

How can we 'inspire' people to want to become Probation Officers?

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How can we 'inspire' people to want to become Probation Officers?

- "What you can't see, you can't be"
-Wright Edelman (2015)

**PROBATION
OFFICER**

Introduction

Despite being involved in most stages of the Criminal Justice System and supervising some 239,015 people per year (Ministry of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service, 2024), the Probation Service appears to have continuously been in the shadows of the Police, Prison and Courts, with Robinson (2016) relating the phrase 'Cinderella service' regarding the NPS to describe the failure of the service to promote itself in the national consciousness. However, why does such a vital part of the CJS remain hidden? The nature of the work could be a factor, with the notion of a service tainted by undertaking 'dirty work' (Mawby & Worrall, 2013).

Given that the NPS deals with individuals who have committed minor to the most serious offences, it may be no surprise that the NPS and its work do not inspire people to want to venture into it as a career, with the Police and Prison services arguably dominating factual and fictional depictions (Mawby & Worrall, 2013). The glamorisation of crime in the media with a seemingly morbid fascination with motivations and the reasons why people have committed crimes may provide a medium in which the Probation Service can establish an identity. However, drawing from Teague (2002), Mawby and Worrall (2013), and the ongoing coverage given to high-profile offences, the role wider media plays in the portrayal (or not) of the Probation Service can have a limiting, or arguably an unhelpful lens on which the public view the service. Conversely, Mawby and Worrall (2013) also highlight that (at least historically) the Probation Service can foster positive relationships with the media. Indeed, most of us will know the range of media platforms on which probation recruitment campaigns have hosted content.



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Of course, it is vital to recognise the range of influences that may further explain why the NPS may fare worse in the public's consciousness. Savage historical fiscal cuts to the CJS and the penal system are obvious practical barriers to investment in public awareness campaigns (The Bar Council, 2024). However, arguably this only serves to reinforce the need for more focus on the Probation Service compared to the Prison, the Police, and Court Services. While all are experiencing difficulties in recruitment, it appears there appears additional factors as to why the NPS remains hidden.

Academically, a significant gap exists in pre-existing research that explores how the NPS emerges in younger people's consciousness, let alone what may motivate them or act as a barrier to aspiring to become a probation officer. Some studies have retrospectively looked at probation trainees (PQiP) reasons for joining the service (Deering, 2010; Gregory, 2008) and related research associated with the Probation Culture (Mawby & Worrall, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2016). These research areas have sought to explore the ongoing tensions regarding the nature and purpose of probation work in times that have seen the metaphoric forced 'divorce' from the historical roots of its links to social work (Canton, 2024) and beyond the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms (Robinson *et al.*, 2016).

Deering (2010) highlighted the increased influx of graduate applications for probation training, with Skinner and Goldhill (2013) raising concerns that this cohort of probation trainees may need more duality of academic ability and social skills to bring these into practice. Until recently, there were two main stipulations for acceptance onto the programme when applying externally: 'prior academic ability' and the need for "a background in supporting individuals facing difficult

circumstances or exhibiting challenging behaviour" (HMPPS, n.d.) Potentially as a reaction to the narrow scope of potential recruits, there is now also a recent route provided for non-graduate applications (HMPPS, n.d.). However, there is still a significant drive towards applicants demonstrating potential academic ability and a range of personal skills drawn from experience, such as emotional intelligence.

As a result, in terms of the aims of this research, early career identification and seeking out arenas for the development of these skills can arguably only serve to increase the strength of recent graduates (please note that there is a third phase of this research planned for mature students who may apply whom already have both life and academic experience, the 'second careerist' cohort as postulated by Mawby & Worrall (2013).

While a plethora of research and theory is devoted to developing generic career aspirations (McLaughlin, 2022), these have been formed from large-scale quantitative studies dominating the US academic field. As a result, the following studies utilise a mixed methods approach to generate and test theory based on the practical and internal factors contributing to the decisions that ultimately affect people's choices concerning a career in the Probation Service. This research draws on the ideas relating to Habitus, which have been utilised in Probation literature regarding the primary (earlier life influences) and secondary Habitus (late education and employment) to understand the development of alignment/attachment to a 'field' of work (Bourdieu, 1984). To explore the early roots of the impact that being a 'Cinderella service' (or more accurately 'Hidden Heroes') has on our younger members of society and present suggestions to inspire the next generation that we have not achieved in the past.

Methods

This paper outlines findings from two concurrent research projects; study one examines college students' perceptions, while study two explores university students' perceptions of the Probation Service (Brown, in progress). Three sixth-form colleges participated in study one, with students primarily studying law, and study two included 50 undergraduate students at Sheffield Hallam University on the single or dual honours Criminology courses (Psychology/Sociology/Law). Once approval was granted, the research team sent an initial survey to all students to indicate the potential uptake towards a career in the Probation Service compared to other careers in the sector, shortly followed by interviews with the students (Krueger, 2014; Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee, 2020). Below are some initial findings from the data analysis stemming from the projects (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patten, 2016).

Influences and Development of Knowledge and Understanding of the Probation Service

Students in both studies raised how a lack of knowledge and understanding of the Probation Service was a barrier to considering the service as a career. For example, within study one, of the 20 students from College one, only 20% expressed interest in a Probation Service career. This finding contrasts the 70% interested in law, 40% in the prison service, and 35% in the Police force. The key reason for this lack of knowledge stems from many students noting that the Probation Service was relatively 'invisible' compared to other criminal justice agencies (Mawby & Worrall, 2013; Teague, 2002), with no uniform, limited visibility within contemporary media and curricula:

"God I need to think. It's going to come in to a lot of TV shows, I'm going to be honest....I can't think of English ones if I'm being honest, just because I feel like England is quite real and they don't do these massive, dramatized things"
(University Student: Interviewee 3)

Within study two, only 28% of undergraduate students reported hearing about the Probation Service via their Career Advisor (McLaughlin, 2022), with these points raised by both the college and university students below:

"I know it sounds really bad, but they are just kind of background characters in other people's stories. Usually, people in action, like police officers or the people... Never really the actual officers... So they're kind of not really there" (College 1: Focus Group 2)

"Cause when we had like career fairs or things like that, I didn't get any information about probation service like nothing whatsoever even in the and I've been on both campuses" (University Student: Interviewee 2)

Therefore, while students could briefly outline what the Probation Service does regarding supporting individuals under their supervision, very few could explain the specifics of the role in detail (Robinson, 2016). As a result, the research team were keen to ask the students what could remove the barriers they face when considering a career in the Probation Service.

Removing the Barriers and Supporting 'Attachment' to the Probation Service

Both the college and university students raised the need for increased knowledge about the service and entry pathways, including raising awareness that students are paid to learn (HMPPS, n.d), alongside factors such as disability inclusivity in the workplace and accommodations for aspiring probation officers with previous victimisation and criminal convictions. For example, college students repeatedly asked whether there are accommodations concerning supervising individuals who have committed sexual and domestic abuse, as this posed a particular barrier for some students at College Two.

50 college students, 52% raised this as a barrier to considering a career in the Probation Service, as reinforced in an interview with a college student below:

"Like I say, if someone has past trauma about abuse, if they're dealing with a person with abuse, they might find it difficult to cope with..." (College 1: Focus Group 1)

Consequently, the students wanted to see relatable role models and stories they could connect with personally to visibly see someone like themselves within the role to forge an attachment to the field (Bourdieu, 1984), which both the college and university students saw as crucial in removing the present perceived barriers to a career in the Probation Service. 70% of undergraduate students wanted to see images and hear stories of how people like them had trained to be probation officers, which the following university student reinforces:

"I'd like having someone and describe like day-to-day Probation. Yeah. Because as I've said, I know more about the rest of it and can put myself in those shoes, like you said, whereas a probation officer, it's kind of a blank spot for me, like a grey spot" (University Student: Interviewee 8)

"Probably just for media to be honest, just from how I've been shown how it is that criminals tend to not be a fan of them" (University Student: Interviewee 4)

Moreover, when considering the previous findings, this would help remove barriers associated with what the students referred to as

'family expectations', with some stating that their family would disapprove of a career in the Probation Service. Therefore, the students noted that university outreach would support the recruitment of students into probation programmes and the Probation Service and inform family members of the role of a probation officer, enabling both students and family members to understand the role better.

Conclusion

As a result, the research team recommends the incorporation of the research findings of these studies into the current review by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) regarding the challenges in recruiting and retaining probation officers. Likewise, HMPPS should prioritise an 'outreach' programme to local schools (at all levels), colleges, and Universities to increase awareness of the Probation Service as a valuable and rewarding career to support recruiting new probation service officers and PQiP learners. Additionally, a core part of catching students early in their career decision-making is the need for school and university career services to have the resources to explain and promote the Probation Service as a career to students considering working in criminal justice agencies. Finally, the commissioning of further research would help understand how to encourage the recruitment of 'second careerists' (Mawby & Worrall, 2013) and how we can address the barriers individuals face when considering a career in the Probation Service. This could also include research into what media representations would be the most effective in an accurate portrayal of the role of probation staff and the challenges of the work they do.

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