

Probation officers rehabilitation aim at odds with government punishment agenda

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In recent years the UK Government has been placing less emphasis on the idea of probation as a form of rehabilitation, instead re-framing it as 'punishment in the community,' with a focus on protecting the public. However, according to new research appearing this month in the *Probation Journal* published by SAGE, recently recruited probation officers may not be completely in step with the Government's approach.

John Deering, Senior Lecturer in [Criminology](#) & Criminal Justice at the University of Wales, Newport, interviewed over 100 trainees entering the probation service three times; at the beginning, middle and end of their training. He found that although those interviewed recognised the Government's agenda, their principal reasons for joining the service were to engage on a humanistic level with offenders and to offer 'help' in the widest sense with a view to assisting individuals to achieve behavioural change.

In his paper, Attitudes and Beliefs of Trainee Probation Officers - a 'New Breed'?, Deering reports that, consistent with wider recruitment trends in the UK for the Probation Service in recent years, some 75% of respondents were female, two-thirds were under 30 and a similar percentage already held undergraduate degrees prior to their training. Those questioned generally gave similar responses, and did not tend to change their views much as a result of training.

During the decade leading up to these respondents applying to join the probation service, the Government had been changing the aims and

purposes of the service, promoting the idea that it had got tougher although still retaining a commitment to some form of rehabilitation. The Government had also removed the requirement for probation officers to qualify as social workers, which was previously the case.

The study shows that in this respect the Government has succeeded. Yet the values and beliefs of recruits seem very much in line with those seen in the past; when asked about why they had applied to train, the clear and overwhelming majority of respondents were looking for a satisfying and meaningful job. They hope to achieve this by working with and 'helping people'. There was little obvious sense of trainees joining to carry out a law enforcement or control agenda.

Recruits also viewed crime as influenced by strong external and determinist factors. These included social, economic and environmental inequalities that limit personal choice and make offending more likely to occur. They linked personal factors leading to criminal activity to individuals' inability to deal effectively with a range of problems and issues, rather than ideas that criminals were innately 'bad' or had chosen to be bad.

"Of course, it is also the case that government retains a belief in the ability of offenders to change," says Deering. "However, these aims are not currently in the ascendancy within government, rather it is more concerned with law enforcement, offender management and risk management."

Deering suggests that there could be some strain, at both personal and at wider organizational levels, in years to come if probation service employees continue to hold such views about probation values and the purpose of the service. These may become increasingly at odds with a government agenda that emphasises offender management and control, punishment and the protection of the public. Although the outcome is

uncertain, employees may become increasingly unhappy with carrying out policies that they disagree with. However, a more positive alternative, according to Deering, might be that clients of the probation service get a more humanistic, constructive and creative probation experience than policy makers envisaged.

"Should these respondents be more widely representative of probation practitioners and continue to hold these attitudes, beliefs and values as practitioners there may be implications for the probation service and for them as individuals, as well as for broader macro level theories about the wider criminal justice system and the probation service," Deering says.

More information: Attitudes and beliefs of trainee probation officers: A 'new breed'? by John Deering is published in the *Probation Journal*, Vol 57(1): 9. [DOI:10.1177/0264550509354671](https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550509354671)

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