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Mentoring and peer mentoring

Gill Buck

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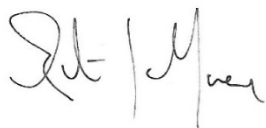
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Gill Buck, summarising the evidence base in relation to mentoring and peer mentoring, with a focus upon its potential for supporting and empowering individuals to desist from offending. It is highlighted how mentors who draw upon lived experiences can potentially inspire mentees in a personalised way, offer high levels of support, reassurance and encouragement, and provide a bridge to other services. Attention is also given to common problems so that they can be avoided, as well as the practicalities of undertaking (peer) mentoring within criminal justice contexts so that safe and ethical practice can be maintained. As set out, investment in high-quality training and support for mentors is essential.



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The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

Mentoring and 'peer' mentoring are increasing features of probation and youth justice settings. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (2019) defines mentoring as 'a one-to-one non-judgmental relationship' in which 'an individual (mentor) gives time to support and encourage another (mentee)'. In the context of youth justice, it is a relationship between a young person and supportive adult, established to help the young person achieve their goals (Nellis, 2004). 'Peer' mentors are community members, often with lived experiences of criminal justice, who work or volunteer to help people in rehabilitative settings. It can be a diverse practice, encompassing one-to-one sessions, group work or more informal leisure activities (Buck, 2020).

This *Academic Insights* paper outlines the potential of mentoring to assist individuals to leave crime behind, with a specific focus on mentors who draw upon their own lived experiences. It also considers some common problems encountered in the hope they can be avoided. Finally, the practicalities of undertaking (peer) mentoring within criminal justice contexts are explored, as these require specific consideration to develop and maintain safe and ethical practice.

2. What research tells us so far

2.1 How mentoring works

Mentoring is widely used in adult and youth justice settings (Hucklesby and Wincup, 2014). 'Peer' mentoring is also growing, with peer mentors making up about 90% of criminal justice mentors in parts of England (Willoughby et al., 2013: 7). Whilst each mentoring relationship is unique, researchers have begun to *theorise* or make sense of some common features. Drawing on criminological theory, Sullivan and Jolliffe (2012) argue that peer mentoring is based on the idea that criminal behaviour is influenced by who we have close contact with. In other words, mentors are positioned as positive role models to influence the behaviour of mentees. However, mentoring is also theorised to be a more democratic or egalitarian approach, prioritising mentee goals:

'The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor's goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees...but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history...[to believe in] the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors'.

Freire, 1997: 324

In this light, mentoring is an empowerment-based practice, which could counter some of the experiences of feeling powerless, unskilled, untrusted or unstable that can be common to people in prison and probation settings (Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013; Pollack, 2004).

Peer mentors, in particular, are well placed to act as inspirational role models, offering reassurance that change is manageable and positive futures are possible (Buck, 2019). Such 'professional ex' (Brown, 1991) positions are more established in recovery from addiction settings (see earlier [Academic Insights paper](#) by Best, 2019), where it is recognised that visible 'recovery champions' help people to believe that recovery is possible and desirable (Kidd, 2011). However, there is growing evidence that peer mentors can also instil hope in prison settings (Nixon, 2020); youth justice settings (Creaney, 2020); and post incarceration (Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2020; Barrenger et al., 2019). Peer workers are claimed to have a credibility that 'professional' rehabilitation workers may not, because they have experienced first-hand many of the same problems and can relate to the challenges of life after prison (Princes Trust, 2012; Boyce et al., 2009). This recognition provides a sense of security within a context where authority figures can be seen as inconsistent or dangerous (Buck, 2019).

Peer mentoring also aligns with 'strengths-based' practice, repositioning criminalised people as 'community assets to be utilized rather than liabilities to be supervised' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 84). Instead of focusing on individual's deficits or risks, it emphasises strengths and varied and skilful modes of coping (Nixon, 2020; Pollack, 2004). Mentors, in turn, may help mentees to create new 'scripts' (Maruna, 2001) or self-stories about potential crime-free futures, a key element of desisting from crime. Once these positive life narratives are established in the mind of the mentee, mentors can encourage and affirm them and offer a physical space for new routines to be practiced (Buck, 2020).

2.2 Reducing reoffending outcomes

There are some indications that (peer) mentoring may help to reduce reoffending.

- A recent study in North America (Sells et al., 2020) found that peer mentoring significantly reduced reoffending amongst men leaving prison.
- The 'Through the Gates' peer mentoring project, launched by St Giles Trust in partnership with the London Probation Service, recorded reoffending rates significantly lower than the national average (Frontier Economics, 2009).
- The reconviction rate for women using the WIRE [female ex-offender led service] was 42%, against the 51% national average for women (The Social Innovation Partnership, 2012: 5).

More generally, Jolliffe and Farrington (2007: 3) found mentoring 'reduced subsequent offending by 4 to 11%', although they noted 'mentoring was only successful in reducing re-offending when it was one of a number of interventions, suggesting that mentoring on its own may not reduce re-offending'.

Mentoring can also result in 'intermediate outcomes' that contribute to desisting from crime, including improved employment outcomes, reductions in substance misuse, and improvements in motivation and self-worth (Taylor et al., 2013). It can help to reduce aggression and drug use (Tolan et al., 2008; Parsons et al., 2008) and improve children's school attendance, performance and relationships with parents and peers (Parsons et al., 2008). Peer mentoring has also been reported to decrease female prisoners' feelings of isolation and increase feelings of self-worth and autonomy (Pollack, 2004). This is important given that maintaining desistance from crime is often correlated with a sense of self-control or a sense of being able to influence one's own life (Zdun, 2011; Maruna, 2001).

2.3 Additional benefits

Mentoring benefits rehabilitation services given it involves high levels of contact compared to the often brief and episodic contacts between professional support workers and their clients (Brown and Ross, 2010). In this regard it can address 'a strong unmet need for support and advice, not only immediately after leaving prison, but for some months afterwards' (Maguire and Nolan 2007: 166). These features are argued to be particularly important for women, as mentoring may facilitate the transition from prison, whilst offering a prosocial source of support, independent from the insecure networks that may be available within criminalised women's lives (Rumgay, 2004). Peer mentoring can also benefit mentors themselves, offering a valuable opportunity to people who often find it difficult to obtain work, due to having a criminal record (Clinks and MBF, 2012). These opportunities are important as desistance from crime requires access to opportunities along with individual will (Boyce et al., 2009).

There is increasing evidence that mentoring provides an effective 'bridge' to other services.

- A recent inspection of resettlement services highlighted that mentoring brings about 'a greater level of cooperation with supervision than anticipated' (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016: 45),
- Reingle Gonzalez et al. (2019) found that 'peer' re-entry specialists assisted mentees to seek support for substance use and mental health conditions, housing and employment.

- Peer mentors have been found to provide an important link between courts and participants (for justice-involved military veterans), positively influencing outcomes including physical and emotional wellbeing (Jalain and Grossi, 2020).
- Peer mentors in health settings have helped women to navigate health and social services during the transition from prison to community, which was critical to promoting their health and wellbeing (McLeod et al., 2020).
- Mentors can also be particularly successful in reintegrating 'young people into education, training and the community' (Finnegan et al., 2010: 10).

There may additionally be emotional/relational benefits. For example, Buck (2018) tracked the following three 'core conditions' within peer mentoring relationships:



These person-centred features offer an antidote to what can often be experienced as disconnected, unhearing and technocratic criminal justice system practices. Anthony et al. (2020) argue that this shift from practice which problematises and pathologizes people, toward healing approaches nurtured by and for criminalised people, is especially important for ethnic minority groups (they use the case study of Indigenous women), given the disproportionate incarceration of these groups. Peer mentoring, in contrast to confinement and surveillance, can offer a relationship-based practice in which people can unburden suffering and grief and discover new self-direction. It can be a safe space to do this given that mentors are perceived to 'genuinely care' and tolerate slip-ups; a common feature of desistance efforts (Buck, 2018).

Mentoring schemes may also forge longer lasting support networks. One programme in New York, for example, was found to provide:

'leadership, support, and guidance for female offenders, and not only created a prosocial environment, but fashioned an entire community. This community continued outside of the prison walls, provided women with emotional support, and subsequently resulted in increased levels of institutional and post-release success'.

Collica 2010: 314

Such ongoing connections represent an increase in 'social capital', i.e. the 'relationships, networks and reciprocities within families and communities' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 20), which can help people to leave crime behind (Farrall, 2011).

2.4 Potential problems with mentoring in criminal justice

It is important that those developing and managing mentoring services avoid common problems in order to increase the safety and effectiveness of services. Spencer (2007: 331) highlighted six factors that contributed to the demise of mentoring relationships:

- mentor [or mentee] abandonment
- perceived lack of mentee motivation
- unfulfilled (or mismatched) expectations
- deficiencies in mentor relational skills, including the inability to bridge cultural divides
- family interference
- inadequate agency support.

There can be mismatches of mentor and mentee in terms of expectations, gender, culture, or race; reluctant or over-zealous mentors/mentees; broken confidentiality; obstructions from others; and parameters/boundaries not agreed upon in advance (McKimm et al., 2007: 13-14). These are all important areas for training and supervision structures to consider.

Mentoring in environments where control and punishment dominate also presents unique problems (Gosling and Buck, 2015). Formerly criminalised workers can experience exclusion in prison and community settings, including restrictions on undertaking mentoring (Buck, 2014). They can also be expected to labour (emotionally) intensively for little or no financial reward (Buck, 2018). Moreover, core humanistic conditions such as caring and listening do not sit comfortably within a punishment framework (Buck, 2018) and punitive environments can cause mentoring to depart from core principles and values, extending the coercive reach of the criminal justice system (Hucklesby and Wincup, 2014). Managers and supervisors need to have regard for these dynamics to effectively support mentors and avoid exclusion, exploitation, and appropriation (Buck et al., 2020).

Volunteering in criminal justice can also take a high personal toll with harms including burnout and secondary trauma (Perrin et al., 2018), post-traumatic stress, injury, or even death (Corcoran, 2012). Taken together, work in prison, resettlement and community justice settings can be stressful, unpredictable, and sometimes unsafe. Good quality training, support and supervision are vital to promote the welfare of mentors and mentees in such contexts, particularly where people are drawing upon their own (potentially trauma-invoking) life experiences (Buck et al., 2020).

Finally, there are warnings that volunteer labour should not substitute for paid professional jobs (Corcoran, 2012), especially as there have been problems providing mentoring on the scale pledged. A 2016 inspection of the government's flagship 'Through the Gate' policy, highlighted serious shortfalls in the promise to provide a mentor to every person leaving prison:

'None of the prisoners had been helped into employment by Through the Gate services and we did not see examples of handover to specialist education or training resources in the community. The low number of mentors available did not match the early promise of CRC contract bids, or the numbers of prisoners who might have benefited from this type of support on release.'

HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2016: 8

This inspection, and an earlier sector survey (Clinks and MBF, 2012) highlight that numbers of suitably motivated and skilled mentors and managers may be insufficient. Most (peer) mentoring projects are run by the voluntary sector, yet funding in this sector tends to be short term, limiting the time it takes for projects to become established and effective (Boyce et al., 2009). Given these concerns, commissioners and managers should plan and invest in services over the longer term.

The Target Operating Model for probation services in England and Wales (HMPPS, 2021) sets out plans for investing in a 'more equitable, diverse and inclusive' criminal justice system. These plans include employing volunteer peer mentors to offer enhanced support to people on probation and those returning to communities from prison (pp.62-68), particularly those with protected characteristics (p.100). They also advocate for a national role to drive an evidence-based approach to peer-led work (p.155). Whilst these are welcome proposals, it is vital that national and local strategies support and develop the volunteers undertaking this important element of criminal justice.

3. Conclusion

Mentoring and peer mentoring have clear potential to assist people with the difficult process of leaving crime behind and to mediate some of the more excluding and limiting practices of the criminal justice system. Mentors who draw upon lived experiences can potentially bond with, relate to, and inspire mentees in a personalised way. They are also able to offer high levels of support, reassurance and encouragement and fill gaps in existing services.

However, problems can also be encountered, including difficulties within mentoring relationships, excessive personal demands upon mentors, a lack of skilled workers, managers (and funding) to deliver this work on a large, long-term scale, and the inherent contradictions and risks posed by attempting an empowerment-based approach within more punitive environments.

For leaders looking to develop and sustain (peer) mentoring programmes, long-term planning and investment is required, along with education for staff and managers about the potential benefits and shortfalls of this approach. Given the practical and emotional demands of (peer) mentoring, good quality training, support and (therapeutic) supervision for mentors – which recognise the lived realities of crime, desistance and practice within punitive contexts – will also be very important to maintain safe and ethical practice and avoid punitive dilution of mentoring values.

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