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RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 73

VOLUNTARY AFTER-CARE

Mike Maguire, Peter Raynor, Maurice Vanstone and Jocelyn Kynch

Probation services in England and Wales have traditionally carried out voluntary after-care work in addition to their statutory tasks, but many now treat it as a low priority. These findings consider the extent of this service, the kinds of prisoners taking it up, the levels of unmet need and demand for such a service, the variations in local probation policy and practice and the views of probation managers and staff on the priority given to voluntary after-care.

KEY POINTS

- ▶ The extent of voluntary after-care has declined markedly in recent years. Not only are fewer prisoners registered as voluntary after-care cases, but only a small minority of these are now likely to have face-to-face contact with the Probation Service, either before or after release.
- ▶ Probation services varied in their attitude to voluntary after-care – one-third actively encouraged prisoners to request it but around 40% either discouraged it entirely, or only took on cases in exceptional circumstances.
- ▶ Some areas had contracted out management of low risk voluntary after-care cases to partnership agencies from the voluntary sector.
- ▶ Despite a general decline in voluntary after-care provision, some probation services were targeting particular categories of offender who were a higher risk to the public.
- ▶ Prisoners registered for voluntary after-care usually had substantial criminal records and were very likely to have difficulty finding suitable accommodation.

BACKGROUND

The extent of voluntary after-care work, and the priority given to it, have declined for various reasons:

- compulsory post-release supervision introduced in The Criminal Justice Act 1991 for all prisoners sentenced to 12 months or more has converted many potential voluntary after-care (VAC) cases into statutory cases
- introduction of the National Standards (Home Office, 1992) to ensure that prisoners sentenced to 12 months or more and those on community orders were supervised according to strict criteria for protecting the public
- tougher restrictions on public expenditure
- increasing research evidence that specific kinds of highly focussed programmes can reduce reconviction rates. This has led the Probation Service to concentrate more on 'criminogenic needs' and direct confrontation of offending behaviour, and less on welfare-based work typically carried out under VAC.

SURVEY OF PROBATION SERVICES

The results of a national survey of probation services showed that although there were an estimated 4,800 VAC cases officially open at the end of 1996, there were only about 750 offenders under active supervision (see Table 1). Many of these were concentrated in a small number of probation areas (see Table 2).

Table 1 Estimated totals of voluntary after-care cases in England & Wales, 1996

Total case files opened	8,800
Cases still currently registered (at the end of 1996)	4,800
Current registered cases where offender in community	1,200
Estimated 'live' cases where offender in community	750

Note: The first two figures are based on Probation Service returns to the Home Office, the final two figures are based on questionnaire returns.

Table 2 No. of 'live' post release voluntary after-care cases in 29 probation areas

No. of cases	No. of probation areas	%
0	4	14%
1-10	17	59%
11-30	5	17%
31-50	1	3%
51-100	2	7%

Note: 45 of the 54 Probation Service areas responded to the questionnaire

The majority of officially registered cases related to offenders who were still in prison and in many cases their files had been opened automatically. However, the study found that most of these prisoners were unlikely to have any face-to-face contact with the Probation Service, either before or after release.

Senior managers who completed the questionnaire confirmed the decreasing priority given to VAC, mainly due to financial constraints and increasing statutory caseloads. This was characterised, in some areas, by explicit policy documents aimed at minimising the number of cases taken on. One-third said they 'actively encouraged' prisoners to request voluntary supervision but around 40% of Services either discouraged it entirely or only took on cases in exceptional circumstances. Despite this general decline in VAC provision, some areas actively targeted certain categories of offender, to persuade them to accept voluntary supervision. These areas concentrated on offenders who were a higher risk to the public or on groups perceived to have greater needs, such as women prisoners. Some areas had contracted out management of low risk VAC cases to partner agencies from the voluntary sector.

There was no overall agreement between areas on how to improve VAC provision. Many felt that little could be done within existing resource constraints. Some suggestions were:

- making throughcare for short-sentence prisoners (or certain categories) statutory
- issuing clearer national policy statements on how to deal with VAC cases
- greater focus on high risk cases
- greater use of partnership arrangements for lower risk cases.

PRISONERS' VIEWS

105 prisoners were interviewed between October 1996 and June 1997. They were all serving sentences of under 12 months and therefore eligible for automatic unconditional release without supervision. The sample consisted of a main sample of 72 men, plus special samples of:

- 20 men from ethnic minorities
- 13 women.

Few prisoners had received (or expected) help from seconded probation officers in prison. Most saw prison officers as the main (though not necessarily satisfactory) source of assistance while 'inside'. Most prisoners expected to have considerable difficulties on release in relation to accommodation, employment and/or finances. Moreover, about a quarter of the main sample and half of the ethnic minority sample said they had no-one to help them with such problems, other than the Probation Service.

Prisoners' views and experiences of 'outside' probation officers were generally positive. However, less than 20% of the main sample thought they might see a probation officer after release.

Only a minority of prisoners interviewed were aware of VAC provision, but, once explained, over half of the whole sample said they might take up VAC if it was offered. The attitudes of ethnic minority prisoners to probation were generally positive, and the notion of VAC was welcomed by most of them.

Interviews with women prisoners show that they tend to face additional problems, both in prison and on release. In particular, they were concerned about their children's welfare and keeping in touch with male partners sent to prison at the same time.

LOCAL PRACTICE

As the survey of probation areas showed, there were large variations in VAC policy and practice (see Table 3). Interviews with senior probation service managers and staff in seven of these probation areas identified three broad approaches:

- minimalist – characterised by giving VAC low priority and allocating few resources to it (in four areas)
- active – VAC was encouraged where it was thought appropriate, mainly at the discretion of senior probation officers (in two areas)
- partnership – VAC was seen as a task which could be managed by voluntary agencies under partnership arrangements (in one area).

Table 3 Current practice in terms of 'recruitment' to voluntary after-care

Statement of current practice	No. of areas	Percentage of areas
Actively encouraged by advertising it to as many prisoners and ex-prisoners as possible. Virtually anyone interested taken on willingly.	9	21%
Actively encouraged and widely advertised, but selective policy towards those expressing interest, aimed at supervising only the most suitable cases.	6	14%
Not widely promoted, but officers strongly encouraged to offer it in individual cases they come across where they perceive a need.	10	23%
Neither encouraged nor discouraged, but left to individual officers to take on if they so wish.	1	2%
Discouraged except in exceptional circumstances.	14	33%
No cases taken on as a matter of policy.	3	7%
Total responding	43	100%

The minimalist approach

In two of the four minimalist areas, probation officers were explicitly discouraged from taking on VAC work. In the other two, VAC was offered to prisoners on a routine basis, but often through letters couched in uninviting terms. Casual calls at probation offices by prisoners after release were discouraged. The general staff view was that as the Probation Service's main aim was to reduce offending, resources could not be spared for VAC, which was seen as welfare work. Those interviewed felt that welfare issues should be dealt with by prison staff and seconded probation officers before release.

The active approach

Managers and staff in the two more 'active' Services stressed the importance of maintaining contact with short-sentence recidivist offenders. They often had severe social needs and some posed a potential risk to the public.

The partnership approach

In one area, a voluntary agency was contracted to provide VAC. It offered welfare services to all prisoners serving sentences of less than 12 months (except those assessed as high risk). About 2,000 initial letters were sent a year and around a quarter of the offenders responded. Volunteers visited about 60% of these, the remainder being offered a VAC 'surgery' appointment after release. Of those visited, most were only seen once in prison but over half were contacted again by telephone or letter, and a small number were contacted five or six times. Post-release contact was less frequent and offenders often missed appointments. Around 7% of all relevant automatic unconditional release prisoners had some contact with the voluntary agency after release from prison.

In most cases, the voluntary agency simply gave advice or information. Over three-quarters of all cases involved accommodation problems but help or advice with employment and benefits were also needed. Problems such as alcohol or drug addiction were usually referred to another agency.

Probation managers were positive about the partnership arrangement which continued the area's strong after-care and 'resettlement' tradition. However, they identified some serious drawbacks:

- the largely untrained volunteers could not work on addressing offending behaviour; high risk offenders were, therefore, officially assigned to a probation officer, but because of high statutory caseloads, these offenders received little or no attention

A casefile analysis, based on 53 voluntary after-care cases in four probation areas

This showed that prisoners registered for VAC usually had substantial criminal records and were very likely to have difficulty finding suitable accommodation. Of the 53, only nine had no previous convictions. Almost half were serving sentences for serious offences: sexual offences (7); violence (10); drugs (3); burglary (5) – more than half these offenders were over 30-years-old. Post-release contact was more likely when the Probation Service made a specific appointment before the prisoner's release. Contact was often a single visit, or was discontinued once immediate problems such as accommodation had been resolved. Only a small minority of these VAC cases mirrored statutory supervision, with continued contact involving work on changing attitudes or behaviour.

- one of the voluntary agency's tasks was identifying cases requiring extended input from the Probation Service. However, this rarely happened, due to a heavy caseload and some weaknesses in assessment procedures.

CONCLUSIONS

This research suggests that the Probation Service generally gives VAC low priority. However, many of the eligible offenders have major social needs and some are in danger of reconviction.

Possible ways forward would seem to be:

- expand the welfare function of prison officers (although their resources are also under increasing pressure)
- extend Automatic Conditional Release provisions to cover short-term prisoners
- empower the courts, as in Scotland, to impose statutory post-release supervision on short-term prisoners where this is considered desirable
- let VAC continue to run down 'naturally', but allow for exceptions in cases of special need
- phase out VAC provision altogether
- use VAC to systematically target only short-term prisoners who present a substantial risk, and combine this with programmes designed to deal with their offending

- collaborate with prison staff to establish a more effective way of collating information on short-term prisoners' needs and risks. Those with high needs and risks could then be referred to Probation Service facilities or other appropriate agencies

- give voluntary agencies the contracts to run voluntary after-care in all probation areas.

The cost of extending Automatic Conditional Release provisions is likely to be prohibitive, while removing or running down VAC completely would eventually mean there was no post-release supervision of short-term prisoners. Superficially, contracting out nearly all VAC to partnership agencies is appealing, especially financially. However, before making any decisions, the Probation Service should carry out a wide-ranging evaluation of how effective such organisations are in meeting prisoners' most pressing practical needs. It should also be borne in mind that volunteers are not trained to address offending behaviour directly, and hence their efforts are likely to be less effective than voluntary supervision by probation officers in protecting the public. It appears that the final three options listed above offer the best way to target resources on prisoners who require the most attention. This could be done by combining contracting out to voluntary organisations with some form of referral to specialist agencies for those with the greatest needs and risks.

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Mike Maguire is Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Cardiff University. Professor Peter Raynor, Maurice Vanstone and Jocelyn Kynch are members of the School of Social Sciences and International Development at University of Wales, Swansea.



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