

Violence to Probation Staff: Patterns and Managerial Responses

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Abstract

This article examines the impact of violence perpetrated against probation officers. It presents empirical evidence based upon work carried out under the ESRC Violence Research Programme. It is argued that the managerial response to violence has been largely defensive and piecemeal. Professional responses to violence are context-bound, while risk assessment is largely confined to the potential harm to the general public posed by offenders. The article concludes by arguing that more attention needs to be given to the evaluation of management responses to violence including appropriate training, and the greater organizational support for safety at work.

Keywords

Violence; Probation service; Management

Introduction

Over the last five years there has been growing concern about violence experienced by professionals working in the community (Gabe *et al.* 2001). This article, based upon work carried out as part of the ESRC Violence Research Programme, seeks to examine the nature and extent of violence perpetrated against this occupational group.¹ We emphasize the importance of understanding the contexts of violence perpetrated against staff (Denney and Stanko 2001). We report on the prevalence of different forms of violence and fear arising from routine engagement with offenders and show its impacts upon professional practices and relationships. It will be argued that understandings of what constitutes violence and strategies to deal with violence are highly individualized. We also seek to show how managerial and policy responses to violence against probation staff have been uncoordinated and at times inadequate.

Social workers, whose occupation is in many respects similar to probation officers, are frequently subjected to threats and violence, some of which have

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fatal consequences. The frequency of violence against social care staff is more fully documented than attacks and threats made against probation officers (Balloch *et al.* 1999; Brockman and McClean 2000). Throughout the 1980s, a number of social workers were tragically killed while attempting to carry out their duties: Isabel Schwartz in 1985, Francis Betteridge in 1986, Audrey Johnson in 1988. During the 1990s, Kate Sullivan in 1992, Jonathan Newby in 1993, and Jenny Morrison in 1998 were murdered by service users while carrying out social care duties.

Although at the time of writing we are not aware of any recorded fatalities in the probation service, there are clear comparisons in the risks which professionals in the community face when working with violent people while implementing action prescribed by law, in many instances against the wishes of the service user.

Policy and the Changing Culture of the Probation Service

We were anxious to situate the findings of our work within the changing organizational developments which have taken place within the probation service. The origins of the probation service can be traced to 1907 with the development of court missionary work. The Probation of Offenders Act of the same year gave magistrates the right to appoint probation officers, but it was not until 1925, with the Criminal Justice Act that specific geographical probation areas were created.

The essence of the idea behind probation lay in the hope that the recalcitrant individual could be saved through constructive rehabilitation. This was reflected in the statutory requirement to advise, assist and befriend the offender. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s probation work developed and went through a “phase of diagnosis” with an emphasis being placed on the quasi-scientism of the assessment and treatment of the individual (May 1991: 15).

Probation training had its roots in the social sciences, and the Home Office became responsible for the development of an individual casework approach which emphasizes the importance of counselling an offender while offering practical help with housing, education and employment. This model predominated throughout the 1960s, culminating in the passing of the 1969 Children and Young Persons Act, which emphasized treatment in the community rather than punishment. As the 1970s progressed there was an increasing disillusionment with this mode of intervention, stimulated by academic research. Martinson, in his study of 231 corrective treatments used by criminal justice agencies, suggested that few if any interventions have any significance on offending behaviour (Martinson 1974).

The election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, and a new right conservative authoritarian agenda, marked a distinctive change in policy towards an emphasis on the “short sharp shock” as a deterrent to criminal behaviour. This approach was reflected in the 1982 Criminal Justice Act. Some commentators during the 1980s linked violence against social care staff to structural factors such as growing unemployment, reductions in the social wage provided by the state, and increasing numbers of mentally ill people in

the community. Violence was associated with scenarios in which “the worker is giving advice, perhaps about the unavailability of services” (Small 1987: 47).

Small argues that the violent state reaction to the miners’ strike of the 1980s symbolically reflected a diminution in social rights which he associates with citizenship. These rights since the end of the Second World War had been structured through services provided by the welfare state. The impact of the miners’ strike and other events, he argues, was to change the fabric of social cohesion, which reduces the perceived legitimacy of agents of the state. Probation officers can clearly be identified as occupying a position which effectively makes them gatekeepers to state services. Successive home secretaries argued that individuals who broke the law had made a conscious decision to commit crime. Consequently, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the state increasingly responded to offending behaviour through punishment (Hall 1993; Denney 1995).

By the early 1990s, after the failure of such an approach to impact on the prevalence of crime, particularly among the young, a more managerial approach was taken with regard to the delivery of a probation service in the UK. The 1991 Criminal Justice Act created a more pivotal role for the probation service. Probation was combined with other forms of sentence, including the use of electronic monitoring and curfews.

New Labour since 1997 has in many respects continued the policy agenda begun by Thatcher. The relationship between the probation officer and the client has changed so as to reflect a more punitive, controlling approach towards probation intervention. This can be seen in the very terminology now utilized by the service. Probation orders are now referred to as “community rehabilitation orders”, while “community service orders” are now called “community punishment orders”. “Clients” are now more usually referred to as offenders.

Since 1995, National Standards for the Supervision of Offenders in the Community require the supervising officer to prepare a supervision plan which sets out an individualized programme for each offender (Home Office 1995). This has resulted in a “case management” approach to intervention with offenders, which is more structured and routinely evaluated for effectiveness. Emphasis is currently upon targeting specific offenders for specific structured programmes of intervention. Case management requires probation officers to set relevant objectives for probation intervention, with particular attention being paid to how changes and attitudes can be brought about (Underdown and Ellis 1998). The probation service now aims to deliver a service which provides punishment to offenders, while restricting liberty. Another major consideration of probation work is the protection of the public, the reduction of offending, the rehabilitation of offenders into the community and offender reparation (Nutley and Davies 2000). In 1998 the Prisons Probation Review formed the basis for a Report entitled *Joining Forces to Protect the Public* (Home Office 1998). Although this report recommended the creation of a National Probation Service, which is now operational, it did not recommend the merging of the probation service with the prisons service. However, Nellis comments:

Even without merger the fusion of prison and probation cultures remains probably the greatest threat to the Service in what is being currently proposed. (Nellis 1999: 311)

The National Probation Service was formed in April 2001 and consists of 42 separate probation areas, which are coterminous with police force boundaries.

The Punitive Probation Culture and Risk of Violence

The impact of this change in organizational culture and practices on the safety of staff has yet to be researched. There is little evidence to suggest that the creation of situations in which probation officers are asked to take a directed, focused and evaluated approach will enhance security. One could speculate that the reverse might be true, particularly if probation officers are charged to enforce more conditions on offenders. Our research did reveal that little, if any, consideration had been given to the security of staff as managerial imperatives had become more centralized and task-focused. Whereas hitherto probation practice had been based on attempting to persuade offenders to “live a good and industrious life” the changes described above will result in probation officers occupying a more confrontational position with respect to offenders. This is particularly the case when officers attempt to impose ever more stringent and detailed conditions which are now attached to orders.

One of the central concerns of our study was the possibility that respect for the role and knowledge of professionals in the community has eroded. The focus on risk to the public has been accompanied by a simultaneous growing reliance on audit and formal, centralized systems of management. Probation managers and probation officers have over the last five years become the subjects of increased scrutiny, while their practices are often formulated in budgetary and accounting terms (Kemshall *et al.* 1997). It is against this background that our study sought to understand the perceptions of probation officers in relation to their own personal safety.

Risk of Violence and the Probation Service

Studies of violence perpetrated against social and health service staff indicate the relatively higher risk of violence to these staff when compared with other occupational sectors (Brockman and McClean 2000). Given the diversity of occupations categorized into this sector, there is little room for research which explores the differentiated contexts and situations in which violence to the different professions arises. While studies of aggression to other professionals like health sector staff and social work staff have been conducted, few have examined violence against probation staff. One of the isolated studies on violence to probation staff provides a snapshot of prevalence from data collected in the early 1990s. Littlechild (1997), in his study of violence experienced by staff in one northern probation service indicated that in the three years before the survey, at least 1 in 5 staff encountered threats, physical and sexual assault. This affected their feelings of security and safety, and made them question their professional role.

In attempting to understand violence against probation staff, one must consider the particular challenges and risks faced by this profession, which are not shared in other public sector occupations. Probation officers will as part of their work routinely encounter offenders who have used violence, or have been convicted of crimes involving violent behaviour. There are few professions where offenders' previous record for violence is both recognized and is the subject of the professional–client relationship. Even when violence involving a service user is not recorded, the potential for harm and aggression are features of work that probation staff consider at some point in their working relationship.

An important factor in the working environment of the probation service is stress. Violence, and fear of violence, is one source of stress. Lack of resources has, according to Smith, created a situation in which the gulf between what the Home Office expects and what is achievable increases. According to Smith available financial resources appear to decrease exponentially with increased demands from employers (Smith 1996). Risk assessment has become more evident in practices which go beyond the writing of pre-sentence reports. Some writers have described risk as forming the basis for a new penology, which focuses on the management of justice (Kemshall 1996; Beaumont 1999). Formal risk assessment in the probation service, as previously suggested, appears to have been far more concerned with the risk that offenders pose to society than with the risk of violence inherent in the probation task itself (Maung and Hammond 2001). The managerial trends described above have inevitably resulted in a more bureaucratized service. Risk assessment itself can become a form of bureaucratic burden which can ultimately add to the load carried by probation officers. Although the assessment and management of risk permeate the work of probation officers, it would appear that the identification of risk of violence to staff is a low-priority activity.

Probation officers through the writing of the pre-sentence reports make recommendations and specific suggestions for sentencing. These recommendations can be influential when sentencers are considering the most appropriate form of disposal (Smith 1996). Offenders have a right to see the recommendation which the probation officer has made, which places the probation officer in a uniquely vulnerable position.

In the next section of this article, we present an overview of findings from a large-scale victimization survey of probation officers, emphasizing the extent and nature of violence to staff and their interpretation of risk of violence in the course of their work.

Methodology

The research upon which this paper draws was undertaken between 1998 and 2001 as one of 20 studies funded under the Economic and Social Research Council's Violence Research Programme. The research involved a large-scale victimization survey administered to all main-grade, senior and community service officers working in the south-east of England. The area covers seven probation services with, at the time of the study, a total of 1,280

staff. The overall response rate for six of the seven participating probation services was 78 per cent, and for the other service 10 per cent.² The self-completion postal survey inquired about experiences of verbal abuse, threats, physical and sexual assault incurred in the course of work between 1997 and 1999. It also queried the impacts of violence and the strategies employed by the professional to handle the risk of violence encountered in their work.

At the back of the questionnaire we invited probation staff to speak further with us about their experiences of violence. Out of the 204 probation officers who were willing to be contacted, we selected 25 across the seven probation services who had experienced physical violence, indecent assault, verbal abuse and threats in the course of their work.

Profile of Survey Respondents

As was consistent with the overall profile of probation staff in the region in 1999, two in every three respondents were female. The average age for women officers was 42 and for men 47 years. The majority (85 per cent) were employed in full-time positions. Some 14 per cent were employed as senior probation officers or managers and the remainder as main-grade probation officer, court welfare officers, and community service supervisors (see table 1). The majority (94 per cent) identified themselves as white and 5 per cent as black or Asian. The average length of time in the post held at the time of the survey was four years and almost two-thirds (63 per cent) of respondents had worked continuously with the probation service.

Table 1

Profile of sample in terms of team/unit membership

Probation type	Percentage
General team	16
Community service supervision	14
Adult supervision team	12
Crown court team	11
Secure unit team	9
Family court welfare team	9
Through-care team	6
Young offender team	5
Probation centre team	3
Area supervision team	2
Bail hostel team	2
Sex offender team	1
Substance misuse team	1
More than team	8
<i>N</i> =	714

What Does Violence Mean to Probation Staff?

In carrying out the research we grappled with what actually constitutes violence. Some respondents appeared to be as negatively affected by verbal threat and abuse as they were by physical assault. Some early definitions have referred to a physical act while later definitions incorporate more eclectic ideas as to what constitutes violence. The view that we have taken is that violent behaviours are transgressive acts, which disrupt the taken-for-granted normative expectations surrounding professional–client interaction (Gabe *et al.* 2001).

Although we set about our survey with a particular definition of violence, as a set of behaviours or acts which are commonly associated as indicators (verbal abuse, threats, physical and sexual assaults), we were keen to establish what violence meant to probation staff. Furthermore, we wanted to find out about the extent to which their perceptions converged with our standard conceptualization. Violence, for the probation officers we interviewed, was more often than not defined as unacceptable behaviour or acts like those we listed above. In some cases these behaviours were seen as definitive of violence. In other instances some of these antisocial acts, like verbal abuse, were a feature of routine interaction as much as they were indicators of violence. As one probation officer stated:

“In the probation service, it is quite acceptable for offenders to use whatever language they feel towards you . . . and there’s very little you can do about it.” (Male probation officer)

However, at times violence was interpreted as more than the act itself; rather the act was violent because of the specific intention underpinning it.

“Violence to me would be, um . . . well not only the physical threat but the verbal threat. But there’s a certain kind of menacing suggestion by certain offenders. They can’t. They won’t [carry out the assault] . . . there’s no overt threat offered but there’s a hint, a kind of insidious attitude that um . . . if you don’t do something that they want then . . . They don’t [actually carry out the assault] . . . it’s an indirect threat. They’ll beat up everybody else but of course not you, but you know you’re no different from the other professionals.” (Female probation officer)

The hint of “something more menacing to follow” plays upon the probation officer’s personal fear, unsettling their sense of personal safety.

“[The verbal abuse] is aimed at me as a woman, it’s not about me being a probation officer, I don’t think. There’s only one person that I think it’s personal but it’s personal with everybody man, woman, child it’s personal everywhere so I don’t feel particularly threatened by that. I feel threatened because obviously it shows how dangerous he is and he is extremely dangerous. But a lot of it I feel is aimed at women, and what I tend to feel is aimed at me as a woman, and what I tend to feel is that this is exactly how this person will talk to his partner, his victim, his mother.” (Female probation officer)

These two examples indicate how the interpretation of violence is context-dependent. The acts of swearing at, threatening harm or intimidating the officer are manifestations of violence, but the extent to which they impact upon the professional's emotions and practices will vary in line with how they are interpreted.

Experiences of Verbal, Physical and Sexual Violence

Probation officers' interpretation of violence is best understood when we look at the extent to which it is a feature of their working lives. Over a period of two years, between 1997 and 1999:

- nine out of every ten probation officers had experienced verbal abuse at work;
- one in five had been threatened with personal harm;
- one in ten had been physically assaulted;
- one in every hundred had been indecently assaulted, all of whom were female.

These figures indicate that violence, in the form of verbal abuse, threats and assaults, is a common feature of routine work for probation staff.

As table 2 indicates, the rates of different forms of violence reported by male and female officers showed some variations but the differences were not statistically significant. Although there were fewer black and Asian officers reporting verbal abuse and threats than their white counterparts, proportionally more reported incidents of physical and indecent assaults.

The distribution of violence also spanned the ranks of probation officers. The reported violence was distributed evenly among senior and main-grade officers. Neither, it seems, did the type of team in which the officer worked affect the risk of violence from offenders or colleagues. The exception to this was court welfare work—more probation officers in court welfare and family court welfare teams reported violence than other teams, but the differences between these teams were not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 35.543$; $df = 32$; $p \leq .198$).

How does one interpret these prevalence rates for violence? Are they high for probation staff or not? The interpretation of these rates is subject to both individual and collective awareness. At the individual level any understanding of the level of risk and rate of violence is clearly linked with coping abilities.

At an organizational level the risk and rate of violence can be interpreted in terms of the impact on the fulfilment of organizational functions and goals. Interpreting rates of violence as a problem in probation work is a function of both individual and organizational capacities.

Situating Violence to Probation Officers

Unsurprisingly, violence reported by probation staff in the course of their work for the most part takes place in situations where their work is undertaken, be

Table 2

Patterns of reported violence by gender and ethnicity 1997–1999

Violence	Frequency	Gender (%)		Ethnicity (%)	
		Male	Female	Black/Asian	White
Verbal abuse	Never	9	7	13	8
	Once / twice	31	27	25	29
	More than twice	59	63	58	62
	<i>N</i> =	271	431	39	661
Threats	Never	56	66	68	61
	Once	26	20	13	23
	Twice or more	18	14	19	16
	<i>N</i> =	264	409	37	634
Physical assault	Never	92	91	90	91
	Once	5	7	8	6
	Twice or more	3	2	2	3
	<i>N</i> =	273	436	39	668
Indecent assault	Never	100	97	95	99
	Once	0	3	5	1
	<i>N</i> =	261	425	38	646

that court house, probation centre, community service site, prison or hostel. It is, therefore, not the unusual, but the usual and familiar settings where the risk of violence is evident.

In our survey we collected data relating to the contexts associated with assaults on probation staff and it is this information that we present in this section of the paper.

Of the 72 reported cases of assaults on probation officers, 79 per cent took place in the officer's main place of work or another building where his/her work was undertaken. Unlike situations which staff tend to fear—unknown streets, dark carparks—the violence reported by probation staff in this survey was situated in the familiar space of the office, the courthouse foyer or the community service site.

One way of further exploring the different contexts of workplace assaults is to identify the circumstances and people involved at the time of the incident, and in this instance the last or most recent incident of violence which the probation officer encountered.

For the most part the last incident described by probation officers involved pushing or shoving. The majority of cases resulted in no injuries, and where wounding occurred it took the form of bruising or scratches. Some 16 per cent of the incidents reported by women officers involved an indecent assault—such as being groped. Over half of the reported incidents occurred in the afternoon or, in a third of the cases, during the morning, and the majority (87 per cent) were reported on a weekday.

Table 3
Type of violence experienced by gender

Type of incident	Male (%)	Female (%)
Pushed/shoved	85	64
Slapped/kicked	8	7
Hit/struck	4	7
Groped	—	16
More than one assault	4	7
<i>N</i> =	26	44

The location of assaults was associated with the main workplace used by the team. So, for court welfare officers violence reportedly occurred in the holding cells attached to court buildings or in court foyers. For family court welfare officers the incidents took place in court, the family home or sometimes the street, whereas for prison probation staff the incidents took place in the prison or sometimes outside prison, when ex-offenders were released.

In the majority of the accounts (81 per cent; *N* = 60) the other party involved in the assault against the probation officer was male. With the exception of one account, all of the incidents reported by male officers and almost three-quarters of the assaults on female officers involved a male assailant.

One might make the assumption that workplace violence is more likely to involve strangers, given the range of people that some staff come in contact with. However, the survey findings suggest otherwise. In 78 per cent of the incidents reported by male officers and 81 per cent of those reported by female officers, the other party was known, and in two out of every three of these cases they were known well. As we mentioned in the introduction, the nature of relationships between offenders and officers is a key dimension of the case-management process.

The relationship of the other party to the probation officer was in most cases that of client (the officer's own client or that of a colleague). For the seven cases of indecent assault reported, two-thirds involved offenders, and a third involved colleagues working with the officer. Probation officers will have file or case notes about the client and his/her personality and behaviour profiles. Clinical reports providing a psychological profile of the client and his/her behaviour can be included in these files. To what extent, then, is the risk of violence from an offender a known variable?

According to the respondents, knowledge about offenders and the risk they pose to the officers' safety is not always to hand—especially if a client is new to the office and the file has not arrived. For others having information is one matter, but having a say in whether you work with that client is another matter altogether.

“there’s lots of offenders in here that we are concerned about in terms of our own safety, the whole team not just me. But whether we have any choice about working with them that’s another thing.” (Female officer)

What can information about the potential risk of violence from a client offer a probation officer? According to some officers, knowing about a client’s potential for violence may act as a prompt to take extra precautions.

“I don’t know whether it [risk assessment] didn’t just heighten my sense of anxiety in a way [laughs] but maybe you should be anxious. I mean I think it’s probably the best way to be in dealing with people like that is to be in a state of kind of heightened awareness that you’ve got to look after yourself.” (Female officer)

Information about a client’s potential for violence—physical or sexual—might be possible to glean from records, but the same information may not be available on the risks posed by colleagues.

When looking at violence, one wants to ask about the causes underpinning the event. But identifying the causes of violence from the perspective of one party has obvious biases. We approached this question by looking at the probation officers’ perceptions about the possible motivating factors associated with the violent incident. We did not label these as “causes” *per se*, but as contributory factors.

In most of the reported cases a combination of factors was associated with the incident, including the mental health status of the “assailant”, their relationship with alcohol or drugs, their personal or social circumstances and in some cases frustration with the service and the decisions of the service. Probation officers covering “office duty” were more likely to encounter unknown offenders under the influence of either alcohol or drugs. This appeared to be a particular source of fear and stress for probation officers. Where possible these offenders would be advised to return on another day, giving the officer time to locate their case/file notes and to prepare themselves to deal with the client if he or she had an addiction or mental health condition.

Even where there are factors that might have contributed to the incident, over two-thirds of the probation officers considered that the client was responsible for his/her violent actions. Culpability for the assault is perceived to lie with the client rather than with circumstantial factors.

Managing Violence

Prior to the incident, the probation staff we interviewed spoke about ways in which they try to “read risks”: checking body language, their own and the offenders’; listening for changes in the tone of voice; or watching for alterations in facial expressions. Such indicators were often used as clues to help the officer “predict” the actions of the other party. Where possible the officer would respond to such cues by defusing and de-escalating strategies:

“If they become more and more uptight or agitated or whatever their mood might be, I will try to model for them the entire opposite. I will try and show how calm I am

about this whole thing, about how easy it all is. And I bring my voice down, I speak more quietly, I moderate everything and 99 times out of 100 you see people come down with you and by the time they leave they're fine." (Male officer)

However, when the cues were not clear, or occurred too quickly to read, how did the probation officers react? Once the assault had occurred the most usual response from the officer was to "get away" from the scene of the incident, or to calm the client down. Only three of the officers in this study tried to restrain the other party and one of these had previously been a police officer trained in restraint techniques.

For the most part, the probation staff wanted to leave the site of the incident to avoid an escalation of violence. This meant walking out of the office, courtroom or wherever the officer was working to give the client a chance to "cool down". This also gave the officers an opportunity to "compose" themselves again. If at all possible, they asked for assistance in the form of pushing panic alarms, shouting for colleagues or ringing through on the phone for help. But where they were in a client's home or out on the street, seeking assistance from colleagues was not an option. In those instances the officer was left to deal with the incident alone. For those officers who were required to make home visits, predicting risk and managing safety was a matter of some considerable concern. For those officers, being reachable was vital if they were to feel safe. Mobile phones are one facility used for this purpose but, as some officers commented, the provision of working mobile phones by their service was not a routine practice.

Once the incident had taken place, three out of every four probation officers who had been assaulted discussed the incident with a colleague, senior management or other relevant party (police, health and safety officer). It is not clear, however, whether the disclosures made were verbal only or formal written reports of the incidents. The distinction is important, as for some staff the verbal disclosure of violence is easier to undertake and manage than the formal report. This is particularly true of cases of indecent assault, especially those carried out by colleagues, where fear of reprisal might dissuade a woman from making a formal report to management.

The impacts of violence can be manifold, ranging from physical injuries through to anxiety and depression. For one in every three officers, the violent incident had no effect. For the majority of probation officers, the incident left an impact upon the way they handled their work, their lives outside of work and future engagement with certain offenders. It resulted in emotional upset, stress and a denting in confidence. But as we found with definitions of violence, the way in which the incidents were interpreted depended upon the probation officers' previous exposure to violence and the way they were expected to handle it.

"I have faced a lot worse [physical attacks] at times before I was in social work. I was a police officer and I faced many [incidents] . . . maybe that's got something to do with it. The fact [is] that this [incident] was to me quite a low-key event, this guy was annoyed at something I'd said and he was going to slap me if he could. And that was how I read it. I know as a probation officer, I now see it in a much

more serious [way] but I suppose . . . I don't know. It was maybe linking back to a past life and thinking well, suppose I had still been in that chequered hatband, what would I have thought of that? And I would have thought nothing of that quite frankly, [it] probably wouldn't have even gone in the pocket book. It was a very minor incident. But because it happened to social workers it becomes much more I think rightly so it becomes much more important." (Male officer)

Only 10 per cent of the respondents' accounts of assaults are presented here because they fall within the two-year time frame under review in the study, but almost one in four officers (23 per cent) had been assaulted prior to 1997 in the course of their work. The overwhelming impact (for 81 per cent of officers) of those previous experiences of violence was an increase in officers' awareness of safety and the need to protect themselves in the course of their work.

One of the impacts of violence is the development of unease about becoming a victim of violence. Compared with staff who reportedly did not experience an assault, those who were assaulted more than once were more likely to report that they were afraid of being assaulted again. Clearly those probation officers who are repeated victims of violence have reasons to fear being assaulted. This is true when they know of the offenders' capability for aggression. But equally, it is true for those officers whose offenders previously demonstrated violence. In this instance fear emanates from the unknown risk and potential for violence presented by a client or his/her associates and friends.

Over half (59 per cent) of the officers surveyed have received some form of training to handle violence, but for some officers this training was not integral to their probation training, but from previous careers in the police or social work. The remaining officers had not received any particular training to equip them to identify and handle aggression.

Implications of the Findings for Probation Staff

Our research indicates that the potential for violence and the consequent fear felt by officers was structured into the routinized tasks of probation officers. Furthermore, probation staff interpreted violence with regard to the context in which the violence took place. Verbal abuse had to a large extent become a normalized form of occupational hazard. Probation officers appeared to develop individualized strategies, such as appearing calm in the face of threat, to deal with potentially violent situations. Despite this the research indicates that the fear of physical violence and verbal abuse can exist despite the officers' efforts to rationalize client aggression. The managerial response to violence appeared to be uncoordinated at a national and local level. Probation managers appeared to respond in a manner which resembled crisis management. Despite the now increasing dominance of a managerialized working environment, there remained a tendency to "clientize" staff who had been physically abused by offering various forms of emergency, unevaluated help, e.g. counselling. No clear managerial contingency in addition to this appeared to exist in the event of violence being perpetrated against staff.

Future Policy Implications

One of the major findings from the research related to the relatively scant attention given to the issue of violence perpetrated against staff. This appeared to apply at both regional and national levels. We would wish to suggest that a number of policy implications flow from the research, which have a direct bearing on probation practice.

Our research indicated that there was no coordinated training at pre-qualification or post-qualification in the management of violence. If officers received training this occurred as part of a previous career or at the discretion of a particular team manager. Little if anything at present is known about the content of this training or which form is most effective. Some of our respondents reported *ad hoc* training being provided by the probation service, which in some instances could have exacerbated a threatening situation. Further research is therefore needed to examine what training currently takes place, and which form of training is regarded by probation officers as being the most useful. Participants in our research called for training that would enable them to take preventative steps to minimize the occurrence of verbal and physical violence and that would also reduce the escalation of verbal conflict into physical violence.

The probation staff in our research indicated that their safety appears to be a low priority for probation service management. This is despite the responsibility of both employer and employee to provide a safe working environment. The Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) 1995, which came into force on 1 April 1996, include a requirement to report to the enforcing authority any incidents including death, major injury or incapacity for normal work for three days or more. This was reflected in a number of areas of the research. Relatively inexpensive measures such as the supply of a functioning mobile phone, although recommended as being a basic safety tool by the Department of Health, were not provided by probation services.

Staff considered that their managers needed to make clear statements to staff and offenders that physical violence, threats and abuse of staff are completely unacceptable. Procedures should be aimed at being preventative rather than bureaucratically reactive. Simply recording violent incidents is not sufficient, but should be backed up by action which supports the member of staff affected. Policies also need to incorporate measures to prevent this type of incident re-occurring. One such measure is to ensure that risk assessments are applied not only to the possibility of re-offending but also to staff safety.

In September 1999 the then secretary of state for health set up the National Task Force on Violence against Social Care Staff. Its remit was to reduce the incidence of violence against staff and volunteers in social care settings and put systems in place which would sustain a reduction in future. The task force made a variety of recommendations including the creation of baseline data and more training. The report stopped short of making more far-reaching recommendations which have been seen to operate successfully in New Zealand social services departments. These measures include the creation of 'Dangerous Situations Teams' specializing in providing support

to staff who believe themselves to be in a threatening situation, mandatory training, and the addition of personal safety reviews to all risk assessments (Stanley and Goddard 2002). These and some of the recommendations made by the National Task Force on Violence against Social Care Staff mentioned above have a direct relevance to probation staff. In addition, the Home Office should publish a protocol, which would encourage responsible sharing of information about service users who present particular risks of violence. Occupational standards for probation should include safe working practices in relation to violence.

What became clear from our research was the need for the Home Office to take a lead in promoting common definitions and reporting categories of violence which can be used across the National Probation Service. Finally, the Home Office could play a central role in encouraging chief constables to give the issue of support to probation staff high priority.

Conclusion

Writers have drawn attention to the dangers of mechanistically placing risk at the centre of welfare practices.

The challenge is to provide guidance and approaches which are firmly, but flexibly embedded in professional and organizational values and culture rather than generating paper mountains of checklists, questionnaires, and written instructions. (Kemshall *et al.* 1997: 228)

One of the interesting questions raised by Smith is the possibility that “old-style” probation work was valued by offenders, providing a possible reason for compliance with probation orders (Smith 2000). New, more punitive approaches to probation could transform what was a traditionally a more consensual approach to probation into a coercion, thus increasing the potential for violence against probation officers. It is clear from our research that while efforts have been made by some probation services to address the needs of staff who have been assaulted in the course of their work, these efforts have tended to be piecemeal, short-term in focus and unevaluated.

The survey results indicate that while staff appreciate the efforts made by management to address the impact of violence, gaps in these responses inadvertently generate their own problems for staff, already dealing with the impact of violence. All of the initiatives which have been implemented need to be reviewed, not just in terms of the impact on the individual’s ability to manage violence, but the effect on all staff. The research indicates that the consequences of violence on individual probation officers is complex and has yet to be fully understood.

Notes

1. This research was carried out jointly by Jonathan Gabe, David Denney, Mary Ann Elston, Ray Lee and Maria O’Beirne.

- This response rate of 10 per cent was achieved in this one service, where the personnel department administered the survey to its own staff for data protection reasons.

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