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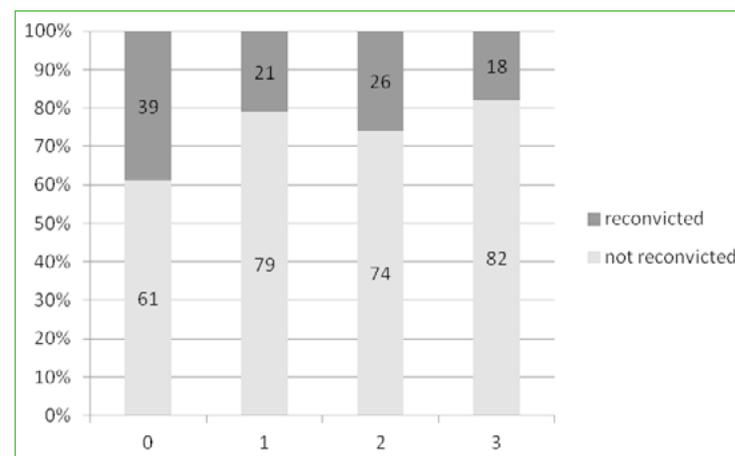
This bulletin reports recent findings from a long term study seeking to ‘open the black box’ of probation supervision. The study started with interviews with 199 men and women on probation in 1997-8, a large number of whom were interviewed again in four subsequent rounds of interviews. The fifth set of interviews with 104 people in the study took place in 2010-11. What emerges from these interviews is that probation may not have an immediate impact, but can start to have an impact on people long after their orders have ended. This happens when other changes in their lives (such as family formation) help to support change. At each interview, participants were asked whether:

- they learnt anything as a result of being on probation,
- their probation officer did or said anything that helped them stay out of trouble, and
- they got helpful advice from their probation officer

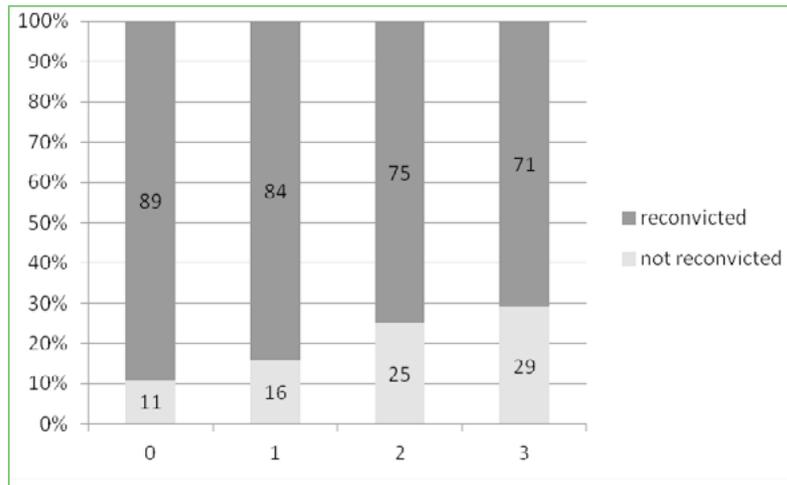
If they answered yes to at least two of these questions, backed up by examples, this was taken as indicating that probation had had a high impact (scoring 2 or 3). Otherwise, a low impact (scoring 0 or 1) was attributed to their experience of probation.

Levels of impact reported during the second set of interviews in 1998 were related to reconviction up to the end of 1998. 30% of the low impact probationers had been reconvicted, compared with 22% of the high impact group (Figure 1). In 2010-11, 11% of the lowest impact group had escaped reconviction compared with 29% of those reporting the highest level of impact (Figure 2). These findings were not statistically significant, but confirm general trends: greater levels of impact are associated with lower levels of reconviction, and this endures over time.

**Figure 1: Impact (1998)**



**Figure 2: Impact (2010-11)**



**So how did that impact work, according to probationers interviewed in 2010-11?**

The clarity of people’s recollection, and level of detail at which they were able to describe how their experience of probation worked for them, and what named officers were doing, suggests that what is being seen here is not just differing levels of motivation or the reconstruction of events in hindsight.

What can be detected in people’s accounts are a variety of different processes at work.

The rest of this bulletin uses quotes from people interviewed as part of this project who looked back to their experience of probation to illustrate some of the mechanisms by which probation interacted with other life experiences to bring about change.

**Exercising Choice** - For some, probation acted as a ‘wake up call’, which helped probationers to realise that they had a choice about who they could be. For others, there seemed a more general and growing unease that how they were living their lives was not for them, accompanied by an apparent choice of what sort of life they could lead.

**Receiving Insights and Advice** – We found continued evidence from these fifth sweep interviews that what was said by probation officers did make a difference to probationers, either because they started to use these insights later on, or because they only started to realise that such advice had influenced them.

“

[Probation] explaining to you really that there’s more to life than what you’re doing, you know, drugs and pinching off people. It is possible to turn your life around and have the life that you want really. That a life of crime’s just no good.

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“

It kind of planted a seed, and it took a few years before I really started to act on it, but I think yeah, probation probably started all that off. Perspective and seeing things from a different angle, instead of thinking from my point of view... So in that sense I think it did me good.

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**Talking and Doing** - The opportunity that probationers found to express themselves properly, and their communication with probation officers, provided a building block in establishing a working relationship that could lead to more practical interventions on the part of the officer. Their recognition that probation represented a last chance also helped to make probationers more receptive to advice and help.

“

She, my probation officer, used to let me talk, let me express myself, find out who I was rather than say to me “no you be this, you do that, you do this”. I never felt like I was dictated to, just made me believe that you’ve got a choice...you can do something with yourself now

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**Probation officers as ‘Normal Smiths’** – Through their own actions – but also by allowing probationers to act themselves – probation officers communicated the essential normality of probationers and tried to convey that they could change. Many of the positive experiences that the probationers reported came from probation officers’ investment in them.

“

If the probation service cares, like it says it does, it really wants to help people, then you will try to help the probation service. And that in itself will help you even more. Because if you try and help them, you try and get their job done. And it just sort of rolls on. It humanises the government, if you like, the judicial service.

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## Further Reading

McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C. and Maruna, S. (2012) *How and Why People Stop Offending: Discovering Desistance*, IRISS Insight No. 15, Glasgow. <http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/how-and-why-people-stop-offending-discovering-desistance>