HM Inspectorate
of Probation

A-Z of key research messages

We are committed to disseminating and promoting research findings in a range of ways, helping to:

(i) build a common understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services
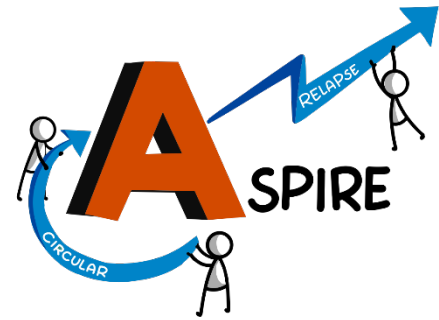(ii) align research, policy and practice.

In this document we set out an A-Z of key research messages and concepts, with accompanying links to further reading.

April 2024

ASPIRE

Contemporary practice is based upon the ASPIRE model of case supervision:

- Assessment
- Sentence Planning
- Implementation
- Review
- Evaluate

The process is cyclical, reflecting the research evidence that positive development and desistance can be a gradual, non-linear, and multidimensional process, with thoughtful consideration needing to be given to how relapses should be dealt with. Those supervised have highlighted the importance of each stage of the ASPIRE process involving real collaboration and co-production.

Probation evidence page - Supervision

Youth justice evidence page - Supervision

Academic Insights paper - Needs assessment: risk, desistance and engagement

Biases

In situations of limited time and resource, intuitive reasoning and recourse to a range of subjective biases can easily take place. To minimise error and ensure that decisions are balanced, reasoned and well-evidenced, practitioners need to seek and critically appraise information, and adopt an open, honest and reflective approach. In youth justice, care needs to be taken to avoid adultification bias whereby adult-like qualities are attributed to children, with notions of innocence and vulnerability displaced by notions of responsibility and culpability, resulting in children's rights being diminished or ignored.
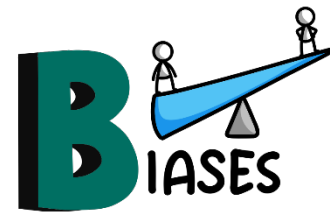
Academic Insights paper - Bias and error in risk assessment and management

Academic Insights paper - Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding

Collaboration

There is widespread understanding that no single agency can provide all the necessary support for those in conflict with the law to find their way to healthy, pro-social and fulfilling lives. Cooperation, collaboration and co-production is thus vital, with all providers working together in partnership through a whole-system approach, supported by strong leadership with a shared and well-communicated vision and values. Collaborative partnerships between key agencies can increase effectiveness and efficiency through sharing information and ideas, improving the engagement and participation of stakeholders, avoiding duplication, and enhancing access to services. Practitioners can benefit from regular multi-agency training, helping to ensure a common understanding, facilitating discussions of different agency perspectives, and strengthening roles and expectations.

Probation evidence page - Services

Youth justice evidence page - Partnerships and services

Research & Analysis Bulletin - Multi-agency work in youth justice services

Desistance theory

Desistance research has developed over recent decades, highlighting the importance of individuality – since the process of moving away from offending behaviour is different for each person – and the need to focus upon working with individuals, the development of relationships, and building upon their strengths and protective factors. Desistance theories also draw attention to the significance of social and situational contexts. The term 'assisted desistance' has been used to describe the role that probation and youth justice services can play, recognising that individuals can be supported to desist from crime but there are too many factors at play for any agency to 'cause' desistance.

Probation evidence page - Desistance

Research & Analysis Bulletin - Supporting the desistance of children subject to court orders

Academic Insights paper - Reconciling 'Desistance' and 'What Works'

Engagement

Engagement is a broad term and can cover a wide spectrum of activity. On one level, it can relate to motivating individuals to participate and attend interventions and can include identifying enablers and barriers and seeking to address these in order to support compliance. However, engagement can be much wider than this, and can involve securing the full participation of an individual, helping them to gain a strong sense of ownership for their progress, and encouraging them to play a central role in decisions around their goals and objectives. Methods should be used which engage, interest and motivate individuals and are meaningful to them and enable them to participate fully. Wherever possible, individuals should be empowered to try and find their own solutions and to identify and pursue their own goals and aspirations.

Practitioners should establish as early as possible where individuals fall on the engagement continuum, with a focus on developing rapport and establishing a sense of trust through ongoing two-way dialogue. Where the practitioner engages fully with an individual through ongoing dialogue and is able to identify and remove any barriers, there is a greater likelihood of the person making positive progress. In some cases, practitioners will need to draw on their full range of skills and experiences, maintaining an appropriate balance between (i) encouragement and 'pushing' and (ii) flexibility and the avoidance of 'drift'.

Research & Analysis Bulletin - The role of engagement for positive outcomes
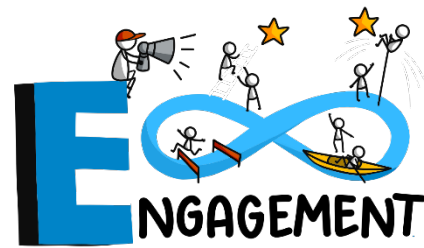
Fairness

According to procedural justice theory, if people feel they are treated in a procedurally fair and just way, starting from the very first contact, they will view those in authority as more legitimate and respect them more. They are more likely to engage and comply, even when the outcomes of the decisions or processes are unfavourable or inconvenient. Clear and consistent communication is thus required from the outset so that people are clear about the expectations upon them and so that they feel that practitioners have taken the time to recognise them as individuals, understanding their specific circumstances, needs, and ambitions.

Probation evidence page - Procedural justice

Academic Insights paper - Exploring procedural justice and problem-solving practice in the Youth Court

Academic Insight paper - Supporting children's compliance on community supervision

Growth mindset

The most effective organisations act as continuous learning environments with a culture of support and critical reflection, and staff continually looking for ways to develop and improve. Practitioners with a growth mindset have a desire to explore, learn and understand, and to keep up to date with new developments – they are curious. They will reflect on and review their thinking, persist in the face of setbacks and obstacles, recognise the need to make consistent efforts to continuously develop, embrace challenges, learn from constructive feedback, and find lessons and inspiration in others' success. They recognise that there may be different ways of doing things and are willing to explore different options.

Youth justice evidence page - Staff

Academic Insights paper - Growth and the core conditions of transformative change

Human rights

The language of human rights provides an ethical foundation for probation and youth justice practice. In relation to youth justice, key criteria have been identified for a child-friendly, rights-compliant system, encompassing children's reintegration, dignity and wellbeing, a prioritisation of diversion, the incorporation of legal safeguards, and a focus upon implementation and operation. There is an emphasis on meaningful participation where children are able to speak their mind and give their views in all matters that affect them, with their opinions being taken into account seriously and given due respect.
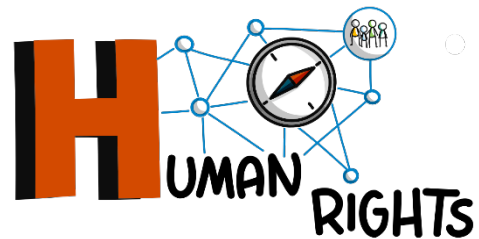
Academic Insights paper - European Probation Rules

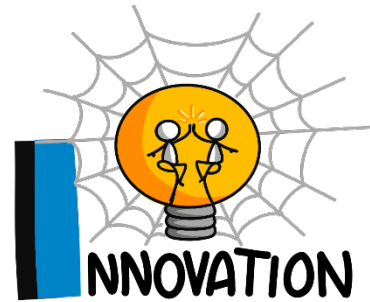Academic Insights paper - International Human Rights Standards and Youth Justices

Academic Insights paper - Compliance with international children's rights in the youth justice system

Reflections from research: Barry Goldson (youtube.com)

Innovation

Evidence-led innovation should be encouraged and accompanied by a commitment to testing and evaluation, so that the evidence base underpinning the delivery of services continues to develop and broaden. An appetite to embrace and learn from research findings which are both negative and positive is required – not all innovative approaches should be expected to have the intended impact. To support innovation, it is clear that networks and relationships are key, both at the level of individuals and organisations. There are natural links between innovation and (i) approaches which involve co-creation with service users, and (ii) localised approaches that focus on the development of shared values.

Academic Insights paper – Innovation and the Evidence base

Justice capital

Recovery capital is made up of social, physical, human, and cultural capital, recognising the importance of the context that an individual finds themselves in, and how responses need to be holistic and person-centred, paying attention to the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. Building upon this, justice capital highlights the specific role of justice organisations and practitioners in delivering recovery capital in an equitable and responsive way, with a focus on how best to work with all individuals, and how to prepare, support and develop staff. Crucially, access to the required capital for desistance can be improved or damaged by the operation of the criminal justice system and the way its key agencies deliver services.

Academic Insights paper - Desistance, recovery, and justice capital: putting it all together

Reflections from research: Kieran McCartan (youtube.com)

Knowledge mobilisation

The concept of 'knowledge mobilisation' covers the meaningful use of evidence and expertise to align research, policy and practice, bridging any divides through positive engagement, end-user participation and a focus on impact. Attention needs to be given to both 'knowledge translation' and 'knowledge mobilisation' – so not simply one-way dissemination but also meaningful two-way engagement and interaction with findings and their implications. Evaluative and reflective practice can then become an integrated part of an organisation's culture, with staff thinking critically about the evidence that underpins their actions.

Research & Analysis Bulletin - Building the evidence base for high-quality probation services: The role of probation providers

Language

Language is rarely neutral and can be powerful, connecting with individuals and setting the tone for how people are understood. Narratives are internalised and can influence and impact upon thoughts and actions; language can thus be harmful or healing, impacting upon individual's identity, sense of self, health, wellbeing, and access to services. Within probation and youth justice, language is particularly important in helping to ensure that positive relationships are not hindered and opportunities for positive development, integration and desistance are not lost. Language should be positive, engaging, considerate, non-stigmatising and empowering. Such language can reduce harm and suffering, prevent a culture of blame and shame, promote hope, and enhance health and wellbeing. All communications must also be age-appropriate and in line with the individual's development and understanding, and any additional needs they may have.

Youth justice evidence page - General models and principles

Mentoring

Personal and professional relationships are often the key to positive change, with individuals influenced to change by those whose advice they respect and whose support they value. 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. There is evidence that mentoring can help children in terms of attitudinal/motivational and social/interpersonal outcomes, psychological/emotional needs, conduct issues, academic/school outcomes, and wellbeing. These effects can be more potent where the mentor is part of the child's regular social network.

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 risks. Given the practical and emotional demands of (peer) mentoring, good quality training, support and (therapeutic) supervision for mentors is also very important to maintain safe and ethical practice and avoid punitive dilution of mentoring values.

Academic Insights paper - Mentoring and peer mentoring

Reflections from research: Shadd Maruna (youtube.com)

Neurodiversity

At least one in three people moving through the justice system are thought to be neurodivergent, and there is extensive evidence of co-occurrence between conditions, as well as interlinking with adversity and childhood traumas. The impacts can vary substantially, and crucially each person's pattern of strengths and challenges will be different. Creating a formulation for each individual, from information gathered from multiple sources, is thus required to fully understand the person in the context of their lives, enabling an inclusive, accessible, person-centred approach.
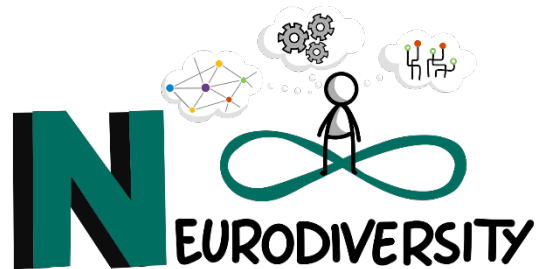
Academic Insights paper - Neurodiversity – a whole-child approach for youth justice
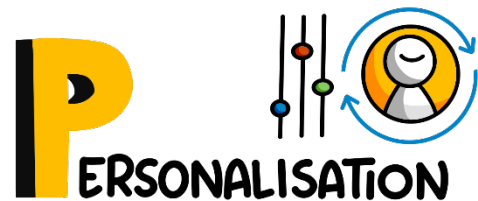
Outcomes

In any delivery logic model, outcomes are the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that result from the services delivered – this can include changes in an individual's knowledge, skills, attitudes, and/or behaviour. Across probation and youth justice services, attention should be paid to ensuring that any outcome measures are sufficiently timely, can be sufficiently tailored to each individual (bearing in mind all the factors linked to desistance) and the supervision/support provided, and, ideally, are able to support claims of attribution. Consideration should also be given to the most appropriate measures for capturing incremental changes, recognising that desistance can be a gradual, non-linear process.

Research & Analysis Bulletin - The links between the quality of supervision and positive outcomes for people on probation

Personalisation

A personalised approach is vital, recognising that individuals' strengths and challenges will be different, shaped by their own personal characteristics, experiences, and circumstances. Thinking about differing levels, for example the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels set out within the social-ecological framework, can be very helpful – building understanding of individuals in the context of their lives and then responding in a holistic, integrated, and person-centred way. It is imperative that everyone benefits from a high-quality, personalised and supportive service, irrespective of their background or individual characteristics and circumstances.

Reflections from research: Chris Fox (youtube.com)

Quality assurance

Services and interventions should be delivered in the way intended, with evidence indicating that outcomes are improved when quality assurance is taken seriously and there is strong implementation fidelity. A key criterion for the accreditation of programmes is that there is an effective quality assurance process in place, with attention being paid to staff skills and training.

Within youth justice, the IDEAS framework – which comprises the five interlinked elements of influence, delivery, expertise, alliance, and support – was developed to support practitioners to evaluate their work with children and their families. It can be used as a quality assurance tool by leaders to develop a culture of effective, relational practice within organisations as it outlines the skills, knowledge and personal attitudes that evidence suggests are necessary to be an effective practitioner.

Reflections from research: Peter Raynor (youtube.com)

Academic Insights paper - The IDEAS approach to effective practice in youth justice

RNR

The Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model has become the leading model of offender assessment and treatment in the world – it is supported by a multitude of studies and meta-analyses, and has been hugely influential in the development of assessment instruments and intervention programmes. It now includes 15 principles, grouped into: (i) overarching principles; (ii) core RNR principles and key clinical issues; and (iii) organisational principles. The risk principle is about matching service intensity to the likelihood of offending, with minimal or even no intervention being sufficient when the likelihood is low; the need principle states that relevant criminogenic needs should be the focus of targeted interventions, with the goal of moving these needs in the direction of becoming strengths; while the responsivity principle specifies that interventions should be tailored, among other things, to the individual's strengths, motivations, preferences, personality, age, gender, ethnicity and cultural identifications.
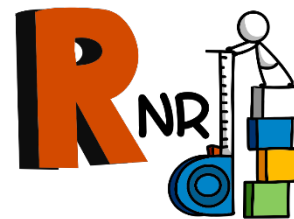
Probation evidence page - The Risk-Need-Responsivity Model

Academic Insights paper - The Risk-Need-Responsivity model: 1990 to the Present

Supervision skills

'Core Correctional Practices' distinguish two kinds of skills: (i) relationship skills and (ii) structuring skills. In terms of the former, positive relationships are characterised by care, empathy, enthusiasm, a belief in the capacity to change, and appropriate disclosure. There is evidence that practitioners can be trained to improve the range and level of skills that they employ, and that those who consistently use a wide range of skills help individuals to desist from offending. Improved skills are more likely to be maintained and used when staff have access to regular supervision by experienced colleagues who have a good understanding of practice skills. The importance of 'professional curiosity' has also been highlighted which requires practitioners to have: (i) time and space to ask the right questions, analyse and act; (ii) time and space to develop relationships with individuals; and (iii) emotional support, recognising the emotional labour linked to its employment.

Probation evidence page - Supervision skills

Academic Insights paper - Supervision Skills for Probation Practitioners

Reflections from research: Peter Raynor (youtube.com)

Academic Insights paper - Putting professional curiosity into practice

Trauma-informed

Justice-involved people have higher levels of adversity and trauma compared to people in the general population, and there has been an increased emphasis on trauma-informed responses and practice. Both staff and children have provided positive feedback to such approaches in youth justice, such as Enhanced Case Management, although some challenges remain in implementing this approach.
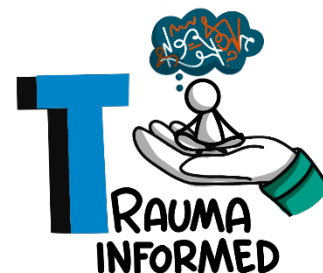
Trauma-informed practice is rooted in desistance and strengths-based models, recognising that the causes and impact of trauma are individualised. The individual person is placed at the centre of the process, allowing their voice to be heard and enabling them to move forward at a sustainable pace. To fully adopt such an approach requires organisations to think carefully in terms of policy, practice, place, and people. Crucially, practitioners need to be supported, supervised, and enabled in a pro-active way. High-quality training on working with trauma should be provided to practitioners so that they can develop clear and suitably consistent responses to people who may not previously have had stability in their lives and may have learned not to trust. Clinical supervision should also be provided to staff, recognising the potential for vicarious (secondary) trauma.

Youth justice evidence page - Adversity and trauma

Academic Insights paper - Trauma-informed practice

Research & Analysis Bulletin - Working with trauma in adult probation

Universal services

To meet the needs of all, there should be a strong mix of targeted, specialist and universal services, with particular attention given to the continuity of support at the end of the period of supervision, facilitating longer-term community integration and social inclusion. Providing access to universal services can prevent repeat or longer-term involvement in the justice system, as well as preventing people from coming into the justice system in the first place. Successful diversion requires other substantive services to be available locally, with a range of options in place to address unmet needs and welfare concerns and to build protective factors. More generally, the research evidence reinforces the importance of working across policy portfolios, e.g. health, education and housing, with a focus on promoting social inclusion, building family resilience, and ensuring access to universal services and facilities. There is a clear need for services to connect and co-ordinate so that resources are available to people in a timely way, when they need them.

Research & Analysis Bulletin - The interventions landscape for probation services: delivery, challenges, and opportunities

Academic Insights paper - Evidence-based core messages for youth justice

Youth justice evidence page - Child First

Voice

Aligning to the four key principles of procedural justice – voice, neutrality, respect and trust – children and adults have reported that they value being listened to and given a chance to 'tell their story'. People are more engaged when they feel invested in the process and part of the solution and believe that justice has taken place. Conversely, where an individual feels that they are not being heard, disengagement is more likely.

The importance of 'voice' is further highlighted in the Lundy model of child participation, developed by academic Laura Lundy and providing a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation, as laid down in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The four elements of the model have a rational chronological order: space, voice, audience, influence. Similarly, Council of Europe guidelines emphasise the importance of meaningful participation where children are able to speak their mind and give their views in all matters that affect them, with their opinions being taken into account seriously and given due respect.

Academic Insights paper - Supporting children's meaningful participation in the youth justice system

Whole-person approach

A whole-person and whole-systems approach recognises the need for a range of different activities at the various levels of the social-ecological model – the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels – especially when rooted in a strengths-based, trauma-informed way that works with individual need. The key factors associated with offending, such as poverty, neglect and abuse, family and neighbourhood environments characterised by violence, to educational disconnect, substance misuse and relationship fragility, all highlight the importance of a holistic approach. An intersectional lens can also be applied, exploring the potential impacts from the intersections of age, gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, dis/abilities, and wider lived experiences.

The research literature further indicates that many needs and offending-related factors overlap and that desistance is more likely if interventions are integrated and combine holistically. Opportunities to provide integrated services and pathways of delivery should thus be well-developed, addressing the needs of the whole person and incorporating wrap-around support where required. There is evidence highlighting the potential benefits from joint working at a local level, involving, for instance, the voluntary sector, health services, and local authorities.

X and Y relationships

Care needs to be taken when considering findings and the potential implications for service delivery. It is important to avoid over-interpreting data, notably when considering the relationship between two variables or factors. Because Y follows X, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that X has caused Y without fully analysing this and establishing the link. We then focus on X as the way to prevent Y but this may be the wrong thing to do. The difference between correlation and causation should always be remembered:

- Correlation is a statistical measure that describes the size and direction of a relationship between two or more variables. A correlation between X and Y, however, does not automatically mean that the change in X is the cause of the change in the values of Y.
- Causation indicates that one event is the result of the occurrence of the other event; i.e. there is a causal relationship between the two events. This is also referred to as

cause and effect, and it is usually established through a controlled study which seeks to isolate the effect of X from all other potential influences.

Data triangulation is helpful, considering to what extent findings can be corroborated using multiple sources of data. To avoid over-interpreting data, the following questions should be considered:

1. What else might be influencing the results?
2. Is there anything missing from the data?
3. What related information might be relevant?
4. Is the data source reliable? Any limitations?
5. Is the finding supported by other sources of data?
6. Is there any conflicting evidence?

The last question is particularly important in helping to avoid confirmation bias, where more weight is assigned to evidence that confirms pre-existing beliefs and/or hypotheses, while potentially ignoring other evidence. Three specific questions to ask to avoid confirmation bias are as follows:

1. What is the data telling me that I expected?
2. What is the data telling me that is in addition to what I expected
3. What is the data telling me that contradicts or seems at odds with what I expected?

Youth to adult transitions

Brain development and the development of maturity is an individualised process that can continue until the mid-twenties, and the youth to adult transition around a person's 18th birthday can be a time of risk, with supportive networks potentially being disrupted and various services falling away. Well-organised multi-agency arrangements and clear lines of responsibility between agencies are thus vital to help with the continuity of provision and to reduce uncertainty, with a constant focus on supporting desistance – it is a time at which many young people desist from criminal activity.

The concept of transitional safeguarding promotes a more fluid non-binary approach to safeguarding as young people transition to adulthood, recognising that many harms and traumas do not stop around a person's 18th birthday. Six key principles are set out, highlighting the importance of an approach which is evidence-informed, ecological/contextual, developmentally-attuned, relational, equalities-orientated, and participative.

Youth justice evidence page - Youth to adult transitions

Academic Insights paper - Transitional safeguarding

Zig-zag (nature of desistance)

The research evidence indicates that desistance from crime is often not a one-off event, with people not ceasing offending as a singular act; instead, it can be a back-and-forth zig-zag process. One of the principles set out within the desistance literature is the need for realism, recognising that desistance, for people who have been involved in persistent offending, is a difficult and complex process, and one that is likely to involve lapses and relapses. It may take considerable time for supervision and support to change entrenched behaviours and the problems that underlie them.

Academic Insights paper - If reoffending is not the only outcome, what are the alternatives?