

The Importance of Evidence-based Practice in HM Inspectorate of Probation

Dr Robin Moore is the Head of Research for HM Inspectorate of Probation. He is interviewed by Dr Darren Woodward who is a senior lecturer in the School of Criminal Justice at Arden University.

The interview took place in June 2023.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for the Prison Service Journal. Please can you explain a little bit about your current role?

Of course. So, I joined the inspectorate as head of research in 2015 and my role is to provide strategic direction to the Inspectorate's research team and oversee the team's research products and the analytical support to our adult youth and thematic inspections. As part of this, the key responsibilities are firstly to review and contribute to the policy and operational evidence base for probation and youth justice services, and secondly, to ensure that the inspection standards and our organisational positions are evidence based, and thirdly, as the most senior analytical specialist within the inspectorate, to provide technical advice. So that all our inspections are as robust and impactful as possible.

Do you have any line management duties?

I have a smallish research team and there are five of us in total, which includes myself. So, I'm there as head of research and then we have two senior research officers and two research officers. I'm currently line managing the two senior research officers who then have line management responsibilities themselves. A small but perfectly formed team.

What's your past experience?

I have over 20 years' experience of leading and managing research strategies and programmes, and undertaking quantitative and qualitative projects. Working within academia initially and then within government agencies before joining the inspectorate. I was head of the research programme within the National Offender Management Service as it then was, and I had responsibility for developing and overseeing the agencies research priorities, programme, and budget. I was also chair of the National Research Committee at that time, which quality assures internal and external research projects across prisons and probation, and prior to that role I was heavily involved in the validation of OASys, the Offender Assessment

System, which is also used across prisons and probation. I've always worked within criminal justice, covering aspects of sentencing, probation, prisons, and youth justice, although never a focus on the police and I've published on a range of topics, including assessment intervention delivery, the role of inspection and evidence informed practice.

How did that get you into research in the first place?

It started right back in my university days. I initially studied, when I first went to university, law, which was at Oxford, but that included a Criminal Justice and Penology module, and I have to say that engaged and interested me more than any of the other modules as part of the course. So, I progressed from there on to a criminology masters, of which there was an empirical component and then carried that on to a criminal justice PhD, which focused on the enforcement of financial penalties by magistrates' courts. And I just continued, initially within academia. I was employed by the Centre for Criminology at the University of Oxford. Leading the national evaluation of the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Programme, which had been commissioned by the Youth Justice Board, so it was a really, you know, big multidimensional evaluation. So, I wouldn't say there was ever a clear plan right from the outset. But I think I've always just followed the areas that have really engaged and interested me.

What does evidence-based practice mean to you?

As a starting point, I always find it helpful to make a distinction between evidence-informed or evidence-led approaches and evidence-based approaches and practice. The former of those approaches, which are guided by the best available research findings alongside practice, knowledge and lived experiences, are underpinned by a clear theory of change. And I think this is important because whilst there's an alignment to the evidence, it also leaves room for promising innovation and at the same time there should be a commitment to evaluation. So once an approach is

then validated through robust evaluation, then specific approaches and interventions can be described as evidence based. And having worked in a criminal justice research for over 20 years, you won't be surprised to hear that I strongly believe in the value of research evidence. We have this strategic aim that services should reduce reoffending while also taking all reasonable steps to keep the public safe. And this is most likely if practice is aligned to the evidence base and if the evidence base continues to grow over time. The more that we can pull together differing types of evidence, the better and certainly the more powerful it can become, and this includes drawing upon and merging the latest research findings, but with professional knowledge and practice wisdom and the lived experiences of those in receipt of the services.

I would also add, reflecting back over my time, and working in this area, I do think at times there there's been unnecessary conflict between differing research areas and approaches. My general view is that paradigm wars are often a bit of a time-wasting distraction from the shared goal of helping people turn their lives around. There is still much to learn, there have always been new things to learn, and the focus needs to be upon ensuring that all research, whatever its type, is as robust and rigorous as possible, so maximising its full potential. Research questions will vary markedly in nature, so a wide range of research methods are required, with a recognition that differing approaches can be highly complementary, so there's room for action-based research, in-depth case study work and longer-term experimental designs. And then crucially, we need to learn to merge all these different types of evidence together, as I would say that's where the real promise lies for evidence-based practice.

One final point, and I think it's particularly important, is that we need to keep pushing the research evidence, particularly when we recognise that evidence and experience are not the only drivers of change; they sit alongside other drivers such as values, resources and political ideologies and interests. There

will be times when political or financial imperatives take precedence, but we should always take opportunities to promote the evidence.

You answered this a little bit at the beginning of the last question, but how is evidence-based practice applied in the Inspectorate itself?

I've been working in the inspectorate for about eight years and it's a really great place to work because there is a strong belief in the need for both probation and youth justice services to be evidence based or evidence led. We're totally committed to reviewing, developing, and promoting the evidence base for high quality services. A key source of evidence is the research evidence, and we use this alongside our inspection knowledge and findings. This incorporates the views of practitioners and those supervised, to inform our understanding of what helps and what hinders services, to develop our inspection programmes, guidance, and effective practice products, and also to consider system-wide change that could change lives for the better. I have a responsibility in terms of the research evidence. So, on the research side, to help review, develop and promote the evidence base, we collaborate with academics and external researchers in numerous ways. We're always looking to utilise and maximise the knowledge, experience, and skills across the research community. Our aim is to produce as rounded and balanced a view as possible of the evidence base, so avoiding partiality, while also recognising that the evidence base never

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stands still, and that it continually evolves, and we should never expect to find all the evidence by looking too narrowly in one place.

An example of our approaches is that we've been commissioning Academic Insights papers since 2019.¹ Through these papers, leading academics present their views on specific topics. This assists with informed debate and aids understanding of what helps and what hinders services. We've now published around 50 papers in total, from a wide range of academics across differing institutions, with differing areas of expertise

1. <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation/research/academic-insights/>

and backgrounds, from both England and Wales, and also some other jurisdictions. Some are very well known and established academics, while some are academics at an earlier stage in their career; and I think that's one of the challenges, to keep an eye on all the latest developments across the entire research community or ecosystem. Trying to identify the new up and coming academics who may perhaps be less vocal than some others and also trying to keep an eye on relevant findings from other sectors. There's a lot of similar findings in comparable sectors, and we are always thinking about what can be pulled across.

I'd also say that we need to recognise that expanding and strengthening the evidence base will be of no or limited value if no attention's then given to it. We have to think carefully about knowledge translation and knowledge mobilisation, so it's not simply one way dissemination, but also two-way meaningful engagement and interaction with research findings and its implications. In terms of knowledge translation, we always think about differing dissemination methods and how to combine accessibility with academic credibility while also recognising that there's a range of preferences in terms of format and style. With this in mind, we've produced online evidence resources, summarising key research findings and presenting them as concisely as possible.

We've also launched some five-minute reflections from research videos which feature leading academics who reflect upon their work and set out their top pieces of advice for the delivery of high-quality probation and or youth offending services. These are short videos with key points that can be digested quickly for those short on time, and we have to be honest here and recognise that many practitioners are short on time.

That's really interesting, so thank you very much. What do you think the future will bring in relation to evidence-based practice?

I can say what I'm hoping to see. I'm hoping to see an increased merging of research findings, professional knowledge and practice wisdom and the lived

experiences of those in receipt of services. A recognition that all have value. We undertook some research on service user involvement in the review and improvement of probation services, and within that report we did conclude that strategic direction was required to support the balance between the value placed on lived and learned experience. I would say it would certainly seem nonsensical to try to reform services without engaging and learning from those who've been in receipt of the services, and this applies equally to children and adults. But it needs to be done

well, so their views and experiences should be a key source of evidence for an evidence informed approach. But the approach needs to be meaningful and not tokenistic.

In terms of other developments, I'm also expecting to see progress in relation to knowledge translation with improved ways of summarising and disseminating evidence. Technologies are developing incredibly quickly at the moment and most notably through new AI tools. There would appear to be some real opportunities here, while also thinking carefully about the potential limitations and also the dangers of such tools and developments.

Thanks. So, my final question for you then is what are the challenges that you are currently facing?

The big challenge at the moment is the current resource demands on the frontline. This is clearly a challenge for undertaking research projects and evaluations, where you often

require the support and time of practitioners and also senior staff and engaged gatekeepers who can facilitate the necessary access. We're seeing this in terms of the ability to get frontline survey responses. So, people's time is limited and that can easily lead to some sort of research fatigue and just difficulties in assisting with research. I'm hoping that over time the probation service will begin to stabilise, and as part of that, I'd really like to see a much stronger commitment to building a research, evidence-based culture which is hardwired into the organisational wide delivery model. You could argue that a cultural shift is required here whereby supporting, co-producing, or instigating

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research is seen as a key part of the job, with clear links to professional learning, development and even career progression. As part of this, there should be a commitment to upskilling staff where required, so that they have a sufficient understanding of the role of research and evaluation. Staff need to be encouraged to and given sufficient time, space, and resources to continually reflect upon their practice and to learn from others and apply findings from research.

I think there's some very related and useful concepts to think about. There's the concepts of a growth mindset and also professional curiosity. Starting with a growth mindset, practitioners with such a mindset have a desire to explore, learn and understand, and to keep up to date with new developments. They'll reflect on and review their thinking, and persist in the face of setbacks, and recognise the need to make consistent efforts to continually develop and embrace challenges. They will learn from constructive feedback and find lessons from others. Therefore, recognising that there may be differing ways of doing things.

Then we have the concept of professional curiosity. Jake Phillips and colleagues have noted how in fields such as nursing, professional curiosity is used to encourage practitioners to stay abreast of developments in the field and to engage with academic research and professional development. This is very much linked to a broader appreciation of the value of engagement with knowledge.

There have been some helpful developments. There's been the recent introduction of a professional register and professional standards for probation qualified staff, and one of those standards requires staff to seek new opportunities to enhance and continuously improve their practice. Having said that, the big barrier that we have at the moment is of insufficient time and space. Practitioners are stretched and this does mean that the focus on areas such as critical reflection can quickly suffer.

Another key challenge for building the evidence is the limited availability of robust costs data. Most research and evaluation studies within probation lack any economic components. The consequence is that robust evidence on both costs and benefits of differing approaches and interventions is generally lacking, and clearly required here. Particularly because when resources are constrained, it is vital that the funds are spent on approaches that provide the greatest possible economic and social return. Finally, I would say there remains a lack of consensus around appropriate outcome measures. I do think an increased consensus around outcome measures, which could be better used to understand factors linked to desistance would be beneficial for us all. Attention will need to be paid to ensure that these outcome measures are sufficiently timely, can be sufficiently tailored to the individual, and can also support robust claims of attribution.