Chapter ten.

the rehabilitation of offenders:

what works?

Introduction.

What are your views on the rehabilitation of offenders? Do you think that it is possible to alter the behaviour of offenders? Should offenders be given the opportunity of rehabilitation? Can long- term offenders become law-abiding citizens through the use of treatment programmes or do you think that an offender will always be an offender? Do you think that the time and money spent on interventions with offenders is justified or a waste of precious resources?

It seems that most people hold their own, sometimes strong, views relating to how offenders should be dealt with following conviction for an offence. Some think that they should be punished and may make statements such as ‘offenders should be locked up and the key thrown away’. Others, however, think that offenders should have an opportunity, if appropriate, to receive treatment aimed at altering their behaviour in an attempt to pre- vent future offending. Still other groups think that the access to rehabilitation should depend on the type and seriousness of the crime committed, the number of previous convictions or the extent of harm caused to the victim of the crime.

Whatever an individual’s perspective on this debate is, over the last twenty years there has been a renewed confidence in offender rehabilitation amongst practitioners and policy makers, especially in the United Kingdom and North America. Nowadays there are numerous rehabilitative programmes which offenders may under- take during their period of imprisonment or while on a community-based sentence. According to UK Home Office figures, in 2004 in England and Wales, over 15,000 offenders completed a community based offending behaviour programme and over 8,000 a prison based programme, many of which are delivered and managed by criminal psychologists. The growth in the use of programmes over the last few years can be demonstrated by comparing these figures against those from 2001. Then only 1,385 offenders completed community based programmes – less than ten per cent of the number that completed such programmes a few years later.

As mentioned briefly in Chapter 1, criminal psychologists have been instrumental in the design, implementation, management and delivery of offending behaviour programmes to a range of different types of offenders within both prison and community set- tings. These professionals use the psychological techniques contained within the programme manuals to target the offenders’ problem-solving, social and personal control skills. Criminal psychological research has shown that offenders tend to be lacking in such skills and there is an argument that it is these cognitive deficits that contribute to an offender’s decision to partake in criminal activities. Therefore criminal psychologists use these rehabilitative programmes to provide offenders with the opportunity to develop their problem-solving and social skills, to reduce rigid thinking and impulsivity and to use these new skills in order to select alternatives to criminal behaviour.

Criminal psychologists have also been involved in the evaluation of the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes. With the public show of confidence in these programmes from govern- mental agencies, it would be reasonable to assume that the evidence concerning their effectiveness is positive and concrete. The reality, however, is that much more needs to be known about programmes and their effectiveness. This topic is still at a relatively early stage of development. With such rapid and large-scale development and implementation of these programmes within some criminal justice systems, the research base is yet to catch up. Our 2004 report (see suggested further readings) of a large-scale research project in England and Wales has produced tentative answers to some import- ant questions, however, still others remain unanswered and new ones are emerging. More research is needed to understand fully the psychological and behavioural effects of offending behaviour pro- grammes on the individuals who are allocated to them.

This chapter will explore the issue of offender rehabilitation and provide insight into the ongoing debate surrounding the effectiveness (or not) of offending behaviour programmes. The chapter will also introduce the reader to some examples of programmes, how they operate and what the research literature says about their ability to reduce reoffending rates. In order to set the scene a historical perspective on the development of offender rehabilitation will first be provided.

the rehabilitative debate.

As mentioned above, the last ten years have witnessed a huge growth in the industry relating to offending behaviour programmes, particularly in the UK and North America. For example, within England and Wales, the Crime Reduction Programme provided governmental funding for the development and implementation of programmes in the Prison and Probation Services. In the following five years, nineteen programmes were approved for national implementation within the Prison and/ or Probation Service. On the other side of the Atlantic, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) also showed its support for rehabilitative programmes through the development of an expert advisory group charged with informing the CSC about offending behaviour programmes and their effectiveness.

However, such confidence in rehabilitative work with offenders has not always been evident. In the 1970s, the consensus amongst the majority of researchers, practitioners and policy makers was that offender rehabilitation was not a feasible venture. After the rehabilitative focus of the 1950s and 1960s, the 1970s heralded a shift in political opinion away from the more liberal policy of offender treatment to more punitive and retributive policies involving harsher sentencing and regimes. The foundation of this view is often traced to the publication in 1974 of a review paper ‘What works? Questions and answers about prison reform’ (Martinson 1974) – the publication of which happened to coincide with the political shift to the right in both the UK and North America. The paper reviewed 231 studies of offender treatment and, despite up to forty-eight per cent of studies showing positive effects, concluded that offender treatment ‘cannot overcome, or even appreciably reduce, the powerful tendency for offenders to continue in criminal behaviour’. Advocates of offender treatment and those working within the treatment services must have been dismayed when such statements surfaced during this period.

The proponents of offender intervention did not lie down and accept defeat. Publications from the late 1970s and early 1980s continued to demonstrate that some interventions, when pro- vided to certain types of offenders, could produce reductions in reconviction. The impact of these usually small-scale evaluations on the debate was not great, however. Many of these studies suffered from problems with the way in which they were conducted, which limited the conclusions that could be firmly stated. The studies that perhaps created the greatest impact on the rehabilitative debate were instead the meta-analyses that came to prominence towards the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s. Meta-analysis is a technique that allows for the statistical combination of findings from a number of studies investigating the same cause (for example, the effectiveness of offender treatment) but may have differed in their methodology (for example, different types of offenders, length of treatment, mode of treatment and so on). The meta-analysis technique, therefore, allows for the combination of findings from different small studies into one statistic: the ‘effect size’. This statistic, in this case, is a measure of the effect of treatment across all the studies entered into the analysis.

The application of this type of analysis to the large number of available small studies showed that the treatment of offenders can, under the right circumstances, provide positive results. In fact, the use of meta-analysis concluded not only an average positive effect across all interventions reviewed, but also made it possible to pick out those features of interventions that were most likely to pro- duce positive results. For the first time it was possible to highlight those features of interventions that, if incorporated into new programmes, were likely to result in a positive treatment effect.

Just as the 1974 review paper had set the agenda for the following decade of public policy in relation to offender treatment, the findings of the meta-analyses of the 1980s and 1990s breathed new life into the rehabilitative agenda. These reviews provided valuable information to programme developers and practitioners concerning the parts of programmes that the research showed as being effective. Programme developers were able to design new programmes which comprised solely of those elements that the evidence said were effective.

THE CORRECTIONAL SERVICES ACCREDITATION PANEL (CSAP) .

Accreditation criteria.

1. Clear model of change backed by research evidence: The programme should have a plan for altering offenders’ behavior (that has been shown by previous research to be effective) thus resulting in less criminal behaviour.

2. Selection of offenders: The programme should specify for which offenders it is intended, taking into account such factors as offence type and their risk of further reconvictions.

3. Targeting of dynamic risk factors: The programme should target criminogenic factors (those which are linked to offend- ing behaviour) that need to be and are capable of change.

4. Range of targets: The programme should address a range of targets as evidence has shown this to be more effective. If a narrow focus is used this should be justified in light of the evidence.

5. Effective methods: The programmes should use those meth- ods that have been shown to be more likely to work. Cognitive behavioural methods (those that focus on chal- lenging individuals’ thoughts and attitudes in order to alter their behaviours) have been shown to work well with a range of offenders but other methods can be used if there is evidence for these.

6. Skills orientated: The programme should teach the offenders skills which will help them live and work a crime free life.

7. Sequencing, intensity and duration: The timetable of the programme should match the targeted offenders’ learning styles and abilities in order to produce maximum impact.

8. Engagement and motivation: The content and methods of teaching should ensure that the offenders’ engagement and motivation is retained and built upon throughout the programme.

9. Continuity of programmes and services: The programme should be fully integrated into the offenders’ sentence and supervision plan.

10. Ongoing monitoring: Monitoring procedures should ensure that the programme is supported and resourced in order to ensure that effectiveness is not undermined.

11. Ongoing evaluation: Evaluation should be built in to the programme in order to inform the ongoing development of the programme.

Adapted from Home Office (2005).