Basic skills programmes in the probation service: an evaluation of the basic skills pathfinder

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Basic skills programmes were evaluated in seven probation service areas. They were set up to explore how best to help offenders in the community to improve their skills in literacy and numeracy and were aimed at those offenders with basic skills needs below Level 1 of the National Qualifications Framework, i.e. below the level of a competent 11-year-old. The project consisted of three stages: screening for those who have basic skills needs; an in-depth assessment; provision of basic skills tuition. The results of the evaluation reported here looked at all these stages and recommended lessons to be learnt for future programmes.

Key points

- The offenders who were ‘positively’ screened (as probably having a basic skills need) were more likely to be unemployed than those who were ‘negatively’ screened. The overall unemployment rate of 51% among offenders in the screening sample was very high, compared with the total UK unemployment rate of 5% in 2001.

- Even when controlling for the effects of other variables, such as drug misuse, which may affect unemployment, the analysis supplied strong evidence of an association between poor basic skills and an increased risk of being unemployed.

- The projects had a high level of attrition for each stage of the process. Only a small proportion of the offenders who should have had access to basic skills provision did so and, of those who did, attendance was often sporadic and drop-out rates were high.

- Lessons to be learnt included:
  - there should be an explicit process for basic skills screening, assessment, referral and provision built into community sentences and promoted by staff at every level, with appropriate training and administrative support
  - for those screened as likely to have basic skills needs, it was found that rapid referral for in-depth assessment was most likely to lead to ‘take-up’ of provision by the individual
  - tuition for basic skills should be integrated with other elements of a community sentence and included as an objective in the supervision plan and sentence.

Previous research has shown that the average educational achievement of offenders is lower than that of the general population (see Caddick and W. Webster, 1998, for example). They leave school at a younger age, have higher levels of truancy, suspension and permanent exclusion from school and have fewer qualifications. It is now recognised that a very high proportion of offenders have low basic skills achievement. In one study of ex-prisoners (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002), 50% had poor reading skills, 80% poor writing skills and 67% had poor numeracy skills. People with poor basic skills often have restricted job opportunities. Therefore, basic skills difficulties may be one factor underlying the over-representation of offenders and ex-prisoners in unemployment statistics.
There is some evidence that interventions to improve basic skills and increase employment prospects are associated with reductions in reoffending (Porporino and Robinson, 1992; May, 1999). Projects to address the basic skills needs of offenders are therefore one way of helping to reduce crime.

The Home Office Crime Reduction Programme funded a range of ‘pathfinder’ programmes aimed at developing evidence-based approaches to reducing crime. Pathfinder projects are exploratory and are independently evaluated. They aim to increase understanding about ‘what works’.

The Basic Skills Pathfinder was one of these programmes and was intended to explore how best to help offenders who were on Community Rehabilitation Orders (CRO) or Community Punishment and Rehabilitation Orders (CPRO) to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.

Seven probation areas were selected to develop basic skills projects under central guidance from the National Probation Directorate. The probation areas involved were Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Sussex and Thames Valley and the evaluation was conducted between October 2000 and March 2002. The evaluation team (from the Probation Studies Unit, University of Oxford Centre for Criminological Research plus the University’s Department of Educational Studies and the ESRC Research Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance) collaborated with the project staff in the pathfinder areas. The results given here cover some of their aims to:

- make a baseline estimate of the prevalence of basic skills needs among offenders, by screening for basic skills needs all those offenders on whom pre-sentence reports (PSRs) had been prepared during the evaluation period
- investigate the association between basic skills needs and other variables such as employment status, alcohol and drug abuse, school attendance and risk of reconviction
- measure the progress of offenders who participated in basic skills provision in terms of improvements in basic skills, gaining and maintaining employment, and participation in further education and training (the time-span of the evaluation prevented the collection of reconviction data)
- examine attrition and attendance rates
- identify good practice in the implementation of basic skills provision within community supervision.

**Evaluation methods**

The evaluation included data collection and analysis of completed pre-sentence reports, screenings, in-depth assessments, basic skills provision and progress measures. In addition, case material was collected for comparison purposes from a group of 145 offenders who had been screened and attended basic skills tuition (the ‘experimental’ group) and a random group of 311 offenders who did not access basic skills provision but were likely to have a basic skills need (the ‘comparison’ group). In addition, interviews were carried out with 97 probation staff, 10 project managers, 17 tutors and 20 offenders who were attending basic skills tuition.

**Table 1 Basic skills levels as defined by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-entry</td>
<td>Below National Curriculum level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry 1</td>
<td>National Curriculum level 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry 2</td>
<td>National Curriculum level 2. The level of a competent 7-year-old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entry 3</td>
<td>National Curriculum level 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 1</td>
<td>National Curriculum levels 4/5. The level of a competent 11-year-old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2</td>
<td>GCSE qualification A* to C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following guidelines provided by the Basic Skills Agency, ‘basic skills needs’ were defined as below Level 1, which is sometimes considered the minimum level of literacy and numeracy required for everyday functioning at work and in general (Table 1). All seven projects developed their own model for tackling basic skills needs (six were already in place before they were selected as pathfinder projects) but they used the same screening and assessment tools and applied agreed procedures for data collection. The process of addressing basic skills needs involved three key stages:

- screening for basic skills needs (done at the PSR stage)
- in-depth assessment of basic skills needs (for those ‘positively’ screened and who received a CRO or CPRO)
- provision of basic skills tuition (including monitoring attendance and progress).

Each stage was dependent on complementary work by staff to motivate participation, to organise referral and to monitor and evaluate progress. Offenders’ participation in tuition was generally voluntary, though co-operation with the in-depth assessment was often a requirement of their community supervision.

**The scale of basic skills needs among offenders**

A third of the sample of approximately 10,000 offenders, screened before sentencing, were probably below Level 1 in their basic skills. This proportion is significantly higher than those in the general population with literacy difficulties (estimated at about 20%) but reflects a similar poor standard of numeracy (between 30%-50%) as that of the general population.

**The characteristics of offenders with basic skills needs**

The offenders who were ‘positively’ screened (as probably having basic skills needs) were more likely to be unemployed and without qualifications than those who were ‘negatively’ screened. The overall unemployment rate of 51% among offenders in the screening sample was very high compared with the UK unemployment rate of 5% in 2001.

Analyses were carried out to determine the extent of the association between having a basic skills need and unemployment in comparison with other variables such as gender, substance abuse, school attendance and assessed risk of reconviction. On their own, all the variables had significant associations with employment status for the total
screening sample. These relationships were complex. 

Controlling for the effects of other variables, the probability of being unemployed was positively associated with:

- **Basic skills needs**: there was a significant and positive association between being unemployed and being screened as likely to have basic skills needs.

- **Risk of reconviction**: the probability of being unemployed was significantly higher for those rated as ‘medium’ risk of reconviction and much higher for those who were ‘high’ risk than for those in a ‘low’ risk category.

- **Substance abuse**: those judged to abuse drugs or both drugs and alcohol were significantly more likely to be unemployed. However, rates of unemployment were similar for those judged to abuse alcohol only and those judged to abuse neither drugs nor alcohol.

Of the 1,003 offenders who were screened as probably needing basic skills provision, and who received a CRO or CPRO, only 194 (19%) subsequently attended for assessment and only 16% (n=155) received a more in-depth assessment.

There were differences between the characteristics of the sample who were ‘positively’ screened and those who attended an in-depth assessment. There was a significant association between alcohol or drug abuse and basic skills needs in the total screening sample but those judged not to have an alcohol or drug abuse problem were more likely to have a further assessment. This association could be because drug users tend to have less stable lifestyles or because they were more likely to be referred to drug treatment programmes than the basic skills programme.

There was also a significant association between high risk of reconviction and being ‘positively’ screened, yet significantly more in-depth assessments were undertaken on those with a low reconviction risk. These discrepancies between characteristics of the sample screened and characteristics of the sample who were further assessed and who attended basic skills tuition are indicative of issues that ‘got in the way’ of planned interventions to meet basic skills needs. However, it should be remembered that these projects were of an exploratory nature – identifying good practice for future programmes was a key element.

### Learning points for each stage of the process

There were fewer offenders attending at every stage of the process. An analysis of why many of those who were ‘eligible’ did not access basic skills provision was undertaken. Case material was examined for the experimental group (145 offenders) and the comparison group (311 offenders). The findings, together with interviews of probation staff, tutors and offenders, and statistical analysis of monitoring data (from five of the pathfinder projects) suggested how basic skills projects can address these issues.

#### The screening stage

About a third of offenders were not screened at the PSR stage, although this had been required during the period of the evaluation. It is not possible to ascertain the reason for this but it may be that problems other than basic skills needs were prioritised, for example, drugs rehabilitation, housing needs or attitudes to offending. A similar proportion of offenders in the ‘comparison group’ could have benefited from basic skills help as in the ‘experimental group’, but the need to address the problem was less likely to be prioritised in the supervision plans for those in the ‘comparison group’. Staff were inconsistent in applying the screening and referral criteria. Some offenders who were ‘eligible’ to be screened and referred, were not. Others who had not been screened, or who were ‘negatively’ screened, were referred for in-depth assessment or attendance.

### Recommendations for the screening stage

There should be an explicit process for basic skills screening, assessment, referral and provision built into community sentences and promoted by staff at every level, with appropriate training and administrative support.

Experience gained in the pathfinder areas indicated that it was feasible and appropriate for basic skills screening to be carried out by probation staff when they were interviewing an offender in order to prepare a court report. The ‘Fast Track 20 Questions’ provided by the Basic Skills Agency was shown to be an adequate screening tool, despite some drawbacks. It was agreed that prior training in use of the screening tool was required.

#### The in-depth assessment stage

The highest rate of attrition occurred following screening for possible basic skills needs. The rate of referral for assessment varied between areas (from 33% to 10% of those positively screened) and varied on a monthly basis within areas.

### Recommendations for the in-depth assessment procedure

For those screened as likely to have basic skills needs, it was found that rapid referral for the in-depth assessment was most likely to lead to ‘take-up’ of provision by the individual. Most of the staff involved in carrying out in-depth assessments thought that a shorter testing procedure would be more appropriate to avoid delays before tuition could start.

The initial investigation of basic skills needs could be carried out at the commencement of a community sentence, in order to inform the case manager’s in-depth assessment and supervision plan. However, a common view was that in-depth assessment should also include attention to speaking and listening skills.

#### The tuition and support provided

Basic skills tuition and other support was provided by qualified tutors or mentors who had been appropriately trained. Most of the tuition was on a one-to-one basis but by the end of the evaluation period more projects were planning group sessions in addition. Sessions generally took place in a probation office. Examples of good practice included: linking teaching material to the interests...
and needs of learners; applying an individual learning plan; providing transport for those who would otherwise be unable to attend; ensuring that individuals have relevant information and encouragement to seek out support themselves over the long-term.

Only a small percentage of those who were confirmed as having basic skills needs below Level 1 went on to attend tuition. Of those who did attend basic skills tuition many only went on one or two occasions then ‘dropped out’. The average number of sessions attended was six.

Interviews were conducted with tutors and 20 of the offenders who persevered in attending basic skills provision. This provided some encouraging ‘success stories’, indicating the major benefits that can be gained over even a short period of time. Most felt they had made improvements in one or more skills such as reading, writing, pronunciation and spelling, using computers, handwriting and filling out forms. One offender thought the classes should have more promotion: ‘I only wish I had discovered them sooner. It is the best thing I have ever done’.

The most frequently mentioned motivation for attending was to improve their chances of gaining employment. Most thought that, by increasing their opportunities, and by changing their self-concept and quality of life, better basic skills would indirectly help them to avoid further offending.

Further recommendations

Motivation

Much of the attrition was attributable to low motivation by offenders to address their basic skills needs. By implication, there is a clear need for motivational strategies to be utilised. A prerequisite to good motivational work by probation staff is that they themselves are committed to the value of basic skills interventions and that the relevance of such work to probation service goals is promoted by senior management and within training.

Priority

While there will always be competing requirements in supervision plans, it is important that basic skills work is given appropriate priority. If it is the case that offenders have a number of community requirements, then basic skills provision should be attended concurrently or after completion of other programmes.

Flexibility

While there is a need for consistency and regulation at each stage, the system should be flexible to allow for differences in individuals’ readiness and motivation to address basic skills problems at different times. The quantity and quality of work undertaken at each stage of the process should be fully monitored and inspected.

Conclusions

Analysis of the screening data suggests that there is strong evidence of an association between poor basic skills and an increased risk of unemployment amongst this sample of offenders. Such an association combined with the high level of basic skills needs revealed by this study indicates that more attention should be paid to addressing an offender’s basic skills needs during probation.

However, the causes of offender unemployment are complex – other factors such as patterns of substance misuse and assessed risk of reconviction also play a part. Future developments of basic skills programmes within the probation service may be better set within a multi-modal framework which has the main aim of gaining and maintaining employment.

Recommendations for the improvement of basic skills tuition

Tuition for basic skills should be integrated with other elements of a community sentence and included as an objective in the supervision plan and sentence. At the same time, offenders should be helped and encouraged to make contact with external providers of basic skills courses so that they can make improvements over the long-term.

More use should be made of information and communication technology to facilitate learning and add to its appeal. Consideration should be given to the development of speaking and listening skills in accordance with the National Standards for literacy and the adult literacy core curriculum. More use could be made of group work to complement individualised teaching.

References


For a more detailed report see Basic skills programmes in the probation service by Gráinne McMahon, Andy Hall, Geoff Hayward, Caroline Hudson and Colin Roberts. (2004). It is available as an Online Report No. 14/04 on http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/