

Criminal Justice Social Work in Scotland: Research, Policy and Practice

Gill McIvor and Janet Jamieson
Social Work Research Centre
University of Stirling

Introduction

Social work as a profession has tended to be characterised by its failure to draw systematically upon empirically derived evidence and knowledge about effective practice. The absence of a sound research base has also typified social work policies which, it could be argued, often owe more to political expediency than to an explicit concern to promote an empirically informed approach. By contrast, criminal justice social work policy and practice in Scotland - and, indeed, throughout the UK - has been increasingly influenced by research, to the extent that major initiatives have been developed in recent years to ensure that policy and practice in this area are consistent with the emerging evidence about 'what works'. This paper will draw upon the experience of the Social Work Research Centre at the University of Stirling in working with policy makers and practitioners to ensure that criminal justice social work policies and practices are based on research and will provide a historical perspective on how the relationship between research, policy and practice has evolved over time.

The creation of criminal justice social work services in Scotland

Since the late 1960s there has been no separate probation service in Scotland. Instead responsibility for the supervision of offenders in the community rests with local authority social work departments. This arrangement has pertained since 1969 when the existing probation service was merged with other welfare services to create generic social work departments. Its primary strength was seen as its emphasis upon the commonality of skills and values which underpinned all areas of social work practice. At a practical level, however, social work with offenders was accorded low priority in comparison with other areas of practice such as child protection work. Over time the courts began to lose confidence in the quality of supervision afforded offenders on probation orders and the numbers of orders made on an annual basis steadily declined.

The decline in the use of probation ran contrary to central government policy at that time which was concerned to minimise the use of short custodial sentences by encouraging the courts to make greater use of probation orders and community service orders (Rifkind, 1989). Whilst financial expediency clearly influenced the desire to impact positively upon Scotland's traditionally high prison population, the policy also recognised the relative ineffectiveness of custodial sentences with respect to subsequent recidivism and the damaging consequences of imprisonment for offenders and their families. To ensure that sufficient resources were available to meet the demand for community service orders by the courts the Scottish Office assumed full responsibility for the funding of community service schemes in Scotland in 1989, though responsibility for the management and operation of schemes still rested with the local authority social work departments.

National Objectives and Standards for community service were introduced at the same time to ensure a greater degree of consistency in the operation of schemes across the country (SWSG, 1989). The standards were developed to take account of evidence from a national study of community service schemes which was exploring, among other things, whether the successful completion of orders was influenced by different approaches to practice (McIvor, 1989). The resulting standards, being based upon available research evidence about what constituted effective community service practice, were more positively received by practitioners than were the equivalent National Standards which were developed by the Home Office in England and Wales.

Two years later 100 per cent central government funding and national objectives and standards were extended other statutory social work services to the criminal justice system - SERs and court services, probation and throughcare (SWSG, 1991). The most significant practical consequence of the new funding mechanism was the creation of new specialist arrangements for the management and delivery of criminal justice social work services. In most parts of the country these services were provided by teams of social workers with a specialist remit or, particularly in rural areas, by specialist workers located within generic teams. A programme of social research

was commissioned to evaluate the impact of the policy with this work undertaken jointly by researchers from the Scottish Office and the University of Stirling.

The primary objectives of supervision identified in the National Standards were:

to help offenders tackle their offending behaviour, assist them to live socially responsible lives within the law and, whenever appropriate, further their social integration through the involvement and support of their families, friends and other resources in their community.

(SWSG, 1991, para 12.7)

Despite the inclusion of a supplement aimed at encouraging an evidence-based approach to supervision, the National Standards were, however, essentially a procedural document offering little guidance as to how, in practice, the principal objectives of the policy could be achieved. There was clearly a danger that considerable energy could be devoted meeting National Standards without there being an attendant increase in the quality and effectiveness of social work practice.

Developing effective programmes of intervention: The Crieff Initiative

In the autumn of 1992 the Universities of Edinburgh and Stirling were approached by the Social Work Services Inspectorate (SWSI) of the Scottish Office with a view to developing a model which would foster the development, and the maintenance, of new practice initiatives which were informed by effectiveness research. This took the form of a short residential training event aimed at providing participants with information about effective approaches to the supervision of offenders and assisting them to apply these findings to their practice while recognising and addressing the practical problems inherent in developing and sustaining innovative methods of work (e.g. McGuire, 1991; Petersilia, 1990; Raynor, 1988).

Prior to the training event social work departments were invited to identify a project which could either be a new initiative at the early planning stage or an existing initiative which might benefit from review and redirection. Project teams - which were to consist at the minimum of a main grade social worker, a senior social worker and a senior manager - were asked to submit a brief outline of their proposed project which included: rationale; objectives; staff and other resources; decision-making structures; the practice model envisaged; content of the programme; stage of development; and cost. Teams were also expected to identify, in advance of the seminar, those issues which would need particular attention if their project was to be successfully implemented. A total of 21 submissions were received.

In May 1993 a two-day residential seminar was convened which was primarily devoted to work in project teams aimed ultimately at the development of a detailed project action plan. During the two days delegates were provided with an overview of the effectiveness research literature, attended research and practice based workshops related to the areas of work being developed in the projects and were offered 'consultancy' by workshop leaders on an individual project basis as required. Project action plans were completed on the afternoon of the second day. The project teams were brought back together at a follow-up seminar in March 1994 to discuss progress and identify problems which had been encountered in the implementation of the project action plans. Nineteen of the 21 projects participated in the follow-up seminar. Two others had fallen by the wayside primarily as a consequence of staffing difficulties. Thirteen of the projects indicated that all or most of the targets identified in their action plans had been achieved and in only two projects, one of which was in the process of reviewing its original objectives, had none of the targets been achieved.

Feedback from the projects suggested that the initiative had been largely successful. Particular emphasis was placed upon the value of working in teams and having 'quality time' for project planning. Participants also valued the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas with colleagues from other areas who were interested in developing similar types of services. Indeed, the main criticism was that there was insufficient opportunity to work together with other teams who were planning to engage in similar types of work. Feedback from the second seminar was similarly positive. It was viewed by many participants as having helped to identify the means by which various obstacles might be overcome. The opportunity to share experiences and ideas with colleagues as a means of resolving problems was particularly valued.

Most projects had been implemented through the deployment of existing resources though in seven cases the resource implications had not been fully identified from the outset. Fourteen projects had been integrated into their department's strategic plan for social work services to the criminal justice system and all but one - which had suffered a lack of continuity as a result of staff changes - were clearly linked into line management structures. Thirteen teams had begun to evaluate their projects using a variety of evaluative methods and data were being generated in seven.

The key issues that were identified from this initiative as having being critical to the successful implementation and maintenance of innovative research-based methods of work with offenders can be summarised as follows:

- the need to demonstrate that there is sufficient demand for the proposed service through the gathering of relevant information prior to the planning stage;
- the need for sufficient 'quality time' to plan, to review progress and to make amendments as necessary;
- the need to enlist the support of management, colleagues and other key stakeholders;
- the need for effective marketing and publicity, including feedback, to referrers and other interested parties;
- the need to adopt a flexible approach to the development of models of service delivery as a means of responding to low or fluctuating levels of demand;
- the need to ensure that objectives are clearly identified and expectations are clearly conveyed to participants; and
- the need for monitoring and evaluation to be built in from the outset.

Following the success of the 'Crieff' initiative as it became known, the model developed was subsequently applied to the development of innovative projects across Europe under the auspices of the Conference Permanente Europeene de la Probation.

Integrating effective approaches into day-to-day practice

By the mid 1990s there was growing interest among social work practitioners in the development of evidence based practice. A number of factors contributed to this trend. First, a number of national conferences had been organised around the theme of 'what works', culminating in the organisation of a Scottish event on this topic in 1995. Second, the Scottish Office had identified a need for criminal justice social work staff - especially managers and experienced practitioners - to have access to detailed and up-to-date knowledge about relevant research and the capacity to evaluate their practice if the effectiveness of work with offenders was to be maximised. In 1994 the Universities of Edinburgh and Stirling were awarded a contract to provide an MSc in Advanced Social Work Studies in Criminal Justice which combined an academic masters degree with the CCETSW advanced award. It is estimated that 10 per cent of all criminal justice social work staff in Scotland now possess an MSc and several have additionally succeeded in achieving an advanced award.

Discussions began in 1996 between the Scottish Office and representatives of The Association of Directors of Social Work, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the academic community regarding the feasibility of establishing a demonstration project in which practice would be directly underpinned by effectiveness research. The proposal was based on the premise that 1) social work services to the criminal justice system in Scotland will be judged mainly on what they are seen to contribute to making local communities safer places to live in and 2) that to achieve this will require properly trained staff who are confident in their professional identity and whose practice skills are based on research findings and other evidence about what works. Its primary objectives were:

To develop and test service delivery systems and methods of practice for supervising offenders in the community based on the most up to date research evidence about the characteristics of effective practice in reducing offending behaviour.

Although the initiative was not taken forward in its initial form the core concept has now been resurrected under the auspices of the 'Getting Best Results' steering group. This group, which consists of representatives of

central government, local authorities, the independent sector, the Scottish Prison Service and the academic community, has been established to take forward a number of initiatives which are concerned centrally with the development of an evidence based approach to criminal justice social work policy and practice. These include:

- the development of post qualifying training in criminal justice social work;
- the introduction of quality assurance systems;
- the development of training for criminal justice social work staff on a consortia basis;
- the identification of 'pathfinder authorities' which will implement an evidence-based approach across all aspects service delivery;
- the development and dissemination of guidance on effective practice relevant to the Scottish context;
- the development of a system of accreditation for programme providers based on the principles of effective practice;
- the development of a framework for the assessment and management of offender risk;
- a review of national standards to ensure that they reflect the growing importance of the 'what works' approach;
- the development of a Criminal Justice Development Centre aimed at promoting an informed approach to policy and practice.

The Criminal Justice Development Centre will have a remit *inter alia* to promote evidence-based policy and practice by promoting and testing models of best practice and management; preparing and issuing briefings on best practice; providing advice to assist local authorities and others to monitor and evaluate practice and management; assist service providers to apply the lessons of research to their particular circumstances; and establish and maintain a database of research and information about good practice and management from throughout the UK and beyond.

Although it is too early to comment on how effective these various initiatives will be they provide a timely opportunity to explore the impact of different approaches to the promotion of evidence based policy and practice in the public sector.

References

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