

***The View of Victims of Crime on
How the Probation Board for Northern Ireland
Victim Information Scheme Might Operate***

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Summary

In 2003-2004, on behalf of The Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) this author completed a piece of exploratory qualitative research on "The Views of Victims of Crime on How the PBNI Victim Information Scheme (VIS) might operate." The purpose of the research was to inform the development of this proposed new scheme as the organisation had not provided a direct service to victims of crime before. The present paper is a summary of that research.

Keywords Victims, Probation Victim Information Scheme, criminal justice system, research to inform practice development.

Introduction

In an adversarial system of criminal justice, victims of crime have rarely felt that they have a voice, or are kept informed about their case (Zedner 1995; Shapland et al 1985). Consequently they often feel that the system is not geared to their needs. In Northern Ireland the Criminal Justice Review (2000) has been seen as the most important survey of Criminal Justice in the last thirty years. It had a central focus on addressing and meeting the needs of victims.

Recommendation 233 (provision of information) of the criminal justice review outlines that:

'... Where a non-custodial sentence was imposed and the victim has an interest in being kept informed, the Probation Board would take the lead.' (Para. 13.42)

This recommendation has led to the development of the PBNI VIS. Historically, the Probation Board's main legislative functions have been the rehabilitation and resettlement of offenders. Public protection and management of risk have increased as priorities in recent years as more serious offenders are supervised. Whilst working directly with offenders, PBNI has always prioritised victim aspects of work in relation to Pre-Sentence Reports, offence-focused programmes, supervision of Probation Orders/Licences and through multi-agency risk management plans. However, PBNI has not to date provided information directly to victims.

Research Aim

"To explore the views of victims on how the PBNI VIS might operate."

Research Objectives

- To determine the views of individual victims and representative organisations to inform the establishment of a PBNI VIS.

- To review relevant literature/ research and victim services.
- To allow the PBNI VIS to be meaningfully evaluated in the future by establishing a base line of the current views of victims.
- To make practice and policy recommendations in relation to victim aspects of all PBNI work.

Literature Review

Zedner (1995) has commented that studying victims has become a growth industry within criminology from 1980. The primary needs of victims to have their experience heard and respected and to receive information, practical help, compensation and support / counselling are now recognised widely (Home Office 1996; Victim Support 1995; Department of Justice USA 2001; Northern Ireland Criminal Justice Review 2000; Maquire and Corbett 1987; Shapland et al 1985). Some feel that restorative justice is more likely to meet these needs. Provision of information to victims is often the first step in any restorative justice practices.

Crime in Northern Ireland

In 2000/2001 about 20% of Northern Ireland households had experienced crime, of which 80% was property related and 20% violence related. The 1998 Northern Ireland Crime Survey found that younger people are more likely to be a victim of a violent crime than older people (11% of 16-29 year olds and 1% of over 60 year olds).

The Research

Research participants were accessed through victims' organisations (Nexus Institute, Victim Support and Women's Aid). Any necessary support, which participants requested following the research interviews, could be appropriately provided by these organisations. Ethical issues in relation to sensitive research were prioritised at all stages. It was essential to become appropriately acquainted with the subject area and advised by victim experts. The research methodology was primarily six in-depth qualitative, semi structured interviews. The interviews were audio taped and thematically analysed.

The main offence / crime types, of which the six participants had been victims, were: domestic violence; sexual offences; burglaries and violence against the person. Five women and one man were interviewed. Four of the participants were in the 26-55 age group and two were 56 years old or over. Interviews were not carried out with people representing all the major offence groups for PBNI. It was however important that those who had suffered the most serious offences were interviewed, as experience of victim contact work by Probation in England and the operation of the Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme in Northern Ireland (2003) confirm that, inevitably, these victims are most keen to be kept informed about their case. All participants valued the opportunity to "tell their story" and to contribute to improvements in how the criminal justice system treats victims.

Findings

The findings from the interviews were:-

- The experience of crime often leads victims to feel vulnerable and nervous.
- They experience the criminal justice system as unsupportive.
- Victims have a range of needs.
- They have little or no knowledge of the role of PBNI.
- All participants welcomed the development of the PBNI VIS.
- The traditional criminal justice system does not always answer basic questions a victim may have.

Some significant comments from across the range of those interviewed included:

- 'When you're a victim, you feel as if everything has gone wrong for you.'
- 'My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth, I was so frightened.' (in relation to attending court as a witness).
- 'It's not the people who do things to you that you get really angry with, it's the authorities.'
- 'I know very little about probation to be absolutely honest.'
- 'I want him to get repaired because I don't want this to happen to someone else or me when he gets out.'
- 'Really that's what most victims want, factual information.'
- 'I didn't think you'd be interested in the victim since you work with the offender.'

Discussion and conclusion

The findings from this research are significant for PBNI, the criminal justice system and victim organisations:-

- Participants confirmed that crime often leaves people feeling vulnerable and that the criminal justice system is regarded as unsupportive. These findings have been recorded by others including; Zedner 1995; Zehr 2002; Northern Ireland Criminal Justice Review 2000 and NIO Research 2003. The range of needs consistently reported by all participants requires an integrated response by relevant agencies.
- Local research, confirming the perceived usefulness of Probation providing information to victims when their case results in a Probation supervised sentence is significant. As the Home Office indicated in 2003, victim services must not be determined by agency priorities, but by victims understanding of their own needs.
- Particularly those research participants who had been the victim of an unknown

offender expressed the need for answers to questions which the traditional criminal justice system does not always provide. These questions included why the offence occurred against them. Assurances that the victim would now be safe were also sought. Victim-led restorative justice could, when appropriate, be considered by Probation and other criminal justice agencies as a means of meeting such victim needs (Zehr 2002).

The local research sample was similar to those most likely to utilise victim services (Newton, 2003) including the proposed PBNI VIS. The findings are also similar to other research throughout the UK and America.

The practical significance of this research include:

- PBNI have evidenced a commitment to improving knowledge and practice in relation to victims.
- The development of the proposed Probation Victim Information Scheme has been informed by the views of victims and the literature review.
- The process has involved networking with other criminal justice and victim organisations.

Recommendations

1. This research confirmed that the PBNI should develop a VIS. The Scheme should provide information in a supportive manner. This should include both the choice to receive information or not, and how this information is provided (i.e. letter, face to face etc).
2. The VIS should be closely integrated with other relevant criminal justice and voluntary organisation services to victims.
3. The PBNI VIS should be regularly evaluated (using this research as a baseline) to measure victim satisfaction.
4. The PBNI should increase public awareness of their role in preventing crime and the harm it does.
5. The needs and interests of victims should be considered in all PBNI policy and practice developments.
6. PBNI plan to commence the VIS in October 2005 following appropriate legislation (Criminal Justice Order [2005])

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Programme Integrity or Programme Integration? The need for a co-ordinated approach to work with domestic violence offenders.

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Summary

Current practice in criminal justice social work tends to emphasise the value of cognitive behavioural interventions, preferably delivered in structured group work programmes, as being the standard for increasingly effective interventions with offenders. This article acknowledges the value of programmes, but urges caution and the need to pay attention to the integration of such programme work with other interventions, including probation case management and inter-agency communication and co-operation. Specifically, the author reports on the findings of a study of a domestic violence offenders' programme in Scotland, and points to a range of programme integration and case management issues arising. The article concludes by drawing lessons for practice, including implications for maximising probation effectiveness, particularly in terms of more integrated working.

Keywords Probation Practice; Cognitive Behavioural Programmes; Case Management; Domestic Violence; Programme Effectiveness, Integrity, Integration; Drift; Resistance; Desistance; Maintenance

Introduction

The upsurge in enthusiasm for cognitive behavioural programmes within the probation service that developed in the wake of the What Works literature has recently been curbed at least in the UK by a number of cautionary findings from research and practice. As early as 1997 Hedderman and Sugg's (1997) survey of probation service programmes in England and Wales had found that cognitive behavioural techniques were not always well understood by probation staff and that programmes in which they were delivered were inconsistently monitored. Discussing the implementation of Glamorgan's early STOP Programme, Vanstone (2000) cautioned that staff enthusiasm for innovative group programmes could result in marginalisation and lack of attention to practice outside the programme, thereby undermining its overall effectiveness. While the accreditation of UK programmes by the joint Prisons Probation Accreditation Panel aims to overcome such shortcomings, there remains concern among practitioners and researchers alike that pre-occupation with the minutiae of programme detail potentially undermines the significance of good practice outside the programme itself. Although accreditation criteria do emphasise the importance of case management, an increasing body of research comments on the significance of a quality supervisory relationship and how it too contributes to reducing offending and other changes in behaviour (Rex 1999, Trotter 1999, 2000).

Such general concerns about over reliance on programmes are heightened when applied to interventions with sexual or violent offenders, and those who are violent in relationships. A significant finding by Gondolf (2002) in a major study of domestic violence offender programmes