

## **What works in promoting 'What Works'? A comment on Sanders, Jones and Briggs**

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### **Abstract:**

This short article is a comment on the recent proposal of a What Works Centre for probation. Any new 'What Works' initiative needs to be informed by the patchy and uneven history of research on the effectiveness of probation in England and Wales. Problems have included, at various times, failure to keep up with research in other countries; over-dependency on Government Departments to conduct and fund research; poor planning and/or implementation of experimental projects; excessive managerialism, and failure to engage practitioners in a research culture. Unless they are avoided, these problems will hamper any new initiative.

### **Key words:**

Probation; What Works; evaluation methodology; Pathfinders; research centres; Probation Inspectorate.

### **Introduction: 'Nothing Works', stagnation and refutation**

The recent proposal of a 'What Works Centre for Probation' published in this Journal (Sanders et al. 2021) is a welcome discussion-starter, but it needs to be considered in the context of the long history of attempts to promote 'what works' in probation. Research on

the effectiveness of probation in Britain goes back at least to the 1950s (for example Radzinowicz 1958) and it is important to understand its successes and particularly its failures, to see what new initiatives should try to avoid.

Although England and Wales have a long history of providing and developing probation services and have sometimes seen themselves as 'world leading', they no longer lead the world in probation research: the majority of reputable published studies of community sentences and supervision of probationers are carried out in the USA or Canada, with substantial contributions from other European countries and Australia. For example the six editors of the recent 'Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice', four of whom were based in the UK, looked for contributors to a wide-ranging compendium of recent research and commissioned work by 119 authors of whom the majority (65) are based outside England and Wales (Ugwudike et al. 2020). In another example from a previous decade an authoritative collection on 'Offender Rehabilitation and Treatment' edited by a British researcher (McGuire 2002) found only eight of its 24 contributors in Britain. Particularly in the USA and Canada research on probation has been pursued consistently over time, in contrast to its rather episodic history in the UK. Here it has been very dependent on central Government funding and therefore influenced by changes in political focus and fashion. In the 1960s and early 1970s the Home Office research Unit carried out several pioneering studies of probation but these largely came to an end after the disappointing IMPACT study ('Intensive Matched Probation and After-Care Treatment'), which appeared to show that intensive supervision on reduced caseloads achieved results which were no better (in some ways slightly worse) than supervision on normal caseloads (Folkard et al. 1976). This result (partly contradicted by more recent research [HMIP 2021])

was produced by rigorous measurement and comparison of outcomes of an input (probation supervision) which was not properly defined or understood, so that good practice and bad practice may in effect have been cancelling each other out, producing an apparent 'no difference' outcome. Similar comments can be made about many of the studies which led Martinson (1974) to argue that nothing worked. This kind of research, which had a certain appeal to neoliberal politicians looking for reasons to reduce welfare spending, led to similar 'nothing works' conclusions by British government researchers (Brody 1976; Croft 1978) and, broadly speaking, a twenty-year pause of official research in England and Wales on 'what works' in probation.

In Canada and the USA, and some other countries, 'nothing works' was not accepted so uncritically, and many researchers concentrated on trying to identify practices and approaches that produced better results than others. Answering the question 'what works?' produced much of what is now accepted as good correctional practice: for example, the risk-need-responsivity approach (Andrews et al. 1990), risk and need assessment (Andrews and Bonta 1995), cognitive-behavioural programmes (Ross and Fabiano 1985), and core correctional skills (Trotter 1996, Dowden and Andrews 2004). In England and Wales, however, research done in other countries is often under-used, and little attention was paid in official circles to 'what works?' research from across the Atlantic, or even closer to home in Scotland (for example McIvor 1990). Small studies were carried out in some universities in England and Wales (for example, Raynor 1988, Roberts 1989) but the full impact of new research on effective practice was not felt until the mid-1990s. The Probation Service itself, through its managers and practitioners, played an important role in this, organising 'What Works' conferences to disseminate the new research (McGuire 1995) and beginning to

develop pilot projects to put it into practice. It should be remembered that probation services were then organised in separate counties, with their own Chief Probation Officers who enjoyed a significant degree of freedom to express their opinions (as several of them did in the now defunct journal VISTA), to run their own association and to start local projects, or even to criticise Government policy; all of this is difficult or impossible now that the Service is one national organisation run on Civil Service principles. The pluralism and diversity of approaches in the 1990s helped to generate a variety of initiatives which moved probation forward. These included the National Probation Research and Information Exchange (NPRIE) which was mainly initiated by Bill McWilliams, then working in the South Yorkshire Probation Service, and brought together the 'research and information' officers which most probation services then employed, together with interested academics. The annual conferences of NPRIE disseminated the results of local projects to a wide probation audience. Examples included the work of the Demonstration Unit of the Inner London Probation Service and the Straight Thinking On Probation (STOP) programme in the Mid Glamorgan Probation Service. Chief Probation Officers such as David Sutton in Mid Glamorgan and Cedric Fullwood in Greater Manchester played an important part in developing and leading early experiments in evidence-based practice, and Andrew Underdown from Manchester went on to play a significant role in the next stage of development as the main writer of the 'Underdown Report'.

### **An inspector calls**

The most important attempt to embed evidence-based probation in England and Wales came, rather surprisingly, not from the Home Office itself but from the independent Probation Inspectorate, then led by Graham Smith who had formerly been Chief Probation

Officer of Inner London. The Conservative Government's political hostility to the Probation Service led to anxieties about its future (though it took a later Conservative Government to attempt to privatise it) and Graham Smith developed and led a project to enhance its effectiveness and impact, called originally the Effective Practice Initiative and later 'What Works'. It is difficult to disagree with Smith's assessment that without a major shift towards the effective reduction of re-offending, the future of probation, in the political context of the time, could have been bleak. The key document for the Inspectorate's initiative was the 'Underdown Report' (HMIP 1998), which was based on a very thorough survey of projects undertaken by local probation services, an appraisal of their effectiveness, and recommendations about the way forward. The report reflected both the strengths and weaknesses of the profusion of projects at the time: probation services claimed to be running 267 programmes which reduced re-offending, but on closer examination by professional researchers only four evaluations were found to provide methodologically adequate evidence for reductions in reconviction (Ellis and Winstone 2002). (I was invited to assist Tom Ellis in appraisal of the research reports, and I can confirm that we were not unreasonably over-rigorous in our judgements.)

Better research to support effective practice was clearly needed and several initiatives at around this time aimed to accelerate progress. In 1996, partly as a consequence of an expected change in probation officers' training, the Probation Studies Unit was set up by Roger Hood and Ros Burnett in Oxford to provide independent research support for the What Works programme, and Colin Roberts directed and produced a significant amount of research there, including the development of ASSET for the Youth Justice Board. The Correctional Services Accreditation Panel, established in 1999, extended to probation the

accreditation arrangements already established for psychology-led programmes in prisons, and the Service itself became a National Probation Service in 2001 with much greater central direction. (Some other developments were perhaps not so favourable: enhanced central direction meant a reduction in local initiatives and locally based research, and training courses for probation officers were removed from almost all Universities by a Home Secretary who did not want probation officers trained with social workers.) The Probation Studies Unit did not survive later changes in the University, but by then researchers in the Home Office were catching up with the What Works agenda. I recall an anxious query from a senior Home Office researcher in the late 1990s asking me to explain what risk/need assessment was, at a time when several Services were already piloting the Canadian Level of Service Inventory (Andrews and Bonta 1995) which was the best-known risk/need assessment instrument at the time.

This was a critical period in the development of evidence-led probation. The New Labour Government provided relatively generous finance for probation 'Pathfinder' projects and associated research under the Crime Reduction Programme, which gave a significant boost to probation research and increased the number of researchers doing it. A number of very interesting reports were produced, but the Pathfinders themselves suffered from many implementation problems which reduced their effectiveness (Raynor 2004). The Treasury's decision to use programme completions as a performance indicator distorted the Probation Service's approach to programme targeting and recruitment and led to official disappointment when numbers of programme completions were lower than expected. In particular, and most importantly for the future of What Works, the rapid timetable led to attempts to force the pace of change by managerialism and central direction, and not

enough was done to ensure awareness, ownership and 'buy-in' among practitioners, who were in any case suspicious of central Government attempts to change their role. The probation officers' union NAPO debated motions opposing both risk assessment and cognitive-behavioural programmes. In the meantime, and unfortunately, the phrase 'What Works' became widely prevalent short-hand for a number of New Labour's initiatives to 'transform' public services, often opposed by public sector Unions and often involving some degree of private sector involvement. For many practitioners the phrase 'What Works' came to mean bad news, and not enough was done to counteract this impression.

The very limited success of the Pathfinders, and the consequent reduction of confidence in the 1990s version of 'what works', contributed to the appeal of broader theoretical approaches to rehabilitation, particularly those under the umbrella of desistance theories. These relied heavily on qualitative research methods and personal accounts from people subject to supervision and other criminal justice processes. Writers about desistance tended not to be prescriptive about what practitioners should do, and sometimes presented their work explicitly as an alternative to 'what works' (for example, Farrall et al. 2014, pp. 290-1). This appealed to some practitioners, although more recently it has been argued that desistance and 'what works' are more productively seen as compatible or complementary approaches (for example by Porporino 2010, Herzog-Evans 2018, Maruna and Mann 2019). Recent research on the impact of the skills and resourcefulness of individual practitioners arguably owes something to both perspectives and moves beyond preoccupation with group programmes.

Already in the 1990s some people were concerned about the apparent dominance of programmes and the relative neglect of individual supervision. Partly there were reasons for this in research methodology: the weakness of ‘nothing works’ research in analysing and specifying inputs left a gap in the three central components of evaluative research, which can be stated as understanding, measurement and comparison. Measurement and comparison were relatively well understood, but understanding inputs was problematic until the production of programme manuals meant that, for the first time, researchers could know what practitioners were meant to be doing. The result was that for a while programmes dominated the research agenda in effective practice, and the specification and assessment of the skills actually used in individual supervision was not developed until later (Bonta et al. 2011; Raynor and Vanstone 2018). A number of the Pathfinders also pointed to another difficulty: evaluative research is much harder to do if projects are not designed and set up with evaluation in mind. A common pattern is to develop and start a project, and then to think afterwards about how to retro-fit evaluation. A more recent example of this was the SEED project in England and Wales (‘Skills for Effective Engagement and Development’): this was a well-informed attempt to build new learning about effective supervision skills into an in-service training programme (Rex and Hosking 2014), but the work of a very capable external research team was frustrated by the failure to build in appropriate comparison groups. As a result, a lot was learned about how practitioners understood quality in supervision practice (Robinson et al. 2014) but little could be learned about outcomes. In contrast the Canadian STICS project (the ‘Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision’), on which SEED was partly based, was designed from the start to enable methodologically sound evaluation and produced clear positive results (Bonta et al. 2011). Overall, what we learn from recent experience is that Government research, in the



Home Office or its successor the Ministry of Justice, has played an important role but has usually not been at the forefront of 'what works' development: we need variety in research funding and in the institutional locations of research. Useful research on effective practice needs to understand the nature of inputs as well as measuring outputs, and the phrase 'What Works' has acquired some unhelpful connotations.

Finally, one more point about methodology deserves attention. We should be wary of fetishizing random allocation designs and RCTs. Even the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (Farrington et al. 2002) recognizes that well-designed quasi-experiments, that take sensible precautions to limit the effects of possible confounding variables, can produce an almost comparable degree of reliability (Hollin 2008). In the practical conditions of criminal justice services quasi-experiments are far more feasible to set up and carry out. RCTs are not impossible but they are necessarily rare, and sometimes require a degree of artificiality which is not very representative of normal practice. They can also sometimes break down when some practitioners are randomly chosen to apply a new intervention and other colleagues are not: knowledge of new methods can 'leak' and practices tend to converge, weakening the difference on which the comparison depends (for example, Deering et al. 2001). Quasi-experiments can also be easier to replicate, leading to greater accumulation of knowledge, even at the price of slightly less certainty. Confining methodology to RCTs would be an unnecessary limitation on research. In addition, not all research is quantitative. Government research has tended to favour quantitative approaches, often used by psychologists, and it is mainly outside Government that we find the kind of social research that underpins, for example, most studies of desistance. It could even be argued that Governments are never likely to promote and carry out critical policy analysis research that

might cast doubt on their own political agendas. How many Conservative governments have supported research on links between inequality and crime?

### **‘What Works’ in hard times**

Currently several organisations have, independently of each other, started to disseminate research summaries aimed at practitioners and managers. These include the Probation Institute, the charity CLINKS and the Probation Inspectorate itself; the latter seems currently to offer the most consistent combination of academic credibility and accessibility, mainly through the ‘Insights’ series of practitioner-friendly concise research summaries overseen by Robin Moore. In addition there are significant new research units, notably the Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (PERU) at Manchester Metropolitan University and, again, the Probation Inspectorate, which has begun to use the information gathered in inspections to answer research questions (see, for example, the recent work on caseload sizes, on which the Inspectorate published new research [HMIP 2021] and PERU contributed a research review [Fox et al. 2021]).

To sum up: the aspiration to promote systematic research on ‘what works’ in probation (perhaps better described as ‘effective practice’) dates back in Britain at least to the 1950s, but has been impeded at different times by systemic problems which any new initiative should try to avoid. These problems include over-dependence on central Government funding, which tends to narrow the research focus to short-term priorities; a tendency, perhaps due to English exceptionalism, to show little awareness of relevant research carried out in other countries; impatient managerialism leading to over-rapid imposition of new approaches and to resistance by practitioners, rather than longer-term strategies to embed

research consciousness and a culture of curiosity; a tendency among many British social scientists to prefer qualitative methods and to avoid 'number-crunching', which limits their contribution to evaluative research and leaves quantitative evaluation of outcomes largely to psychologists; frequent failure to implement new initiatives in a way which lends itself to evaluation, so that learning opportunities are lost; and, last but not least, the fact that some politicians prefer to be guided by their own opinions, or their perception of public opinion, rather than by research (Raynor 2020). Populist denigration of expertise by politicians (for example, Gove 2016) has not helped the development of effective practice.

More hopeful signs are that research on probation services is now widespread in British Universities, in spite of the fact that since 1998 most of them no longer train probation officers. Researchers are well networked with colleagues in Europe and further afield through organizations like the Community Sanctions and Measures working group of the European Society of Criminology and CREDOS (the international 'Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision'). More researchers are seeing the need for evaluative research to combine qualitative and quantitative methods: qualitative, to understand the nature of the activity and how it is perceived and experienced by those who provide and undergo it, and quantitative, to measure relevant processes and outcomes and to compare them with different services or situations. The process can be summarized as 'understand, measure, compare', and it is easily apparent that studies like IMPACT, and much of Martinson's meta-analysis, failed to understand the nature and quality of the services under evaluation, while other studies show good understanding but fail to deliver meaningful measurement and comparison.

What, then, does all this imply for a 'What Works Centre'? First, it needs to avoid the trap of excluding more researchers than it includes. University managers may see 'centres' as a way of attracting a bigger share of research funding, but the cause of research will probably be served better if any emerging 'centre' acts more as the focus or facilitator of networks of researchers in a number of institutions, including the probation service itself. Relevant models worth studying are the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research which brings together a number of Scottish Universities, and the stimulus offered to probation research in the past by NPRIE and by the 'What Works' conferences of the 1990s. Collaboration can be strengthened by ensuring that research projects include partners from more than one institution. Secondly, it needs to avoid over-dependence on Government funding, aiming to draw at least as much on independent charities and foundations so that in addition to evaluations, it can undertake the kind of policy analysis which might be less welcomed by politicians. It also needs to recognize that in England and Wales there are two Governments, not one, and the powerful case for devolution of criminal justice to Wales will create its own distinctive research agenda. Thirdly, probation research needs mixed methodologies and a range of social science approaches, with qualitative and quantitative researchers learning to work together and appreciate each other's skills (admittedly a Utopian goal but worth pursuing). Such developments need to be firmly rooted in an understanding of the range and history of research on 'what works' in probation, and the business of networking, outreach and promotion of a research culture is probably more important than building a centralized resource.

Finally, the question of governance will always need to be considered, and there are no easy answers. The outcome needs to provide both expertise and legitimacy, and one of its

priorities must be to create a sense of ownership among practitioners. A better understanding of evidence and its contribution to good practice is one aim of the professionalization agenda promoted by the Probation Institute and increasingly recognized within the Ministry of Justice. The recent 'Insights19' initiative promoted by the Ministry aimed to popularize evidence-based approaches within the Probation Service. However, for many reasons outlined above, the MoJ should not monopolize the control of research on effective practice. Any emerging Centre should be accountable to independent bodies as well as to Government, and should also work closely with practitioner-based organizations such as the Institute and NAPO (which during the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the main promoter of a professional approach to practice). It is interesting to speculate, for example, on what might emerge from collaboration between HM Inspectorate of Probation, which led the original 'What Works' project of the late 1990s and is now an important research centre in its own right, and a leading academic player such as the Cambridge Institute of Criminology, originally set up to carry out research of interest to Government but independently, and now the home of the Probation Archive (Annison and Dominey 2021) as well as significant relevant expertise. Other combinations might of course be possible: what is important is that they should be inclusive, networked and committed to embedding evidence-based methods in practice and among practitioners. History suggests, however, that the title 'What Works' should probably be avoided, in favour of something like an Effective Probation Development Unit or a similar title. Getting these developments right will be difficult, but we should hope that somebody will respond to the challenge.

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