

Prolific Offender Projects – a new route to public protection?

Anne Worrall summarises the features and benefits of prolific offender projects.

Prolific offender projects are a relatively new development in the UK and have their roots in a number of political and professional developments over the past decade (Maguire 2000; Walton 2000). Intelligence-led policing has been directed towards the targeting and incapacitation of prolific offenders in the belief that 'a relatively small number of individuals account for a substantial proportion of detected crime' (Heaton 2000). The emphasis of this approach has been on the gathering of information and its use to detect, categorise and manage offenders through monitoring and surveillance. Alongside this has been the development of evidence-based probation practice (Hough and Chapman 1998) and the emergence of the What Works? agenda, dominated by cognitive behavioural approaches to work with offenders. In recent years, however, the broader personal and social needs of offenders have re-appeared as an essential focus for the success of rehabilitation. Consequently, prolific offender projects reflect both the shared and conflicting cultures of developments in police and probation practices.

More recently, the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 created local crime and disorder partnerships which have provided the environment in which these projects have been able to grow and, apparently, flourish. The impetus for inter-agency working and information exchange has come from the requirement to produce and publish local audits of crime and disorder and strategies (Phillips et al 2000) to reduce these problems. With this impetus, however, has also come the pressure on prolific offender projects to demonstrate their impact, not only on the offending behaviour of project participants, but also on local crime rates - an infinitely more difficult connection to demonstrate.

Key characteristics of prolific offender projects

Prolific offender projects have been concerned with the reduction of volume property crime, predominantly theft and burglary. The central feature of prolific offender projects has been the combination of intensive attention from both the police and probation services. The key innovation of the projects (modelled on the much-quoted Dordrecht project in the Netherlands) has been joint working between two criminal justice agencies that, traditionally, have been wary of each other's aims and methods.

The other characteristics of the projects derive from this central feature. First, the project is staffed by designated police and probation personnel, and located on either police or probation premises. Second, participants in the project are required to meet local criteria that categorise them as 'prolific' - that is, among the most persistent property offenders in the locality. Third, they are subject to formal court orders of community rehabilitation or post-custodial licence. Fourth, participants are subject to high levels of police monitoring and programmes of intensive probation supervision (involving about four appointments per week) that seek to address their offending behaviour (though not normally through groupwork or accredited programmes) and other needs such as housing, substance misuse, leisure, education and employment. Fifth, in order to achieve this, there has to be an agreed mechanism of information exchange between all participating agencies. Finally, there is an agreed procedure for swift enforcement in the event of non-compliance or further offending.

The Newcastle-under-Lyme project

One such project for adult offenders is to be found in Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire. Located in the probation office and staffed by a probation officer and a seconded police constable, this project was supported by local SRB funding and began in late 1998. From the outset, it was evaluated by a research team from the Department of Criminology at Keele University (Hope et al 2001; Staffordshire Probation Area 2001) and has become one of only two projects to date to be independently evaluated—the other being the Burnley/ Dordrecht Project evaluated by the University of Huddersfield (Chenery and Pease 2000). The evaluation was concerned with both the implementation and the effectiveness of the project over its first two years. It compared the progress of the first 29 participants with a similar group of offenders who had not been exposed to the project and found that the project appeared to have had an effect in the direction of reducing the re-offending rates of participants, on average, by over 50 per cent when compared with similar non-participants. With all the caveats and provisos normally expressed by cautious academics, this seemed a promising finding.

However, although it is statistics that make headlines, it is important to look at the stories and the processes behind the figures. The project has



been able to provide intensive supervision and individualized treatment packages. Of particular significance has been 'fast-track' drugs assessment and treatment. Other forms of assistance have included accommodation tenancies, constructive leisure activities, college courses and job search advice. Perceptions of the project among participants, workers and colleagues have generally been very positive. The 'success' of the project is seen to owe much to the police and probation coordinators who have provided a good example of police-probation partnership.

A more controversial issue, however, is the extent to which increased monitoring has detected continued reoffending - which would normally be an indicator of programme failure - and has turned this into an indicator programme success if it is responded to promptly and forcefully - a 'win/win' situation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the project has continued to work with such offenders while in custody and to retain them on the project post-release.

It has already been suggested here that it is not a realistic expectation of these projects that they

should demonstrate a reduction in local crime rates. Changes occur in reporting and recording behaviour, and in police priorities; newly active offenders replace offenders on the project; other initiatives - as well as social and economic changes - all affect the local crime rate. These factors cannot realistically be controlled for in the short term. However, this does not mean that projects cannot contribute to, and inform, local community safety policy and practice, reducing the fear of crime and improving the community's general sense of well-being.

Prolific offender projects are developing around the country and their evaluation is raising many issues of policy and practice. Not least among these are issues of selection, information exchange, evaluation methodology and cost-effectiveness. But they are also offering hope that 'something' can be done to reduce the recidivism rates of those non-violent property offenders who are the bane of ordinary people's lives and constitute the bulk of the short-term prison population. ■

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