**Devolving Probation Services: An ethnographic study of the implementation of the Transforming Rehabilitation Agenda (ESRC Ref ES/M000028/1)**

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**KEY PROJECT FINDINGS**

In September 2013 the Ministry of Justice published details of how its Transforming Rehabilitation agenda would restructure the delivery of offender management services in England and Wales. Within these reforms approximately 70% of the activities carried out by a public sector probation service were to be outsourced to the private sector through the establishment of 21 community rehabilitation companies (CRCs). This research draws on 14-months of observation and interview-based research to capture, in one case study area, the experience of staff during this period of profound organisational change through the creation, early development, and sale of a CRC.

The project involved the research team conducting a series of interviews with staff throughout the CRC, and extensive observational research of key decision and policy-making forums. Made possible through an on-going dialogue with the organisational management group the study benefited from unprecedented access to the CRC in terms of engaging staff and attending meetings to observe how the decisions of senior managers within the new company were being formulated, implemented, and, in time, received by staff. We have demonstrated that it is possible to conduct ethnographic research in the probation context, even in circumstances of extreme upheaval: something that has rarely been attempted. We have also demonstrated the importance of studying organisational change in ‘real time’, rather than retrospectively, when the impacts are perhaps less raw and are likely to have been subject to narrative restructuring.

Our research has demonstrated that the *Transforming Rehabilitation* reforms have threatened the collective ‘probation ethos’ in a number of respects. Firstly, the notion of workers delivering a ‘public service’ is compromised by the introduction of a market-driven logic in probation work. Secondly, the restructuring of established working relationships, both within and external to the case study area, have renegotiated the distribution of status and power between the various stakeholders in offender management, particularly in respect of the relationship and interface between the National Probation Service and CRCs. Thirdly, the reconfiguration of probation service areas (and the probation staff groups working with them) has consequences for the endurance of locally formulated area based loyalties as powerful influences in how individuals and collectives operate. Fourthly, the reforms have resulted in a significant loss of ‘human capital’ in the probation sector as many experienced staff have decided to look for alternative employment.

More broadly, our research has been able to demonstrate that whilst there are some similarities between the experiences of workers subject to the involuntary transfer of their labour from public to private sector organisations within and between fields, there is also the potential for some important differences. In our study we have identified these as relating to the particular occupational cultures and loyalties involved; to the speed of processes of transition; the leadership approaches adopted to drive through change; and to the certainty of outcomes. How workers experience and manage such transitions, we contend, tells us much about the prospects for retaining (formerly) public sector staff within fields that are increasingly being subject to private sector influence.

**IMPACT PATHWAYS**

The research team, under the terms of the collaboratively agreed access arrangements, provided the host CRC with three substantive reports and accompanying presentations to provide real time commentary relevant to the on-going delivery of offender supervision/rehabilitation services. This has been seen, by managers and staff alike, as providing a valuable stimulus for reflective learning in the development of the CRC. These findings underpinned a workshop attended by national CRC management leads, acting as prompts for sharing best practice. The research had also been discussed on established social media sites widely read by practitioners such as <http://www.russellwebster.com/> and <http://probationmatters.blogspot.co.uk/>

The study has (to date) yielded one published article in the *British Journal of Criminology* and the research team have a contract with Routledge to produce a monograph based on the study entitled ‘Devolving Probation: A case study of public sector reform’ (due for publication in 2017). An invited chapter is being written for a text entitled *Privatisation and Criminal Justice,* with a second invite following for a CREDOS (Collaboration of Researchers for the Effective Development of Offender Supervision) publication (both due for publication 2017). Conference papers have been delivered at the annual meetings of the European Society of Criminology Working Group on Community Sanctions and Measures (Sheffield, 2015) and the European Society of Criminology (Porto, 2016). The team will deliver a keynote address at the EU COST Action *Offender Supervision in Europe* (Brussels, 2016) conference to an audience of approximately 150 delegates drawn from academics, researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from across Europe.

**SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT**

The processes we have outlined above provide a salient case study of the impact of policy for the transition between public and private sectors. It also contributes to a growing body of literature which is exploring the experiences of those most intimately involved in, and affected by, the outsourcing and privatisation of criminal justice services and functions. Given that the indications are that this trend is likely to continue in England and Wales for the foreseeable future, the research should increase awareness among policy-makers and professional practitioners of the importance of preparing and supporting individuals to adapt to their changed circumstances. In doing so, the research provides a case study of the much broader policy narratives around the transfer of public goods into private ownership which has been a dominant driver in the reshaping of public services in both England and Wales and the USA. These developments are likely to be extended and adopted by other jurisdictions hence we envisage the research to have a longevity beyond its immediate timeframe and contribute towards enhancing the effectiveness of public services and policy.