing experiences as exposure to adverse events in the household, including substance abuse, mental illness, intimate partner violence and criminal behaviour, as well as verbal, physical and sexual abuse. It is known that adversity in childhood can often lead to offending amongst women (Lawrence, 2022). A study by Levenson *et al.* (2015) found higher rates of adversity exposure in a sample of justice-involved women (41 per cent) in comparison to women not involved in the justice system (15 per cent). The increased number of childhood adversities in women involved with the justice system then pose an increased risk to their physical and mental health (Turner *et al.*, 2021).

Rhoades *et al.* completed a study in 2016 which shows how adversity in childhood can impact upon young people and how this links with offending behaviour in their later years. Sixty-one male and eighty-one female participants were recruited into randomised controlled trials. The results showed that, for females, family violence, parental divorce and cumulative childhood risk factors were significant predictors of adult arrest, rather than juvenile justice referrals. Each additional childhood risk factor increased the risk of adult arrest by 21 per cent. Women who experienced parental divorce were nearly three times more likely to be arrested as an adult and those who experienced family violence were two-and-a-half times more so than those without such experiences.

Rhoades *et al.*'s study notes the impact that emotionally traumatic events may have on women and their risk of offending in later life. It is important that practitioners working with women understand the impact of adversity in childhood and how they might present. Evans-Chase (2014) provides knowledge around this by stating that adversity in childhood may impact on self-regulatory behavioural and emotional responses, leading to delinquency, interpersonal violence, drug and alcohol use, and suicidal or self-mutilating behaviours.

Adult trauma and offending

Traumatic events that happen in adulthood can be as devastating as trauma experienced in childhood and have a significant impact on a person's life. Karatzias *et al.* (2017) suggest that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5* (DSM-5), are common among women in prison, with 58 per cent meeting the criteria for PTSD.

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is reported that women are more likely to use maladaptive coping strategies to manage stress and trauma-related symptoms (Kelly *et al.* 2015). Baranyi *et al.* (2018) define some of these maladaptive coping strategies by saying that women are more likely to turn to frequent and heavier use of substances and display passive and avoidance-focused coping styles, compared to men. Levenson *et al.* (2015) support this view, identifying that due to trauma, individuals adopt high-risk behaviours as part of forming abnormal coping strategies. So, not only are women employing substance misuse and passive/avoidance-focused coping mechanisms, but they are also using the offending itself as a coping mechanism for their trauma.

For some women, the trauma they experience can be linked to their offence, or the act of the offence itself can be the trauma that they need support with (Pink and Gray, 2022). Kubiak (2004) concurs, stating that a diagnosis of PTSD may interfere with the ability to benefit from rehabilitative programmes, can have an impact on impulse control and may be associated with higher reoffending rates. In these circumstances, using offence-focused work and programmes may be beneficial as it can help reduce two issues at once: the trauma and the offence. However, this is something that would need to be carefully managed to reduce potential of retraumatising the person.

The prevalence of trauma and adversity amongst women in contact with the justice system substantiates the need for evidence-based practice in contemporary probation practice, which is encapsulated within both PBNl's *Women Strategy* and strategically within the *Corporate Plan 2023–2026*. The *Corporate Plan* ensures focus on empowering service-users and staff, whilst also recognising the cultural, historical and gender issues that impact on service-users.

Trauma-informed practice is an evolving form of professional practice that is relevant to all justice-involved women. McAnallen and McGinnis explain this as a 'person-centred and whole-system approach, which differs from trauma-focused interventions that target underlying trauma' (2021, p. 110). Sweeney et al. (2018) suggest that services which fail to recognise trauma can negatively affect outcomes for women who can be retraumatised. Professionals need to be aware that offence-focused work cannot take place if the woman is not mentally or emotionally able to understand her actions and take responsibility. This evidence-based theory is encapsulated within principle three of the *Women Strategy* to ensure that holistic case management is adopted by all staff who should 'use gender-responsive risk and needs assessment and case-planning' (2025, p. 6). This emphasises focusing on the need to understand women's offending background, the trauma they have experienced and how the adoption of a trauma-informed approach can assist, before attempting to reduce recidivism through the use of restorative justice – hence why a trauma-informed approach is so important.

Restorative justice

So where does restorative justice fit and why is it important with women who have offended?

Restorative justice is a process that was introduced in the late 1970s in response to the neglect of the needs and rights of victims within the criminal justice system (Choi et al., 2012). The Crown Prosecution Service in England (2023) states that the three main aims are victim satisfaction, engagement with the perpetrator and creation of community capital. While such programming can take many forms, in justice settings it usually involves direct conferencing between the person responsible for the offence and the person who has been harmed. Any form of restorative justice requires the consent of both parties and some recognition of the impacts of the offending behaviour

on the person harmed. Restorative justice can offer a trauma-informed, relationship approach that acknowledges the experiences and focuses on healing rather than punishment, understanding the harm caused in context whilst fully accepting the impact of the offence on the victim.

Dandurand and Griffiths (2006) state that there are five main categories of restorative justice: (1) victim–offender mediation; (2) community and family group conferencing; (3) circle sentencing; (4) peace-making circles; and (5) reparative probation and community boards and panels. Paul (2016) adds to this by saying that letters to the victim from the perpetrator are also commonplace.

As PBNI is a key organisation in the supervision of those within the justice system, it is important to reflect that the benefits of restorative justice have been acknowledged and adopted into practice with the implementation of the *Restorative Justice Strategy 2024–27*. This strategy highlights the benefits of using restorative justice in practice and the different ways that restorative justice can be used within the organisation.

Changing the use of restorative circles

The Restorative Justice Council (2023) suggests that there are indications that restorative justice may be even more effective for women. Restorative justice has been identified to be a particularly useful intervention for improving a person's sense of self-worth (Marder, 2013), and participation may also have positive effects on the mental health of the women who are involved.

Elis (2005) also proposes that restorative justice may be more beneficial for women, as the process focuses on strengthening informal relationships. Research completed by Osterman and Masson (2016) shows that women are keen to emphasise how the context of their offending was not an excuse for their offending behaviour. This willingness to be transparent about their offending adds to their suitability for the restorative justice processes, as in many cases they are already aware of the harm they have caused during their offending.

The difficulty, however, can be in getting women to embrace the restorative justice process and take part, especially if the aim is to engage a woman in group work. Osterman and Masson (2016) highlight that it may be more challenging to get a female case to a restorative justice conference because of possible past traumas that may need more attention before the case reaches the point of readiness. This reinforces that women need to be in

a relatively stable frame of mind before entering into a restorative justice scenario and reiterates the importance of addressing traumas before or during offence-focused work. There was also a suggestion by practitioners that prior relationships between perpetrator and victim were more common in female cases, thus making these cases more complicated (Miles, 2013). This is a barrier to be aware of when trying to use restorative justice with women in the justice system.

Restorative justice circles were first used in the late 1970s in the United States, with young people who were deemed as ‘troublesome’ (Wachtel, 2016). As the years progressed, the use of restorative circles remained mostly the same. The aim of the circle was to bring together a group of people, discuss ideas, take responsibility, empower and encourage each other and hold each other accountable. The use of the restorative circle is a more adaptive form of restorative justice (Wachtel, 2016).

Literature from Hayes and Daly (2003) explores cases involving young girls who offend and their victims, who are known to them. They found that in these situations, where a restorative justice circle was used, there can be an increase in contested facts and less apologetic behaviour. Therefore, lower levels of positive outcomes, including minimal change to reoffending rates, were found.

Despite the work from Hayes and Daly (2003), it is exactly this form of restorative justice that this article proposes could be used best with adult female service-users, the suggestion being that it is going to be used differently from the traditional form of restorative circles and may not include the victim of someone’s offence, but instead a victim representative. This allows for the victim’s voice to be heard throughout the restorative justice experience.

Bazemore and Umbreit (2001) state that restorative justice circles demand a lot of time and therefore are not used on more minor offences. Moreover, they also state that circles require a significant time commitment, prompting some to suggest that they should be used where deep, long-term intervention is needed. The use of circles for a more long-term intervention is what could be best used with female service-users.

Stuart and Pranis (2006) outline certain unique qualities of the circle process, which include: a formal opening and closing of the circle, use of a talking piece to create safety and regulate discussion, building the relationship between the women before engaging in meaningful conversations surrounding traumas and victims, and addressing underlying causes of problem behaviour rather than focusing on a single incident. The last of these processes is what is most intriguing and would be the most

important aspect of the restorative justice circles. The main aim of the circles would be that the women could explore their traumas together, in a safe space, to gain understanding of what led them to this point in life.

As a result of the prevalence of shame and guilt experienced by women, the use of restorative justice may be of benefit in terms of enhancing female sense of worth. A study completed in 2012 by Gaarder and Hesselton looked at how restorative justice circles helped with shame and the feelings experienced by girls who had offended. The study found that such shaming was a necessary part of the restorative process for the residential group. The girls felt ashamed when speaking about their offence. However, in the circles, the constructive use of shame enabled the girls to accept responsibility for their harmful action and move on. From this point on, this article will refer to the use of circle intervention as 'healing circles', as it is felt that this is a more apt name than restorative justice circles.

Many of the women using the healing circles will have been victims themselves and could possibly empathise with the victim of their crime because of their own experiences (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). This new use of healing circles can focus on two things – offending and trauma – as it aims to deal with both at the same time.

The idea of using a healing circle as group therapy for those who have offended may not be a main focus point of restorative justice, but it is important to note that there is research to show that talking in a group setting can be beneficial for women in the justice system. The Probation Service (2021) states that 'talking therapy' is most effective in helping women to identify and change negative and self-destructive patterns of behaviour. The use of the group setting can lead to a sense of peer mentoring and healing amongst the group members, as the women, with similar experiences, can help lead each other and work on staying away from a life of offending. NHS England (2023) also highlights that peer support does not replace the need for effective professional advice, support and information. However, it does provide people with a supportive community that enables them to play a more active role in the ongoing management of their health and wellbeing.

Difficulties in using healing circles

Risk

It is important to remember that the women who will be together in these healing circles have committed criminal offences and, depending on the

offences, could be assessed as presenting a high risk to others. An example would be women who have been violent, who are not taking responsibility for their offences or who are victim-blaming (Osterman and Masson, 2016). Being aware of the offences and the people who would be brought together is something a facilitator would need to consider before starting the healing-circle intervention. As some women are also victims of their offence, they can take exception to the fact that they have to acknowledge their wrongdoings as well (Larsson *et al.*, 2018).

Mental health

A main concern with healing circles is that, if they are not delivered appropriately, they could exacerbate a woman's existing mental health problems (Miles, 2013). There must be safeguarding measures in place to protect the women involved in the healing circles as it is not appropriate to have them involved if they are too unwell to begin with. Women who want to be involved in the healing circle would need to be ready to engage in such work, as it can have negative as well as positive outcomes. This is another use for the facilitator, to determine the readiness of the participants.

Victims

By using the healing circles in the way that this article proposes, there is a chance that some victims will not have their harm restored. This article does not seek to use healing circles as an only form of sentencing, but as something that goes hand-in-hand with another sentence, such as a community order or custodial sentence. If used appropriately, it would be the hope that these healing circles could show a new way of managing female service-users, both in the community and in the custodial setting.

Conclusion and way forward

The healing circles that have been proposed will potentially take some time to become adopted within the criminal justice system. It is important to understand that these circles look at the healing of the woman's trauma, and the aim is to reduce reoffending through empathy and understanding. If these healing circles were considered, they could replace or run parallel to current victim interventions/programmes that are used within the community and prison settings.

Healing circles could be used as a programme that lasts for a defined period of time, giving the woman a chance to explore herself and what led to the offending behaviour. The use of healing circles in this context could be similar to the use of problem-solving courts/justice. In these cases, once a woman has gone through this specialised approach, a judge assesses what is a suitable sentence after the identified criminogenic needs have begun to be addressed (Problem Solving Justice NI, 2018). This could be a way to use healing circles as it would give a woman the chance to explore her trauma before being sentenced, which could enable her to complete her sentencing in its entirety.

The use of healing circles aligns with PBNi's *Women Strategy* and *Restorative Justice Strategy* and therefore will be proposed for consideration as the *Women Strategy* is progressed in the coming year. The healing circles would provide a strengths-based relationship approach, not only with female service-users and professionals but in a peer-support capacity. It would also support the links between the women and their community, collaborating with family and society once again. The use of healing circles is adapting a trauma-informed approach in a unique way, exploring a new way of working in a gender-specific approach and giving women the chance to step away from the criminal justice system.

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Mindfulness for Emotional Regulation: Reflections on a Pilot Mindfulness Programme with a Group of Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) Service-Users in the Community

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Summary: Mindfulness-based interventions teach participants how to regulate attention and increase awareness of the present moment, with an open and accepting attitude. Participants learn how to move their attention from cognitive processes to an awareness of bodily sensations. This can lead to a reduction in rumination and worry and reduced reactivity to provocation (Farb and Segal, 2024). The effectiveness of mindfulness for people on probation has not been robustly studied but there is some promising evidence of its potential benefits. This article centres on a pilot mindfulness-based programme offered to a small group of probation service-users in PBNI. The facilitator reflects on her perception of the programme's effectiveness and participants' evaluations of the programme. The evaluation of this pilot provides support for the possibilities that mindfulness can offer as a strength-based intervention to improve emotional regulation in offending populations.

Keywords: Mindfulness, offending behaviour programme, emotional dysregulation.

Introduction

Mindfulness training has been shown to increase the capacity for emotional regulation in general populations (Khoury *et al.*, 2013), and there is evidence that emotional dysregulation can be a precursor to various types of offending behaviour (Gillespie *et al.*, 2018). Research investigating the use of mindfulness within criminal justice systems is emerging with promising results, including reductions in negative mood states and improvements in self-regulation for service-users (Davies *et al.*, 2021).

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This article centres on a pilot mindfulness programme offered to probation service-users in the community who had experienced recurrent depression, anxiety, difficulties in coping with stress, emotional reactivity with others or a history of repeating unhelpful habit patterns. The six-week programme taught participants how to learn from their direct experience. They learned how to pause and experience how various emotions manifest in the body, and they were introduced to a different way of relating to difficult and unwanted mood states and thoughts.

The aims of this project align with the criminal justice recommendations in the *Mindful Nation* report (MAPPG, 2015, p. 53):

The NHS and NOMS should work together to ensure the urgent implementation of National Institute for Health and Care Excellence's (NICE) recommended Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) for recurrent depression within offender populations.

This article provides a summary of the existing research linking emotional dysregulation to offending behaviour, followed by an overview of the current evidence supporting the use of mindfulness-based interventions to increase emotional regulation. It outlines the nature of the pilot programme and discusses the themes and patterns emerging from participants' evaluations and sets out how the pilot affected people being supervised in the community. The article reflects upon participants' perceived improvements in emotional regulation, with evidence of decentring from thoughts and emotions and an awareness that thoughts are transient. It reflects on participants' increased ability to cope with difficult mood states, reduction in rumination and worry, increased resilience, improved impulse control and increased self-compassion.

The next generation of offending behaviour programmes is currently being considered by PBNi, which includes strength-based approaches. This paper therefore makes recommendations as to how mindfulness-based interventions could provide a very useful adjunct to those service-users with particular issues with emotional dysregulation and assist their successful rehabilitation in the community.

Emotional dysregulation and offending behaviour

Emotional regulation deficits have been linked to a variety of offending behaviour, including violent and sexual offending. The integrated theory of

sexual offending (Ward and Beech, 2006) posits that offending occurs due to several interacting variables, which can impact neuropsychological functioning. This can manifest as poor impulse control, negative emotional states and obsessive ruminative thinking.

Ward and Gannon (2006) propose the Good Lives Model-Comprehensive (GLM-C) as a theoretical framework which combines the integrated theory of sexual offending with a strengths-based approach. This model emphasises the importance of psychological wellbeing in rehabilitation and risk management. Key to this is equipping people with the capacity to lead more fulfilling lives. Ward and Gannon discuss the role of self-regulation in offending pathways and specifically mention the need for techniques to restore inner peace.

Gunst *et al.* (2017) explored the role of affect regulation in sexual offending and the often-secondary importance of this as a target in treatment programmes.

Robertson *et al.* (2015) found that participants with difficulties in attending to their emotions had a more extensive history of aggressive behaviour. Garofalo and Velotti (2017) found an association between aggression and emotional dysregulation and concluded that 'treatments for violent offenders should target emotion regulation skills to reduce aggressive tendencies in the presence of negative emotionality'.

Tonnaer *et al.* (2017) used fMRI scanning (functional magnetic resonance imaging, a neuroimaging technique) to highlight changes in brain activity when service-users convicted of violent offending were deliberately provoked. They suggested that cognitive resources were quickly depleted in efforts to self-regulate, increasing the risk of loss of self-control and reactive aggression.

A growing body of literature indicates that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a high prevalence rate in forensic populations (Craig *et al.*, 2017). Meddeb *et al.* (2023) explored the links between ACEs, emotional dysregulation and aggressive anti-social behaviour, concluding that addressing emotional regulation deficits could be an important treatment target.

Common amongst these studies is the importance of attending to negative emotionality rather than attempting to suppress or even distract from such mood states. Substance misuse (a known risk factor for offending) is often rooted in an attempt to numb psychological pain. Mindfulness can increase the capacity to tolerate unwanted mood states, thereby boosting relapse prevention.

The effectiveness of mindfulness in general populations

Williams and Kabat-Zinn (2011) discuss how the term mindfulness has become ubiquitous, but it is often misunderstood and is tricky to define. Segal *et al.* (2013) summarise a mindful approach as 'holding thoughts and feelings in awareness rather than trying to change them' (p. 5). Kabat-Zinn (2013) emphasises the foundational attitudes of mindfulness to cultivate, which include non-judgement, acceptance, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving and letting go.

Since Jon Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in the late 1970s, numerous studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in improving many biopsychological conditions, including anxiety, depression, stress and addiction (Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Developments in neuroimaging have added weight to these findings, showing the neuroplastic effects of mindfulness (Farb and Segal, 2024). The latest research using fMRI scanners not only demonstrates that mindfulness works, but, for the first time, now explains how it works.

Farb and Segal (2024) discuss how the brain's default mode network automatises so many aspects of daily activity, but it does so at a cost. Automatic reactions to stressors do not serve us when this keeps us stuck in harmful habit patterns. They have discovered via neuroimaging studies that mindfulness disrupts the default mode network by deliberately expanding awareness to take in a wider field of bodily sensations. Over a period of weeks these effects remained between periods of formal mindfulness practice, indicating longer-term changes to the structure of the brain.

In short, Farb and Segal (2024) found that mindfulness works via several processes: increased awareness of sensory experience, decreased proliferation of rumination and increased attentional stability and reduced reactivity to provocation.

Mindfulness for probation service-users

Ideally, service-users would be able to employ skills of cognitive reappraisal when faced with a challenge. However, this level of executive functioning tends to go offline when faced with acute stressors (Sheppes *et al.*, 2014). Common responses to feeling overwhelmed are suppression and avoidance, which can be successful strategies in the short term but are usually maladaptive in the long term (including substance use and reactive aggression). Individuals who struggle with emotional regulation are more

likely to have poorer impulse control and are more likely to abuse substances (Weiss *et al.*, 2012).

Both anxiety and depression have been linked to poor interoceptive awareness (awareness of bodily sensations). Research on recurrent depression suggests that suppression of bodily sensations is integral to relapse (Farb and Segal, 2024). Awareness of bodily sensations can be increased with regular mindfulness practice (Schwartz *et al.*, 2025). A 2024 meta-analysis by Molteni *et al.* supported the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions for trauma-related symptoms and interoception.

A focus on bodily sensations disrupts rumination, creates a pause and allows participants to engage with what is actually happening rather than what might happen. It also allows participants to become aware of their own reactivity to particular stressors (Farb and Segal, 2024).

Many of the Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) based offending behaviour programmes ask participants to note their bodily reactions, but this assumes that people have the capacity to do so. Many people who have experienced trauma are even less attuned to bodily sensations or have dissociated from the body as a result of trauma (Molteni *et al.*, 2024). A trauma-informed mindfulness approach ensures that individuals learn at a pace which feels safe for them (Treleaven, 2018).

The pilot programme

I have been employed as a Probation Officer with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNi) for 23 years. Having begun practising mindfulness several years ago and, as it transformed my own wellbeing, I became increasingly convinced that many of our service-users could also benefit from this practice. It appeared to me that much of the maladaptive behaviour amongst our service-users was driven by attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions and that mindfulness could offer a means of non-harmful self-regulation for our service-users.

Having trained as a mindfulness teacher from 2019 to 2022 at the Mindfulness Centre Dublin, part funded by PBNi's further education study scheme, I am a certified member of Mindfulness Teachers Association Ireland (MTAI). I completed further training with Oxford Mindfulness, including teacher training for the 'Finding Peace in a Frantic World' programme (Kuyken *et al.*, 2020).

The Finding Peace in a Frantic World programme (hereafter referred to as the programme) was developed by Oxford Mindfulness. It is an abridged

version of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, which has a strong evidence base (Gkintoni *et al.*, 2025). The programme teaches mindfulness skills and how to use these skills to improve wellbeing and resilience to stress. A core aim of the programme is reducing cognitive reactivity. I chose this programme as it covers the key components of mindfulness training in a course that is accessible due to its abridged format and shorter guided practices.

Each week has a different theme and builds on previous learning. The programme covers: recognising autopilot mode, connecting with the body, using breath and body to anchor attention, observing thoughts as mental events, facing difficult emotions, learning to respond rather than react, cultivating self-compassion and planning for long-term mindfulness practice.

In one Belfast-based team, I proposed facilitating a pilot programme to service-users on a community sentence or subject to licence. This was supported by PBNI's senior leadership team. I received regular supervision from an accredited, external mindfulness supervisor.

An information sheet was provided to the service-users, via their Probation Officers, detailing that the programme was suitable for those who had experienced recurrent depression, anxiety, difficulties in coping with stress, emotional reactivity with others or a history of repeating unhelpful habit patterns. It was explained that mindfulness can offer an alternative means of self-regulation and can lead to reduced reactivity. It was not suitable for those who were acutely unwell, as per Oxford Mindfulness guidelines on selection criteria.

It was important that participants self-selected for this programme. It was explained that attendance was voluntary and there would be no adverse consequences for those who chose not to complete the programme or if they missed sessions. However, it was noted that missing more than one session would usually mean that they should complete the programme at a later date as they would have missed too much of the programme.

Referrals were completed by Probation Officers with the service-users. The referral form screened for acute mental health issues and unmanaged addictions. Following screening, ten participants were assessed as suitable and all ten attended an orientation session. Eight participants attended the first session and seven completed the full programme.

The curriculum can be delivered in a six- or eight-week format. I chose the six-week programme (90-minute sessions), with the addition of a group orientation session the week before. The purpose of the orientation was to explain more about the programme and create a group agreement, which

was informed by trauma-sensitive mindfulness approaches. Treleaven (2018) explores how mindfulness teaching can be adapted to prioritise emotional safety and autonomy for those with a history of trauma. It was essential to co-create a space that felt safe and supportive. Integral to this was choice – freedom to choose to attend, to engage in the practices and to take care of any emerging difficulties.

Introducing the ‘window of tolerance’ (Siegel, 2020) in the orientation session appeared to be useful for many. The ‘window of tolerance’ illustrates the concept of zones of nervous system regulation. On either end of the optimal zone are the hyper-arousal and hypo-arousal zones. These describe states of heightened anxiety and overwhelm and states of disconnection and shutdown. Mindfulness can help expand the optimal zone of emotional regulation (Treleaven, 2018).

Most of the participants voiced an experiential understanding of being in states of dysregulation – both overwhelm and shutdown. There was a sense of hope amongst many in the group that mindfulness could offer a means of coming back into regulation when they experienced either anxiety or depression. The importance of hope is highlighted in a 2025 HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights paper (Ali *et al.*, 2025/04). The paper notes the benefits of facilitating transformational hope as part of a strengths-based approach which supports desistance.

The group left the orientation session knowing that they were not unique in their struggles. This was a revelation for many; one participant commented, ‘It was also positive to learn I was not the only person such severe anxiety affected’.

The programme taught participants how to learn from their direct experience, rather than learning about more abstract, cognitive concepts. They learned how to pause and to experience how various emotions manifest in the body, and they were introduced to a different way of relating to difficult and unwanted mood states and thoughts. Each week, participants were provided with handouts and audio recordings (approximately ten minutes in duration) to support ongoing practice. They were invited to complete home practice on a daily basis and reflect on their experiences in a daily log and in the subsequent session.

In line with a trauma-sensitive approach, there was regular communication between sessions, by text, email and phone or video calls, when needed. Supervising Probation Officers were informed of attendance and any presenting concerns.

During the sessions, I was attuned to participants' presentation and spoke with those I was concerned about after the sessions. Two participants reported difficulties with physical pain, very low mood and feelings of shame. When I noticed they were struggling, I met with these participants individually, and this, with the support of their own supervising Probation Officers, gave more space to their emerging needs and allowed both to complete the programme, with self-reported improvements in emotional wellbeing.

The themes of the programme included relating differently to thoughts and feelings and turning towards difficulty, accepting and allowing and rebalancing. By week two, there was already a shift in the language used by some participants, from getting rid of negative emotions to an emphasis on changing relationships to unwanted states. In discussing difficult experiences during the guided practice, one participant commented that difficulties are usually found in the past or in the future and when we pay attention to the present, we often find we are actually okay.

Participants were able to explore their experiences between sessions, through the lens of mindfulness. One man spoke about his reaction when his car broke down, spiralling into rumination and worry. He explained how mindfulness disrupted this habit pattern, evidencing decentring from his automatic thoughts and the utility of practice in everyday life.

Participants noted challenges in maintaining consistent daily practice, even with brief ten-minute sessions, and so were introduced to the benefit of a one-minute practice. This allowed those who were struggling to form a daily routine to establish a baseline and then increase the duration of practice.

In the last two sessions, participants reflected more on their learning. They spoke of a sense of being more than their past and allowing fear and anxiety to pass through them. One participant spoke of an abiding sadness, but he was now able to feel this more in the body, thereby bringing a more expansive awareness that he was 'more than just sad'. Another commented that he believed his thoughts were 'mad', until he heard everyone else sharing their thoughts.

At the end of the final session, participants were given an evaluation form. A brief introduction to the form outlined that responses were anonymous and some of the comments might be included in this article. The evaluation invited participants to share their motivation for attending the programme, what they found most and least useful about the programme and the impact (if any) it had on their day-to-day life to date. They were also asked how interested they were in continuing to practise mindfulness and whether they

would recommend the programme to other probation service-users. There was also space for any additional comments.

The evaluation form was completed by all seven participants who completed the programme. Their motivation for attending the programme included coping with difficult thoughts and feelings (particularly anxiety), relief from emotional pain, to increase self-worth and self-compassion and to address offending behaviour.

Participants reported perceived improvements in emotional regulation, with evidence of decentring from thoughts and emotions and an awareness that they are transient; increased ability to cope with difficult mood states; reduction in rumination and worry; increased resilience; improved impulse control; and increased self-compassion. Zhong *et al.* (2022) found that childhood trauma increased impulsivity in offending populations, and increasing self-compassion was more effective than cognitive reappraisal in mediating impulsivity. Therefore, self-compassion may be an important treatment goal for PBNi service-users.

When asked what they found least useful, three participants said that they found all of the programme helpful and offered no critique or word to this effect. One commented on his own social anxiety at the beginning but reported that he found this improved towards the end of the programme. The remaining comments focused on individual preferences for group discussion rather than pair work, and preferences for various practices used in the course.

In the evaluation forms, all seven participants reported improvements in their day-to-day lives, including:

‘It’s given me a clarity to be okay if things don’t work or turn out how I want them to.’

‘Enriched my life for the better.’

‘That the thoughts will not be there forever.’

‘Not ruminate on negative thoughts.’

‘Anxiety is still there, still real but I do find I am coping better. I know this is step one.’

All participants were very interested in continuing to practise mindfulness and all said that the course would be useful to others on probation:

‘Help in understanding emotions and thoughts and feelings. Being able to regulate.’

‘First, it’s brilliant for impulse control. I’m here ultimately because my internet usage got out of control. Recognising that I don’t have to act on urges to watch porn has been brilliant for me. Also, there is a tremendous amount of shame and self-disgust because of the crimes I’ve committed. This course has really helped me deal with that shame.’

The success of the group was most apparent at the end of the final session. The participants appeared to be reluctant to leave, such was the sense of community, support and acceptance within the group.

The potential benefits of mindfulness for probation service-users are manifold, as is evident from the participants’ comments. One of the benefits is a shared understanding of the struggles that every person faces, regardless of their background. Mindfulness offers a way of coping with universal problems, acknowledging the inherent worth and strength of each participant and equipping them with lifelong skills to enhance their own wellbeing for their benefit and for the benefit of others.

This project was possible only through the foresight of PBNI in supporting me to facilitate this pilot and, importantly, the courage of the participants to take part, and to engage authentically and openly with the pilot programme.

Conclusion

While mindfulness has become increasingly popularised in the west, there remains some scepticism due to the Buddhist origins of the practice. Farb and Segal (2024) suggest that given their most recent data, this practice ‘isn’t any more mystical than doing a few stretches in the morning’ (p. 61).

Many of our service-users have a history of trauma, addiction and mental health issues, and struggle with emotional regulation. PBNI is committed to becoming a trauma-informed organisation, with the aim of achieving compassionate, nurturing, relationship-based practice, and building strong, resilient, healthy and productive communities. Mindfulness training can support recovery from trauma and can also support good mental health

outcomes. Mindfulness for criminal justice service-users is a growing area of research and practice, with promising results (Per et al., 2019).

Mindfulness-based interventions could offer a low-cost and high-impact option for those who wish to learn a different way of coping with life stressors. The programme could provide direct benefit to service-users, in addition to providing some workload relief for their supervising Probation Officers. It has the potential to promote desistance and reduce reoffending.

PBNI is currently considering the future of offending behaviour programmes, including strength-based approaches. Mindfulness-based interventions could provide a very useful adjunct to those service-users with particular issues with emotional dysregulation. It will be important that participants are self-selecting. Moreover, while participants would be asked to commit to attending for the duration of the programme, there should be no sanctions for non-attendance.

A further pilot and formal evaluation of this programme with more probation service-users would allow for further research investigating the effectiveness of mindfulness for emotional regulation in offending populations.

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Investigating the Potential of Mental Health-Related Podcasts as a Psychoeducational Tool within the Probation Service

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Summary: This research, undertaken as part fulfilment of a Masters in Applied Psychology (Mental Health), explored the potential for mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool for clients within the Probation Service. While mental health-related podcasts are often used for personal enjoyment, they also offer psychoeducational benefits, particularly for socially excluded populations. The need for alternative forms of support became exacerbated during the global pandemic, COVID-19. During this time, mental health-related podcasts played a fundamental role in providing an alternative way to support people struggling with a range of psychosocial challenges. Today, whilst the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic are long over, mental health-related podcasts continue to be of benefit to a range of populations.

For the study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Probation Officers online via Microsoft Teams (N=5). Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Findings indicate an increase in clients' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour. Podcasts assisted in establishing a sense of hope and community for probation clients and officers, resulting in a growth in this relationship dynamic. Participants report value in formally incorporating mental health-related podcasts as a resource within the Probation Service. These findings provide evidence of mental health-related podcasts having a positive impact on clients in the Probation Service and among Probation Officers. Future literature should focus on the integration of this psychoeducational tool into similar services.

Keywords: Mental health literacy, psychoeducational tools, mental health-related podcasts, Probation Service, COVID-19.

Introduction

The modern criminal justice system aims to support people with lived experience, with particular focus on reintegration (Webster *et al.*, 2006, cited in

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Li et al., 2019). This shift, while progressive, faces criticism for potentially undermining victim justice and perpetrator accountability. However, addressing the root cause of criminality is vital for reducing recidivism (Li et al., 2019). To gain a deeper understanding of the roots of criminality, contemporary research has increasingly focused on exploring the ramifications of experiencing childhood in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Noroozi et al., 2018; Ejlskov et al., 2023). Youth growing up in these circumstances face an elevated risk for violence, emotional difficulties and negative peer influences. Additionally, forming negative peer associations plays a crucial role in shaping a young person's involvement in destructive activities, such as substance dependence and criminality (Hesselink and Bougard, 2020).

High levels of interpersonal trauma significantly predict the extent of psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Kessler et al., 2010; Tzouvara et al., 2023). Prolonged exposure to childhood adversity can result in complex trauma, altering perception and emotional regulation (Briere and Scott, 2015; Halpin et al., 2022). Difficulty in emotional regulation leads to hypervigilance, whereby non-threatening situations are seen as potential threats. Such exposure can erode a person's sense of safety and trust, reducing the willingness to engage in mental health services (Courtois and Ford, 2012; Liddon et al., 2018). Instead, these emotions become overwhelming, with the person responding by dissociating. Exposure to complex trauma can enforce maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as substance dependency, self-harm or engaging in high-risk behaviours (Kilkelly et al., 2023). Early experiences of trauma can shape attachment styles, impacting on the bond made with others and trust in relationships (Zakaria et al., 2022). Many may struggle with forming secure attachments, leading to difficulties in establishing close and trusting relationships (Bowlby, 1988; Muñoz et al., 2022). Avoidant behaviours may be exhibited to prevent emotional closeness or display anxious behaviours that result from fear of abandonment (Weaver et al., 2020). Negative perceptions about oneself are often internalised, with a person feeling undeserving of success and happiness (Fergusson et al., 1996).

Given that trauma and mental health difficulties are associated with negative later life outcomes, such as criminal activity, addressing these issues must be part of responding to the reduction of crime and recidivism. Mental health literacy promotes efforts to reduce stigma and to foster attitudes that maximise positive mental health outcomes and wellbeing (Sirdifield and Brooker, 2020). It enables individuals to recognise personal challenges, to

make informed decisions and to seek therapeutic support (Furnham and Swami, 2018). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that many of those within socially excluded populations lack adequate support and access to professional mental health guidance. A poor understanding of mental health has impeded many from seeking therapeutic support and recovery interventions (Goldney *et al.*, 2001, as cited in Furnham and Swami, 2018). Addressing the barriers to seeking help and promoting accessibility to mental health services can facilitate a greater awareness and understanding of the prevalence of mental health issues within these communities. Not only does this aid in increasing mental health literacy, but it also challenges stigmatising beliefs surrounding mental health.

The relationship between trauma, poor mental health literacy and destructive behaviour is multifaceted (Wiechelt and Straussner, 2015). This complex interplay is often observed within the Probation Service. The mission of this service is to deliver high-quality, supervised community sanctions and measures for individuals referred by the justice system, supporting positive change and enhancing community safety (Probation Service). Here, Probation Officers aim to support clients to make positive changes in their lives, while collaborating with other agencies, such as mental health services, to create a comprehensive support system for those under the Probation Service's supervision. Conventionally, the fundamental objective of a probation service was to observe and report behaviours to the court (Probation of Offenders Act, 1907, as cited in McNally, 2007). However, contemporary approaches used today have enabled a diverse range of rehabilitation resources to be made available. Although criminal justice podcasts act as an invaluable tool in facilitating accessible information to marginalised groups, COVID-19 lockdown ignited the emergence of mental health-related podcasts as a potential psychoeducational tool. During that time, the Irish mental health system was under significant strain, resulting in many health organisations, such as the Probation Service, having to respond promptly to this unprecedented situation (McNicholas *et al.*, 2021). The content of mental health-related podcasts focuses on psychological wellbeing, emotional literacy and mental health education. Guests of hosts share lived experiences and coping strategies, all while reducing stigma and supporting mental health self-management (Berry *et al.*, 2021). This research, facilitated by the Probation Service, aims to explore the use of mental health-related podcasts as a supplementary psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. It is grounded in the recognition that clients often face barriers to accessing

traditional therapeutic services, including stigma, low engagement and systemic pressures. Podcasts, by contrast, offer an accessible, low-cost, and scalable intervention that can be integrated into clients' daily routines. The parameters of the project include assessing the relevance, accessibility and perceived effectiveness of mental health-related podcasts for individuals among this population.

The rise of podcasts has demonstrated the value in psychoeducational content, resulting in an increase in mental health literacy (Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). An increase in podcast engagement has begun to change the nature of service provision, mostly benefiting those who experience social exclusion and face barriers, such as low educational status or low income (Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). In addition, those under probation supervision face significantly more challenges when accessing mental healthcare due to a combination of personal stigma and lack of access to healthcare in general (Power, 2020). Furthermore, the aftermath of COVID-19 has left marginalised groups particularly susceptible to a further decline in mental health, despite the ease of restrictions, highlighting the need for an increased use of psychoeducational tools within service provision (Dale *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

This study is explorative and investigates the impact of accessibility to mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool, gathering data from Probation Officers who work with this client group. Additionally, the current study aims to provide an interpretive insight into the role of mental health-related podcasts when used within the Probation Service. The study also examines the level of help-seeking behaviour, mental health literacy and willingness to engage in support offered to clients within the service.

Participants and sampling

This study includes five participants, three of whom identified as female, and two identifying as male. Three out of the five participants held the position of Senior Probation Officer, each offering more than fifteen years' experience in the Probation Service. The remaining two participants held a minimum of two years' work experience in their role. As Probation Officers provide an array of support for multiple clients, a rich insight into the probation services can be observed.

Table 1: *Participant profile (Participants referred to as 'P' to ensure anonymity, N=5)*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Length of time working in the Probation Service</i>	<i>Personal interest in podcasts?</i>
P1	Senior Probation Officer	>20 years	Yes
P2	Probation Officer	>2 years	Yes
P3	Senior Probation Officer	>15 years	Yes
P4	Probation Officer	<2 years	Yes
P5	Senior Probation Officer	>20 years	Yes

Data collection

Convenience and non-probability sampling were used to recruit participants who met specific criteria: Probation Officers within the Probation Service, aged 18 or over, with at least one year of experience. Recruiting participants for this study involved contacting various probation services in Ireland via email, and this process was facilitated by the Probation Service. Those who expressed an interest in participating were provided with an information sheet, outlining the research objectives.

Following a semi-structured interview schedule, nine core questions were constructed, supplemented with prepared prompts. Open-ended questions were formulated to enable participants to elaborate on unanticipated topics, ensuring conciseness throughout. Interviews began by introducing general questions about the participants' current work role, along with what they would ordinarily consider as the biggest risk factors for offending. As the interview continued, the direction moved towards the implications of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions on clients, and how the participants confronted these obstacles. Stemming from this, interviewees were asked if they had any personal experience of mental health-related podcasts, and if their clients reported listening to the podcasts during this time. In the latter half of the interviews, participants were asked if they noticed changes in mental health literacy or help-seeking behaviour, if they saw the potential for formally incorporating mental health-related podcasts into the service, and if they had any concerns.

Data analysis

Given the limited literature in this area, Inductive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2023) ensured that the findings were data driven as opposed to preconceived perceptions of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). The analytical process began with familiarisation with the collected data. This preliminary step encompassed a thorough review of the interview recordings, making subsequent notes throughout (Clarke *et al.*, 2015). Following this preliminary stage, the initial coding phase began, during which time an extensive scan of the dataset was conducted through line-by-line coding. These codes formed the foundation upon which the corresponding themes and their respective subthemes were delineated.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at the authors' university. Ethical approval was also sought and approved by the Probation Service's research group. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were reminded of this at the beginning of each interview, in addition to be asked to sign a consent form. Participants were reassured that their identity and answers given were to remain anonymous. Data were stored on an encrypted One Drive facilitated by the authors' university, where it is to remain for a minimum of ten years.

Results

Five core themes emerged from the data: Implications of COVID-19 restrictions, Lived Experiences, Accessibility, Psychoeducation, and Potential concerns. Subsequently, each theme consists of corresponding sub-themes (see Table 2).

Implications of COVID-19 restrictions

The onset of the global pandemic, which was declared in 2020, led to a decline in mental health among many people, particularly those in socially excluded populations (Dale *et al.*, 2021). The intensity of lockdown restrictions resulted in the closure of many community-based support structures, such as recovery meetings, and disruption to addiction and mental health services. Those in socially excluded populations, such as people under probation supervision, were particularly affected. In attempts to combat this, Probation Officers

considered alternative ways to provide support for their clients. The subsequent sub-themes outline the predominant challenges and intervention resources used in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Norton, 2020).

Table 2: *Five core themes with corresponding sub-themes*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Sub-themes</i>
Implications of COVID-19 restrictions	• Presenting challenges • Thinking outside the box
Lived experiences	• A sense of community • A sense of hope
Accessibility	• Language • Easily obtainable
Psychoeducation	• Professional development • Mental health literacy
Potential concerns	• Content quality concerns • Lack of mental health services • Standardisation

Presenting challenges

As with most organisations, the Probation Service had to respond to an unprecedented situation. In response to this, a sense of uncertainty was experienced by participants when remodelling service practices during this period. The disruption to the smooth operation of all community-based services had a detrimental effect on many clients' recovery processes, including increased relapse. Participants recalled clients returning to unhealthy environments, resulting in a significant rise in domestic violence, including a rise in child-to-parent violence:

'My clients weren't able access services to help them cope with uh, the loss of structure to their day, the loss of employment and also then being forced to live in environments usually overcrowded, and where those interpersonal difficulties were exacerbated. We would have seen a huge rise in intimate partner violence during this time, but also domestic violence incidences where child-to-parent violence increased as well.' (P1)

Participants acknowledged the use of over-the-phone support yet recalled the significant disruption in intervention types and client engagement:

‘It really impacted the people who were already in addiction or were fighting with addiction. Like struggles, like, even though they were getting some support over the phone, it just wasn’t the same.’ (P4)

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic left services with a broad range of concerns to address. Participants reported the severity of this challenge, and the significant amount of time clients required to regain a stable mental state:

‘But with COVID-19 certainly with these clients in mind, again, it took them an awful long time even after the restrictions started to lift, before their moods improved, their depression started to lift.’ (P5)

Thinking outside the box

Although this isolation period brought challenges for the Probation Service and people on probation, participants expressed gratitude for the availability of podcasts, an alternative resource used to maintain consistency in clients’ lives. One participant mentioned how she began suggesting mental health-related podcasts due to her own personal interest in the medium:

‘This is how we ended up coming to podcasts because we were all working at home and I suppose that was the thing as well, I heard *Mental Health-related Podcast* and that’s when we started going, I think we’re onto something here. We, you know, we started having these conversations, we had to start thinking outside the box. We had to start thinking about ways of reaching vulnerable people and trying to find supports in not the usual ways and through this, I think, Covid had huge benefits in this area.’ (P3)

The COVID-19 restrictions impacted on the way that services could provide support for their clients. There was a pivot to telehealth and online working tools. In response to this, the participants in this study utilised this challenge to think outside the box and recognised that mental health-related podcasts could become a new resource for their clients,

'I think it was a huge reflection piece for a lot of people, especially for clients, you know, and so I definitely think that COVID-19 was definitely a contributing factor for suggesting these podcasts.' (P2)

Lived experience

All participants viewed podcasts that featured lived-experience stories as an important tool for those in probation services. Gaining an insight into the challenges endured by others has assisted both people under probation supervision and Probation Officers in the challenges of substance recovery, in particular. This theme documents the benefits to both clients and staff, with a sense of community and hope reported.

A sense of community

Facilitating clients with the opportunity to hear others with similar past experiences allows for a magnitude of positive responses, instilling feelings of validation and corroboration: 'There is absolutely no substitute, there's no comparison to hearing something from somebody directly' (P3).

Probation clients identify with others who are real people with similar life experiences, such as trauma, substance dependence and criminality. Hearing from people who are further along their journeys of recovery and desistance provides clients with a rich understanding of their current difficulties and the potential pathways out:

'That's who should be talking, somebody who has lived the drug experience, knows what it's like to really be caught in addiction, and then the struggles and the difficulties with trying to access support.' (P5)

Clients are hearing from people who sound and look like them, who come from similar communities, and a familiarity with the podcast contributors gives clients a sense of belonging and solidarity: 'It's almost like it gives them that sense of community or that they're part of something' (P4).

Participants also recognised a shift in the dynamic of their client-facing relationships, igniting conversations about subjects that the client may not ordinarily have discussed. Through these conversations, a mutual understanding became apparent between participants and their clients: 'We discuss their view of it, how it relates to their circumstances and how it relates to their own mental health and their own story' (P2).

A sense of hope

In addition to creating a sense of community, participants reported that many clients have a renewed sense of hope. For clients undergoing recovery interventions, such podcasts provide hopeful yet candid reports of the challenges that occur in recovery journeys. Through this, the stigma surrounding relapse diminishes, motivating clients to persevere, augmented by first-hand accounts of those who have faltered and succeeded. This candidness, facilitated by recovery and mental health-related podcasts, displays raw and authentic struggles, frequently a feature of substance dependence. Hearing accounts of those who have overcome these obstacles is vital in instilling the idea that recovery is possible:

‘There are other people who are struggling like him, and that it’s OK to struggle like him and that there’s support out there. I think it’s really powerful when people have struggled and then they speak openly and publicly about it, because that gives people hope.’ (P4)

It was reported that podcasts have instilled hope not only for clients within the probation services, but also for the officers themselves. Participants revealed a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the insight gained through listening to these podcasts: ‘It’s almost that I am the one privileged to hear what they share with me on their lives’ (P3).

They appreciate the role hope plays in recovery and the privilege of being trusted with the information from the clients. Subsequent to this, participants are encouraged to persevere and are reminded of the importance of remaining hopeful: ‘You don’t want to diminish or dim somebody else’s light, when actually that’s what gets them up out of the bed in the morning and wanting them to change their ways’ (P1).

Accessibility

The accessibility of mental health-related podcasts adds to their efficiency. Accessibility relates to two factors. In addition to podcasts being easily obtainable and free, they also provide information in an understandable format.

Easily obtainable

Clients are able to access podcasts free of charge. These podcasts can also be accessed in any environment, in private or public, rewinding and pausing whenever the client sees fit, while also, 'I've been able to easily offer this up to my clients and kind of go, you go away and listen to this and then come back and we can have a discussion' (P1).

In addition to this, the most explicit distinction between these podcasts and conventional therapeutic resources is their immediate availability. Some more traditional resources might involve barriers, such as finance, travel, and specific opening hours. These barriers do not exist when accessing podcasts:

'Most people have a phone. That is the one thing that people have as default, so you were able to recommend something that wasn't pie in the sky, that was actually a realistic option for them to tap into.' (P3)

Accessible language

Although many services aim to have plain-language resources available, some may still pose a challenge for many groups, such as those with poor literacy levels. Participants noted the language used in some mental health-related podcasts to be accessible, particularly episodes featuring people with lived experiences:

'I think that that's the beauty of these podcasts. When I started recommending them, it was because it was spoken in their own dialect, in words you can understand, experiences that you've had, and in the middle of it all, extremely positive messages.' (P3)

Participants listed the positive impact on the clients and on themselves. While actively listening to these podcasts, participants reported being reminded of the importance of using lay language and the accessibility it enables. In addition to this, participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining a balance between professional and lay language when working with clients: 'I feel like I need to listen to them as well to be able to meet people at their level without being patronising and condescending' (P1).

Through listening to these podcasts, clients gained confidence to raise challenging topics with their Probation Officers, and participants noted an increase in their confidence to initiate these discussions with clients:

'Sometimes I think there's a fear for clients that's, like, I can't talk about these things, I wouldn't have the words, that's a big thing, you know, sometimes the vocabulary isn't there, and I think by listening to these podcasts and going, well, he's after saying something exactly how I would say it.' (P3)

Psychoeducation

Since introducing mental health-related podcasts to clients, one of the fundamental changes observed, was an increase in psychoeducation. Both Probation Officers and people under probation supervision expanded their knowledge regarding the importance of mental health literacy.

Mental health literacy

Participants highlighted the importance of recognising how trauma has affected their clients. Through mental health-related podcasts, clients were given the opportunity to reflect on stories shared by recoverees. Clients were able to listen at their own pace and reflect on how these topics related to their journey.

""I've been to other groups in the prison before and never got it, but after listening to the podcast I actually get it." So, him being able to say that to me, I think there's a level of honesty and candour that comes with that.' (P1)

Clients began recognising the value of utilising services and openly communicating their needs as they arose. Participants noted a distinct improvement in their clients' confidence regarding expressing personal journeys and recovery aspirations. As a result, a reduction in stigma was observed among clients:

'He ended up sharing stuff with me and ended up going to services and I don't think he would have had the confidence to go before listening because he felt like he couldn't talk about himself.' (P3)

Since introducing these podcasts, participants found clients were more willing to engage and contribute to discussions. A sense of understanding and clarity was noted, as clients felt informed about trauma and how it related to their

personal experience. Participants were encouraged by how clients were able to make self-discoveries and compared this type of experience to a form of self-help:

'I know, obviously, our mental health service, that challenge is there, but there are services out there and so even, like, there's, you know, listening to these for ... you can go on and listen to loads of podcasts that could be of help, almost self-help.' (P4)

Professional development

Participants acknowledged a shift in how they professionally present themselves. Through mental health-related podcasts, participants were able to reflect on their professional approach and its effectiveness. One participant, drawing upon a personal experience, stated that engaging with this medium had reminded her of the importance of perspective and to communicate with clients as a professional, but also as an authentic person:

'I had this lecturer, and I always remember her saying to me, "Don't ever be afraid to show up as a person". Not that you're going to start oversharing. You're still going to have your boundaries and all of that; professional boundaries are very important as well. But I think there shouldn't be such a great divide, and I think these podcasts definitely helped me shift a little bit and just reminded me to be a little bit more human.' (P5)

Additionally, podcasts were able to provide first-hand accounts of journeys from struggles to recovery:

'I think it's not just something that is useful to recommend to clients; it is invaluable as a practitioner, you know. I think the thing with these podcasts is it's just like being a guest in people's lives. It's just giving you a broader view.' (P3)

Participants were able to garner a richer and more personal insight into the experience of substance dependency:

'It's been a positive thing for me as well, you know. It allows me to kind of empathise with their situation and put myself in their shoes and understand it from their perspective, you know.' (P2)

Potential concerns

Participants reported some concern about introducing a medium that focuses on trauma and mental health to socially excluded populations. There were concerns about clients having access to podcasts with questionable or inaccurate information.

Content-quality concerns

Participants were concerned about the quality of information featured in some podcasts and reported that some clients were more susceptible to accepting false or prejudiced information.

Not only can podcasts contain misleading messages, but they also have the power to spread dangerous or harmful content. Participants acknowledged the damage that could be caused through the spread of misinformation. These messages could have a negative influence or even promote self-destructive behaviour:

‘They have the ... I suppose they can spread the inappropriate, dangerous, horrible messages. I think that there’s a risk and a danger there, that I suppose the wrong or incorrect information can be shared.’ (P4)

While it is beneficial for clients to listen to podcasts suggested by these professionals, such recommendations can lead clients to channels that may contain unreliable content. Participants expressed caution about this, fearing their suggestions might lead clients down the wrong path: ‘People don’t listen to podcasts in a vacuum, and people can listen to other podcasts. People can get other sources of information and stuff like that’ (P5).

Lack of services

By listening to mental health-related podcasts, clients’ mental health literacy notably improved. While this is a positive outcome, clients are more aware of the need for therapeutic intervention and the potential consequences of not receiving it.

‘That would be a cautionary note for me, is that when you increase anyone’s literacy in that kind of way, the expectations are raised as well, and, you know, we should be able to match that.’ (P2)

Receiving a diagnosis has little to no benefit if therapeutic support is not offered. If no guidance is offered on how to manage diagnoses, clients resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as substance dependence. With no opportunity to experience new coping strategies, the clients' faith in the system becomes depleted:

'What is the usefulness of having a diagnosis if there's nobody there to help them to put strategies in place to cope with them? The reason why they formed the coping strategies that they have [is] because they've been let down by the system over and over again.' (P1)

Introducing mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service was described in the main as a positive. However, due to a range of concerns, there was apprehension about potential harms and the need to reduce these risks by introducing organisational protocols. Participants expressed hesitation about regularly suggesting mental health-related podcasts to clients. One participant compares the medium to the 'Wild West', stating that there is little to no regulation in place to monitor content. Participants have become more reluctant to recommend different podcasts because of this ambivalence:

'I know it's like the Wild West. There are no rules as such, which, in one way, allows for quite a creative and positive space, but on the other hand it, you know, we have to be very wary of what podcast we would suggest people listen to.' (P5)

In large organisations such as the Probation Service, maintaining flexible and creative client work is essential and podcasts certainly accommodate this creativity. Nonetheless, participants began highlighting the need for standardisation: 'I don't want to recommend something then that potentially is something I shouldn't be recommending if there is that risk there as well' (P4).

Participants agreed that standardisation might assist in reducing the level of engagement in channels where biases are reinforced, and misinformation is spread: 'There's a fear that, you know, that people could go down rabbit holes or the fear that it could do more damage than not' (P5).

Accumulating a list of appropriate mental health-related podcasts would provide Probation Officers with a starting point. Participants proposed that by allocating specific podcasts that have been approved by the Service, more Probation Officers would be inclined to suggest the medium:

'If there was a specific set of podcasts, then that would be very beneficial 'cause you know that the information being provided would be very structured and carefully thought out.' (P2)

Other participants proposed creating an online portal, where clients or staff could access podcasts relating to trauma, substance dependence and recovery interventions. Participants perceived this as being particularly beneficial for igniting conversations within their offices and amongst staff members. By generating these conversations, not only are clients provided with accurate information, but Probation Officers are given the opportunity to enhance their professional development further:

'I think this is where you can use the portal, like, I think every week why can't you say, oh, this is a really good podcast – we're recommended seeing this? Or you listen to this one for addiction, for mental health, for young people and then because ... but also that means it's gonna start conversations in the office because there's a lot of people who won't recommend them because the people still don't listen to podcasts themselves.' (P4)

'The Probation Service should certainly look at having kind of training days or in-service days where Probation Officers say, listen, it's OK to use these, you know, use these as jump points to generate discussion with your clients and stuff like that.' (P5).

Discussion

The objective of this research study was to explore the potential role of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. The use of mental health-related podcasts in this context surged during the global pandemic, COVID-19. With lockdown restrictions negatively impacting on the mental health of 74 per cent of individuals aged 18 to 34, alternative client support was needed to tackle this unprecedented situation (Dale *et al.*, 2021; Central Statistics Office, 2023). It must be noted that, while the global pandemic played a role in the increased use of mental health-related podcasts in this context, participants identified COVID-19 as a contributing factor in, rather than the sole catalyst for, its integration into the service.

In addition to this medium addressing concerns raised by the pandemic, results indicate that mental health-related podcasts continue to be of benefit for probation clients. This sample supports the potential value of this medium in the Probation Service as instrumental in tackling barriers associated with service access. This study highlights the pivotal role played by mental health-related podcasts as a form of self-help for clients. In light of service-provision gaps, and unforeseen circumstances, participants found solace and comfort in this medium. These findings are consistent with contemporary research conducted by Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023), in which results support mental health-related podcasts, along with private counselling, as the most preferred option in terms of enhancing mental health awareness (Tobin and Guadagno, 2022, cited in, Ó Caoilte *et al.*, 2023). Similarly, Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023) highlight a clear distinction in the motivations for podcast listenership. It was reported that individuals with lower socio-economic backgrounds found educational value in mental health-related podcasts, while those with higher educational attainment listened to podcasts for entertainment purposes. These findings correlate with the present sample, noting that participants initially began listening to podcasts for personal entertainment, yet discovered the potential use for their clients. These first-hand accounts encompass the reality of criminality, trauma and substance dependency, gradually improving clients' mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour.

Evidently, mental health-related podcasts also contributed to an increase in Probation Officers' mental health literacy. Through listening to mental health-related podcasts, both Probation Officers and their clients shared a notable appreciation for the content featured in this medium. Additionally, results suggested that participants felt there was value in formally incorporating this tool into the Probation Service. The data reported in this study provide compelling arguments to support mental health-related podcasts being a valuable psychoeducational resource, particularly for clients under probation supervision who may exhibit poor mental health literacy or help-seeking behaviour (Noroozi *et al.*, 2018; Hesselink and Bougard, 2020). Participants reported clients exhibiting a heightened interest and deeper connection when podcast creators or guests shared their own personal journeys. The podcasts facilitated an outlet for self-actualisation and acceptance, an experience which was unfamiliar to those with negative peer associations. This suggests that there is an opportunity to build upon mental health awareness among those with poor mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviour.

Traditional concepts of masculinity, often entwined with rigid gender norms, have been responsible for propagating violence among socially excluded populations. A study conducted by Ó Caoilte *et al.* (2023) highlights the enormous benefits offered by mental health-related podcasts, specifically for individuals identifying as male. This is particularly pertinent in light of the fact that a considerable 57 per cent of males have experienced physical assault by other males and related offences (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Furthermore, incidents of sexual offences are reported later by males, in comparison to their female counterparts. This particular observation accentuates the complexity of male experiences with violence, and their potential hesitancy in seeking help or disclosing such incidents to authorities. The value of mental health-related podcasts for men appears to become more pronounced, providing a discreet and accessible platform to address not only the consequences of violence but also the underlying societal factors that contribute to these disparities.

Using this medium as a tool to combat mental health illness could also be explored as a strategy for pre-empting mental health emergencies. By broadening the use of mental health-related podcasts, mental health concerns could be identified and addressed quicker than formal services, preventing the concern from escalating. Contemporary research builds on the concept of neutralisation (Matza and Sykes, 1957), whereby experiencing trauma from authoritative figures excuses criminality or destructive behaviour, creating a divide between professionals and their clients. It can be difficult for clients to redefine these preconceived perceptions about authoritative figures, thus deeming relationship quality with Probation Officers essential in the recovery process (Courtois and Ford, 2012; Liddon *et al.*, 2018). The enhanced awareness facilitated by this medium plays a pivotal role in reshaping the dynamic between Probation Officers and their clients, with results indicating that the podcasts have been fundamental in breaking down barriers. By presenting different concepts and narratives in an accessible and relatable manner, these podcasts served as a common ground for communication, bridging the gap between Probation Officers and clients.

Although participants unmistakably expressed the desire for integrating such podcasts into the Probation Service, it must be acknowledged that discussion of the feasibility of implementing this medium raises pertinent considerations. Among these is the monitoring of content quality, whereby content should be vetted prior to being implemented as a psychoeducational tool. Furthermore, findings reveal a significant sense of uncertainty regarding

the spread of misinformation. In order to combat ambiguities surrounding the use of mental health-related podcasts in this setting, strategies must be devised. Participants showed a particular interest in standardisation, whereby a compilation of Probation Service-approved mental health-related podcasts would be made available. Not only would this ensure that the content was vetted, but it would also ensure that each podcast aligned with the ethos of the Probation Service. By devising a reliable and accessible resource, more Probation Officers might be encouraged to suggest mental health-related podcasts to their clients (Goldney et al., 2001, cited in Furnham and Swami, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study provides evidence of the value of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool within the Probation Service. Mental health-related podcasts offer a unique and effective platform for delivering psychoeducational content to a diverse audience of Probation Officers and people under probation supervision. The exploratory nature of this study contributes to innovative approaches to addressing mental health challenges in health organisations.

Potentially, this is still an area of exploration

Rehabilitation groups, foster-care services and homeless shelters are just a few areas that could benefit enormously from this psychoeducational tool, potentially reducing stigma around these socially excluded populations. Exploring the use of this resource in these areas could be considered. However, in saying this, it is important to note that some caution should be taken around monitoring the quality of podcast content. This is particularly essential when target audiences include those with low educational attainment, in which these individuals tend to be more susceptible to believing false information. The spread of bias or incorrect information can be immensely damaging for those in vulnerable populations. To ensure appropriate and safe content, organisations must suggest podcasts that have undergone standardisation and content monitorisation. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, the integration of new media forms presents an opportunity to overcome conventional barriers and reach a wider audience. In sum, the deployment of mental health-related podcasts as a psychoeducational tool in the Probation Service not only aligns with contemporary shifts in learning preferences, but

also holds the potential to bridge existing gaps in mental health support. As an adaptable and engaging medium, podcasts offer a dynamic channel for knowledge dissemination and support, redefining mental health awareness and intervention within the Probation Service.

The participants eligible for this research were exclusively Probation Officers associated with the Probation Service. It is noteworthy that all the individuals taking part in this study demonstrated a pre-existing interest in podcasts, listening to episodes for personal enjoyment. Therefore, this is a very self-selecting group of participants who may have a positive bias. Given the potential positive bias stemming from the participants' existing interest, future research should strive to recruit a more diverse and inclusive participant group. In addition to this, all participants were residing in Ireland and have experience working only with the Probation Service. Increasing inclusivity would allow for diverse perspectives on the potential benefits of mental health-related podcasts in this context. Analysing different perspectives would enable a more impartial and comprehensive evaluation of the role of mental health-related podcasts within this setting. This approach would ensure a robust analysis, drawing insights from multiple perspectives, refining our understanding of the medium's impact in this setting.

Future literature should conduct an in-depth exploration of the implications associated with incorporating this medium into various stages of the supervision journey within the Probation Service. There is an opportunity to investigate whether attitudes towards this medium evolve across different phases of recovery, or whether clients exhibit a higher inclination to engage during stages of this process. Delving into these aspects would shed light on the nuanced dynamics between the medium's effectiveness and the varying progress stages of individuals under probation, contributing valuable insights to the field.

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Characteristics of Public Health Approaches for Violence Prevention (PH-VP): A Rapid Review

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Summary: Serious violence places a significant burden on the criminal justice system, accounting for a disproportionate focus for probation supervision. It is not only a policy and practice priority but is of significant public interest. Since the 1980s, calls have increased for a science-based approach to tackling violence that recognises the complexity, while reducing exposure to and impact of violence. Public health for violence prevention (PH-VP) has emerged as a leading paradigm that has helped to facilitate community coalitions around a common goal. However, few studies have sought to capture the core characteristics of such an approach, thus inhibiting its wider application and refinement. Understanding the concept and application of PH-VP are vital for prevention and rehabilitation. The role of probation is to tackle the root causes of offending behaviour, prevent reoffending and reduce victims of crime. In tackling offending behaviour, including violent behaviour, probation staff seek to understand the causes of offending, which are often linked to adverse childhood experiences, including exposure to violence and abuse, childhood neglect, loss of a parent and poor mental health and addictions. Using evidence-based interventions and programmes, it is the role of the probation

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practitioner to work holistically with those who have offended, to prevent further offences from being committed. Much of probation's role in assessing and managing risks, providing interventions and behavioural change programmes and working in collaboration with partners has similarities with a public health approach and it is therefore key that probation practitioners understand the concept. The primary aim of the current study was to synthesise the evidence around the characteristics of public health approaches for youth violence prevention, and what it might mean for prevention in the Irish context. A rapid review of published and unpublished literature was undertaken, and experts in the field were consulted on the search. From the 754 sources identified, 60 were included in the review. Findings of the review included: since the 1980s, the rhetoric has remained largely unchanged; there is a high degree of variability in its application; there is a paucity of high-quality process evaluations documenting implementation; the characteristics of public health for violence prevention include the 5 Ps (priorities, principles, policies, practices and programmes), and a focus on one at the expense of the others is unlikely to be considered a public health response, or to reduce violence meaningfully. Practical application of the findings is discussed.

Keywords: Community violence, cultural contexts, youth violence, prevention, public health approach.

Introduction

Freedom from serious violence is a fundamental right (Hillis *et al.*, 2016; UNICEF, 2022) implicitly embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹ and yet, many of those within the criminal justice system have been harmed and are often also responsible for causing harm (Widom, 1989; Walsh, Doherty and Best, 2021). While policy frameworks recognise the public health needs of those in the criminal justice system (Bailie, 2024), they largely define public health as a strategic outcome (DoH/DoJ, 2019). It is much more. Public health is an operating framework that can help to define the process of prevention, providing structure and guiding principles within which complex challenges, such as serious crime and violence, can be prevented. Public health has been defined as the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through community efforts (PHE, 2019). There has been growing interest in the utility of applying public health approaches to understand and respond to community violence (Whitehill *et al.*, 2014; IRC, 2025). Prevention rather than reaction is one of the key distinguishing features of the public health approach (Moore, 1995;

¹ https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/sdg-target-16_1-violence

PHE, 2019), an objective consistent with the strategic objectives of crime prevention policies across the island (Department of Justice, 2021; TEO, 2021; Department of Justice, 2022; Youth Justice Agency, 2022; PBNi, 2023), and one that aligns closely with public attitudes (Ross and Campbell, 2021; B&A, 2022) which consistently report fear of violent crime as a priority. Given that prevention is central to the rehabilitative ideals of probation services, understanding the nature of violent crime from across sectors, and which approaches could enhance prevention, is critical.

To public health advocates, violence reflects intentional injury, which can not only be prevented but can be conceptually nested within the wider category of health problems that include disease and injuries (Mercy et al., 1993). Through this lens, violence is viewed not as a result of individual pathology, but as an outcome of complex and interacting social and economic factors (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2021). The public health model is generally described with four key elements: problem identification through surveillance; risk analysis to identify who is most at risk and why; the implementation of targeted evidence-informed activities across multiple sectors (Dahlberg and Mercy, 2009; WHO, 2020); and scaling up responses for a systemic impact. Understanding the concept and application of PH-VP are vital for prevention. Much of the work carried out by probation practitioners has similarities with a public health approach, including focusing on preventing reoffending and taking a holistic approach to each individual who has offended in order to tackle the underlying causes of their violent behaviour. The scale of those on probation's caseload presenting with poor mental health, addictions and trauma demonstrates the clear need to tackle these issues in a collaborative and cross-cutting way and not just as a law enforcement problem. The primary aim of the current study was to synthesise the evidence around the characteristics of public health approaches for youth violence prevention.

Methodology

In order to maintain rigour and transparent reporting (Featherstone et al., 2015), a rapid review (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005) was used to clarify the key characteristics associated with the phenomenon (Levac et al., 2010). This thematic rapid review uses systematic principles to synthesise and explore the common and divergent principles and approaches in the areas of public health and violence prevention. The result is a thematic synthesis of core issues relevant to the field.

Identifying relevant studies

The SPIDER tool (sample, phenomenon of interest, design, evaluation, research type) (Cooke et al., 2012) was chosen because it offers greater specificity than the PICO/PICOS tool, particularly when process and implementation-type studies are assumed to be more qualitative and narrative in nature. Three academic databases (Medline, PsycInfo, and Scopus), as well as the first forty pages of Google Scholar were searched using the following terms: “public health” AND youth OR teen OR adolescent OR “young people” AND community AND violent* and prevent*. Contact was also made with six experts engaged in PH-VP activities who advised on studies that may have been missed during the search.

Literature selection

Studies were restricted to those that focused on complex public health programme implementation for violence prevention, as opposed to single interventions, those that were in the English language, were peer reviewed articles, technical reports or policy briefings that described and/or evaluated the concept, process and/or impact of public health responses to prevent youth violence. Studies from 1985 onwards were included, which is generally considered to be a seminal point for public health and violence prevention research and practice. There were no restrictions on geographical setting.

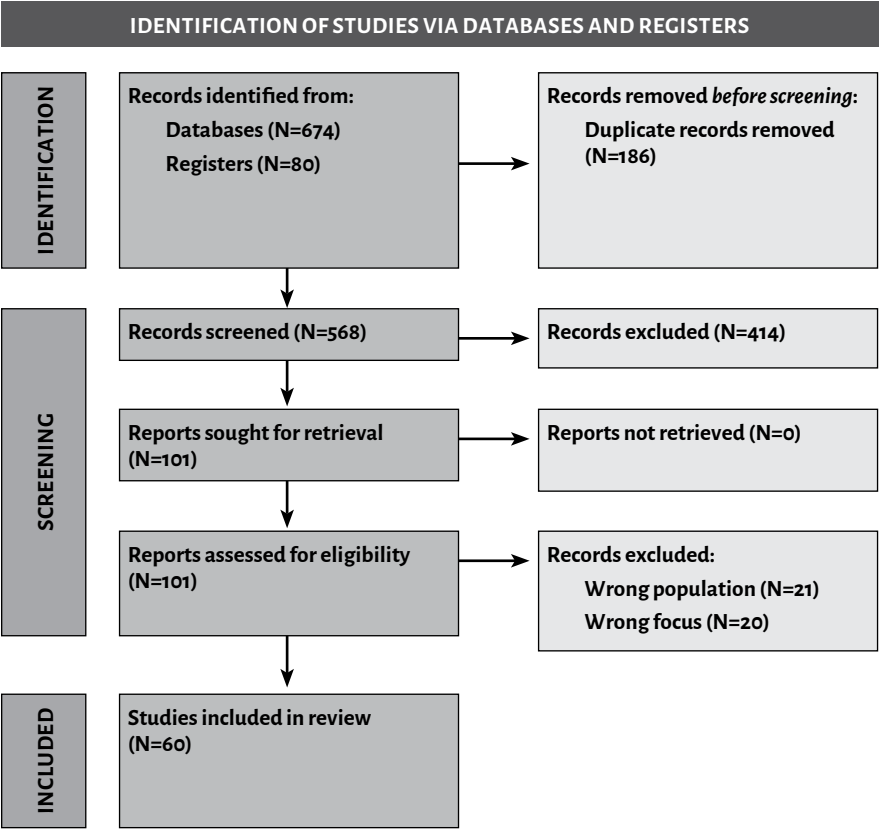
Screening

The review platform Rayaan was employed for study selection and screening. Authors CW, DS, KS and KR screened titles and abstracts against inclusion and exclusion criteria. All reviewers screened the full text articles for possible inclusion. Disagreements were noted on Rayaan and resolved by two members of the team. Prior to commencing screening, a brief calibration exercise was conducted to test consistency in the application of the criteria outlined above. Two pairs of reviewers (CW and KS; DS and KR) reviewed ten (each) of the same abstracts. Where differences existed (n=2), the reviewers met to reconcile different perspectives and to agree on an outcome. No formal quality assessment was applied due to our focus on extracting conceptual data as opposed to drawing any conclusions based on results or perceived impact (Tarzia et al., 2023).

Data extraction and analysis

From a total of 754 sources identified, 186 duplicates were removed, leaving a total of 568 sources being screened. Of these, 414 were excluded based upon the abstract and 101 sources were retrieved for full appraisal. After a further 41 were excluded on the basis that they had either the wrong population or the wrong focus, the remaining 60 sources were included (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart



The authors applied a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas and Harden, 2008) to analyse the data. All authors summarised the findings on a predefined extraction form. The SPIDER tool (Cooke et al., 2012) was adapted for the

purposes of data extraction (see Table 1). The authors systematically examined text and developed themes that captured concepts associated with public health interventions for youth violence prevention (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Commonalities were identified, and three authors (CW, PA, FC) met to review these commonalities and identify the preliminary themes and sub-themes. The process moved in an iterative and inductive way from descriptive towards the analytical (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

In total, 60 separate studies, reviews or expert opinion pieces met the criteria for inclusion. The characteristics of the literature identified are outlined in Table 1. Regarding the representativeness of the sample, the majority of studies were based on data/perspectives from the United States ($n=27$; 44.2%). Other sites included the United Kingdom ($n=11$; 18%); the UK and Australia ($n=1$; 1.6%); and Canada ($n=1$; 1.6%). The remaining 21 sources (34.4%) either provided no specific geographical context or gave a more global reflection. Twenty-seven (45%) of the studies were opinion pieces and of the remaining studies that described PH-VP programmes, there were few details on the study sample demographics. This may be because the focus was on the implementation of community-wide initiatives as opposed to the efficacy of single interventions on key outcomes for specific target groups. As a result, the lack of sample data does not significantly limit the generalisability of the themes that emerge from the data.

Results

Five themes were developed from the thematic analysis: the priorities defined by public health teams of coalitions; the principles that underpin public health for violence prevention responses; the policies that facilitate or impede prevention activities; the specific practices that are embedded into and integral to public health for violence prevention responses; and the discrete programmes that combine to form a coherent response.

Table 1: Summary of articles included in the review (N=60)

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Abdu-Adil and Suarez (2022)	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Initial findings suggest the programme shows promise in increasing provider skills and engagement. More research needed on effectiveness.
Akpunne (2021)	Baltimore, USA Practitioners	Primary	Qualitative dissertation using surveys and analysis	Areas of agreement on actions: laws, programmes, services, and regulations to reduce youth violence.
Armstrong and Rosbrook-Thompson (2022)	London, UK Practitioners	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Observations and interviews with practitioners	Interventions limited by resources and institutional divides. Query if metrics could capture meaningful change.
Axford et al. (2023)	N/A	N/A	Evidence synthesis	A combination of strategies relating to design, delivery, staffing, settings, content and format can help youth engagement.
Bowen et al. (2004)	USA	Primary	Case study, 12 communities over a 6-year period	Factors required for community responses to violence prevention: time and require agility; phased responses. Creating safety; understanding violence; collective efficacy; promoting peace; democratic empowerment and social justice decision-making.
Catalan et al. (1998)	N/A	Primary, secondary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Interventions that address multiple risk factors concurrently hold most promise.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
CDC (1993)	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Violence needs to be addressed as a societal rather than individual issue. Activities should be multi-modal, implemented in the appropriate environments, goal-oriented, tiered for universal and targeted groups.
Chanon Consulting and Cordis Bright (2018)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Many interventions shown to modify risk and protective factors for multiple different kinds of violence, and some shown to reduce violence.
Chavis (1995)	NJ, USA	N/A	Multiple case study	Need to define a common goal. Outcomes difficult to measure.
Children's Commissioner (England) 2021	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	No overarching national data to reflect the scale of the issue.
Cohen et al. (2016)	USA Thriving Youth	Unclear	Case study	Mostly descriptive overviews of literature (risk and protective factors).
Craston et al. (2020)	UK 18 VRUs	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Process evaluation	Embedding PHA horizontally and vertically requires longer-term cultural change.

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Research type</i>	<i>Main findings</i>
Dahlberg and Mercy (2009)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	PH approach involves using epidemiological methods to characterise violence and identify modifiable risk factors. Ongoing need to document and monitor violence and identify effective programmes and policies.
David-Ferdon and Hammond (2008)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Community willingness to engage in prevention efforts is contingent on trusted relationships. Policy prioritisation is an important driver.
David-Ferdon et al. (2016)	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Sustained, broad, significant youth violence reduction requires a multi-level, multi-sector approach, including programmes operating at various intervention and ecological model levels.
Davidson et al. (1998)	New York, USA	Primary	Impact evaluation	Patterns differ between communities. Effective surveillance is critical. Addressing multiple factors in communities is required.
D'Inverno and Bartholow (2021)	USA	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion	The editorials reflect on strategies, partnerships and paradigm shifts in youth violence prevention, moving from individual to structural factors.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Dymnicki et al. (2021)	USA 12 community sites (8 low- and 4 high-capacity)	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Case study	Focus on capacity building required for PH interventions. Need for site readiness check (protocols; joint working practices; data systems). Importance of technical support as coalitions get started, learning events.
Fratraroli et al. (2010)	USA Practitioners from partner agencies	Secondary, tertiary	Case study	Describes contacts that the street workers have with young people – consistent with the pyramid model of outreach. The programme emphasises peace-making NOT only preventing violence.
Hammond et al. (2011)	N/A	Primary	Case study	A comprehensive response is lacking. There is a need for an evidence-informed, state-backed, collective vision within a social-ecological framework. Collective efficacy suggested as an appropriate outcome.
Haselden and Barsotti (2022)	N/A	Primary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	PH approaches to gun violence should frame the issue as violent intent among a small, high-risk subset of owners. Cautions against analogies that portray all gun owners as ‘diseased’ and advocates for collaboration with stakeholders in developing solutions.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Hawkins (1999)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion	With adequate training, time and resources, communities can prevent youth violence in a joined-up and co-ordinated way via the CTC 5-phase model.
Hawkins et al. (2002)	USA Communities that Care	N/A	Case study	Complexity of violence risk and protective factors requires a complex response. Communities central to responses and can be supported by choosing evidence-supported interventions. CTC proven to have sustained impact on violence outcomes and processes.
Healthcare Public Health team (2019)	Southwark Council, England, UK	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Recommendations at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels with named suggested owners. (Themes: addressing root causes, transforming lives, cross-cutting recommendations)
Hernandez-Cordero et al. (2011)	USA Community Mobilisation Plan	Primary	Case study	Social-ecological perspective and community mobilisation are essential. Importance of academic, state, and evidence-based technical support. Contextual risk factors should be identified using high-quality data. Mobilisation focused on four areas (education, peers, parenting and community disorganisation). Lack of funding can cause dissent.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Heurermann and Melzer-Lange (2002)	N/A	N/A	Case study	Coalitions have promise but require conscious and systematic efforts. Steps include: understanding context, having a single mission, identifying effective strategies, gaining consensus on problems and solutions, and having clear leadership.
Irwin et al. (2021)	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Systems leaders can facilitate PH approaches by: facilitating and engaging in multi-agency collaboration; engaging with communities, families, and young people; establishing best policies and practices and a culture of curiosity and improvement.
Kingston et al. (2016)	USA 6 CDC-funded Youth Violence Prevention Centres	Primary, secondary	Multiple case study	Focus on evidence-based practices and the need for implementation perspectives. Researchers/ community partnerships central to PH implementation. Leverage high-quality data to identify and target malleable risk/protective factors. Need for contextual adaptation.

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Research type</i>	<i>Main findings</i>
Klose and Gordon (2023)	Australia, UK 25 practitioners and academics	None	Comparative study	Lack of consistency with regard to defining a PH approach; not clear what conditions support it; generally, agreement on collaboration but not clear on mechanisms; concept of violence as infectious disease was common; successful PHA places emphasis on traumatic experiences.
Lai (2008)	USA Asian American and Pacific Islander populations	Primary, secondary	Multiple case study	Highlights the need for long-term university–community commitments where universities provide information on youth justice data.
LGA, England (2018)	N/A	Universal, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Provides an overview of the problem, a definition of a PH approach and an outline of evidence-based responses. Does not describe the implementation. Outlines evidence-based models/treatments; standards of evidence; the three tiers.
London Councils (2018)	UK Community responses in Glasgow (VRU), West Midlands, Hackney	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	A successful PH approach includes ‘zero tolerance’ with tailored support, including a means to escape. Also requires close co-operation and co-ordination between local authorities, schools, police, emergency services, NHS, and the voluntary sector.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Masho et al. (2016)	N/A	N/A	Review article (REVIEW)	Surveillance of violence involves the systematic collection, management, analysis and interpretation of data and makes use of existing sources of data.
Massetti and Vivolo, (2010)	USA Community partnerships for violence prevention via the UNITY programme	Primary, secondary, tertiary (although not specifically outlined)	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Youth violence is a largely place-based issue, requiring the leadership of communities. Understanding community context is important. Address multiple risks using a range of methods/models in a purposeful, data-driven way. Improved Collective Efficacy as outcome.
Matjasko et al. (2016)	USA 6 Violence Prevention Centres	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Multiple case study	Importance of: leveraging evidence and experience (of previous iterations); formulation of a conceptual framework that includes inputs, outputs and outcomes across the ecology. PH approaches require a strategic response across systems that make best use of data, evaluate responses and target multiple levels of need concurrently.
Mercy et al. (1993)	N/A	Primary, secondary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	The process, the strategies (objectives) and potential interventions must be supported by evidence. This is qualified with examples from practice.

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Research type</i>	<i>Main findings</i>
Meyer et al. (2008)	Richmond, VA, USA	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Case study	Practical example of university–community partnerships in design, implementation and evaluation of interventions. Process included: relationship building; shared goals; shared expectations; incremental changes; communication plans. No assessment or critique of the quality of interventions
Moore (1995)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	PHA should complement criminal justice approach. PHAs introduce a new access point to view violence (hospitals and doctors' surgeries) and bring expertise in data collection, analysis and multidisciplinary programming. PH focus on victim brings new people to the discussion on violence (i.e. minority populations).
Osidiye and Palmer (2019)	Britain	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Suggests calls for PH approach are premature. UK policies do not adequately address diversity and youth violence.
Pound and Campbell (2015)	N/A	N/A	Evidence review of 32 papers (REVIEW)	Social ecological perspective important. Many of the prevention programmes target only individual behaviour and not the socialising processes or conditions. Summarised the findings into nine theoretical areas. Describes the need for theoretical foundation in PH-VP work.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Powell et al. (1996)	USA 15 intervention projects engaging 5–18-year-olds	Primary, secondary	Multiple case study	Difficulties around organisational, implementation and scientific issues. Conflict around definitions, responses, resources.
Prothrow-Smith (1994)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Violence is a complex social and economic issue. Public health techniques that combine awareness-raising, behavioural change and environmental change can be useful. A combination of approaches is often required.
Public Health England (2019)	England	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Place-based, multi-agency approach requires whole systems approach. Change is complex, messy at the start, requiring time and flexibility. Small steps and small pockets of funding to build trusting relationships in communities.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Quigg et al. (2021)	Merseyside, UK Violence Reduction Units	N/A	Mixed methods	Facilitators: funding; legislative footing; local buy-in; data from multiple sources; high-quality training; new technologies that connect people and ideas; participatory approaches; colocation; community support. Impediments: change of personnel; inconsistent leadership; short-term funding; lack of expertise in specific areas; disconnect between strategic and operational roles; the role of police.
Rajan, 2021	N/A	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	PH approach to school violence prevention, spanning primary to tertiary interventions, is advocated. Gaps exist, including on firearms. More interdisciplinary work needed linking health and education outcomes to inform comprehensive, evidence-based policies.
Research in Practice/ Dartington (2022)	England and Wales	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Causes of violence interrelated. Ecological model is useful. PH focus on upstream prevention. Violence as PH epidemic, not individual pathology. Need to address systemic risks.
Rodney et al. (2008)	Ohio, USA School-aged minority youth (N=3094)	Universal/ targeted	Quan-pre/post-test	Social bonds associated with greater/lower involvement in violence.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Russell (2021)	N/A	Primary	Evidence review	Promising interventions: school-based dating/intimate partner violence prevention programmes; parenting/family-focused approaches; mentoring; community-based coalitions. Mixed evidence: out-of-school activities, early childhood home visits. No effect/potentially harmful: deterrence and fear-based approaches. Limited evidence/no conclusion: programmes to prevent gang involvement/violence.
Rutherford et al. (2007)	N/A	Primary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Defines systemic risk factors; role of public health in violence prevention; and approaches (systematic data collection, prevention and intervention strategies, political engagement, and advocacy)
Sabol, Coulton and Korbin (2004)	N/A	N/A	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	Because risk factors are correlated between different forms of violence, ecological efforts can prevent multiple types of victimisation. Hyper-segregation of deprived communities may result in closer ties, but excluding external supports reduces collective efficacy.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Smokowski et al. (2018)	North Carolina, USA Three evidence-based programs middle schools; 400 justice-involved youth; and 300 parents	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Synthesis of evaluation data: 2* Quasi experiment; RCT; longitudinal using county-level data from 6 years before the interventions began	Multifaceted approaches involve academics, policymakers, education, community. Underpinned by social ecological theory. Aggression: no statistically significant changes between treatment and control groups. Reduction in recidivism compared with control. Long-term effects on family functioning.
Snider et al. (2010)	Toronto, Canada N=84 injured youth within each of three phases	Secondary, tertiary	Mixed-methods evaluation	Provides novel, evidence-supported method for engaging multiple groups in problem identification and service design processes.

Author (Year)	Location	Level	Research type	Main findings
Spivak et al. (1989)	Boston, USA The Violence Prevention Project of the Health Promotion Program for Urban Youth	Primary, secondary	Case study	Describes Violence Prevention Project: two neighbourhoods, high school violence prevention curriculum, community implementation (education piece), secondary-level support service development (including training for agencies and development of clinical treatment services), and mass media campaign.
Thao et al. (2011)	Berkeley, CA, USA 388 6th–12th graders	Secondary	Case study	PH approach underpinned by community development principles and practices. Community mobilisation can be supported by partnerships with academia. Multi-tiered solutions offer promise.
Thornton et al. (2002)	USA Practitioners	Primary, secondary, tertiary	Expert opinion (REVIEW)	More research is needed to evaluate individual strategies, as well as effectiveness in concert.
Umemoto et al. (2009)	Hawaii, USA Two communities	Primary, secondary	Case study	Need for comprehensive responses that include capacity and trust building to attain sustainability. Does not address implementation. Process is iterative. Began with micro responses and then led to more systemic responses. Without coordination, cross-cutting efforts become disjointed.

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Research type</i>	<i>Main findings</i>
Vivolo, Matjasko and Massetti (2011)	USA National Academic Centres for Excellence (ACEs)	Unclear	Case study	Argues for a logic model and heavy government investment over a prolonged period (e.g. five years). Argues for potential of dynamic, multi-faceted approach with community/research partnerships.
Watson-Thompson et al. (2008)	Kansas City, MO, USA A community partnership	Primary	Case study	Using the framework on one youth project facilitated 26 changes and is described as an effective catalyst for mobilising community support. Importance of engaging youth in assessment, planning and action in community mobilisation.
Whitehill et al. (2014)	Chicago and Baltimore, USA 24 violence interrupters	Tertiary	Multiple case study	Argues for the need to keep arm's length from the police. Utility of violence interrupters and credible messengers. Primarily use conflict resolution and mediation techniques. Potential need to adapt programmes to fit with local context.
Zimmerman et al. (2011)	Michigan, USA Evaluation of staff and young people N=22	Primary	Mixed-methods evaluation	A focus on whole-community activities is critical given many violence prevention efforts are school-located.

Theme 1: Priorities

Sources consistently stated that PH-VP teams should first identify and define the problem (CDC, 1993; Heuermann and Melzer-Lange, 2002; Dahlberg and Mercy, 2009; Snider *et al.*, 2010; Hammond and Arias, 2011). Through a process of problem identification and quantification, priorities could emerge for community coalitions – a common purpose underpinned by robust and objective evidence. Despite the consistency, few studies actually described how this was implemented. Among these few, it was evident that problem identification and alignment is often more difficult than it is assumed to be. Some coalitions even avoid these crucial steps, instead opting to make assumptions about what the priorities are without any critical engagement with the data (Meyer *et al.*, 2008).

Priorities tended to differ across the literature. For some, the priority was serious violence (PHE, 2019). Others were more specific, opting to address youth violence (Rodney *et al.*, 2008; David-Ferdon *et al.*, 2016; Smokowski *et al.*, 2018), gun (Whitehill *et al.*, 2014; Haselden and Barsotti, 2022), or community violence (Masho *et al.*, 2016; Abu-Adil and Suárez, 2022). The metric of success was often, but not exclusively, significant reductions in various forms of violence (Bowen *et al.*, 2004). Others, however, chose to measure the determinants of violence (Kingston *et al.*, 2016), suggesting the difficulties capturing baseline data and of ensuring that the follow-up data accurately captured change in the preferred direction.

One source commented on the pressing need to reduce the silos of prevention (Hawkins *et al.*, 2002). Given how the variables predicting one form of violence are so intimately connected to other forms of violence, there is promise in joining up efforts across violence prevention activity, particularly as ‘...community residents tend not to differentiate between one sector or the other as they struggle with the collective effects of violence in their home and in their communities’ (Bowen *et al.*, 2004). Indeed, this was central to many of the sources’ reflections. Coalitions, a mainstay of PH-VP, appear to have been defined in various ways, but fundamentally, they are a consolidated collection of diverse entities who agree and, indeed, are energised by a desire to work towards a common goal (Chavis, 1995).

Theme 2: Principles

The principles underpinning PH-VP were the most consistently described theme (Moore, 1995; Rutherford *et al.*, 2007). An overarching theme was that

violence must be understood as an individually experienced phenomenon but relevant to the whole of society (Massetti and Vivolo, 2010; Hammond and Arias, 2011). The dominance of Social Ecology as a guiding framework supported this nested and bi-directional impact (David-Ferdon et al., 2016; Hawkins et al., 2002; Hernández-Cordero, 2011; Matjasko et al., 2016; Sabol et al., 2004; Umemoto et al., 2009; Smokowski et al., 2018; PHE, 2019; Irwin-Rogers et al., 2021). This, at least in theory, enabled teams to understand the multidimensional nature of violence and contributed towards encouraging sectors that would not normally have engaged in violence prevention activities to become involved (Mercy et al., 1993; Davidson et al., 1998; Hawkins et al., 2002). Yet few of the sources that were reviewed actually described its operationalisation, a frustration noted by several studies (Bowen et al., 2004; Hammond and Arias, 2011; Pound and Campbell, 2015; Matjasko et al., 2016; Irwin-Rogers et al., 2021).

Another principle lies within the medicalised terms used in PH-VP (Hawkins, 1999). Most consistently, authors described the problem as being analogous to the spread of infectious disease (Whitehill et al., 2014) and pointed to the observable empirical evidence that quite often, victims of serious violence are implicated in the perpetration of violence. Relatedly, if violence behaves like a transmissible disease, then it can be interrupted. Thus, the optimism of prevention was central to much of the literature (Powell et al., 1996; Hawkins, 1999; Hawkins et al., 2002; PHE, 2019; Irwin-Rogers et al., 2021).

Many sources recognised that PH-VP activity is complex, time-consuming and requires both patience and resources. As such, community coalitions often require capacity-building activities to support violence prevention activities (Umemoto et al., 2009; Vivolo et al., 2011). PH-VP teams, although motivated, were often found to have deficits in one or more areas of theory development, data collection, data analysis, programme selection, implementation, and evaluation (Powell et al., 1996). While collaboration mitigated some of these risks, capacity building often remains necessary for effective and sustainable responses (Kingston et al., 2016). Several studies described response development as an iterative process (Bowen et al., 2004), with capacity issues addressed as they evolved.

While the principle of whole-system collaboration was central to much of the literature (Hawkins, 1999; Kingston et al., 2016; PHE, 2019; Quigg et al., 2021), it was interesting to note that several authors presented more nuanced and even cautious reflections on their collaborative exercises. For example,

Whitehill *et al.* (2014) suggested that to be effective, collaboration teams should be limited and, specifically, should exclude the police, in order to maintain the confidence of communities who are often so acutely mistrusting of them.

Given how we understand community violence to affect children and young people disproportionately, the fact that only one source (Hammond and Arias, 2011) meaningfully engaged with the issue of youth participation represents a significant gap both conceptually and practically.

Theme 3: Policies

Despite locating the wider barriers and facilitators within an implementation context, few sources engaged with or described national or organisational policies (Thornton *et al.*, 2002). Of those that did, Hammond and Arias (2011) described the importance of a national public health strategy for violence prevention in the United States, led by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This strategy provided support for motivated entities to engage in bi-directional forms of influence where data informed a response, and the evaluation of that response then informed future responses. In the UK context, Irwin-Rogers *et al.* (2021) stressed the importance of a learning and sharing culture to enable evidence-supported practices to become routinely embedded, and Public Health England (PHE, 2019) outlined the relevant policy changes that had taken place to support transformational change.

One of the most significant policy shifts in the United Kingdom came in 2019 when the UK Home Office scaled up its support to Violence Reduction Units across areas perceived to be most badly affected by community violence. The Units were described as being underpinned by a Public Health framework. In their process evaluation of those Units, Craston *et al.* (2020) reported that the policy-driven Units had led to better collaboration and data sharing across sectors.

Theme 4: Practices

The practices involved in PH-VP were generally consistent across the sources and included a series of steps: understand the problem; implement evidence-supported practices; translate evidence into policies; and track progress (Thornton *et al.*, 2002; Hawkins *et al.*, 2002; Hammond and Arias, 2011; Kingston *et al.*, 2016; Matjasko *et al.*, 2016).

The literature suggests that effective surveillance systems should be established across systems to monitor the most salient risk and protective factors (Davidson *et al.*, 1998), but several sources lament the general quality of administrative data and the difficulty of sharing data across agencies (Masho *et al.*, 2016; PHE, 2019). Combining partial datasets (e.g. health, justice, education and employment) can contribute to a fuller picture (Masho *et al.*, 2016), and policy-driven agendas appeared to help compel organisations to do so (e.g. Craston *et al.*, 2020).

While multi-sector collaboration was seen as critical to the public health approach, the centrality of community was of equal importance. Indeed, efforts that excluded the community in any sequence of the response were generally perceived to be unsustainable. Sabol *et al.* (2004) rely on the theory of collective efficacy to argue that within communities that have been deeply segregated, connecting communities to those outside of their hyper-localised sphere of influence can be transformative. Partnerships, particularly research-community partnerships, were one of the most consistently described practices across the literature reviewed (Powell *et al.*, 1996; Lai, 2008; Meyer *et al.*, 2008; Massetti and Vivolo, 2010; Matjasko *et al.*, 2016). In line with previous violence prevention research (e.g. Hawkins *et al.*, 2002 and Redmond *et al.*, 2009), authors such as Kingston *et al.* (2016) cite the need for researchers to work alongside communities and provide illustrative examples of this via Communities that Care and PROSPER. In one study, the authors noted the impact of this extensively co-ordinated approach, underpinned by data, and situated those across the ecology in the context of short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes (Matjasko *et al.*, 2016). In another review of Communities that Care, Hawkins *et al.* (2002) outlined the factors associated with effective partnerships. These included: a clear mission and effective leadership (Heuermann and Melzer-Lange, 2002); paid staff (Hawkins *et al.*, 2002); clear and measurable, objective, sound procedures and trust (David-Ferdon and Hammond, 2008). This collaborative effort to achieve population-level change sets public health apart from personal medical services (Powell *et al.*, 1996) and criminal justice responses (Mercy *et al.*, 1993).

Despite the general sequence with which implementation was envisaged (Thornton *et al.*, 2002), there was some evidence that in some cases, teams applied a 'test and learn' approach, opting to skip particular elements (e.g. problem identification and risk assessment) and move into programme implementation (Umemoto *et al.*, 2009; Craston *et al.*, 2020). While the challenge of time constraints was cited several times, these reflections beg

the question, which elements are required to constitute a public health approach, and which are disposable?

Theme 5: Programmes

Sources anchored their description of programme activity along the WHO (2020) typology of primary, secondary and tertiary provision (Prothrow-Smith, 1995; Quigg *et al.*, 2021). Relatedly, most papers made explicit reference to the utility of theorising violence and its prevention within a social ecological framework (Hammond and Arias, 2011; Hernández-Cordero *et al.*, 2011). While several sources highlighted the steps required to move beyond problem identification to theme selection towards programme implementation (e.g. Quigg *et al.*, 2021), few specifically described how this was done (Massetti and Vivolo, 2010; Kingston *et al.*, 2016).

There were a few exceptions. Watson *et al.* (2008) discussed a primary-level intervention for prevention in Kansas City that was underpinned by a twelve-point framework. In the UK context, Craston *et al.* (2020) summarised a process evaluation of eighteen Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) and found that a stable staff team, effective engagement, evidence-informed responses, and working towards cultural change were all implementation facilitators. Few studies reported working in the tertiary space, with those most acutely vulnerable to violence or most embedded in violent activities. Of the most commonly cited programmes working in this area were the CeaseFire and variations of the Cure Violence model (Frattaroli *et al.*, 2010; Whitehill *et al.*, 2014; PHE, 2019). In contrast to primary and secondary preventative activities, which tended to be delivered in schools and homes, these programmes tended to be delivered on the streets.

Most of the literature reviewed implied a need to measure change. For example, Mercy *et al.* (1993) suggested that of the programmes being implemented, anticipated outcomes can broadly fall into one or more of three groups: change in attitude/knowledge/skills; change in the social environment; change in the physical environment. While several others similarly described the need to measure and report outcomes, few actually named specific outcomes. In one of the few that did, Smokowski *et al.* (2018) reported a significant reduction in twelve-month recidivism for justice-involved youth (10.26 per cent vs 26 per cent). Another source suggested that increases in collective efficacy could provide the theoretical foundation for activity as well as the primary outcome (Massetti and Vivolo, 2010; Hammond and Arias, 2011).

Discussion

Interpersonal violence is a global challenge (WHO, 2020; Walsh and Cunningham, 2023) and youth violence, in particular, has received significant policy attention over recent years. Several decades of evidence demonstrate the deleterious effects of being exposed to violence both directly and indirectly (Fowler et al., 2009). The harms can be so enduring that finding ways to reduce the prevalence and impact of violence has become an increasing priority, and one that is mandated by national governments' commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as the global Sustainable Development Goals (Hillis et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2022).

Public health has become a leading paradigm for violence prevention (Irwin-Rogers et al., 2021). This rapid review is the first to synthesise the qualitative literature on PH-VP. The analysis of 60 sources provides insight into the characteristics of PH-VP activities and the gaps that exist in our understanding, producing a coherent characterisation of public health for violence prevention. Since the US Surgeon General's speech in 1985, PH-VP has expanded across the US and beyond. However, the rhetoric has remained largely unchanged (and also relatively unchallenged) since then. It remains unclear which elements of a public health approach are sacrosanct, and which are optional depending on factors such as culture and context (Ogden et al., 2009). Considering the need for complex responses that include tiered programming (primary, secondary and tertiary interventions) (WHO, 2020; Quigg et al., 2021) situated in a four-step, cyclical model of problem identification, risk assessment, implementation and evaluation (Watson et al., 2008; Kingston et al., 2016; Smokowski et al., 2018), the paucity of more nuanced evaluations that illustrate the degree to which these have been successfully implemented (or not) has hindered progress in this area.

As a science-based response to violence (Hawkins et al., 2002), public health publications appear to have remained fairly dogmatic, providing few opportunities to engage critically with the structure, content and impact, and thus limiting opportunities to enhance them further. The implementation factors that have been recognised as increasing the feasibility and acceptability of evidence-supported responses, such as organisational 'adaptability' and contextual 'compatibility' (Durlak and DuPre, 2008), are largely missing from the literature. That said, the call for a science-based approach to violence prevention has contributed towards an alternative to a criminal justice response (Moore, 1995; Dahlberg and Mercy, 2009), as well as

a more coherent definition and a four-step process widely accepted as the norm (PHE, 2019).

This review found that one of the reasons why the characteristics of public health for violence prevention is not sufficiently well documented includes the dominant methods of reporting. Of the 60 sources reviewed, 27 (45 per cent) were expert opinion pieces, lacking a robust research/review methodology. Most of the sources were highly descriptive and generally lacked details on the 'how' of implementation (Mihalic and Irwin, 2003). This implementation perspective or paying attention to and truly understanding how the activities that are designed are put into practice (Mihalic and Irwin, 2003; Fixsen *et al.*, 2005) is critical. Not only was there a lack of methodological diversity, but there appear to be geographical and demographic limitations. Most studies reviewed described the context in the United States, thus the findings may not be contextually or culturally relevant in other jurisdictions. Further, the literature addressing youth violence notably appears to exclude youth voices. While community coalitions are commonly described, definitions of community do not appear to include young people. Combined with the lack of diversity across the literature, these are serious omissions and if we are to advance our understanding of violence prevention, this review demonstrates a need for empirical studies outside of the context of the United States and, in particular, studies that document and describe the process of implementation, including novel methods for engaging children and young people in prevention efforts.

The combined evidence from this review found that five components, implemented in whole and in part, appear to characterise an effective PH-VP approach. From an implementation perspective, these are important details that in their absence reduce opportunities for new coalitions to learn, adapt and refine effective violence prevention activities (Fixsen *et al.*, 2005; Durlak and DuPre, 2008). Whilst it was a highly useful advance during the 1980s and 1990s, this review points to specific weaknesses in the original four-step process documented by the WHO and widely cited among many of those seeking to implement a public health approach for violence prevention. Advancing evidence suggests that there is likely a need to be more specific and conscious with regard to the approach to implementation. Firstly, and most obviously, violence prevention and reduction is a complex issue with multiple implementation domains. The four-step sequential model does not reflect this complexity. Those who are designing and implementing packages of interventions for violence prevention rarely work through the four-step

process sequentially; it would make no sense to do so as the data on problem identification are never complete or unambiguous, and the implementation environment is never a blank sheet of paper.

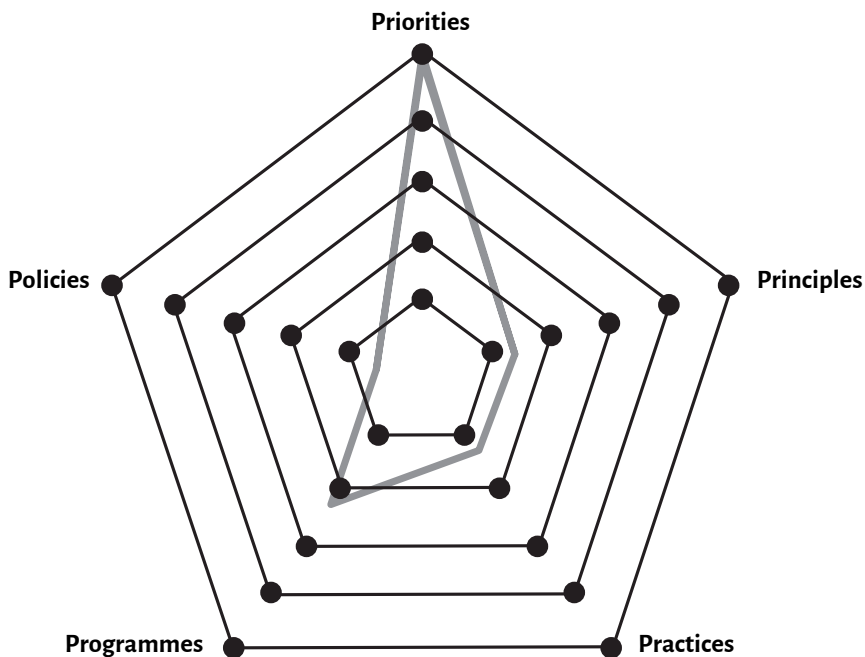
Further, coalitions rarely come together in a vacuum. There is often a 'trigger' that facilitates movement towards a coalition. This is an important element of the PH-VP process that is not sufficiently captured in the four-step model. The sources included in this literature review suggest that rather than a single cyclical process, PH-VP requires multiple cycles at the same time, particularly as there is need to implement primary, secondary and tertiary responses across multiple domains simultaneously. If the conceptual model for violence prevention is a coherent package of interventions covering a wide spectrum of need, then the implementation model needs to be more sophisticated and account for the complex environment in which those decisions are being made. It may make more sense to think of the four-step process as a heuristic device, which describes the type of decision-making process that is required, rather than an implementation approach.

As an alternative, the authors propose that rather than a sequence of steps, PH-VP teams could reflect on their efforts with reference to the five key characteristics to reflect the complexity of PH-VP more closely than is currently documented. In this response, teams can reflect on and assess their response at any point in time. This allows teams to benchmark their efforts as well as the resources that they have available, identifying strengths and where gaps exist that need action (see Figure 2). This, we contend, also reduces the ambiguity of PH-VP responses.

In conclusion, PH-VP approaches are an appealing alternative to approaches that focus solely on a criminal justice response, in that they recognise the multifaceted drivers of serious violence, the complex pathways into violence, and the multidimensional responses that are required to interrupt violent pathways. PH-VP should, but does not always, prioritise a science-based approach, leveraging high-quality (but not infallible) data to inform decision-making. It is complex and can take time. The effort appears to pay dividends more quickly when there is a policy context conducive to change. However, this review also suggests that significant gaps exist in how these efforts are documented, and which components are necessary to implement a truly PH-VP programme. This review suggests that the dogmatically accepted four-step process model does not sufficiently capture the complexity of prevention responses, and that despite the current consensus, and some degree of excitement, an implementation perspective

is required, and that with further reflection, the true utility of these approaches may become more apparent.

Figure 2: *PH-VP benchmark*



Critical findings

- There has been increased interest in public health for the prevention of serious violence.
- Given the short- and longer-term impact of exposure to serious crime and violence, there is a pressing need for a science-based approach to its prevention, underpinned by a coherent framework such as public health.
- This review summarises the best available data and suggests that the 5 Ps can help to inform public health responses

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of this review is that it provides important insights around what we currently know regarding public health for violence prevention. The review illustrates the areas where new knowledge is needed and leverages the combined insights to provide an implementation focus. A major limitation of the study was that the recommendations are based on a small number of studies that coherently documented the process of implementation. Further, many of these were limited to the North American context. While the recommendations are underpinned by these insights, the authors recognise that as the corpus of evidence increases, the implications may also change.

Implications for research, policy, and practice

Research: This review found consistent messages across the literature that was included. However, many of these studies were opinion pieces. Few studies documented in a clear and coherent way the process of implementation. This review illustrates a significant need to capture the factors that facilitate and impede public health approaches to violence prevention. There is also a challenge moving forward to test the utility of the 5 Ps outlined in the review in informing the design, implementation and evaluation of public health for the prevention of serious and violent crime.

Policy: This review found that policy priorities are a core characteristic of public health for violence prevention activities. However, few studies described these in sufficient detail. This could imply a lack of policy focus built into designs, but it could also nod at the dearth of policy attention given to violence prevention outside of the United States. There is a need for concerted effort at country level to monitor exposure, impact and responses, particularly in the Irish context. While criminal justice practices in the Irish context implicitly align with public health, there is significant utility in agencies embedding a public health framework more overtly. Insights from this review could help to shape how.

Practice: This review has significant relevance for probation services, which increasingly work with younger people affected by, and who are involved in, serious violence. This 5 Ps framework offers probation practitioners a coherent approach to guide multi-agency interventions that address root causes rather than solely managing risk. The findings also underscore the importance of embedding violence prevention in routine practice, aligning closely with the rehabilitative and preventative aims of probation services.

Above all, this review should help to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of the public health approaches to violence prevention. It documents that paucity of evidence thus far, and therefore providing practitioners with an enhanced framework, underpinned by the 5 Ps, could address a significant gap. (For an overview of research implications, see Table 2).

Table 2: *Review implications*

Area	Implications
Research	• As the characteristics of PH-VP have remained largely unchanged since the 1980s, more empirical research is needed on PH-VP. • There is a need for a greater focus on process and implementation.
Policy	• Cross-cutting policy frameworks are required at national level to document exposure to violence; impact of violence; and activities that are developed in response.
Practice	• Understanding the characteristics of PH-VP is critical for implementation. • Insights from this review will help to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of PH-VPs.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Community Service Orders in Ireland: Implementation, Impact and Judicial Perspectives

Nicola Carr and Niamh Maguire*

Summary: Community Service Orders (CSOs) have existed in Ireland since 1983 as an alternative to short-term imprisonment. Despite legislative efforts, most notably the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Amendment Act, 2011, to encourage their wider use, CSOs remain underutilised. This article reports on a study commissioned by the Department of Justice to evaluate the impact of the 2011 Act. Drawing on a systematic literature review and semi-structured interviews with District Court judges, the research explores structural and attitudinal factors influencing sentencing decisions. While judges recognise the rehabilitative potential of CSOs, barriers such as delays in probation assessments, absence of probation staff in court, and restrictive suitability criteria often impede their use. Judges frequently consider individuals with substance misuse, mental health issues, or repeated offending as unsuitable for CSOs, narrowing their practical reach. These limitations have hindered the CSO's effectiveness as a meaningful alternative to custody. The findings underscore the need for reforms. Greater clarity around the function of CSOs, improved access to timely probation assessments, and more flexible models are necessary. The article concludes by situating these findings within Ireland's broader penal landscape, highlighting the potential of CSOs to reduce reoffending and prison overcrowding if supported by policy and practice frameworks grounded in desistance, restorative justice and social justice principles.

Keywords: Community Service Orders, short-term prison sentences, sentencing, judicial perspectives.

Introduction

Community Service Orders (CSOs) have formed part of Ireland's penal landscape for over four decades. Introduced under the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act, 1983, CSOs emerged against a backdrop of rising

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prison numbers and a growing recognition of the need for viable alternatives to custodial sanctions. The scheme was introduced as a mechanism that could serve the twin purposes of punishment and rehabilitation, while also benefitting the community. Underpinning this legislation was a desire to provide the courts with a practical and constructive sentencing alternative, one that maintained a degree of penal weight without resorting to the damaging consequences of short-term imprisonment.

However, from the outset, the transposition of CSOs from neighbouring jurisdictions elicited criticism from some Irish legislators, who questioned the originality and appropriateness of importing penal measures wholesale from another jurisdiction. These critiques reflected broader concerns, not just about policy mimicry, but also about whether such measures were adequately tailored to the Irish context, including the structure of the criminal justice system and the social and economic realities of those who appear before the courts. In conceptual terms, the CSO has long been associated with a range of penal purposes. Commentators have observed that the sanction straddles multiple penal rationales, from deterrence and rehabilitation to reparation and reintegration. This multiplicity of aims, described as a 'smorgasbord of penal purposes', has created ambiguity regarding the CSO's primary objective, which may have contributed to inconsistent uptake and application. Nonetheless, the flexibility of CSOs is also seen as a potential strength, allowing for responses that can be tailored to both the offence and the person.

Empirical research conducted since the introduction of CSOs in Ireland has pointed to numerous factors that shape their use (Walsh and Sexton, 1999; O'Hara and Rogan, 2015; Guilfoyle, 2018). Early studies documented variability in how and when CSOs were imposed, as well as concerns about their displacement effect, where CSOs were imposed in cases that may not otherwise have warranted a custodial sentence, thus potentially widening the net of penal control. More recent studies, including those commissioned by the Probation Service, highlight operational issues, such as delays in placing individuals in suitable community projects, and limitations imposed by suitability criteria. These issues may restrict the number of people for whom CSOs are considered appropriate and, in some cases, may reinforce the use of short-term prison sentences.

Judicial perspectives have also played a central role in shaping the use of CSOs. Judges' assessments of suitability, often influenced by factors such as addiction, mental health and previous offending history, significantly affect sentencing decisions. Furthermore, systemic and practical concerns, such as

the availability of Probation Service staff in court and the perceived effectiveness of CSOs, have an impact on whether they are seen as a credible alternative to imprisonment.

This article reports on findings from a study that examines the implementation and impact of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Amendment Act, 2011, which was intended to increase the use of CSOs in Ireland. Through a systematic literature review and interviews with District Court judges, the research explores both structural and attitudinal barriers to the imposition of CSOs. The article draws out key findings of relevance for probation practice.

Background

Community Service Orders (CSOs), were first introduced in Ireland under the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act, 1983. This followed their earlier introduction in England and Wales in 1972 and their subsequent introduction in Northern Ireland and in Scotland (in 1976 and 1978 respectively). The impetus for this new criminal justice sanction, which was in part motivated by a desire to alleviate rising prison numbers, was outlined by Michael Noonan, the Minister for Justice who sponsored the legislation:

The purpose of the Bill is to provide the criminal courts with a further sanction which they may apply in appropriate cases. Stated very briefly, the Bill provides that when a person is convicted of an offence for which the court considers that in the ordinary way the appropriate sentence would be one of imprisonment, the court may, with the offender's consent, instead order him to perform a specified number of hours of unpaid work. The work contemplated is work of a kind that will benefit the community but that people cannot readily be got to do in the ordinary way for pay.

(Noonan, M., *Dáil Debates*, vol. 341, no. 7, 20.04.83)

In *Dáil* debates on the proposed legislation, John Kelly, a Fine Gael TD, and incidentally a member of the same party as the proposing Justice Minister, was critical of the transposition of a penal measure that had been devised in England and Wales into Irish legislation:

Now we have our own little Bill, the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Bill, 1983, the guts of which have been lifted straight out of the British

Act. I cannot count the number of times I have complained about that in this House, nor can I count the number of occasions on which I had to criticise patterns of Government and administration here, not necessarily all statutory, in which we seem to have no ideas of our own and wait until the British have taken any kind of step before we take one for ourselves.

Kelly, J., *Dáil Debates*, vol. 342, no.1, 03.05.83

He went on to elaborate:

...this is simply one more example in the ignominious parade of legislation masquerading under an Irish title 'An Bille um Cheartas Coiriúil (Seirbhís Pobail), 1983' which is a British legislative idea taken over here and given a green outfit with silver buttons to make it look native. I protest against that.

Kelly, J., *Dáil Debates*, vol. 342, no.1, 03.05.83

While Kelly's chief complaint pertained to the lack of originality on the part of Irish policymakers, the *Dáil* debates at this time also point to some more fundamental concerns regarding the purpose of this sanction. Indeed, the question of the precise penal purpose of CSOs (now badged as an 'unpaid work' condition of a community sanction in England and Wales and as a condition of a 'Community Payback Order' in Scotland) has long been the subject of debate (Carr and Neimantas, 2023; McCarthy, 2014). One of the earlier commentaries on Community Service Orders described them as serving a 'smorgasbord of penal purposes' (Pease, cited in Carr and Neimantas, 2023). These multiple purposes speak to a lack of clarity regarding their purpose, while at the same time the potential of CSOs to achieve diverse aims. This could be considered both their potential strength and weakness.

Previous Irish research

The first systematic study of CSOs in Ireland was published by Walsh and Sexton in 1999. Based on an analysis of a cohort of cases, the study found that there had been variable uptake of CSOs since the introduction of this sentence. Those most likely to receive a CSO were single, white, unemployed males. Over half the sample had criminal records, although a proportion of these were relatively minor. This study found that there was variability across urban and rural areas in relation to the number of CSO hours imposed for

equivalent offences, and that in some cases CSOs were imposed where the custodial threshold had not been reached. In other words, there was some evidence that CSOs were not displacing the use of custody but had a net-widening effect.

Maguire (2008) asked judges in the District Court to pass sentence in hypothetical vignettes on theft, burglary, assault and road traffic cases. She found that the most frequently cited reason for why people were deemed unsuitable for a CSO was their drug and/or alcohol addiction. Most judges expressed the view that persons with drug and alcohol addictions were not suitable for Community Service Orders because they posed additional health and safety risks (over those without active addictions) and they lacked reliability. Some expressed the view that if addressing their addiction were made a condition of the CSO, then it might be suitable, but only if the person was already positively motivated to address their addiction. Circuit Court judges, on the other hand, generally felt that while CSOs were a good alternative for less serious offences heard in the District Court, CSOs were not punitive enough for the types of case typically dealt with in the Circuit Court.

Research by Riordan (2009) examined the use of CSOs and suspended sentences from a judicial perspective. He found that CSOs were underutilised by judges, in part because they did not consider them an equivalent penalty to custody and therefore were reluctant to impose a CSO in lieu of a prison sentence. On the other hand, suspended sentences, which can also be imposed as an alternative to custody (both partially and fully suspended), were used more liberally by judges. Riordan (2009) suggests that this is because judges considered suspended sentences to achieve more of a deterrent effect, explaining their relative popularity.

Analysis of the case characteristics of the population sentenced to short-term prison sentences (of less than twelve months) compared to CSOs in 2011–12 found that there were not marked differences between the population who received either sanction (O'Hara, 2016). However, this research reported considerable variation in the use of CSOs and short-term prison sentences across court type and jurisdiction (O'Hara and Rogan, 2015). Subsequent research by Guilfoyle (2018) explored the background to the introduction of CSOs in Ireland, as well as the implementation and operationalisation of the legislation. He notes the high threshold for the imposition of a CSO in the originating Act (in lieu of a sentence of imprisonment), as well as the fact that no guidance is provided to judges on how community service should be compared with a prison sentence. Specifically, how many hours of community

service equate to how many days of imprisonment? This lack of clarity may hinder their use. Guilfoyle (2018) further identifies that, in practice, the guidance on considerations for suitability for CSOs, which are informed by Probation Service assessments, may further limit the uptake of CSOs, particularly given that some people, such as those with ongoing drug and alcohol misuse difficulties, may be automatically rendered unsuitable. He notes:

From the outset, therefore, this essentially placed a boundary around the CSO and severely limited the number of offenders whom CSOs would likely be imposed upon.

(Guilfoyle, 2018, p. 69)

More recently, the Probation Service has commissioned studies to explore the operation of the CSO scheme, including an 'Operational review of community service' (Crowe, 2023) and *An Evidence Review of Community Service Policy, Practice and Structure* (Kennefick and Guilfoyle, 2022). The operational review analysed existing data on community service and carried out a consultation with a range of stakeholders. It found that the Community Service Scheme run by the Probation Service is broadly operating as intended, but that there were a number of 'significant issues in how the Scheme is organised' (Crowe, 2023, p. 1). Some of the issues identified included sometimes significant delays in the time between a person being sentenced to a Community Service Order and being placed on a community service site.

Following a recommendation of the Penal Policy Review Group (2014), the Probation Service commenced an Integrated Community Service (ICS) pilot. This provided for community service to be imposed with additional conditions, such as treatment for drug addiction or restriction of movement orders. The ICS provides for some flexibility in the operation of a CSO. A Probation Officer can grant permission for a person to spend up to one-third of their CSO hours in education, training or a treatment programme (for men, and up to half of their CSO for women). The operational review outlines that in the period 2017–19, the top three offences resulting in a referral for a Community Service Order from the courts are theft, drug offences and assault.

Since 2020, drug offences have accounted for the most referrals (19–23 per cent), while in 2021, road traffic offences were the most common offence for which people received a CSO. Based on an analysis of crime data published by the Central Statistics Office, the operational review notes that

there may be scope for the Probation Service to adopt some offence-specific interventions. Analysis of demographic data provided in the review points to some gender differentials regarding referrals for CSOs, particularly for people receiving sentences for non-payment of court-ordered fines. Women feature more prominently in this category than in general figures on offending, and they also typically receive shorter prison sentences (of less than one year). Data on reoffending rates included in the operational review show that there are much lower one-year reoffending rates across all offence types for people sentenced to community sanctions when compared to imprisonment. The operational review makes a number of recommendations to promote awareness of CSOs amongst the general public and key stakeholders, including the judiciary and the Garda Síochána. Further recommendations include the development of partnerships between local and national organisations in order to expand the network of community service placement opportunities, and a more systematic examination of information on compliance with orders, to explore factors promoting compliance and whether these vary across placements.

In their evidence review of community service, Kennefick and Guilfoyle (2022) note that the CSO lacks a coherent penal purpose. It is positioned as an alternative to custody, but it does not incapacitate a person in the same way as imprisonment. Its retributive capacities, i.e. depriving a person of their time in recognition of the harm caused by offending, are somewhat limited. A CSO may serve a rehabilitative purpose, but this may not be foregrounded in its execution. It can involve an element of reparation, i.e. 'paying back' to the community through undertaking unpaid work. Drawing on wider research literature and examples from other jurisdictions, Kennefick and Guilfoyle (2022) have proposed the development of a tripartite strategy for CSOs based on principles of *desistance*, *restorative justice* and *social justice*. This, they argue, would make the functions of CSOs more discernible to a broad range of stakeholders, including people subject to such orders, sentencers and the wider community.

Taken together, existing research points to a number of problematic issues with the use of CSOs in Ireland. These include concerns regarding regional variation and differences in the weight of penalties imposed, with no consistent metric regarding the relative equivalence between community service hours and length of imprisonment; questions regarding eligibility for particular cohorts of people appearing before the courts; and concerns voiced by sentencers regarding the positioning of CSOs on the penal continuum.

Current context

As noted, the foundational legislation, the Community Service Act (1983), positioned this sanction as a direct alternative to prison, meaning that a CSO (ranging from 40 to 240 hours) could be imposed only if the judge was already considering a prison sentence. The candidate must be considered suitable to perform community service (this is determined through assessment by the Probation Service); appropriate work must be available; and the person must consent to the order.¹ Since the introduction of the CSO, uptake has been variable. At the same time, the use of short-term prison sentences (sentences of twelve months or less) has risen, despite their well-recognised damaging effects (O'Donnell, 2020).

Subsequent amending legislation has sought to promote greater use of CSOs and to reduce the use of short-term prison sentences. The Criminal Justice (Community Service) (Amendment) Act, 2011 introduced a new duty on judges to consider the imposition of a CSO as an alternative to a prison sentence of twelve months or less. However, critics noted that this legislation underscored already existing requirements to obtain assessment reports from the Probation Service where a CSO was being considered, and it merely required judges to consider a CSO as a sentencing option rather than to mandate its use (Maguire, 2014, 2016; Guilfoyle, 2017). Further legislation (Fines (Payment and Recovery) Act, 2014), introduced to curb the use of prison sentences for fine defaulters, allowed courts to implement a CSO for non-payment of fines.

Despite an expressed policy intention to reduce the use of short-term prison sentences and to promote the use of CSOs, the prison population in Ireland continues to rise (Penal Policy Review Group, 2014; Department of Justice, 2022). Daily average custody numbers have risen year on year, and the Irish Prison Service now faces an overcrowding crisis. Available data provide an insight into the contributory factors for this growth. The remand population has expanded, as have the numbers of people serving longer prison sentences. A further key factor is the continued use of short-term prison sentences, despite an avowed policy commitment that prison should be used sparingly (Department of Justice, 2022). At the same time, the uptake of community sanctions, including CSOs, remains highly variable. Data published by the Probation Service show that the rate of usage of community

¹ These specifications are contained in s. 4 of the 1983 Act (later substituted by section 4 (a) of the 2011 Act).

sentences ranges, for instance, from 60–80 CSOs per 100,000 of the population in Cork to just 1–20 per 100,000 in the neighbouring county of Kerry (Probation Service, 2024a).

Advocates of community sentences draw on a number of arguments to support their greater use and to reduce over-reliance on imprisonment. Irish data show that community sentences have a lower recidivism rate than prison sentences (O'Hara, 2016). Twenty-seven per cent of people sentenced to a community sentence in 2020 had recidivated within one year, compared to 41 per cent of people released from custody (Central Statistics Office, 2023, 2024). Reoffending rates over three years following sentencing reveal similar patterns. The economic cost differentials between community sentences and imprisonment are also substantial. Data provided by the Department of Justice show that prison is fourteen times more expensive than a community order (Department of Justice, 2022).²

Moreover, the arguments against the use of short-term prison sentences are compelling. Beyond short-term incapacitation, this sentence offers very limited opportunity for engagement with services within prison (which is even further compromised in the context of overcrowding) (O'Hara and Rogan, 2015; O'Donnell, 2020). People sentenced to short-term prison sentences may lose existing resources, such as housing or employment, that could support future desistance from offending (Killias *et al.*, 2010; Klement, 2015). Families are financially affected (Kirk and Wakefield, 2018), particularly where the person imprisoned is a primary caregiver.

About the research

This research was commissioned by the Department of Justice and sought to examine the impact of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Amendment Act, 2011, which, as noted, was intended to encourage greater use of CSOs. The research comprised two main elements: a systematic literature review exploring the relative impacts of CSOs and short-term prison sentences on recidivism, as well as any potential insights from other jurisdictions on the use of CSOs. This included a consideration of legal frameworks, including the prerequisites for imposing such sanctions and any disqualifying criteria. The second element of the research involved research interviews with District Court judges. This court level was specified because of the volume of cases

² This report records that the average annual cost of a prison place in 2020 was €80,445, compared to an annual cost of €5,712 for probation supervision.

dealt with in District Courts and the fact that most sentences of short-term prison sentences or CSOs originate from these courts. All elements of the empirical research project were subject to a full and independent ethical review by the South East Technological University Ethics Committee.

Interviews with District Court judges were carried out using a semi-structured interview schedule and sentencing vignettes. In-depth semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit judicial perspectives on the main research questions relevant to understanding judicial views on the use of short prison sentences and Community Service Orders in the sentencing of minor criminal matters in the District Court. The interviews were designed to last no longer than one hour and were supplemented by the use of three short sentencing vignettes. Sentencing vignettes are short case summaries that provide situated contexts in which to explore judicial approaches to sentencing. In this study, we used them as an additional aid for understanding the types of scenario in which judges might impose CSOs in lieu of short prison sentences. The vignettes were completely fictitious and not based on real cases observed or related in any way to the interviewee.

To achieve the research sample, we extended invitations to participate in the research to all District Court judges in office.³ Through this approach, thirteen judges participated in the research. The research sample comprises judges with a wide range of experience and who have sat/are sitting in both metropolitan and provincial districts. The sample also includes moveable judges. Interviews, which were held in person or online and lasted one hour on average, took place between April and September 2023. Once transcribed, the interviews were coded and analysed thematically using NVivo and guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The following sections report on four key themes arising from this analysis of judicial interviews.⁴ Unique codes are used for participants to safeguard anonymity.

Deciding to impose a short-term prison sentence or a Community Service Order

The sentencing practices and rationales of judges in determining when to impose a short-term prison sentence or a Community Service Order were a key focus of this research. In interviews, we explored the circumstances in which respondents considered a short-term prison sentence would be

3 At the time of the research, there were 63 District Court judges in office. The research sample constitutes approximately one-fifth of the judicial population serving in the District Court.

4 See Maguire and Carr (2024).

appropriate, based both on the offence type and the individual characteristics of the defendant. Judges adopted different approaches based on their views of the potential for particular sentences to achieve specific sentencing aims. Deterrence and rehabilitation were the most commonly cited aims, with short-term prison sentences associated with the former and Community Service Orders more commonly associated with the latter. The quotes below are typical of perspectives in which prison sentences (even of relatively short duration) were deemed to have a deterrent or containment effect:

'It's [imprisonment] a deterrent for both them and for society at large.'
(DCJ03)

'[A] lot of the time one is sending people to prison not because it is going to have any rehabilitative function but more as a containment or a protection to society after significant failures....' (DCJ09)

While the inherent limits of imprisonment were recognised by many, some considered that there were specific types of offence and/or personal characteristics which would render imprisonment the most suitable sanction.

'Now, I never consider CSO for [no insurance offences]. Because they need the lesson. They're going to keep driving. The problem with these guys, you see, they're recidivists and they just don't ... CSO is going to do nothing for them. Won't stop them driving. The whole reason you're putting them in prison is to actually physically stop them getting behind the wheel of a car. CSO doesn't do that.' (DCJ07)

Evidence of individual sentencing practices in relation to particular offence types is also seen in the following extract, where, in contrast to their counterpart above, the respondent describes their preference for using CSOs for a range of road traffic offences, including the offence of driving without insurance:

'I suppose I'd consider [a CSO] a lot in road traffic offences. For example, no insurance, where somebody is on their second or third conviction for no insurance, or other serious road traffic offences. Where you know they've had multiple chances now. And you know it's been fines up to now and it really does need to be a stricter penalty at this stage. So, I

would usually consider Community Service Orders for that. Or again, multiple drugs convictions. But usually, road traffic would be the one that would spring to mind initially.’ (DCJ01)

These examples provide evidence of some idiosyncratic practices in relation to sentencing for specific offences. Based on their experiences and the types of offence they see on a regular basis, some judges consider particular offences as eligible or ineligible for a CSO. This shows the potential for considerable differentiation in how offences are dealt with in courts across the country.

As well as forming a judgement regarding which offences would be suitable for a CSO, judges also consider the characteristics and profiles of defendants, when making their determination. Here, sentencing patterns amongst judges in the research sample were consistent. Dependence on drugs and alcohol and mental and physical health issues were considered a barrier to imposing a CSO and made the imposition of a prison sentence more likely.

‘The reality is that a lot of people between drug and alcohol use just can’t regulate their day, so they can’t, you know, they’re not deemed suitable, because you’re setting them up to fail really with community service because they’re not going to be able to regulate themselves to get there.’ (DCJ01)

Prior histories of repeat offending were considered particularly problematic – ‘It really comes down to, I think, the amount of offending involved, as opposed to the offence’ (DJC06). Evidently, repeat offending is inherently problematic, but also because it conveys a message that previous sentences had not ‘worked’.

‘So a point arises where a person, for example, who is committing thefts has committed so many thefts, and I’m talking about hundreds, that I have to come to the conclusion that, at least notionally, they’re beyond rehabilitation, because they have been offered engagement with the Probation Service, they’ve engaged with them previously, they’ve been given community service, they’ve been given suspended sentence, they’ve been ratcheting up all of the time, and the behaviour continues, and a point arises where imprisonment is just the appropriate remedy because it’s a deterrent for them.’ (DCJ03)

In these circumstances, where a person was adjudged to be 'beyond rehabilitation', sentencers considered that they had no sentencing options available to them other than imprisonment:

'And 250 previous convictions and 90 previous convictions and they're after engaging three or four or five times with community service, they're after having five or six Community Service Orders imposed on them and it's just not stopping, and in some instances somebody can be caught stealing in a shop and brought to the Garda station and released on bail and be back there again in the afternoon, and the victims must be thinking, what in the name of God is going on in the Garda station and what's going on down in the court house and why is nothing being done about this? ... A point arises where I just think, within the mechanism that's available to me, I have to ratchet this up to an actual custodial sentence. I've tried fines, I've tried community service, I've tried suspended sentences and it's just still going on, offence number 105. I now have to just bring deterrent into it....' (DCJ03)

As the extract above illustrates – 'what in the name of God is going on in the Garda station and what's going on down in the court house...?' — public perception is also part of the underpinning rationale for resorting to prison in these types of cases. While judges were clear to articulate that public opinion or media coverage did not have a direct impact on their decisions regarding which sentence to impose, it is evident that some judges are, at the very least, mindful of how their sentencing decisions are perceived in their Districts.

'Imagine if the victim were to go to the local hotel for lunch the following week and find her assailant cutting the grass. Now I know they tend to cut the grass in public areas, but it could be a public area outside the hotel. That's just not good enough. So that would be a case in which I don't think I would, that would be the sort of case in which I wouldn't impose a Community Service Order. I wouldn't consider it appropriate as an alternative to imprisonment, you know.' (DCJ08)

'[I]n order for you to be ... seen to be doing my job properly, I'd have to impose a sanction, which is of a custodial nature.' (DCJ06)

This speaks to the wider issue regarding judicial, as well as public, confidence in community sentences, and whether such sentences are seen to achieve the desired penal effects. Judges were clear that where deterrence was at the forefront of their decision-making, CSOs were not considered to serve this purpose. On the other hand, in cases where rehabilitation is foregrounded, judges were more supportive of the idea of imposing a Community Service Order.

What would encourage greater use of CSOs and less use of short-term prison sentences?

In interviews with judges, we explored what might encourage greater use of CSOs and less use of short-term prison sentences. In this section, we detail those findings most directly relevant to probation services.

Availability of probation staff in court

It is important to emphasise that the formal determination as to whether a person is suitable for a CSO is made by the Probation Service through CSO Suitability Assessments. Such an assessment can also be more broadly incorporated into a Pre-Sentence Report. However, as indicated above, judges frequently form an initial view about suitability and then decide whether to refer a person to the Probation Service for an assessment. In other words, judges used their own filtering processes in deciding which cases to refer for suitability assessments. This practice of *a priori* filtering of cases must be placed in the context of availability of probation assessments. For instance, some judges spoke of their frustration in accessing timely probation assessments, particularly where there were no probation staff available in court:

'So, they [probation staff] used to be in court ... but that seems to have fizzled out. I don't know why. Maybe during the recession there were cutbacks. It gradually petered out, and now we're left in the position that we ... you're waiting.' (DCJ06)

Given the volume of cases dealt with in the District Courts, judges were keen to avoid further delays, and were therefore reluctant to adjourn for assessments, particularly where they had previously encountered delays. This had an impact on their inclination to refer cases to the Probation Service:

'But there's no probation officer available that day. So, no matter what you want to do, you can't do it. And then you're looking at a list and you're kind of going, OK, I'm looking at the same person that you want to try and give the chance to with CSO. You're looking at them going, they're never going to come back. I'm going to be a year chasing them with a warrant. They'll lay low ... the whole thing is resources. I'd say if we started to lash out the CSO orders ... tomorrow, they wouldn't have the capacity to deal with them. So, I don't know. It's all very aspirational. They can barely get us a report. It's taken two months to get a report.' (DCJ07)

As Morgan (2003) observes, courts are one of the key constituencies for probation services. At the most basic level, the Probation Service's caseload originates from the orders of the court. As outlined earlier, there are a several contingent factors influencing sentencers' decisions regarding whether to sentence a person to a community or prison sentence. The availability of timely assessments can inform decision-making and is a practical but significant issue. Prior studies on CSOs in Ireland, including an evaluation by the Department of Justice in 2009, have noted the persistence of this concern, pointing to wider questions regarding adequate resourcing of the Probation Service to ensure equitable access to reports across courts in Ireland. At the very least, ensuring equitable access to probation staff across court districts would address potential differentiations in access to justice. It might also promote the greater use of community sentences in some cases. Relatedly, judges interviewed for this study expressed a desire to know more about the community service projects operating in their areas and about the types of work that people engage with on projects.

Suitability criteria and adaptability of CSOs

One of the key findings from this research, as highlighted above, is the fact that certain cohorts of people are automatically deemed unsuitable for a CSO (either *a priori* by a judge, or following assessment by the Probation Service). This includes people with substance misuse issues and those with physical and mental health difficulties. This potentially excludes a significant cohort of people who appear before the court for consideration for this sanction, rendering a prison sentence a more likely outcome. Again, this finding echoes previous research on CSOs, including the earliest study by Walsh and Sexton (1999). In order to promote greater use of CSOs, it makes sense to explore the

potential to adapt these orders to the needs of individuals appearing before the courts. Integrated CSOs (which allow for up to 30 per cent of the hours of the order to be allocated towards activities addressing the underpinning reasons for offending) have been piloted, and further developments and adaptations to CSOs, drawing on the tripartite model outlined by Kennefick and Guilfoyle (2022), may have the benefit of, firstly, addressing CSOs to the profile of cases that appear before the courts and, secondly, increasing the confidence of the judiciary and the public in the use of this sanction.⁵

Recent developments

The Probation Service has recently published an *Implementation Plan* for the development of community service (Probation Service, 2025). This plan details a number of key objectives, including aims to increase the use of CSOs by the courts and to improve secondary outcomes for people who have offended, including access to education, training and skills-development work. Increasing the number of same-day community service reports nationwide is included as a target. This measure may go some way towards addressing the report availability and delay issue identified as a barrier.

The *Implementation Plan* also commits to tailoring of CSOs to nature of offences (to enhance reparation) and to individual skills, to enhance opportunities and community benefits. While this focus is welcome, the fundamental issue of cohorts of people being considered unsuitable for CSOs remains unaddressed. Recent plans to increase the maximum number of hours in a CSO from 240 to 480 hours, outlined in the General Scheme of Criminal Law and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, 2025, will increase the punitive weight of CSOs, but it also does not fundamentally address the fit of CSOs to people appearing before the courts.

This issue of suitability and adaptability of community orders is wider than CSOs. Potential modifications of the CSO will need to be considered in the context of the long-promised Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill, which proposes to extend the range of community sanctions and measures available to the courts (Probation Service, 2024b).⁶ Research from other

⁵ Integrated Community Service was introduced as a component of Community Service in 2016. A developmental activity undertaken by a person subject to a Community Service Order, which is addressing criminogenic risk may be counted as a proportion (up to 30 per cent) of the hours of the court order. The verification of the activity is done by the Probation Service. The activity may be a therapeutic, educational or individual/group work intervention. The recent *Community Service Implementation Plan* (Probation Service, 2025) commits to a review of this mode.

⁶ The *Probation Service Strategy 2024–2026* (Probation Service, 2024, p. 10) refers to supporting the advancement of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill, 2014.

jurisdictions suggests that adaptability and expansion of community sanction provision should be alert to the risk of net-widening (Aebi *et al.*, 2015; Burke *et al.*, 2023). This will be a fine balance to achieve.

Conclusion

Community Service Orders, though established with the intention of serving as a robust alternative to imprisonment, continue to face a host of challenges in their application and perception. While the foundational legislation presented the CSO as a meaningful sentencing option in lieu of short-term prison sentences, its practical implementation over the past four decades has been shaped by a mix of systemic limitations, judicial discretion, and evolving penal policy. This study sought to evaluate the impact of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Amendment Act, 2011, which placed a duty on judges to consider CSOs as an alternative to custodial sentences of twelve months or less. Although the Act signalled a policy shift toward favouring community-based sanctions, evidence from judicial interviews suggests that the Act's influence has been muted by both structural and attitudinal constraints. Judges, while open to using CSOs in certain scenarios, often encounter obstacles such as delays in Probation Service assessments, a lack of Probation Officer presence in court, and a limited understanding of the scope and nature of CSO placements. These barriers reduce the practical accessibility of CSOs and contribute to their inconsistent application across different courts and regions.

Moreover, the research highlights a significant issue concerning suitability. Many individuals who appear before the courts, particularly those with substance misuse issues, mental health challenges, or complex offending histories, are often deemed unsuitable for community service, either by judicial preconception or by the Probation Service during assessment. This exclusion effectively narrows the CSO's reach. While initiatives like Integrated Community Service Orders (ICSOs) have attempted to address this issue by incorporating education, training or treatment within the CSO framework, their limited roll-out has not yet addressed the core issue of exclusion based on suitability criteria.

The broader penal context further complicates the potential for community sanctions to reduce imprisonment. Despite recurring policy commitments to reduce reliance on short-term custody, Ireland's prison population continues to grow, driven in part by the persistent use of such sentences. This is despite clear evidence that CSOs, and community sentences more generally, are

associated with lower reoffending rates, lower costs and fewer harmful side-effects for individuals and families. The economic and social rationale for shifting away from short custodial sentences toward more expansive use of CSOs is well supported, yet this shift has been hampered by both practical constraints and deep-rooted penal cultures that still prioritise custody in many cases.

Looking forward, the successful reform and revitalisation of CSOs will require not just legislative or procedural adjustments but a more fundamental reconceptualisation of their purpose and place in the penal system. The Probation Service's 2025 *Implementation Plan* includes promising initiatives to increase the use of CSOs, improve access to same-day reports, and tailor placements to individual capabilities and community needs. However, real change will depend on more than operational fixes; it will require a clear articulation of the CSO's penal purpose and a commitment to addressing barriers to access.

The proposed Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill offers an opportunity to expand and adapt community sanctions to meet contemporary penal needs. However, reforms must be approached carefully, to avoid net-widening and to ensure proportionality. A tripartite model, based on desistance, restorative justice and social justice, such as that proposed by Kennefick and Guilfoyle (2022), may provide a principled framework for embedding CSOs more firmly and fairly in Ireland's sentencing landscape. The findings of our research underscore the importance of continued evaluation, resourcing and thoughtful innovation in the pursuit of these aims.

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Securing Suitable and Stable Accommodation for Probation Service-Users in NI – A Study

Gail McGreevy and Stephen Hamilton*

Summary: Supporting people who have offended to access suitable and stable accommodation means that they will have a better chance of turning their lives around, reducing reoffending and making our communities safer. Northern Ireland is facing significant challenges in the provision of housing for the general population. Over the past decade, the social housing waiting list has been growing, outstripping the supply of available housing. There has been a significant rise in the number of households with homelessness status and the need for temporary accommodation is increasing every month. In 2023, the number of new homes completed locally fell to its lowest level in more than 64 years, causing a housing supply crisis. Research indicates that those who have offended face even more difficulty in accessing accommodation (van Tongeren, 2022). Many of those who enter custody lose their homes, and there may be a breakdown in family and community relationships. High numbers of those who have offended also experience poor mental health, addictions and trauma. The stigmatisation and exclusion experienced by offenders, as well as the need for effective risk-management plans to be put in place, can lead to challenges in accessing suitable accommodation (McCarthy and Hagan, 2024). In seeking to address this issue, the PBNi focused on analysis of data in respect of the specific issues faced by its service-users. This paper outlines the findings of a survey conducted with Probation Officers in respect of the accommodation needs of their service-users and outlines organisational actions taken as a result of the findings of this survey.

Keywords: housing, accommodation, offenders, data, survey, approved accommodation, homelessness, hostels, Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Introduction

Providing suitable and appropriate housing and accommodation is one of the most significant issues impacting upon the work of the Probation Board for

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Northern Ireland (PBNI). Many service-users face significant barriers to securing stable housing due to various factors, including risk issues, legal restrictions, financial constraints and social stigma, as well as lack of housing stock and lack of ability to plan properly for people's release from prison on licence. Research shows that the provision of suitable accommodation for service-users serving a community sentence is a critical factor in reducing reoffending and contributing to desistance (Thompson, 2014). Likewise, having a home when you leave prison is a key determinant for successful rehabilitation and preventing further offending. The Report *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland* (NIAO, 2023) highlights the clear links that exist between homelessness and reoffending and found strong consensus that inadequate stable accommodation was the greatest barrier to desistance, given that having an address is key to accessing services, including healthcare and employment. According to figures released by the Ministry of Justice in England, people leaving prison without settled accommodation are around 50 per cent more likely to commit further crimes than those with stable accommodation (Nacro, 2024).

The Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland (CIHNI) believes that we are currently grappling with a profound housing and homelessness crisis. It sets out that the issues relating to this are multifaceted, spanning a critical undersupply of social housing, escalating rates of homelessness and deteriorating housing conditions across the region, and addressing these challenges requires urgent and comprehensive action at multiple levels of government and society (CIHNI, 2024). The housing challenge is recognised by government.

One of the nine strategic priorities set out in the Northern Ireland Executive Programme for Government launched in 2025 is to: 'Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing' (NIEO, 2025). The Programme for Government elaborates:

Good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing. We want everybody to have access to affordable, sustainable and quality housing that meets their needs within thriving and inclusive communities. The challenge we face is evidenced by the social housing waiting list, which currently stands at over 47,000 households, including 35,000 experiencing housing stress.

(NIEO, 2025, p. 42)

Accordingly, one of the actions in the Programme for Government is to: 'Continue to prioritise housing support for vulnerable people across our society through NIHE's three-year Supporting People Strategy' (p. 45). The issue of providing accommodation for those who are already marginalised and excluded from society because of their offending behaviour is a significant challenge in the face of a wider housing crisis across Northern Ireland.

Given the significant issues being faced in accessing housing for service-users and the apparent scale of the housing crisis in Northern Ireland more generally, PBNI established an internal probation accommodation working group in 2024, made up of staff along with a Board member with a background and expertise in the housing sector. The purpose of this working group was to identify key issues around accommodation for service-users, including the scale of the problem and related data; develop actionable recommendations to improve access to safe, stable and supportive housing for service-users; facilitate collaboration between probation services, housing providers, and relevant organisations to develop sustainable housing solutions and provide a forum for sharing best practices and insights on addressing service-user accommodation needs and challenges.

In respect of addressing the scale of the problem, data relating to accommodation/housing are not routinely collected by PBNI. However, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners have been anecdotally reporting that accessing housing for those who have offended is an increasing problem. In order therefore to try to quantify the scale of the issue and collate meaningful data, an internal survey was designed and disseminated to staff in PBNI. The purpose of the survey was to ask Probation Officers to reflect on the scale and impact of the accommodation/housing issues affecting service-users who are currently being supervised by probation through a community sentence or licence.

This paper reflects on the findings of this survey and, as PBNI enters into the consultation for its new strategic Corporate Plan 2026–29, it considers what solutions we can be part of and what work we can drive forward in order to address the accommodation issues that currently exist for service-users.

Methodology

A survey was developed by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) statisticians seconded to PBNI in January 2025 to provide a snapshot of the issues surrounding accommodation/housing for service-users currently

being supervised by PBNi. The survey was issued on 2 January 2025, and a private link was emailed to a total sample of all Probation Officers available (253). The survey ran for just over two weeks and closed on 19 January 2025 (PBNi, 2025).

As of 31 December 2024, the number of service-users being supervised by PBNi was 4,202. Of the thirty-eight Probation Officers who responded, a combined caseload of 848 service-users was reported. The survey sample represents 20.2 per cent of the overall number of service-users being supervised. Given that information was not collected in relation to individual service-users, there is no way to quantify whether this is a representative sample with respect to gender, age, type of order/licence, therefore care should be taken when interpreting findings.

Twelve questions were posed to participants:

1. How many people are you currently supervising in the community (do not include those currently recalled and in custody, or those subject to a warrant)?
2. Of that number, how many are currently rough sleeping/street sleeping/needing a crash bed? (A 'crash bed' refers to a hostel which offers people a bed for the night based on who is first in the queue. People will usually have to leave the accommodation in the morning and will have to queue again for a bed the following night).
3. How many are currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation?
4. How many are currently residing in a hostel?
5. How many are currently residing in PBNi Approved Premises?
6. How many service-users on your current caseload were released from prison without any accommodation?
7. How many service-users on your current caseload were released from prison without appropriate accommodation?
8. Of those in your caseload who are currently housed, how many are currently at high risk of their accommodation breaking down/ending?
9. In how many cases has lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall?
10. Over the past 12 months how many people have you referred to Approved Premises, but who did not get a place?
11. As a supervising Probation Officer, what specifically do you think are the three key issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNi service-users?

12. As a supervising Probation Officer, what do you think are the three key possible solutions/actions required to reduce the amount of accommodation-related issues for your service-users, both male and female?

There was a free textbox included in the survey where participants could elaborate on their responses. The survey was collecting aggregate information and was not seeking the names or identifiable details of service-users but rather seeking a general picture of the issues.

There are limitations in respect of this as it was based on staff knowledge of their caseload. Whilst they would have a good knowledge of the circumstances of people they supervise, there may be circumstances of which they were not aware and therefore there may be an element of under-reporting of the extent of the issue.

The key findings

Of the 848 service-users identified through the survey:

- 5.1 per cent (43) were currently rough sleeping/street sleeping/ needing a crash bed
- 9.9 per cent (84) were currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation
- 2.8 per cent (24) were currently residing in a hostel
- 3.2 per cent (27) were currently residing in PBNI Approved Premises
- 4.5 per cent (38) were released from prison without any accommodation
- 3.7 per cent (31) were released from prison without appropriate accommodation.

There were a number of common themes from the survey findings and the provision of qualitative feedback, which is considered in more detail through this paper, including the scale of those at high risk of their accommodation breaking down, cases where a lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall, the availability of approved premises, issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNI service-users, and suggested solutions put forward by staff.

Those at high risk of accommodation breaking down/ending

According to staff responses to this point-in-time survey, 9.6 per cent (81) of service-users were at high risk of their accommodation breaking down or ending. The most common reported reasons for this were addiction, mental health issues, unstable relationships and community tension. For example, one Probation Officer responded:

'Ongoing multitude of concerns/needs/risks including addictions, hedonistic lifestyles, poor and often untreated mental health, lack of support network, domestic concerns, under threat, low motivation and overall lack of regard for rules/statutory requirements.'

Staff were invited to provide some of the details of the reasons for accommodation instability/housing difficulties of people on their caseload. One Probation Officer noted the diverse circumstances of four individuals on their caseload. These included experiences of 'sofa surfing' and 'poor state of apartment (squalor) due to history of alcohol misuse'. Another service-user whose parents were selling their home faced homelessness, while another's mother was evicting him and his adult children (with additional needs) due to ongoing family disputes. Another person under supervision was living in an aunt's refurbished shed while awaiting his own accommodation. He also had additional complex needs.

All of the responses highlighted the complex needs and chaotic lifestyle of many of the people under supervision of probation. There were also comments in respect of community tensions in a number of cases and individuals being under threat from within their local community. One Probation Officer responded in respect of four service-users:

'For all four indicated above they have been the subject of paramilitary attention so have had to move location due to the threats made against them. They are moved to Northern Ireland Housing Executive temporary accommodation from which they can be relocated at any time should suitable permanent accommodation become available.'

Cases where lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in their breach or recall

Significantly, staff respondents also reported that the lack of appropriate accommodation had a significant role to play in the breach of a community order or recall of fifty-three service-users. An individual is recommended for recall when they can no longer be safely managed in the community. Likewise, someone can be in breach of their community sentence if they fail to abide by the conditions of the order. Some common themes in these responses were a lack of stability, having to share accommodation with peers who had a negative influence, leading to relapse and being unable to meet requirements of their order/licence due to the lack of suitable accommodation. In other cases, service-users struggled to maintain independent accommodation, with pressure from other individuals leading to relapse into addictions or deterioration of mental health issues/isolation issues.

Highlighting a common theme, one Probation Officer commented:

‘Lack of stability that a home with supportive family provides is not present for many of my service-users. They often feel isolated and are isolated in hostels (away from their hometown) and B&Bs and sofa surfing. This lack of appropriate accommodation has often lent itself to service-users further involving themselves in substance misuse that has led to further offending – then recall/breach.’

Availability of approved premises

The survey data also illustrated that over the last twelve months, thirty-eight service-users were reported to have been referred to approved premises but did not get a place. In Northern Ireland there are currently seven approved premises with 91 beds available in total. These premises are establishments that are owned and managed by the community and voluntary sector, including organisations like Extern and the Simon Community. They are not owned by Probation; however, they provide criminal justice organisations including Probation with a really important service, particularly where there are concerns about an individual’s risk of serious further offending, or there are additional considerations about how the public will be protected in the early stages of their release from prison. Approved premises provide short-term accommodation for people who meet these criteria, to help them make a successful transition from custody to community in a structured and supportive environment.

Referrals to approved premises mostly came through a weekly allocation panel. Demand for places is high, and priority is given to those subject to licence. This can impact on the availability of sufficient places to support the testing of long-term prisoners on temporary pre-release testing at the latter stage of their sentence. We know that there are other challenges, as highlighted by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJINI) (CJINI, 2023), including that there is no separate provision for women and the approved premises have difficulty supporting the needs of people with underlying health conditions.

In their report on approved premises, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate noted:

Often those released from prison could not be told where they would be living until shortly before their release and there were therefore consequential impacts on processes to support their transition from custody. Issues identified in previous inspections about continuity of medication, registration with general practitioners, availability of photographic identification, access to benefits and bank accounts at the point of release persisted despite work taken forward by the Northern Ireland Prison Service to improve this.

(CJINI, p. 7)

Further, a significant issue with approved accommodation, highlighted by CJINI in 2023 and reiterated by probation staff in this survey, is the lack of move-on accommodation following a stay in approved premises. The Criminal Justice Inspector noted that:

Move-on planning could be improved but accessing suitable sustainable accommodation in the community was challenging especially set against the wider issues in the housing sector in Northern Ireland. A number of residents were spending too long in approved premises.

(CJINI, p. 7)

Issues and/or barriers we need resolved in terms of accommodation for PBNi service-users

Some of the issues and/or barriers identified by probation staff as requiring resolution in terms of accommodation for PBNi service-users included: the overall lack of available accommodation across the board within private

rented, social housing, hostels, and approved premises. It was also noted that there was a specific lack of appropriate accommodation for those service-users managed within the Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (certain sexual and violent offenders).

One respondent stated:

‘There is a clear need for more hostel bed availability, and at short notice. There is a need for “move-on” plans for those in hostels longer term, so as to free up bed space and fuller support for hostel accommodation for SROSH [those presenting a significant risk of serious harm] service-users prior to their release from prison – as this is a known risk status prior to their release date. There are also concerns around the vulnerabilities of individuals providing accommodation – for example older grandparents.’

Practitioners also reported a reliance on crash beds leading to service-user instability, with one practitioner stating: ‘A crash bed miles away is of little benefit – people resort to sofa surfing as they may have support from people they know in an area they are familiar with.’

Other Probation Officers reported the difficulty in managing cases when service-users were released from prison without accommodation and prison releases occurring at the weekend when housing services are not readily available. A common theme was the difficulty in managing releases on a Friday afternoon: ‘Friday afternoon releases cause a significant issue as people can only resort to emergency out-of-hours accommodation, if this is even available’. This issue has been raised with the Department of Justice, with the ultimate aim of new legislation to address this matter under statute. In addition, the Lady Chief Justice has recently instigated listings changes in High Court bail hearings, to avoid bail releases from Friday courts (Judicial Communications Office, 2024).

Suggested solutions put forward by staff

Some suggested solutions made by staff to the issues raised included: improved communication with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and one specific point of contact for PBNi within the Northern Ireland Executive; the development of a dedicated multidisciplinary team with representation from all stakeholders to address the issues; earlier planning during contact with the Northern Ireland Prison Service to reduce the number of service-users being

released from prison without appropriate accommodation, and a specific resource within PBNI dedicated to helping source housing.

The challenge of finding solutions was articulated by one Probation Officer who stated:

‘This is a particularly difficult question due to the complexities of homelessness and the multitude of barriers there are for individuals who are homeless i.e. access to services, lack of identification, dual diagnosis (substance misuse/mental health), difficulties with accessing employment, exploitation, etc.’

Another highlighted the fact that one agency cannot solve all the problems, stating:

‘If we were to look at actions, it is important that there is a strong presence of multidisciplinary working which I think can get lost at times. Specifically considering how difficult it is for an individual who is homeless to maintain so many services across different locations. Unfortunately, many individuals resort to breaching their Orders/Licences just to have shelter.’

This also highlights the desperate circumstances that some service-users find themselves in, where they may resort to offending in order to access accommodation.

Organisational actions taken as a result of this survey

It is apparent there are no easy or simple solutions to tackling the issues highlighted above. However, within Probation we have set in place an organisational response following the analysis of the available data. Probation’s business plan for 2025–26 (PBNI, 2025) sets out that Probation will support the work to develop a Departmental Adult Reoffending and Desistance Strategy for Northern Ireland. A key part of this strategy will relate to issues regarding the provision of accommodation. Probation has commenced the development of a proposal with NIHE, which would see an arrangement between both organisations to second a NIHE housing officer to PBNI. The seconded role will focus on addressing the accommodation needs of PBNI service-users across Northern Ireland, as well as potential access to probation-specific crash bed(s). This initiative reflects both organisations’ shared commitment to reducing

reoffending, preventing homelessness and improving outcomes for justice-involved individuals.

We have also committed within our Business Plan to developing our partnerships with Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, the community and voluntary sectors and others to support service delivery in identified areas, and primarily housing support.

The complexity of housing needs in the PBNI-supervised population often requires joint, tailored approaches that cannot be achieved through siloed service delivery, as highlighted in many of the responses to the survey. A seconded housing professional from the Housing Executive embedded within PBNI would enable direct collaboration, enhance housing access pathways (particularly to temporary accommodation), and improve support for individuals under probation supervision to maintain their accommodation. It is anticipated that this seconded role will

- Enhance PBNI's access to temporary accommodation
- Consider the viability of PBNI having access to a crash-bed facility solely for PBNI service-users
- Provide expert housing advice and support to PBNI staff and service-users
- Develop and assist in the execution of housing plans for individuals with complex accommodation needs
- Facilitate direct communication and referral pathways between NIHE (and Housing Associations) and PBNI
- Identify and escalate to government ministers systemic barriers to housing for this cohort
- Inform strategic planning within both organisations.

A steering group comprising senior representatives from NIHE and PBNI will provide oversight of this initiative, with regular progress reporting, including data on housing outcomes, case impact and learning, and a formal review will be undertaken at the twelve-month point, with recommendations for sustainability or scaling.

Conclusion

This survey has provided data, from the perspective of probation staff, about the scale and impact of accommodation and housing issues on a cohort of

service-users within PBNI. It has provided a snapshot of some of the pressing issues as identified by staff, including that 5 per cent of those service-users included in this survey were currently rough sleeping, street sleeping or needing a crash bed, and that almost 10 per cent were currently accommodated by means of 'sofa surfing' or other inappropriate accommodation. These arrangements add to the chaotic nature of the lifestyles of many of our service-users and make it difficult for them to access employment, education and support without an appropriate address.

Small numbers of service-users were living in hostels and approved premises, which reflects the small number of available beds throughout Northern Ireland.

Finally, almost 10 per cent of service-users were released from prison either without any accommodation or without appropriate accommodation, which makes the reintegration and resettlement of people post-custody extremely challenging. This supports the anecdotal information we have received over recent years from staff about the difficulties in preparing people for release from prison.

The survey has enabled us to use the available data to inform our organisational response and put in place initiatives which we hope will begin to ease the challenges currently faced by service-users and enhance our partnership and collaboration with housing executive colleagues.

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Doing What Matters Most: How Probation Can Contribute to Reducing Reoffending

Gillian Montgomery*

Summary: This paper considers the opportunities for Probation to develop its contribution to preventing reoffending and desistance in the context of a new strategic plan published by the Northern Ireland Executive, prioritising 'safer communities'. For the first time, the strategic vision of government encompasses the need to enhance and strengthen community sentencing in Northern Ireland, and this provides opportunities to contribute more to preventing reoffending. This paper sets out the context in respect of reoffending in Northern Ireland, the academic framework of desistance, PBNI's current contribution to desistance, and operating context and the opportunities for PBNI to contribute further to reducing adult reoffending in light of this new strategic approach.

Keywords: Reducing adult reoffending, cross-government strategy, desistance, theories of desistance, PBNI, community-based sentences, community service.

Introduction

In 2025, the Northern Ireland Executive published its Programme for Government (PfG), *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most*, which outlines its nine priorities for the years ahead. Within priority seven, 'Safer Communities', it commits to developing a cross-governmental strategy to reduce offending and reoffending. Within this strategy there will be a focus on preventing people from entering the justice system, where possible through early intervention and diversion, and when individuals do enter the justice system, an increased use of community sentencing (Northern Ireland Executive, 2025).

There is a clear synergy between this PfG priority and PBNI's remit, role and function. This paper outlines the impact of reoffending on NI society, some of the research in respect of desistance, PBNI's current contribution to desistance and reducing reoffending and, importantly, what we need to do

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to enhance the impact we have on making communities safer in the context of a new strategic direction from the NI Executive.

Reoffending

The *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland* Northern Ireland Audit Office report (NIAO, 2023) outlines that there are approximately 31,000 individuals convicted at court each year or given an out-of-court disposal. In 2021–22, there were 11,724 reoffences committed by 3,386 individuals, with adults committing 10,734 of these reoffences.

The *Cost of Crime in Northern Ireland* report (DOJNI, 2025), whilst not specifically on reoffending, estimated that the cost of crime as a whole to Northern Ireland was £3.4 billion. We also now know, following work completed by the Department of Justice, that the cost of reoffending in Northern Ireland is £374 million.

In 2021–22, 17.6 per cent (3,386) of individuals in the cohort reoffended (adults 17.4 per cent, youths 23.5 per cent), which is a 1.2 percentage point decrease from the previous year (18.8 per cent). At 45.4 per cent, those released from custody had the highest reoffending rate. This was followed by community supervision (28.6 per cent), community other (17.1 per cent) and diversions (15.7 per cent). Across all disposal groups, reoffending rates decreased compared to the previous year's cohort (NISRA, 2024).

It is clear, however, despite moderate reductions in reoffending in recent years, that reoffending remains an issue which costs Northern Ireland economically but, more importantly, in terms of the impact on victims and wider society. Reducing reoffending must be a priority area for the Department of Justice and all organisations tasked with preventing offending and reoffending because of the serious impact that it has on victims, communities, families and the individuals themselves. It is therefore essential that all organisations involved in preventing reoffending understand and align their policies and practices with evidence and research in respect of what works in assisting people to desist from crime.

Academic framework of 'desistance'

Given that the term 'desistance' now permeates nearly all discussions in relation to both criminal justice policy and practice, it is easy to forget its relative infancy. As noted by Maruna (2017), 'As recently as two decades ago, hardly anyone had heard the term, and even the criminologists that created the

concept could not decide how we were going to spell the word' (p. 5). Annison and Moffatt (2014) point out that although there is an unsurprising familiarity with the term 'desistance', given that the fundamental aim of criminal justice policy and practice is to deliver a reduction in offending and reoffending, its actual meaning within the criminal justice system is surprisingly unclear and there is no universally accepted definition of 'desistance from crime'. Within probation practice, it is frequently referred to as the 'cessation of offending', but this is not a universally accepted position. Beck and McGinnis (2022) published a very interesting article on the relationship between probation supervision and desistance, which adds an extra component to consider. Weaver (2019) suggests that the debates surrounding the definition of desistance are reflective of the 'diversity of theoretical conceptualisations of desistance and the challenges of empirically measuring desistance' (p. 642). Whilst desistance from crime is generally accepted as being the 'long term abstinence of criminal behaviour among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behaviour' (McNeill *et al.*, 2012, p. 2), there is significant divergence in views regarding the length of the criminal career the individual had to be initially involved in to be considered a 'desister', the nature and seriousness of the original offences committed, the frequency of offending that had to take place, the seriousness of any potential relapses and how long the individual has to be a 'non-offender' to be considered a 'desister' to establish with any degree of certainty that desistance has occurred.

In recent years, there has also been a change in mindset regarding desistance as an entirely personal journey for the individual, to acknowledging that desistance is much more of a social movement (Barr and Montgomery, 2016; Maruna, 2017).

There is a growing body of research underlining the importance of viewing desistance as a process, supplemented by the burgeoning number of criminologists and indeed practitioners who refer to the desistance 'journey', a progression by which individuals cease offending (i.e. a dynamic interpretation) and sustain and maintain an offence-free lifestyle, as opposed to its being the actual 'outcome' (i.e. a static interpretation):

Since the 2000s, desistance scholars have more commonly come to conceptualise and debate desistance as a process rather than an event or as the moment of crossing an arbitrary threshold.

(Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 435)

The view that desistance is a process/journey is supported by Uggen and Kruttschnitt's (1998) proposal that desistance has two clear elements – the change from offending to non-offending, and then the non-offending becoming a permanent state, that is, the long-term maintenance of non-offending. Maruna (2001) concurs and outlines that the definition of desistance needs to emphasise and focus on the 'maintenance' rather than the ceasing to offend/termination.

The static definition of desistance, which is focused on termination alone, masks the complexities and challenges that the individual has experienced in their journey towards ceasing to offend and has the potential negative consequence of individuals who have lapsed or relapsed into offending behaviour not being offered the support, encouragement and reinforcement they need in periods when they need it most. It can be suggested that the definitions advanced by Bushway *et al.* (2001, 2004) and augmented by Kazemian (2007) are based on a more realistic interpretation of the individual's desistance journey, and challenge academics and practitioners to accept a level of ongoing (re)offending as a norm, without losing belief that the person can change, or losing 'hope' that they will cease offending.

Primary, secondary and tertiary desistance

'Primary desistance denotes the cessation of offending behaviour, including temporary absences or gaps in the commission of crime' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 435), recognising that desistance is a process/journey and that non-permanency is a reality.

Farrall and Maruna (2004) define secondary desistance as the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the adoption of a non-offending identity, which signifies that the person is compliant with the law and 'social norms'. Graham and McNeill (2017) outline that the negative effect of 'labelling' starts to be reversed when people identify themselves and, more importantly, are identified by others as something other than an 'offender first'. Feedback from PBNI's service-users involved with the service-user involvement groups strongly supports this notion. Being viewed by PBNI as worthy of being asked for their feedback supports this identity shift.

McNeill's (2016) tertiary desistance refers 'not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but in shifts to one's sense of belonging to a community' (p. 201). This reinforces the importance of belonging, of (re)integration into communities, of a sense of self and, importantly, being able to receive and being in receipt of

rights and opportunities available to all (Graham and McNeill, 2017). Tertiary desistance is posited as the ultimate, the end goal where the previous 'offending self' pales into insignificance. However, given the increasing focus and attention to 'post-punishment' punishment, by virtue of disclosures of previous offending and disqualification from many aspects of life,

fuelled by populist punitiveness (Bottoms, 1995; Garland, 2013), the sobering reality is that a significant number of people with convictions will never be allowed to realise tertiary desistance.

(Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 436)

The final Draft Justice Bill in Northern Ireland may go some way to addressing some of these issues.

Brief overview of the theories of desistance

Individual theories – maturational/agentive

The theories that fall into the maturational/agentive theoretical perspective suggest that as people who have offended get older, i.e. enter their late twenties, early thirties, there is a marked decline and eventual cessation of criminal behaviour that commenced in their adolescent years (Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983; Moffit, 1993). The earliest proponents of this perspective, Glueck and Glueck, stated in 1937,

the physical and mental changes which enter into the natural process of maturation offer a chief explanation of improvement of conduct with the passing of years.

(Glueck and Glueck, 1937, p. 149)

Since this time, the focus on a decline in offending as age increases has been front and centre of criminological studies and debate. The age crime curve outlines a steep incline peaking in late teen/early adulthood and declining over the remaining ages, substantiating that most individuals desist as part of the 'natural' ageing and maturation process (Uggen, 2000; Laub and Sampson, 2001) and supporting the sentiment that 'violence is a young man's vice: it has been said that the most effective crime fighting tool is a 30th Birthday' (*Times Magazine*, 1994). Within this school of thought, there is consensus that offending will decline with age and 'that the vast majority of those people who

start to offend eventually cease' (McNeill *et al.*, 2012), yet there is still very little consensus regarding the cause of this decline. The view that 'ageing is the only factor that emerges as significant in the reformatory process' (Glueck and Glueck, 1937, p. 105) is, however, too simplistic and masks the fact that individuals desist at various times in their lives and at various rates (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Neither does it explain the individual who committed their first offence, i.e. fraud, at the age of 40 years, the 60-year-old female shoplifter, or the prolific car crime 'offender' in their fifties. Nor does it unpack the ageing process or the impact of various biological changes, social interactions or general life experience that occur with age: 'age indexes a range of different variables and in itself is not an explanation for change' (Maruna, 1997, p. 3). As of March 2023, 23 per cent of those supervised by PBNI were in the 20–29 age bracket and 39 per cent were in the 30–39 age bracket. This is a significant shift from 2013 when the figures were reversed, with significantly more falling into the 20–29 age bracket than were in the 30–39 cohort (PBNI, 2025a). Whilst it is difficult to provide a clear explanation for this change in age profile on PBNI's caseload, it does misalign with the widely accepted age/crime curve.

Social and structural theories – sociogenic

Social learning theory, which is used to describe both why someone starts offending and why they stop offending, suggests that it is the same variables that lead someone into crime that, when reversed, lead to the cessation of offending (Akers, 1990; Cromwell *et al.*, 1991; Warr, 1998). For example,

differential association with non-criminal peers, less exposure to, or opportunities to model or imitate criminal behaviour and the development of attitudes favourable to desistance.

(Weaver, 2019, p. 646)

One of the strengths of social learning is that it applies equally to desistance from crime and to other problematic behaviours such as drug misuse and alcohol misuse. Whilst this is positive, the approach is still lacking in that it does not account for the onset of commission of crime in someone who has a stable upbringing, prosocial peers and role models, some of the characteristics more frequently evident in some white-collar crime.

Practitioners frequently focus on the influences of social control, including family, education and employment, when trying to encourage desistance.

However, individuals are more likely to gain employment after they have stopped/ceased offending, as opposed to employment causing desistance; it is the impact of employment on the individual's sense of self, their goals and priorities that can explain the link between employment and desistance. Similarly, Giordano *et al.* (2002), whilst acknowledging the importance of family and friendship, and social bonds, in encouraging desistance, outline that positive social bonds have a positive influence on how the individual sees themselves, their sense of self and their sense of identity, as well as shaping and influencing how they use their free time, as opposed to being the actual trigger for desistance. Further, it is important to note the gender difference when considering the importance of relationships/marriage; Sampson and Laub (1993) noted that a stable relationship is conducive to positive behavioural change in men. However, the same relationship can be a hindrance for desistance for women, and independence from a relationship actually promoted desistance (Leverentz, 2006).

This therefore suggests that desistance cannot be explained or triggered exclusively by internal factors such as age, or external factors such as gaining employment, but rather a combination of the two, which result in changes to both personal identity and perceptions of social identity, with notable synergy with the concepts of secondary and tertiary desistance (Maruna, 1997; McNeill, 2006) discussed above. It is important, however, not to construct the individual as a passive responder to these social factors, without considering the impact of individual circumstances (Farrall and Bowling, 1999).

Identity theories

Identity theories highlight 'the subjective dimensions associated with ageing, human development and changing social bonds' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 439). To explore the impact of being a parent, as an example, individuals involved in the criminal justice system frequently link their becoming a parent with the cessation (temporary or otherwise) in their offending behaviour, yet there are many individuals who could be termed persistent 'offenders' who have children. Therefore, becoming a parent is not a trigger or cause of desistance, rather it is the subjective value the individual places on being a parent that is important in modifying the trajectory of life. Identity theories are useful when trying to explain desistance as they are more unique to the individual and avoid overgeneralisations about the causal or triggering effect of, for example, becoming a parent (Farrall, 2002; Paternoster and Bushway,

2009). Understanding the cognitive shift in any situational change is critical to understanding the associated change in behaviour (Giordano *et al.*, 2002). Graham and McNeill (2017) helpfully highlight that 'identity theories draw attention to the de-labelling process of becoming known as someone or something else; that is, something other than the stigmatising labels of "offender" or even "ex-offender"' (Graham and McNeill, 2017, p. 439), creating a sense of citizenship and belonging. The social opportunities that employment/marriage etc. present to the individual are hooks for identity change and, ultimately, desistance. The more social bonds grow, the greater the incentive to avoid offending, to desist, as there is too much at stake for the individual to lose, including their positive perception of self and their 'new' identity as a 'family man', 'good mother', or 'hard worker'. Further, when individuals take on a role or are even given the opportunity to apply for a role that is altruistic in nature, be that with or without financial reward, the impact of 'identity' generation is enhanced (Graham and White, 2015). Whilst avoiding overgeneralisations that other theories can be accused of, identity theories still leave gaps and questions and do not fill all the voids left. To give one example, identity theories do not fully explain why an individual who has desisted for a period of time, who has a stable family life, employment and social bonds – all factors linked to their initial decision to stop offending or desist – might relapse into offending behaviour.

Situational theories

Bottoms (2014) 'observes that the situational and spatial dynamics of desistance, whilst barely featuring in the criminal careers literature, deserve attention in their own right'. Offending behaviour is influenced by more than age, social control and social bonds, but also by the social and physical environment in which people are 'situated'. Behaviour can change, for better or for worse, when the surrounding environment is changed. Farrall *et al.* (2014) further this proposition: 'desistance is not just about no longer offending, it is also about adopting a different set of routines which take individuals to very different places from when they used to offend'. They acknowledge that there is an element of personal choice, and imposed changes on a social or physical environment are unlikely in themselves to create desistance. For example, they found that those who have desisted from crime 'appeared to consciously create routines for themselves and others' (p. 173). Given the struggles that many individuals who have offended have in making rational choices in any

and, indeed, all areas of their lives, this approach has been criticised for underplaying the 'deficiencies' that these individuals have in relation to decision-making (Healy, 2013). Felson (1986) stated that the issue with the focus on choice and agency is that people make choices, but they cannot choose the choices available to them. Desistance is therefore more likely to occur or commence through an 'interplay between individual choice, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual' (Farrall and Bowling, 1999, p. 261).

PBNI's current contribution to desistance, and operating context

Probation is a central part of the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland and PBNI is responsible for the supervision of individuals serving a community sentence and those who have been released from prison subject to licence, currently over 4,100 individuals (this number includes those currently in custody who will ultimately be supervised).¹ As part of the supervision of orders and licences, PBNI delivers a suite of programmes and brief interventions targeted at the individual's offending needs. PBNI is responsible for preparing pre-sentence reports for Magistrates, Crown and Appeal Courts to assist sentencers in imposing the most appropriate sentences, and completion of reports for the Parole Commissioners; over 3,000 reports, in total, are completed annually. PBNI also works in prisons, preparing people for release into the community, and provides an information service for victims of crime, with over 500 registered victims, and it delivers restorative interventions where appropriate. This will be an increasing area of work in the future. It must all be seen in the context that PBNI is a demand-led service, with finite resources.

The landscape within which Probation operates is constantly evolving and becoming increasingly complex. More service-users are presenting with significant mental health conditions, poly drug use/addictions and issues with accommodation. Service-users have complex needs, and the causes of their offending behaviour are rooted in socio-economic issues, including poverty, poor mental health, and addiction. Access to sustainable and appropriate housing for those on probation and those leaving custody is a growing issue. Previously, the NI Audit Office Report highlighted the need for increased cross-government working along with a more clearly defined strategic direction to focus on the systemic issues, which are making it more difficult to

¹ Statistics on annual and quarterly figures can be found on the Probation Board website at <https://www.pbni.org.uk/statistics-and-research>

rehabilitate 'hard-to-reach' prolific 'offenders' trapped in a cycle of offending and reoffending (NIAO, 2023, p. 15). Most recently, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on *Reducing Adult Reoffending in Northern Ireland*, published in June 2025, highlights the need to finalise the development of a cross-departmental offending and reoffending strategy, which should have a central focus on victims, and which takes cognisance of and aligns with the existing strategies and initiatives across key stakeholders (NIA, 2025, p. 13).

Bearing in mind the evidence and research in respect of desistance, how can PBNI adapt its practice and influence policy to contribute over the course of the next three years to reducing adult reoffending?

PBNI's future contribution to reducing adult reoffending

There are a number of ways in which Probation could contribute further to reducing adult reoffending. However, these are dependent upon having the right investment, support and policy and legislative framework in place.

Increased use of community-based sentences as an alternative to short prison sentences

There are currently three community orders that can be imposed by the courts in Northern Ireland. They are a Probation Order, a Community Service Order (CSO) and a Combination Order (including the Enhanced Combination Order). Local and international evidence (including reoffending statistics) show that community sentences are more effective than short prison sentences at reducing reoffending (NISRA, 2024). Probation supports the use of custody as a necessary means to manage those who pose a risk of serious harm. It is, however, recognised that imprisonment negatively impacts the support structures and those positive 'social bonds' that may prevent people from offending or reoffending, such as family relationships, accommodation and employment.

Enhanced Combination Orders (ECOs), which were implemented initially in 2015 in two court areas, deliver positive outcomes and support desistance and rehabilitation, as evidenced by research and evaluations.² As an alternative to a short prison sentence, it is an example of an effective mechanism to reduce demand on prisons and improve outcomes for individuals and wider society. PBNI's budget allocation for 2025–26 has

² Access all the evaluations on Enhanced Combination Orders at <https://www.pbni.org.uk/problem-solving-justice#toc-2>

allowed the organisation to roll out the use of ECOs to a third court area and, for the first time in ten years, enhance our commitment to ECOs. It is our ambition to provide this intensive community order to all court areas of Northern Ireland, but it will take investment to enable us to provide it throughout the jurisdiction. The PAC (2025) recommendation for the Department of Justice to make the full roll-out of the ECO programme across Northern Ireland a key priority to be delivered within the next eighteen months is therefore welcomed (NIA, 2025, p. 14). Longer-term investment in ECOs will provide more positive outcomes for individuals and take pressure off the increasing prison population in Northern Ireland.

Increased use of community service

Arguably, the most well-known form of community sentence is community service, often depicted in the media by images of individuals undertaking manual work. Community Service (CS) is one of the most successful orders in terms of preventing reoffending in Northern Ireland. The most recent reoffending rates tell us that 24.8 per cent of those undertaking CS will reoffend within the twelve months following sentence. That means that 75 per cent of those receiving CSOs will not reoffend in the next twelve months. This must be seen in the context of the seriousness of the behaviour for which a standalone CSO is imposed; CSOs are frequently imposed when the individual does not present with other issues that require probation intervention. Further, whilst not directly comparable, the reoffending rate for those being released from custody having served a sentence of twelve months or less is 59.5 per cent. The numbers of CSOs imposed by the judiciary in NI has seen a year-on-year reduction over the past ten years. In 2010, CSOs made up 20 per cent of the PBNI caseload. In 2024, they made up just over 8 per cent of the caseload.

PBNI is committed to work with the Judiciary to increase the number of CSOs imposed. There is more to do to enhance judicial confidence in these orders. A range of work placements needs to be available that provide appropriate options for the people and a creative approach to ensuring that people undertake fulfilling and meaningful work that benefits local communities. PBNI servicer-users self-report that undertaking meaningful community service enhances their sense of 'citizenship and belonging' as they are able to give something back to their local community. In the course of the next twelve months following a public relaunch of our community service strategy, PBNI will be considering how to enhance the current Community Service Order to make this option more attractive to the Judiciary.

In our neighbouring jurisdiction, the Republic of Ireland, Section 3 of the Criminal Justice (Community Service) Act, 1983 (as amended by the Criminal Justice (Community Service) (Amendment) Act, 2011) provides that a court must consider a community service order in cases where that court is of the view that a period of imprisonment of twelve months or less is an appropriate sentence for the offence committed. Similar legislation does not currently exist in Northern Ireland, and it may be worth considering in detail the impact and outcomes of this legislation in the Republic of Ireland and whether a similar legislative framework would be beneficial in Northern Ireland.

Post-release support

We know that, for those leaving prison, additional assistance is needed to support desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration into communities. It allows individuals to make positive connections in their communities, helps to prevent reoffending and supports more positive outcomes for the individuals and, in turn, local communities.

Desistance theory emphasises the need for a dynamic, person-centred approach to supervise and support individuals following their release from custody. The challenge of the desistance journey is one that transcends the boundaries of criminal justice institutions and organisations, incorporating the need to support and repair relationships within families, communities and society. Anecdotal evidence suggests that individuals are less likely to reoffend if they can access appropriate, practical support and develop prosocial bonds as they return to the community. More consistent and, indeed, increased availability of support services for those leaving custody is therefore required. Changes such as not releasing individuals on a Friday or Saturday (which requires new legislation in Northern Ireland) and ensuring that those leaving custody have sufficient access to prescribed medication and appropriate accommodation would have significant impact. There are undoubtedly lessons to learn from recent legislation introduced in Scotland, the Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland) Act, 2023, which states that prisoners should not be released on certain days of the week, in order to aid their rehabilitation. PBNI would be keen to examine similar possibilities for Northern Ireland.

Peer mentoring

There is a growing body of research and evidence to support the use of peer mentoring for those involved in the criminal justice system and those released

from custody. PBNI has some experience of mentoring via previous programmes like the 'Transitions Project', 'Reset' and 'Through the Gate', but utilising the skills of those with lived experience of the justice system is a next step that should be actively considered.

'Transitions' is a peer-mentoring programme delivered by NIACRO, which aims to help reduce offending, improve community safety and, at an individual level, improve resettlement and reduce the potential for return to custody for those transitioning from custody back into their community. It is intended to improve life management, motivational skills, health/lifestyle, and employment prospects for participants. Mentors provide a one-to-one, tailored mentoring service to individuals being released from custody who will be facing significant difficulties upon release. PBNI issued a funding call for a 'Through the Gate' service in 2024, building upon the same principles of the programme delivered by NIACRO Transitions at that time. NIACRO was successful in obtaining this contract to deliver a two-year programme to a target of sixty participants per annum. Transitions is a peer-mentoring programme for service-users, male and female, aged 30 plus (under 30s delivered through NIACRO Aspire community engagement, i.e. individuals who do not have a court order/licence) across Northern Ireland, who require peer-mentoring support to assist their transition back into the community following release from custody during a critical period, with the aim of aiding their successful resettlement and reducing reoffending. A 1:1 tailored programme is delivered to help reduce reoffending by assisting with motivational skills, improving health/lifestyle, supporting emotional wellbeing, and providing signposting and assistance with increasing employment prospects for participants for up to twelve weeks post-release.

This is an area where PBNI can potentially partner with other agencies who have more experience in this area of work. The experience of HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) Engaging People on Probation (EPOP) policy, which includes the use of volunteers and the employment of service-users, should also be carefully explored.

Early intervention

As a result of funding challenges, PBNI is currently in a position to provide only very limited early intervention, most notably the Promoting Positive Relationships Programme (PPRP), which provides men alleged to be abusive towards their partners with the opportunity to engage in an intervention programme aimed at developing knowledge and skills in which to develop

healthy, non-abusive relationships. This is a significant contribution toward the NI Executive *End Violence Against Women and Girls* strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2024). PBNI's unique contribution towards this strategy should be further explored and considered. One tangible suggestion is to develop and deliver a 'healthy relationship' intervention to assist service-users in identifying issues in their intimate relationships at the earliest opportunity. This early intervention should be developed and co-produced with service-users to maximise its overall effectiveness. Existing service-user groups provide a mechanism for this. It is an area of development which requires some limited financial support and, over the course of the next three years, it will be considered if this can be achieved within our resources.

Post-supervision support

A further area where PBNI could potentially make a contribution to reducing reoffending is by offering post-supervision support to service-users who have completed their licence/orders. It is not unusual to hear of service-users who 'self-sabotage' when they are coming near the end of their order/licence period. These individuals, who may be socially isolated, rely on the support of PBNI and, on occasion, reoffend to ensure that they retain the support of and contact with PBNI. Through partnering with community and voluntary sector, or through increased resources for PBNI service-user groups, it may be possible to plug this gap.

Increased use of data and evidence

The NIAO report points to a need for more 'intelligent' use of information in, and beyond, the criminal justice system. In 2024, PBNI commissioned the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) to complete a data linkage project to help determine the effectiveness of the Assessment, Case Management and Evaluation system (ACE) assessment tool (NISRA, 2025).

Data for individuals supervised by PBNI during 2019–20 and 2020–21 was linked with the Department of Justice (DoJ) reoffending dataset, and analysis carried out in relation to gender, age, disposal type and number of reoffences. Overall, it was determined that ACE assessments are a significant predictor of reoffending behaviour (PBNI, 2025b).

Over the coming year, PBNI will undertake work to enhance our gathering and use of such data and build on the research work undertaken in respect of ACE outcomes, to enable us to prioritise and target service-users with whom the most difference can be made.

Conclusion

The seven areas identified above where PBNI could do more to contribute to reducing reoffending require investment, legislative change (in some areas) and collaboration with partners across government. Underpinning these areas is the need to address public perception of what effective sentencing is. It is important to note that there are other initiatives led by the Department of Justice, now supported by PAC (NIA, 2025), where PBNI will play a contributory part in reducing reoffending. These are the development of electronic monitoring that utilises the latest technologies, and developing bail support and bail information schemes for females and males (NIA, 2025, p. 15).

In order to tackle the myths around community sentencing and the work of probation, and help to build public understanding about the benefits and positive impacts of community sentencing and rehabilitative work undertaken in the community, there is a requirement for a co-ordinated approach across the justice system to engagement and public awareness work.

Judicial confidence, stakeholder confidence and wider public confidence are critical if the opportunities presented in our new Programme for Government are to be maximised and do not only what matters most, but what impacts most on all our communities in Northern Ireland.

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Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit: A Human Rights and Equality-Led Approach to Supporting Desistance

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Summary: The Probation Service Strategy Statement 2021–2023, the precursor to the current Strategy Statement, began a process of restructuring the Probation Service’s approach to the multiple complex issues involved in criminal behaviour. Rooted in the belief that social inclusion factors such as addiction, poor mental health, and homelessness can be responded to more effectively through a revised and structured approach, a new Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU) was established to oversee the effective co-ordination and implementation of the Probation Service’s work in these areas. The role of SIRU is to draw together the work of the Probation Service across issues such as those outlined above, in order to ensure a consistent and coherent approach, leading to better outcomes for everyone engaged with our service. This is in response to an understanding and appreciation of the social context and the ways in which the above needs may interrelate and require complex and innovative solutions, rather than thinking of rehabilitation solely as one of individual treatment to reduce/remove criminogenic risk. The Unit aims to ensure that our work is aligned with wider social inclusion policy directions, in order to maximise opportunities to support reintegration and thereby reduce reoffending. The Unit is grounded in the Probation Service values of accountability; collaboration; compassion; empowerment; and inclusivity. Flowing from these, the Unit also aims to embody the values of equity and progress. This article will focus on SIRU’s strategic goals, setting out the initiatives and partnerships that will support them, and outlining how their achievement will support the operational outcomes of the Probation Service.

Keywords: Inclusion, reintegration, community.

Introduction

Reintegration is a core objective of probation supervision. The Irish Probation Framework (IPF) sets out reintegration via its inter-reliant symbolic and practical

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dimensions.¹ Regarding the former, the IPF highlights the acceptance of people who have previously committed offences as integrated members of their respective communities. In terms of practical supports, the IPF refers to enabling people who have previously committed offences to access prosocial opportunities such as housing, education and employment (Robinson, 2007).

However, barriers to accessing prosocial opportunities for people under probation supervision are often beyond the direct control of the Probation Service and are shaped by experiences of poverty and social exclusion. To address social-exclusion-related barriers to reintegration, and the relationship between social exclusion and the underlying causes of crime more generally, the Probation Service began to develop capacity in the area of *social inclusion*² with the establishment in 2022 of the Social Inclusion and Reintegration Unit (SIRU).³

For the Probation Service, social inclusion refers to the process of enabling individuals, particularly those who have offended or are at risk of offending, to participate in society by removing barriers and supporting access in areas such as education, employment, housing, health and community engagement. SIRU interprets social inclusion to mean a proactive effort to support the reintegration into society of people who have offended, by promoting access to essential services and opportunities, reducing marginalisation, and fostering a sense of belonging, responsibility and participation in community life.

Although SIRU is a small unit within the wider Probation Service structure, it has the potential to play a significant role in supporting the achievement of the Probation Service's strategic goals and embedding a culture of social inclusion. The Unit is grounded in the Probation Service's core values of accountability, collaboration, compassion, empowerment and inclusivity,⁴ and cascading from these comes the value of equity. Equity is recognising that everyone has different needs, backgrounds, and barriers – and giving people the specific support they need to succeed. By promoting equity, SIRU aims to ensure that support is fair and inclusive – not just equal. SIRU will ensure that these values are consistently central to the Unit's work plan and decision-making.

1 The IPF is a bespoke model of probation practice that is evidence informed, underpinned by research, and aims to deliver the best possible outcomes for clients.

2 The Department of Social Protection *Road Map for Social Inclusion 2020–2025* defines Social Inclusion as follows: 'Social Inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally.'

3 An APPO was appointed to the Unit in November 2022, while one HEO was recruited in July 2024 and an additional HEO recruited in November 2024.

4 Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

This article illustrates the role that SIRU will play to support the Probation Service, both in its day-to-day work and in the achievement of its strategic goals. We begin by summarising work undertaken by the Unit to date, outlining the prioritisation of key social-inclusion-related work streams, and the approach adopted by SIRU in identifying barriers and advancing solutions. We then discuss the potential value of this work to the Probation Service, our clients and community safety.

Elevating stakeholder voices: Informing SIRU's work

The work of SIRU is aligned to Probation Service strategic policy as well as wider Government social inclusion policy. However, at the heart of the Unit's work is the goal of enabling Probation Service staff to support people engaged with probation. Ultimately, our aim is to improve outcomes for our clients and bolster their efforts to achieve desistance and reintegration. This outlook shaped the establishment of SIRU's strategic goals.

A key consideration in the early development of the Unit was a commitment to ensuring that the voice of those who have experience of engaging with the Probation Service informs policy and practice. In March and April 2024, a series of consultation sessions were held with people with lived experience of probation supervision. The first of these took place in the Probation Service's offices at Haymarket, Smithfield, in Dublin, and was co-ordinated by an external facilitator, with the primary focus being to inform the development of the Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

The second consultation, which involved twenty-two participants with lived experience of probation supervision, representative of gender and geographic diversity, was held at a neutral venue. Importantly, this session was co-designed and co-facilitated by SIRU and a lived-experience advisor. This collaboration significantly improved interpersonal trust and open communication, a noted benefit of peer involvement (Swirak and Quinn, 2023). A SWOT analysis of Probation Service engagement was utilised to focus participants' feedback, which highlighted strengths including positive and supportive relationships with Probation Officers; weaknesses such as systematic barriers to engagement; an opportunity to utilise lived experience to support engagement and trust-building; and a threat to effective practice in the form of multi-agency-related obstacles and retraumatising experiences. It is noteworthy that experiences of poverty and social exclusion were present within each of these themes.

Participants noted compassion and empathy on the part of Probation Officers with regard to their previous experiences. However, the consistent reality emerged repeatedly of having to navigate probation engagement alongside issues related to housing instability, addiction and mental health support needs, and childcare and transport costs. These issues raised barriers to engagement, which itself can raise a barrier to trust-building with support agencies, including the Probation Service. This feedback is crucial to SIRU in our work to support the Probation Service in navigating complex issues affecting clients in its work to support desistance and reintegration.

In addition to consulting those with lived experience of Probation Service engagement, the SIRU team engaged in regional focus groups with staff to identify key challenges affecting their client group, with regard to the remit of the Unit. Housing and homelessness arose as the most prominent social-inclusion-related challenge identified by staff across the Probation Service, which inhibits the successful supervision of clients and their ability to support desistance effectively. This issue was followed by mental health, and then addiction. Of note, staff raised the absence of multi-agency co-ordination, which can result in clients falling between gaps; this aligned with the feedback from those with lived experience regarding multi-agency-related obstacles and retraumatising experiences.

It is crucial to SIRU that our work is driven by the voice of our key stakeholders, mindful of the challenges that staff face daily when supporting clients, and for clients in striving to live prosocial lives and successfully reintegrate into their communities. The themes identified above shaped the development of SIRU's inaugural work plan: prioritising work to embed lived experience within the work of the Probation Service; addressing the specific needs of women engaged with the Probation Service; and working to improve access to housing stability for our clients at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

Empowering clients: Embedding lived experience

The Probation Service, in its current Statement of Strategy, has committed to embarking on a journey to embed lived experience, a process led by SIRU:

Pillar 4: Enabling Social Inclusion – Develop mechanisms to embed lived experience, victim and community voices to inform and enrich our work.⁵

5 Probation Service Statement of Strategy 2024–2026.

The benefits of utilising lived experience within the criminal justice system, as well as across other areas of social inclusion, are well grounded and the practice has been embedded in the voluntary sector to great effect (Irish Red Cross, 2019a; TPI, 2019a; Buck, 2021; Hoey *et al.*, 2022; Villani *et al.*, 2023; English, 2024).⁶ The ongoing evolution of this work has resulted in the development of toolkits and standards frameworks to support the embedding of lived experience across sectors including health (Naughton *et al.*, 2015; Kelly and O'Neill, 2024), housing (Housing First National Office, 2024) and the criminal justice sector (Irish Red Cross, 2019b; TPI, 2019b).

A core action with regard to lived experience in the current *Probation Service Action Plan* is to co-design and establish a consultative forum with people with experience of probation supervision. A consultative forum is envisioned to facilitate the regular involvement of lived experience voices in the development of Probation Service practice, policy and training. Led by SIRU, in December 2024, the Probation Service made a call for nominations for *Lived Experience Advisors* to support the co-design of a consultative forum – an important component to ensure end-user engagement throughout the design process. A significant number of nominations were received from Probation Service operational staff and Probation-funded community-based organisations, as well as self-referrals directly from former clients. Three advisors with extensive experience working in health and criminal justice settings in positions such as peer support workers and training consultants, as well as reflecting geographic and gender diversity, were recruited. Throughout 2025, the lived experience advisors have worked alongside SIRU and the Probation Service's Lived Experience Working Group, in designing workshops to develop the design for a structured forum that can identify systemic barriers faced by clients and inform development of probation interventions and programmes. This process has addressed areas such as supporting forum membership, establishing clear purpose and value, and ensuring whole-of-organisation engagement.

In addition to this important work to embed lived experience within the Probation Service, the Service is committed to empowering persons who wish to use their experience of engaging with the criminal justice system to make a positive impact in their communities. Facilitating this pathway, the Lived Experience Action Development (LEAD) Programme is a Probation Service

⁶ Examples of peer-led organisations currently working in the Irish criminal justice system are Care After Prison, which is a national peer-led criminal justice charity supporting people affected by imprisonment, current and former offenders and their families, and Spéire Nua, which is a project assisting people with criminal convictions to access the labour market.

funded programme delivered by Equal Ireland, PACE Ireland, The Turnaround Project, and Spéire Nua. This seven-week programme is designed by individuals with lived experience for individuals with lived experience, and will develop practical leadership, communication, mentoring and facilitation skills, and build confidence among participants. The pilot programme commenced in Q2 2025 and concluded in August 2025, and was presented on by the LEAD Experts by Experience group at the 16th Irish North/South Criminology Conference hosted by Maynooth University in June 2025.

Working with women

The nexus between gender-related marginalisation and the criminal justice system has been highlighted in previous research on the relationship between homelessness and criminal behaviour, which featured in this journal, carried out by Mayock and Sheridan (2013). Within this research, a picture clearly emerged of the institutional cycle tied to marginalisation and social exclusion. Participants experienced significant educational disruption during childhood, as well as experiences of domestic violence and abuse, and reported heavy or dependent substance use along with poor mental health (Mayock and Sheridan, 2013). Such experiences of trauma and adversity have also been found amongst violent female offenders (Al Hassan, 2021).

The Probation Service recognises that interventions for women need to be gender-sensitive and trauma-responsive, as experiences of trauma and adversity are most often at the root of women's pathways to social exclusion and criminal behaviour. It is for this reason that the Probation Service has regularly sought to further develop and improve its policies and practice with regard to women (Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, 2014; Probation Service, 2015; Probation Service, 2016; Probation Service, 2021).

The Probation Service's current work in this area is underpinned by both the *Review of Policy Options for Prisons and Penal Reform 2022–2024* and the *Probation Strategy Statement 2024–2026*. The Probation Service is committed to strengthening gender-specific initiatives and developing new evidence-informed proposals that respond holistically and compassionately to the needs of women who offend. The Probation Service has committed to the development of a new gender-responsive Action Plan. SIRU is currently leading the development of this evidence-informed, trauma-aware Action Plan for working with women with the WISE (Women's Inclusion, Strength and Engagement) Group, formerly known as the Women's Strategy Group.

The input and lived experience of women who have engaged with the Probation Service are critical to the integrity and appropriateness of this Action Plan. Other initiatives underway and in development include the Supervised Temporary Release (STR) Team attached to Limerick Prison, transitional accommodation provision for women in the Southwest and the Traveller Women Community Service pilot in Cork.

Housing and homelessness

As noted above, housing and homelessness arose as the most prominent social-inclusion-related challenge identified by staff across the Probation Service, which can inhibit the successful supervision of clients and their ability to support desistance effectively. The relationship between housing and homelessness and criminal justice system engagement is well documented (Geiran, 2004; Gulati *et al.*, 2019; Seymour, 2004), and it is well recognised that a risk of homelessness faced by persons subject to Probation Service supervision and/or leaving prison has a significant negative impact upon the potential success of criminal justice interventions, such as supervision orders and associated support services aimed at achieving desistance (Seymour and Costello, 2005).

However, since the development of an understanding of this link in an Irish context, the scale of homelessness in Ireland has risen considerably,⁷ with different cohorts experiencing increased levels of risk. Much like homelessness, patterns of criminal justice involvement vary across populations. Across Europe, evidence has found that there exists a small sub-cohort within homelessness, which is associated with long-term and recurrent experiences of homelessness and frequent contact with the criminal justice system (CJS). The interaction of these factors can create an institutional cycle or 'revolving door' for this subpopulation, characterised by recidivism and recurrent periods of homelessness (Hrast *et al.*, 2023). It is within this context that SIRU has commenced its work to support the Probation Service and its clients to navigate this challenge.

During 2024 and 2025, SIRU engaged in consultation with Probation Service colleagues, including those working closest to this issue in the Dublin Homeless Team and the Sex Offender Resettlement Team, as well as the

⁷ In the decade since data on the number of people residing in emergency homeless accommodation was made available by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the number of adults recorded as homeless in Ireland increased by 315 per cent, from 2,385 in June 2014 to 9,899 in June 2024.

Probation Service representative on the Criminal Justice Housing First Pilot Steering Group. The Unit also consulted with colleagues in the Housing Agency, Local Authorities, the HSE, and homeless service providers across Ireland. This engagement informed the development by SIRU of a housing and homelessness position paper, for consideration by the Probation Service leadership team, which included: recommendations on the improvement of data collection; the consolidation of data-sharing agreements with key stakeholders such as Local Authorities; improved co-ordination of interagency engagement to ensure geographic consistency; and a review of progression outcomes from existing Probation-funded accommodation options to inform any future developments in this area.

In addition to advancing the implementation of a number of these recommendations, SIRU has engaged closely with the Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration (DoJ) to inform the forthcoming academic research on the scale and impacts of homelessness in the CJS, which was commissioned by DoJ in 2024. The Unit is also co-ordinating an independent evaluation of the Criminal Justice Housing First Pilot Programme⁸ on behalf of our partners in the Irish Prison Service and Dublin Region Homelessness Executive. Housing First is an internationally recognised, evidence-based solution for people experiencing long-term homelessness, with complex needs such as mental health issues, and substance misuse or addiction. The model includes the provision of secure housing and visiting housing and health supports (Tsemberis, 2020). The pilot programme specifically targeted those in the criminal justice sector presenting as experiencing long-term homelessness, with a range of complex needs. This evaluation will inform the future engagement of the criminal justice system in this vitally important approach to tackling long-term homelessness.

As is the case with many of the prospective social-inclusion-related issues that SIRU and the Probation Service engage with, housing and homelessness relate to a complex issue that is not within the direct control of the Probation Service and relies upon collaboration with external statutory and non-statutory agencies and bodies. SIRU will support the Probation Service to ensure that its engagement and strategic collaboration on these issues are as

⁸ The Housing First Criminal Justice Pilot Programme operated from 2020 to 2024, designed for those leaving prison and/or subject to Probation Service supervision presenting as homeless and at acute risk of becoming entrenched in emergency homeless services due to a combination of mental health, physical health and substance misuse issues. The Pilot Programme is a criminal justice specific stand to Ireland's Housing First Programme. As of April 2025, there are 1,060 people in Housing First tenancies in Ireland.

effective as possible in supporting the delivery of the best possible outcomes for our clients, and community safety.

The value of a social-inclusion-focused approach

The establishment of SIRU adds substantial value across strategic and operational organisational functions. The model of work of the Unit to address issues such as those outlined above is national in scope and focuses on advocating for and informing strategic policy change which can benefit many clients rather than that of individual case management. The Unit can operate as a bridge between operational practice and wider social policy, ensuring that probation work aligns with national strategies on social inclusion, as well as supporting the co-ordination of collaborative interagency work essential to addressing social-inclusion-related issues. Taking a helicopter view of operational barriers impacting on the work of colleagues engaging in the supervision of community sanctions, and connecting these barriers to opportunities presented by national strategies or solutions facilitated through interagency collaboration in other local or regional contexts, SIRU can support the development of a cohesive and consistent approach to problem solving.

Rather than responding in isolation to issues like addiction, mental health problems or homelessness, the Unit facilitates an integrated approach, which is also deeply cognisant of the voices of those experiencing these issues. This leads to more consistent, coherent, and ultimately more impactful, responses, which supports ensuring the best outcomes for clients. While it is acknowledged that SIRU is still in its infancy, the Unit has the potential to provide a central framework for aligning and co-ordinating social-inclusion initiatives across the Probation Service.

SIRU ultimately works to embed the value of equity within probation practice, aiming to ensure geographic parity with regard to service provision and connection to necessary supports. Such a person-centred approach echoes the principles of the Irish Probation Framework, ensuring more responsive service delivery that reflects the experiences of clients, especially those with intersecting needs. The Unit's integration and promotion of lived experience into its development and work planning aims to deliver both practical and cultural benefits to the Service that enhance the effectiveness, relevance and legitimacy of the Service's work. By supporting effective reintegration and reducing marginalisation, SIRU enhances the Service's contribution to safer communities and fewer victims.

Conclusion

Since its establishment, SIRU has emerged as a key driver in embedding social inclusion within the Probation Service. The Unit has begun to develop a more co-ordinated, inclusive and responsive approach to addressing the broader social determinants of offending. SIRU development has adopted a multi-year, multi-project approach to identifying social-inclusion barriers and possible strategic solutions, as well as establishing crucial lines of communication with statutory and non-statutory agencies and organisations. SIRU has already demonstrated its value in leading work related to lived experience, working with women who offend, and housing and homelessness, and aims to further this approach in areas such as substance misuse and addiction, mental health issues, and race and ethnicity.

SIRU can support the Probation Service to ensure that the voices of our most vulnerable clients, who experience marginalisation and social exclusion, are both heard and centred in the development of policy and probation interventions.

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Book Reviews

Becoming a Social Work Manager¹

Angie Bartoli

St Albans, Herts: Critical Publishing, 2025

ISBN: 978-1-915713-75-9, 132 pages, paperback, £15.99

‘Leadership in social work isn’t about power – it’s about people.’ This is the central theme of Angie Bartoli’s book, *Becoming a Social Work Manager*. An informative, reflective read, grounded in real-life examples, it provides good insights for those navigating the transition from practitioner to manager in social work practice.

This book is designed for social workers stepping into management roles, with attention to the emotional and relational complexities of leadership. It describes the relational, evolving practice of leadership as rooted in ethics, communication and care.

The book is structured thematically and revolves around four key transitional themes:

1. Preparation for the role
2. Navigating multiple identities
3. Managing people
4. Prioritising self-care.

Each theme is explored through accessible chapters. The use of case studies helps to ground the theory in practice. This approach is especially useful for those who are reflective practitioners or who prefer learning from lived experience.

In the first theme, preparation, Bartoli invites readers to reflect on their motivations for entering management. She challenges the assumption that

¹ Reviewed by Collette Lattimore – ISU Area Manager Northwest Derry PBNi (email: collette.lattimore@probation-ni.gov.uk).

being a good practitioner automatically means that you will be a good manager. Instead, she encourages intentional reflection and prompts the reader to engage in self-reflection about their intentions.

The second theme, multiple identities, particularly resonated with me. Social work managers often find themselves caught between conflicting roles – peer v. supervisor, advocate v. enforcer. Bartoli gives voice to these tensions without judgement. For example, she acknowledges the discomfort of supervising former colleagues and provides tools for maintaining clarity and consistency. This part of the book is particularly good for new managers who might feel alone in this in-between space.

The third theme, managing people, emphasises that effective people management in social work goes far beyond delegation and performance reviews. Social work leadership is about supporting emotional wellbeing, enabling reflective practice, and building a culture of learning and mutual respect. Her insights into supervision – particularly reflective supervision – are especially strong. This chapter provides tools to handle interpersonal conflict, motivation and burnout, all while maintaining humanity.

In the chapter on self-care, Bartoli debunks the myth that managers must sacrifice themselves for their teams. She stresses the importance of boundaries, emotional regulation and supervision, for managers as well as frontline staff. She discusses the emotional labour of leadership and encourages managers to model healthy, balanced practice. I found this especially relevant in a post-COVID world, where burnout is rife and work–life boundaries are increasingly blurred.

What stands out in Bartoli's language is its clarity, warmth and accessibility. She writes in a supportive tone. Her style is straightforward but thoughtful, making the book suitable for students, newly appointed leaders, and even seasoned managers looking to reflect.

The book also engages with contemporary practice – most notably, the shift to remote and hybrid work due to COVID-19. Bartoli explores the impact of remote supervision, virtual communication and leading through uncertainty. This makes the book feel up-to-date and relevant.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its consistent grounding in social work values. It never loses sight of the profession's commitment to empowerment, dignity and justice. Bartoli consistently reminds the reader that these values should guide managerial decisions, whether you are supervising a team member, making a disciplinary call or designing a rota. She reminds us that relational leadership is ethical leadership.

That said, the book is not without its limitations. While Bartoli to some extent addresses people management and conflict, I would have liked to see a more in-depth section on managing difficult staff behaviours or performance issues. These are often the most stressful parts of being a manager, and they deserve more attention. Similarly, a more detailed toolkit for handling team dynamics or resistance to change would have added further practical depth.

Another minor limitation is that the book leans heavily on anecdotal examples, which are relatable but may feel repetitive to readers looking for more structured, step-by-step guidance or formal models. While the emotional tone is a strength, some readers may crave more measurable strategies or clearer policies for use in organisations.

Despite these limitations, I found the book incredibly helpful and highly recommend it – especially for practitioners who want to remain reflective and ethical as they take on new responsibilities. It offers both reassurance and challenge. It validates the messy, emotional reality of social work leadership, while also pushing readers to think more intentionally about their impact. It encourages readers to lead with empathy, to reflect rather than react, and to remember that their identity as a social worker does not need to be left behind when they become a manager. In fact, Bartoli argues that it is those very values that will make you a strong leader.

This book makes a compelling case that good management in social work is not about hierarchy – it's about holding space, making hard decisions through a compassionate leadership style, and creating environments where both staff and service-users can thrive. It blends personal insight, case examples, theory and practice, and should, I feel, be required reading for any social worker looking to take the next step in their career.

Sentencing Serious Sex Offenders – How Judges Decide When Discretion is Wide²

Dermot Griffin

Bristol: Policy Press, 2025

ISBN (print): 978-1-5292-3473-2, 172 pages, hardback, £45

In this slim volume, Dr Griffin uses a focused lens to look at the broad issue of sentencing discretion by judges in Ireland. By looking specifically at those most serious cases which resulted in sentences of fifteen years to life, he takes the reader on a journey through the various factors that influence sentencing decisions, placing judicial discretion within a wider context of socio-political discourse and judicial jurisprudence. We may think of decisions that judges make as individual and subjective, but in fact judges are making decisions in the context of the wider sentencing canon. It should be interpreted as collaborative and reliant on the input of other professions such as Probation Officers, mental health professionals and members of An Garda Síochána. In the Central Criminal Court, a very small number of judges (one judge was responsible for 45 per cent of sentences) have developed a significant level of expertise. Since 2008, judges have a duty to explain their sentencing process.³ Through this requirement, we can better understand how judges balance ‘retribution, rehabilitation, incapacitation and deterrence’ (p. 27) in their sentencing.

Griffin specifically examines 108 cases from 1985 to 2022, in higher courts, resulting in these longer sentences. These are the most ‘truly egregious cases’ (p. 2). He chooses these cases because they provide good data in terms of sentencing judges’ remarks, appellate judges’ remarks and media coverage. These are exclusively sentencing decisions in sexual offence cases.

Judicial discretion is controversial and is often the subject of commentary in the press, where the public or the victims express a view that the sentence does not reflect the seriousness of the crime. Critics would suggest that judicial discretion can lead to ‘inconsistent, unfair and arbitrary decision making’ (p. 4). Meanwhile, experts would refer to the ‘practice wisdom’ (p. 5) of the judges in these higher courts. Quite often, there is room for discretion within the rules. The book takes us through the principles of sentencing, incorporating the purposes of punishment. One of the findings of this book is

² Reviewed by Daragh Bailey – Regional Manager the Probation Service.

³ DPP v Farrell [2010] IECCA 68.

that discretion allows for more consistency than one might assume when first examining the practice.

A Sentencing Guidelines and Information Committee was set up in 2019. However, it has yet to issue guidance. What we do have, since 2014, is sentencing bands which judges are invited to consider when considering the case. The study covered sentences of rape, rape under section 4, aggravated sexual assault, and defilement of a child under the age of 15, as these are offences where sentences of fifteen years to life are available to the court. Interestingly, from a probation perspective, is that in over half of these cases (52 per cent), judges suspended part of the sentence, often with probation supervision (38.5 per cent) to manage the risk of reoffending.

While judges may impose concurrent or consecutive sentences, in the cases considered in this study, consecutive sentences would have resulted effectively in a life sentence. Therefore, they have not been utilised by judges in these cases, as per the sentencing principle that consecutive sentences should not result in a *de facto* life sentence. Where there are multiple victims, individual victims may feel that the sentence imposed on their particular count does not represent justice to them; judges are, however, hampered in their decision-making by this sentencing principle.

The rules of evidence are not as strict in sentencing hearings, and defendants can bring in a wide range of what they consider mitigating evidence. In these sentencing hearings, the principle of proportionality is demonstrated through examining the mitigating and aggravating factors and the gravity of the offence. Some factors, such as alcohol consumption, may be an aggravating or a mitigating factor, depending on the individual's relationship with alcohol and whether they were acting out of character. There is considerable discussion exploring the range of aggravating factors, such as grooming, threats and plying with alcohol or tricking victims; these are all aspects of Probation Officer offence analysis and recommendations. This is very interesting when it comes to the gravity of the offence, as it is not just the seriousness of an offence but also about harm caused to the individual and the circumstances of the defendant, as well as any aggravating factors. These issues are often seen separately outside of court but to a judge these aspects are merged.

Of the cases in this study, 43 per cent were appealed, which means that there is quite a lot of discourse among judges, which provides the sentencing canon. In 50 per cent of the appeals, the perpetrator received a reduced sentence. During the time period in which these cases occurred, a change in

guidance was established through the appellate court, which established a guilty plea as a recommended mitigating factor in sentencing. This guidance has seemingly impacted on the appealed cases in this study. However, this guidance is no longer applied in all cases.

Griffin looks separately at cases involving adult victims and those involving child victims. Adult-victim cases often involved random attack from strangers, a relatively unusual occurrence within sexual offending. International research has shown that judges do not see intimate partner rape as equivalent to stranger rape, and Dr Griffin questions the potential impact of 'rape myths' (p. 11) on the 'sentencing canon' in Ireland. An implication for probation practice may be to examine whether such bias is evident in our assessments or reports. The 'breadth, depth and depravity of offending' (p. 11) was the focus for judges in sentencing cases with child victims. All child-victim cases in this study involved multiple offences. The relationship to the child was often an aggravating factor (position of trust or authority). Judges also considered the scale of the harm caused and the level and extent of violence involved.

This book highlights that sentencing is not as individual and subjective as one might imagine, but in fact reflects the multiple purposes and stakeholders involved in the process. It is collaborative and sits within a sentencing canon based on prior cases and judges' expertise. This research demonstrates that sentencing is more consistent than inconsistent and that judicial discretion supports this consistency. This book is highly informative and can help us, the Probation Service, to locate pre-sentence reports as an essential tool in sentencing.