



University of Oxford
Centre for Criminological Research
in collaboration with
Berkshire Probation Service

Increasing the Employability of Offenders

An Inquiry into Probation Service Effectiveness

by Andrew Bridges

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Acknowledgements

This inquiry arose out of an initiative of the Employment Working Group (EWG) of the Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP). Many developments had taken place in probation service practice in relation to offender employment work in the early 1990s, and in 1994 the EWG proposed that a research project be commissioned to evaluate what was working.

After a number of initial setbacks the project was reconstituted as a personal research inquiry to be undertaken in my capacity as one of the first two Visiting Fellows at the University of Oxford's newly established Probation Studies Unit in the Centre for Criminological Research.

Grateful acknowledgements are due to all my colleagues in the Centre for their personal support and interest throughout the nine months of my part-time secondment to the Unit. In particular Ros Burnett was, during her time as the Head of the Unit, an appropriately most exacting supervisor of the drafting of this report, as was Roger Hood after her. Professor Hood's support extended to the financing of the substantial data entry work which this inquiry eventually entailed. Heather Hamill and Stephanie Chester made an excellent job of both the database design and the data entry.

Nevertheless the remaining shortcomings in this report, and its delayed completion, are of course my own responsibility, and are at least in part a symptom of undertaking the task alongside more than full-time work as a senior manager within a public service that is experiencing an unusually taxing time. This does however mean that I can take this opportunity to express my considerable gratitude to my employers the Berkshire Probation Committee for supporting the secondment financially, and to my Chief Officer colleagues at Berkshire Probation Service who were so personally supportive to me throughout the year.

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Research Findings Summary

1. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Research by others has demonstrated a clear link between offenders gaining employment and desistance from offending. The purpose of this research was therefore to measure probation service effectiveness at increasing the employability of offenders as a direct contribution to crime prevention.

2. IMPORTANCE

The crucial importance to crime prevention of this work is demonstrated by much research, notably the UK-based study by Farrington *et al* who showed that young men who persistently commit crimes for material gain committed about three times as many offences when unemployed as when they were in employment. Furthermore, Lipsey's American meta-analysis concluded:

The single most effective factor in reducing re-offending rates, with a positive effect size of 37 per cent, is employment.

This positive effect is **not** achieved by the **input** of vocational guidance alone, but by the **outcome** of gaining work. The importance of establishing probation service effectiveness at increasing offender employment becomes clear.

3. METHOD

The method was to analyse the employment-related interventions (EIs) attempted by 11 different area probation services, and the employment-related outcomes (EOs) recorded as achieved, in a total of 739 terminated case files of whom 480 had been unemployed at and soon after the start of supervision.

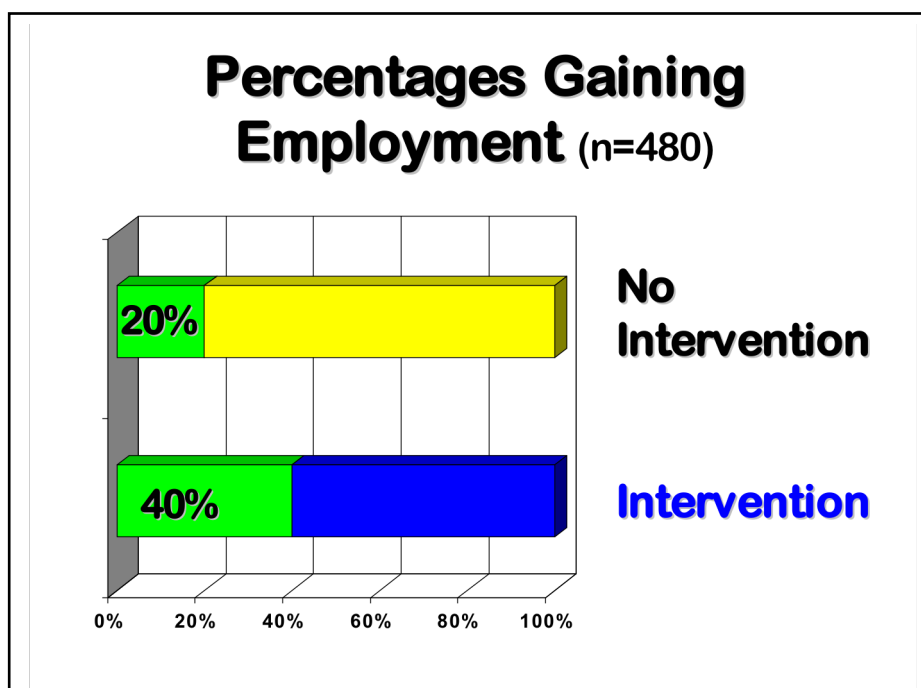
4. MAIN FINDINGS:

a) *Present performance*

With offenders who were unemployed on commencement, those who had an EI gained a job before their supervision ended at **twice the rate** of those who did not have an EI during their supervision. Probation services were also effective in increasing offender employability by a range of other measures.

- Of the 262 cases unemployed at and soon after start of supervision and who **did not** have an EI, 20% started a job at some point before supervision ended.
- Of the 218 cases unemployed at and soon after start of supervision and who **did** have an EI, 40% started a job at some point before supervision ended, double those who had not had an EI.
- Although this was not a control group comparison, further analyses found that the features of the two samples of offenders were not fundamentally different.

Figure 1



Furthermore,

- Of the 218 cases unemployed at and soon after start of supervision and who **did** have an EI, a further 21% achieved other employment outcomes (EOs), such as a job interview before supervision ended making a total of 61% of cases in all.
- The rate of success was similar whether the intervention was directly provided by the probation service or was purchased from a partnership agency.
- Of the total sample of 739 cases, 16% were employed at the start of supervision and 31% were employed when supervision ended.

b) Potential for development

Despite these successes, many opportunities to be even more effective appeared to have been missed. Analyses of cases to discover why EIs were attempted in some cases and not in others pointed to inconsistent or diffident probation practice as the main factors.

- In 55% of the unemployed cases no intervention was attempted.
- High rates of unemployment in the local community were not a barrier to the achievement of EOs.
- Poor motivation by the offender could also be overcome.
- Other factors which might inhibit employment intervention were also not a barrier to the achievement of EOs.
- The under-deployment of employment interventions was due more to the individual POs than to the factors which might inhibit employment intervention.
- Among offenders who had difficulties which might inhibit POs from making an employment intervention, those with an EI achieved double the level of job-starts of those without an EI.

By deploying employment-related interventions as an integral element alongside other mainstream probation interventions, the overall effectiveness of probation service supervision would be visibly increased.

5. CONCLUSION: SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE PROBATION SERVICE NATIONALLY

This research found that where probation services made interventions aimed to increase the employability of unemployed offenders, they were able to double the proportion of persons who took up employment. Nevertheless in the majority of cases, no such interventions were made. The analysis of the case files studied for this project suggested that more intervention would lead to more job starts by offenders.

Hence the evidence in this research strongly suggests that probation services can increase offender employability, aiding the objectives of both the Home Office and the DfEE, but that they could become even more effective.

CHAPTER ONE

Origin and Aims of the Inquiry

1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMPLOYMENT AND OFFENDING

The Home Office states that one of the key purposes of the probation services of England and Wales is to reduce offending.¹ Therefore, to designate a study of probation intervention to increase the employability of offenders as *An Inquiry into Probation Service Effectiveness* assumes the existence of a relationship between employment and offending. This report therefore begins by addressing the evidence relating to the existence and nature of such a relationship.

The question of this relationship has been explored in a number of ways (as has been well documented, for example by Downes²), and is described further below. Furthermore the debate has been carried on in a highly political context, especially during the Conservative governments of 1979–97. Margaret Thatcher's famous attributed assertion that

There is no such thing as society

and John Major's reported exhortation to

Condemn a little more and understand a little less

set the tone. With the view that offenders should bear an increased responsibility for their own behaviour came strong criticism of any suggestion that, for example, unemployment was a 'cause' of crime. A report by John Wells in 1996³ engaged with this political debate by asserting that the then government, having used unemployment explicitly as a device to counter inflation,

wishes to absolve itself of any responsibility for any collateral damage in the form of increased criminality.⁴

However, Dr Wells' report primarily addressed the subject as a poverty issue, unsurprisingly showing unemployment as a key cause of poverty, and linking this in turn with increases in crime over the past twenty years.

¹ *Three Year Plan for the Probation Service 1996–99*. Home Office, 1996.

² David Downes, (1993). *Employment Opportunities for Offenders*, Home Office.

³ Report from the Employment Policy Institute, 1996.

⁴ Quoted in the *Guardian* 15.2.96.

Many attempts have been made to address the question of the relationship between unemployment and crime, more directly by means of aggregate studies, attempting to correlate the prevalence of unemployment in the country as a whole with the prevalence of recorded crime – with variable results. Steven Box in 1987⁵ found a connection between unemployment levels at the end of one year, and the level of crime reported the following year, and claimed that this

supports the view that unemployment is causally linked to crime levels.⁶

However, a Home Office study by Jackie Orme⁷ in 1994 came to an opposing view in two respects. She concluded from an analysis of the figures from separate police areas that

overall there was not enough evidence to suggest that a consistent correlation existed between unemployment and recorded crime at the police force level.⁸

Furthermore, even where she did find some significant correlations⁹ she did not accept that these indicated a causal connection.

Orme does however properly go on to set out the many limitations to a study of this nature, such as the selective nature of recorded crime figures and the varying sizes of police areas. In particular she makes the point that aggregated figures may well obscure the connections that might be found by breaking down the figures by age, gender or specific geographical area. The grave limitations of aggregate studies is also illustrated by the fact that the data analysed by Carr-Hill and Stern in 1979¹⁰ was also used by Hakim in 1982 to come to entirely the opposite conclusions.¹¹ With aggregate studies it is even more difficult than usual either to demonstrate or to refute that a particular correlation indicates a causal connection.

In this respect, Tarling's overall assessment of aggregate studies in 1982 seems fairest. He observed that

...aggregate studies have probably exhausted their potential to illuminate a connection between unemployment and criminal behaviour.

On the subject matter itself he concluded:

Since crime goes up during periods of low unemployment and many crimes are committed by people in employment or of school age, it is clear that unemployment is not the sole determinant, or even the major determinant, of crime. Against this, and despite the caveats that can be made in connection with the aggregate studies discussed, some evidence of a relationship persists, suggesting that unemployment is a factor in the causation of crime, although it may not be a major factor; furthermore it appears to be inter-related in some complex way with other aspects of economic disadvantage or social deprivation.¹²

⁵ Steven Box, (1987). *Recession, Crime and Punishment*.

⁶ Box, *ibid.*, p85.

⁷ Jackie Orme, (1994). *A Study of the Relationship between Unemployment and Recorded Crime*, Home Office Research and Statistics Dept.

⁸ Orme, *ibid.*, p5.

⁹ Orme had found 'significant correlations' for certain quarters in 1990 and 1991 for burglary, vehicle crime and theft offences. In her view, this was to be expected when a rapid nationwide increase in unemployment took place during a period of general long-term increase in recorded crime.

¹⁰ R. Carr-Hill and N. Stern, (1979). *Crime, Police and Criminal Statistics*.

¹¹ C. Hakim, 'The Social Consequences of High Unemployment', *Journal of Social Policy* 11 p433-467. Hakim points out that Carr-Hill and Stern's data does confirm that areas with a high proportion of working class young men have both high unemployment and crime.

¹² Roger Tarling, (1982). 'Unemployment and Crime', Home Office Research and Planning Unit *Research Bulletin* 14, 28-33.

An alternative approach is to look at the effect of periods of both employment and unemployment on people with a history of offending behaviour. Graham and Bowling (1996),¹³ in an investigation for the Home Office, did not identify unemployment as a criminogenic factor for young people. They did on the other hand take the view that gaining employment was an important aid to desistance from offending, in that it significantly helped the maturation process. This securing of a stake in society had in turn been found to be key factor in leading a young person away from crime. Stephen Farrall made a similar assessment, drawn from a survey of the literature.¹⁴ He noted the role of ‘new structures in daily life’ in the findings of a number of authors, with employment being the chief of these, in leading to desistance from further offending.

Perhaps the authority most frequently quoted in the UK in recent years has been the conclusion of Mark Lipsey that:

The single most effective factor in reducing re-offending rates, with a positive effect size of 37 per cent, is employment.¹⁵

However, it has to be accepted that Lipsey’s extremely wide-ranging meta-analysis is of studies of juveniles, rather than adults, and in the USA rather than the UK. Its relevance to the present inquiry therefore has some limitations. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the magnitude of the ‘positive effect size’ recorded by Lipsey, and also another of his findings that had a significant effect on the design of this inquiry. He found that what he called ‘vocational guidance’ had an effect on re-offending that was marginally detrimental rather than beneficial. The implication is that employment intervention that does not actually lead to an employment outcome might do more harm than good in terms of the offender’s likelihood of re-offending.

The significance of this implication for the design of this inquiry has been that an emphasis has been given to the distinction between the concept of an employment intervention (hereafter ‘EI’) and the concept of an employment outcome (hereafter ‘EO’). Although it is not always easy to give a crystal clarity to this distinction in practice, as is discussed further below, it is an important distinction to aim for. This is because Lipsey’s evidence seems to suggest that real employment outcomes reduce the likelihood of re-offending whereas some interventions-that-fail-to-lead-to-outcomes may even increase it.

However, having noted this lesson from Lipsey, the assessment which best provides a theoretical context for this inquiry was provided by Farrington *et al* in 1986.¹⁶ Their data were from the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development, a longitudinal study of London males. The self-reported job history of each of the 411 male participants was analysed alongside his official criminal record, thus enabling a study of both convicted and unconvicted young men, and the effects on each of them of being in or out of work. They found that the rate of offending during periods of unemployment was three times as great as during

¹³ J. Graham and B. Bowling, (1996). *Young People and Crime*. Home Office Research Study 145.

¹⁴ Stephen Farrall, (1995). ‘Why do People Stop Offending?’ *The Scottish Journal of Criminal Justice Studies*, **1** 1, pp51–59.

¹⁵ Mark Lipsey, (1995). ‘What do We Learn from 400 Research Studies on the Effectiveness of Treatment with Juvenile Delinquents?’ in J. McGuire, *What Works in Reducing Offending: Guidelines from research and practice*, Wiley 1995

¹⁶ David Farrington, Bernard Gallagher, Lynda Morley, Raymond St Ledger and Donald West, (1986). ‘Unemployment, School Leaving and Crime’, *British Journal of Criminology* **26** 4.

employment.¹⁷ Furthermore the researchers' statistical analysis enabled them to conclude that unemployment was related to crime independently of the many individual differences between convicted and unconvicted persons.

A more detailed analysis showed that the type of offence was a key consideration. Crimes for material gain were associated with unemployment, but there was no such association for other crimes. Also the benefit of being in work was reduced, although not eliminated, when the job was of a particularly low status. More significant from a probation service perspective is their finding that the effect of unemployment was strongest with the young men who were most predisposed towards offending. Hence, although unemployment does not seem to be very significant in supposedly causing otherwise law-abiding young men to commit crime, it is a very significant criminogenic factor for the frequent offenders who are typical of those under the supervision of the probation service. The significance of unemployment for older males is less clear cut, but can be inferred from the overall findings of the research reviewed here.¹⁸

Another way of expressing this conclusion is to say that the outcome of gaining employment appears to reduce considerably a male offender's likelihood of re-offending. It therefore follows logically that work to increase offender employability should constitute an important part of mainstream probation service supervision. Thus this inquiry aimed to measure the extent to which probation services through their employment-related work achieved employment outcomes (EOs) of the kind which appear to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. This conceptual approach could also provide a model for the inquiries which could measure the achievement of other outcomes that have also been demonstrated to reduce the likelihood of re-offending in some circumstances, such as the gaining of cognitive skills.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF EMPLOYMENT WORK: PAST PROBLEMS

Having established the importance of offender employment work in principle, this section discusses why the probation service has been slow to develop it in practice.

a) 'A sense of hopelessness'

The research of Farrington *et al* was published in 1986, but the question of the impact of employment on recidivism was a live research issue long before that. Furthermore there has undoubtedly been a strong belief among practising probation officers that when an offender gains employment he or she is gaining a significant step on the way towards a crime-free life. Therefore it is, at first sight, surprising to record that during the 1970s and 1980s many probation officers were apparently reluctant to engage in employment work with offenders under their supervision.

An MPhil thesis by Diana Fulbrook, published as a report by Hereford and Worcester Probation Service in 1990¹⁹ thoroughly described and assessed this phenomenon. From her reading of a large number of case records, and interviews

¹⁷ Farrington *et al*, p342. 0.49 offences per year in comparison with 0.16.

¹⁸ The significance of unemployment for female offenders is more doubtful, but most agencies working to increase offender employment take the view that women should have fair access to that service.

¹⁹ Diana Fulbrook, (1990). *Long-term Unemployment and the Probation Service*. Hereford and Worcester Probation Service.

with offenders under supervision and their officers, there emerged a sense of hopelessness by probation officers in dealing with the issue.

There were of course exceptions, but the majority of the cross-section of officers in Fulbrook's sample felt for a variety of reasons unable to do anything effective to help the people under their supervision to gain employment. Few recalled anything from their qualifying training on employment, few were aware of current advice and guidance circulated within their own service, and most seemed to feel that they had little to offer in terms of tangible help. Of the offenders in the sample identified as 'long-term unemployed' it was evident to Fulbrook that three-quarters were, in effect, perceived by their supervision officers as unemployable.

Officers seemed to be much more ready to engage with offenders about their family problems and what Fulbrook calls 'emotional deprivation'. The main examples of employment work, where it was undertaken, consisted of referrals for NACRO work schemes or practical help with CVs etc by probation service volunteers. There were also mixed views about the appropriateness of such work, with some officers expressing the view that a life of unemployment was an acceptable individual personal choice. However, more prevalent was the paradoxical view expressed in the following quotation by an officer:

I expect them to try to find work, but I do not expect myself to do anything about that.²⁰

Fulbrook furthermore found that the expectation of offenders under supervision seemed to mirror that of officers – but with one exception: only a small minority of offenders saw any benefit in being unemployed. On the contrary, most saw employment as a key step that they must take towards rehabilitation. Yet they did not expect the probation service to help them achieve this. When they did receive employment help it came as a surprise. Officers had said that one of the reasons they did not discuss employment with people under their supervision was that offenders did not raise the subject with them. And yet offenders said that they had not raised the subject because they did not think their probation officer would be interested. It appeared that offenders and officers each reinforced the view of the other that employment work, whether a desirable aim or not, was in practice a hopeless task not worth attempting.²¹

As late as June 1996 an article by Peter Gregory in *Probation Journal*²² reported research that indicated that probation officers in Lincolnshire (another area, like Hereford and Worcester, where management had invested heavily in employment initiatives) in practice gave a low priority to employment work with offenders. It was not the purpose of Gregory's article to gather evidence as to why this was the case, but it is noteworthy that two academic studies had confirmed the existence in recent years of a significant level of non-engagement with employment work by many probation officers.

²⁰ Fulbrook *ibid.*, p13.

²¹ Perhaps it may be permissible for the author to add that, as a practitioner in the 1970s and 1980s, the overall picture described by Fulbrook appears to be true. Job-search groups and other initiatives of the time were not widespread practices.

²² Peter Gregory, (1996). 'Employment and the Probation Service: the Client Perspective', *Probation Journal*, June.

b) *Progress towards strategic partnerships*

Until at least the mid 1980s the non-engagement by most probation officers with employment work could at least be seen as a reflection of the lack of policy and direction prescribed by their own employing Services. NACRO and the Apex Trust provided a range of services, projects and work schemes in various parts of the country during the 1970s and 1980s, and were therefore seen as the key players in employment work at the time. From a national perspective the probation service role was a marginal one.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s the profile of employment work undertaken by the probation service nationally started to change. ACOP organised a national conference in July 1989, and the Home Office issued a letter to chief probation officers in December 1990 recommending (but not requiring) that they establish local offender employment forums.²³ A somewhat loose-knit informal quarterly gathering of mainly voluntary organisations known as the National Offender Employment Forum gained a secretarial service from ACOP and also the regular attendance of a Home Office representative. In January 1994 the Forum started meeting at the Home Office.

During the early 1990s further advice and guidance on offender employment issues were provided, both for internal and external use, by the Employment Department (later to become the Department for Education and Employment, the DfEE), the Employment Service (the agency responsible for delivering the service), Training and Enterprise Councils, and other bodies such as the Apex Trust. ACOP assisted in the drafting of much of this advice and guidance, and the growing message was that all the relevant organisations should work together on this issue in partnership.

In May 1994 the Home Office issued a Probation Circular (40/1994) requiring that each Service establish a policy and strategy for its work in the employment, training and education of offenders. In a most unusual initiative, the circular was issued in two parts: following part one containing the Home Office's statement of what was required from each service was part two, in which ACOP provided 'advice' to each service on how it might fulfil the Home Office's requirements. Working in partnership with others was again a key part of the message.

From 1993 to 1996 the Apex Trust was funded by the Home Office to provide a consultancy service to the probation services of England and Wales, and to provide practical help to many of them to develop their employment work, particularly in partnership with other agencies. In February 1995 the then Home Office Minister of State, Baroness Blatch, opened a multi-agency conference to promote the partnership approach. During the last period of this consultancy Apex was commissioned by the National Offender Employment Forum, which was again in transition, to produce a report to assess the progress made both by the probation service and by partner agencies in implementing the large amount of advice, guidance and requirements which had been issued in the previous few years.

²³ This contrasted with the Home Office Circular of 1988 that at that time required the establishment by each probation service of an Offender Accommodation Forum (although subsequently this statutory requirement has been rescinded.) At the time employment work was still something to be approached more tentatively than, for example, offender accommodation.

The report's recommendation that

probation services are the most appropriate agencies for taking the lead on offender employment issues²⁴

was accepted by the Forum as uncontroversial. In about ten years the probation service had moved from being almost 'not a player' at all in the offender employment world to the pivotal role.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN RECENT YEARS

Among the many separate developments in policy and practice described above, two overall strategic changes can be identified. The first of these concerns a transformation in the perceived role of the probation service nationally in offender employment work.

a) *Partnerships, both joint-working and purchasing partnerships*

One feature of this rapid development of offender employment work by probation services in recent years has been the associated development of partnerships with other organisations. In the author's opinion it is helpful to make a distinction between two types of partnership – joint-working and purchasing – when tracing these developments. The central importance given to purchasing partnerships in recent years has been due to the establishment of a target set by the Home Office which requires that a certain percentage of each probation service's revenue budget should be spent on purchasing certain qualifying services from voluntary or private organisations or individuals. As was recorded by the Apex Trust's National Audit report, and also in the Home Office's own monitoring of financial returns, a large proportion of the purchasing partnerships entered into by probation services across the country concerned the purchase of services related to offender employment, usually from local or national voluntary organisations such as NACRO, SOVA or the Apex Trust.

It is not the purpose of this report to open up a discussion of the issues raised by the development of purchasing partnerships in general, but it is relevant to note that one of its effects has been to encourage the creation of a very wide variety of systems and structures by different probation services in the ways in which they undertake their offender employment work. Some have 'outsourced' almost the entire task, some still aim to provide most of the service direct using their own staff, and a number of probation services have mixed and matched in different combinations. This subject is revisited in chapter three.

The other type of partnership, the joint-working partnership, has also been entered into by many probation services. In the classic case of a local offender employment forum, other statutory agencies such as the Employment Service, the Training and Enterprise Council and the local authority may recognise that by working together on a shared objective to increase the local employment of offenders they may also be enhancing the likelihood of achieving their own organisational objectives.

²⁴ Apex Trust, (1996). *National Audit of Offender Employment Policies and Practice*. Recommendation 11, p7.

b) *The need to measure results*

All of the recent developments noted above have been rapid, and on the whole been perceived by all involved as being a good thing. However, there has as yet been little analysis of the ways in which they could be defined as a success. By the very nature of its inquiry, the Apex Trust's National Audit was able to commend what it found to be good practice in terms of either the numbers of offenders participating in specific projects and the assessed quality of the interventions undertaken, or the satisfaction expressed by participants or by partners. Important though it has been to examine *standards* of work put in, and the *satisfaction* expressed by users, the piece of the jigsaw that was often missing was the measurement of *results* achieved. This viewpoint reinforced the author's plan for an inquiry that would particularly focus on the question of results, in order to make a distinctive and relevant contribution to the study of offender employment work.

CHAPTER TWO

Design and Methods of the Inquiry

1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

ACOP's Employment Working Group identified the need for a quantitative measurement of effectiveness to be attempted by setting for itself early in 1994 a group objective to promote a research project of a 'what works?' nature. After pursuing a number of different avenues and options without success it was not until nearly two years later that the prospect of a secondment to the newly-established Probation Studies Unit at Oxford presented the author with the opportunity to pursue the proposed project in person.

Probation services across the country expressed remarkable willingness to participate in the inquiry, even in the cases of those who candidly declared that they doubted if their area practice would emerge as being good. With the secondment to the fellowship being part-time, there was little room to manoeuvre in terms of the arrangements for conducting the fieldwork. On the one hand I took care to ensure that what I was asking for from each probation service was not unreasonably onerous on either them or me, and on the other hand every single service approached went out of its way to ensure that the practical arrangements went well.

Each service made available a sample of case files for me to read, and in each case I travelled to the area concerned to read them and score them on a data form I had devised.

2. METHODOLOGY AND ISSUES: ANALYSIS OF INTERVENTIONS AND OUTCOMES

It was pointed out earlier in this report that this inquiry focused on probation service effectiveness in achieving results, measured in terms of employment outcomes (EOs), which appear to reduce the likelihood of re-offending. This meant undertaking an analysis of the employment interventions (EIs) attempted as well as the employment outcomes (EOs) achieved by probation services. A key early task was therefore to identify what might count as an intervention and as an outcome.

To help bring to life the concept of ‘outcomes’ it was necessary to ask, ‘What does success look like in this area of work?’ To undertake a quantitative analysis it was necessary to have defined this in advance of embarking on the main collection of data. It was also necessary to be clear what should ‘count’ as an outcome rather than as an intervention – especially important because of the findings of Lipsey referred to above.²⁵

Assessments of individual offenders and referrals of them to (for example) education or training courses are of course valuable interventions, and often a creditable achievement by the worker, but they do not in themselves constitute outcomes.²⁶ Instead they should be seen as employment interventions (EIs), work that is undertaken by any worker or agency with the intention of increasing the employability of an offender.

EIs have traditionally focused on guidance and training, which are of course important, but their effectiveness can be increased if there has also been a careful assessment of the offender to ensure that he or she has been entered for the most appropriate training provision. Such an assessment needs to take into account both a realistic potential of the individual and the real opportunities available in the local job market.

‘Outcomes’ can be seen as the measure of what has been achieved as a result of the work, or ‘interventions,’ described above.²⁷ Some demonstrable increase in the offender’s employability has to be identified. For example, an offender may have experienced an EI such as an assessment or training course. It is then necessary to assess whether or not there has been an identifiable benefit which the person has gained as a result of the experience which means that their employment prospects have increased to some extent (even a small increase). Any qualification gained from a training course could count as an EO, but so also could the production of a curriculum vitae, attendance at a job interview (even if unsuccessful), or evidence of some new constructive use of leisure by the offender. To reiterate, in the case of a training programme, referral to and attendance at the training programme would be interventions (EIs), but the qualification and interview gained at the end would both be outcomes (EOs).

The full lists of EIs and EOs identified in this study can be seen in Appendix I. Every case in the sample was analysed in respect of every EI and every EO on each list.

²⁵ It will be recalled that Lipsey found that the intervention of vocational guidance appeared to be actively counter-productive – i.e. it increased the likelihood of re-offending – where it did not lead to the outcome of employment. This has been cited as evidence to support the school of thought which says that probation services should not attempt EIs in cases where there are not ‘realistic’ job prospects. This begs the question of how ‘realism’ is assessed. One of the recurring themes in offender employment work generally, illustrated further in this report, is the excessively low expectations of offenders by some probation officers.

²⁶ Lipsey’s conclusion about the negative effect of guidance work is understandably hard for some workers to accept, but it highlights the need to be as clear as possible in distinguishing outcomes from interventions.

²⁷ It is however acknowledged that it is possible for an EO to be achieved without a preceding EI by or on behalf of the probation service – indeed it will be seen later that this is a regular occurrence.

3. EMPLOYMENT OUTCOMES: SOME DETAILED CONSIDERATIONS

The list of possible EOs ranges from the very 'hard' outcomes (such as 'gained employment') to the very 'soft' (such as 'completed job application or a c.v.'). The suitability of each EO on the list as a means of measuring what had been achieved during supervision varied considerably from individual to individual. For example, one offender might have already been 'job ready' when supervision started, so it would not be appropriate to identify the fact that he is 'job ready' at the end of supervision as an outcome. In contrast, for the next offender, who had perhaps hitherto been extremely disaffected and underachieving, the completion of a job application might have been a noteworthy achievement, and one that increased his employability.

EOs therefore had to be applied as a measure of 'added value' (a measure of the increase in employability that had taken place since supervision started) rather than as a measure of absolute achievement. Offenders started supervision with a very wide range of existing skills, abilities and achievements, so the list of possible EOs in turn needed to be wide-ranging. Accordingly, in this study an EO was only recorded for a case where the author was satisfied that it had been achieved during the relevant (current) period of probation service supervision. The EO either had to have been achieved for the first time during the period of supervision or it had to have occurred following an adverse change in circumstances shortly after the start of supervision. By way of a plain illustration, if a person was in employment continuously throughout the period of supervision he or she could not be deemed to have achieved the outcome of gaining a job. But if the person had been in employment on commencement but then lost the job quite early on²⁸, gaining a job would constitute an outcome in the same way as if he or she had been unemployed from the start.

Another criterion for this inquiry was that one specific achievement could not lead to the recording of a multiple number of EOs. For example, where someone completed a job application, and was interviewed and accepted for that job and then gained a job, the only EO recorded was that of gaining the job.

There was of course a humbling reality to the fieldwork despite the careful conceptual planning described above. Although the carefully devised lists of EIs and EOs stood up reasonably well to the almost infinite variety of circumstances which can be thrown up by the messy reality of probation work, other shortcomings did emerge. The nature and quality of case recording varied very considerably. In the majority of probation services the record of weekly and other contacts with the offender was made by hand, usually on a plain running record sheet, and many of these were difficult to read.

Whether readily legible or not, most files appeared to record fairly reliably whether an offender was currently in or out of work, but in some of them the evidence about other employment outcomes was distinctly patchy. Not surprisingly, this was particularly the case where no intervention had been made. For this reason it was not possible to compare such outcomes in 'no intervention cases' as a whole with those which had been achieved where an intervention had been made.

²⁸ Five per cent of the total sample had a job at commencement but lost it during the first four weeks of supervision.

Therefore, in practice, the only employment-related outcome that could be used for comparative purposes was the simple gaining of employment (or 'job start'). Accordingly, this is the outcome most commonly referred to in practice in this report.

4. THE SAMPLE

As has already been emphasised, this inquiry was closely defined with a very specific focus, and the sample of case files analysed reflected that approach.

a) Demographic variety

Case files were drawn from over eleven different probation services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For practical reasons, probation areas in the south-east of England were particularly well represented, but six of the eight ACOP regions in England and Wales had at least one participating service. There were cases from inner city areas and from high unemployment areas in addition to the wider variety of cases from shire counties.

b) Case selection

Initially 739 case files were selected relating to offenders who had terminated statutory supervision so that an analysis could be made of outcomes that had or had not been achieved. One of the merits of the methodology was that it would be possible for probation services to replicate it in their own day-to-day practice. By analysing cases at the point of termination a range of 'outcomes achieved during supervision' can be measured.

Only probation order, combination order (looking at the probation element) and ACR (automatic conditional release) cases were selected. Community service cases were excluded because, although valuable employment-related work does sometimes take place in such cases, this has normally been seen as an 'optional extra' benefit in addition to the core reparative purpose of such orders. Having discarded community service orders, the three types of supervision selected represented in quantitative terms the bulk of normal mainstream probation supervision.²⁹

c) Representativeness and validity

In order to achieve a reasonably representative sample, most services were asked to provide lists of the cases that were 'the last 100 to terminate before 31 March 1996,' and most managed this successfully.³⁰ There was no reason to believe that any of the English and Welsh Service samples were not reasonably representative of that service's practice.³¹ However, it was found that a cohort of such cases would produce too few in which the question of employment intervention had been a live issue. Accordingly, the participating services were

²⁹ There was every prospect that to attempt to include either the younger age-group or the longer-term ex-prisoners would have added various practical difficulties due to their different circumstances which would have been disproportionate to the benefit of having their small numbers added to this sample.

³⁰ A couple of services provided cases with a wider range of termination dates, while one other service which came into the project at a later date worked to a different termination date, and the smaller sample from Northern Ireland was identified on a slightly different basis anyway.

³¹ The overall distribution of termination dates was recorded, confirming that 78 per cent of the cases terminated during the first three months of 1996, and in this respect seems to reflect a reasonably sound standard of representation.

requested to ensure that a sufficient number of offenders who were unemployed on commencement would be included in the cohort. While this means, of course, that unemployed cases were over-represented in the sample as a whole – being 76 per cent as compared with the figure of 64 per cent found in the ACOP survey for January to June 1995³² - there was no reason to think that the sample was distorted in other respects³³ or that the unemployed cases, which were the focus of this study, were in any way unrepresentative of unemployed offenders under probation supervision.

³² The comparison is of course a close but not absolutely direct one. The twice-yearly ACOP survey aggregates the figures returned from over 40 of the 54 probation services, collapsing the analysis of offenders into four employment statuses and reporting these at the pre-sentence report stage, at commencement and at termination of supervision. Since a large proportion of periods of supervision are for twelve months it is reasonable to compare the ACOP figures for commencements for early 1995 with information recorded at commencement for this sample of offenders terminating in early 1996. It is a 'good enough' comparison, bearing in mind that this is not a volatile matter, with the national figure for offenders who are unemployed at commencement undergoing a very gradual decline from 70 per cent in early 1993 to 61 per cent by late 1996.

³³ Eleven per cent of the cases were female, and the same proportion was of a skin colour other than white; 45 per cent were aged 25 or less at the point when supervision ended. In 54 per cent of cases the main current offence for which the order or sentence had been originally imposed was one of dishonesty, in 20 per cent one of violence, in 2 per cent sexual, and in 23 per cent 'other'. This last category included possession and supply of illegal drugs, but the majority in this category had committed offences of driving whilst disqualified and driving with excess alcohol. Offenders who had just been released from prison constituted only a fifth of the total sample, as there is no statutory licence for adults for sentences less than twelve months and because those serving sentences of four years and over had been excluded from this sample for pragmatic reasons. Of the other four fifths of cases, three-quarters were on probation and the others were on a combination order. Although there were significant numbers of people who completed periods of supervision of nine months or less (34 per cent) or more than 18 months (14 per cent) the majority (52 per cent) completed supervision periods of around twelve months. The most common period was, unsurprisingly, twelve months itself (36 per cent). All of these figures are close to figures for the aggregated national probation caseload as reported in the Home Office's annual Probation Statistics.

CHAPTER THREE

Present Performance

The findings of this inquiry have been divided into two broad headings, *Present Performance* and *Potential Development*, the first of which is addressed in this chapter, and the second in the next. The focus in this chapter is on what probation services studied achieved in increasing the employability of the offenders under their supervision; the next chapter examines what more might have been achieved.

1. EMPLOYMENT STATUS ON COMMENCEMENT AND TERMINATION

Although this report focuses on the impact of employment interventions on unemployed offenders, it may be helpful first to consider changes in employment status between the commencement and termination of supervision in the sample as a whole. The categories employed were those used in the twice-yearly survey conducted on behalf of ACOP (Association of Chief Officers of Probation):

- Employed (whether permanent, temporary, full or part time)
- Unemployed (but registered as available for work)
- Full-time education or training
- Other employment status (usually either sick, incapacitated or not available for work for other reasons such as childcare).

Table 1

**Employment status of total sample on commencement and termination
(N= 739)**

Total sample	%			
	Employed	Unemployed	Full time education/ training	Other status
Commencement	15.9	75.9	1.4	6.9
Termination	30.5	58.0	3.4	8.1

Table 1 shows that the employment profile of this cohort of offenders had distinctly improved over the course of their supervision:

- **Nearly twice as many were employed at the point of termination than had been in work at the beginning.**

This is a useful finding for the probation service because the regular survey carried out by ACOP is not able to track a specific cohort of offenders and monitor their own changes in employment status – although some individual probation services appear to be able to do this.³⁴ Although the numbers were too small to make it possible to carry out a detailed analysis by ethnic origin, gender and race, the figures in each case raise some questions for further research. Among the 76 black and other skin colour cases 18.4 per cent had been employed at the commencement of supervision, and 26 per cent at termination. This increase of 7.6 percentage points was well below the 14.6 percentage point increase for the sample as a whole. As far as the 75 women offenders were concerned only 12 per cent were employed at commencement and although the proportion had increased to 20 per cent by termination of supervision, again the eight percentile increase was considerably lower than amongst the sample as a whole. These findings suggest that a greater effort to improve employability amongst both ethnic minority and women offenders needs to be made.

On the other hand, while only 12.8 per cent of the 328 offenders under 25 years of age were employed on commencement of their supervision, the proportion had increased to 28.7 per cent, or by 124 per cent.

2. MEASURING THE IMPACT OF EMPLOYMENT INTERVENTIONS WITH UNEMPLOYED OFFENDERS

Although 550 of the cohort of offenders studied were unemployed at the commencement of their supervision, it emerged from the initial data analysis that 70 out of them experienced a significant change for the better in their employment circumstances very early on in their period of supervision. Almost always this meant in they had gained employment within four weeks (usually much less) of commencement of supervision, and before any probation service EI had been started. These were mainly cases where, in response to the crisis of the moment, the offender or his/her friends or family made a special effort, and a result was achieved within a day or two of going to court or being released.

It was obviously prudent to remove such cases from the sample of those unemployed for whom employment interventions might have been offered. The analyses that follow therefore concern 480 cases which can be said to have been unemployed both on and soon after the point of commencement of supervision.

³⁴ There has also been doubt cast over the ACOP figures for termination of supervision, where for many areas the figures seem remarkably similar to those for commencement. Many think that the figures for termination are not entered with due diligence, with the data entry from commencement being carried forward.

a) *Employment interventions undertaken with offenders unemployed at and soon after commencement*

The first important finding to note is

- **that in over half of these unemployed cases – 55 per cent – no employment intervention of any kind was attempted. The possible reasons for this are explored further in chapter four.**

The kinds of intervention made in the 45 per cent of cases where help with employment issues was given are shown and explained in Appendix III. It will be seen that the most frequent (in 24 per cent of cases) was referral for a specialist assessment by a colleague within the probation service, followed by referral for a specialist assessment by another agency (19 per cent) and specialist assessments either undertaken by a colleague within the probation service (14 per cent) or in another agency (13 per cent). In 11 per cent of cases vocational training was attempted.

b) *Outcomes for unemployed offenders where no employment interventions were attempted*

Up to now it might have been inferred that the conceptual structure used in this report makes the assumption that EOs are always a direct consequence of an EI. However, it is by no means unusual for an EO to arise where no EI has been attempted. It was therefore necessary to examine the extent to which the 262 cases (55 per cent) where no EI had been attempted had nevertheless started a job at some point at some point before termination of supervision:

- **Twenty per cent had done so, although there was little evidence of any other EOs being achieved (another three cases only).³⁵**

Some people may be surprised that offenders had been able to gain employment in significant numbers even where they have not been helped, either directly or indirectly, by the probation service. Yet it must be recognised that even in the times of the recent recession there was a regular turnover of people gaining (as well as losing) employment. In 1993 for example, in the county of Berkshire with a population of 750,000 and with at that time an unemployment rate of 8 per cent, some 2,500 people were starting employment every month. The figure may vary at different times and in different parts of the country, but in reality it is not that surprising if some of these monthly jobstarters are people under probation service supervision making progress by their own efforts.³⁶

³⁵ Bearing in mind that these were cases where no EI had been attempted, these findings seemed to support my very strong impression that probation officers were in general very reliable in recording changes in the employment status of offenders in their own case records (Part Cs) – however, their records were insufficient for the purpose of monitoring many of the other variables, especially where the probation officer had presumably not planned or expected to monitor such details.

³⁶ This is of course in addition to those who gained employment very early in their supervision, discussed in the previous section and excluded from this subset.

c) *Outcomes for unemployed offenders where at least one employment intervention was attempted*

Of the 218 cases where the probation officer had attempted an employment intervention, 87 (40 per cent) had started a job. And in a further 45 cases (21 per cent) there was evidence of at least one EO other than that of gaining employment:

- **Thus, an employment outcome of some kind had been achieved in 61 per cent of the 218 cases.**

At first sight this figure of 61 per cent for ‘any EO’ might look somewhat low when it is evident that most of this figure can be accounted for by jobs actually started.

It may therefore be helpful to reiterate the following points:

- the research design was quite strict as to what counted as an outcome
- probation case records probably under-reported outcomes other than job starts
- each case only counts once, no matter how many outcomes they achieved – and therefore:
- the sin of overstating the findings has been avoided.

Of course, it is not possible to assert definitively that the jobstarts and other EOs in these cases was in every case a direct result of the EI undertaken – but then it is never possible to prove such a causal link. It is only possible to show statistical associations between factors in each inquiry, and endeavour to eliminate other possible explanations for such associations. But it nevertheless can be asserted that in this sample of unemployed offenders subject to probation supervision there was a significant correlation between an employment initiative having been undertaken and the offender starting a job. Thus:

- **Twenty per cent of unemployed people on supervision who were unaided found work**
- **Whereas 40 per cent of unemployed people on supervision who had had help found work.**
- **This is *double* the rate of outcomes with an intervention than without.**

But see note below³⁷

³⁷ It is still necessary to point out that there are almost certainly other differences between the two samples – this is not a case of a control-group comparison. Nevertheless the key point remains that the input of EIs is positively associated with EOs, notably including offenders finding real jobs. As will be seen in the next chapter, the features of the offenders with EIs were not fundamentally different from those without EIs.

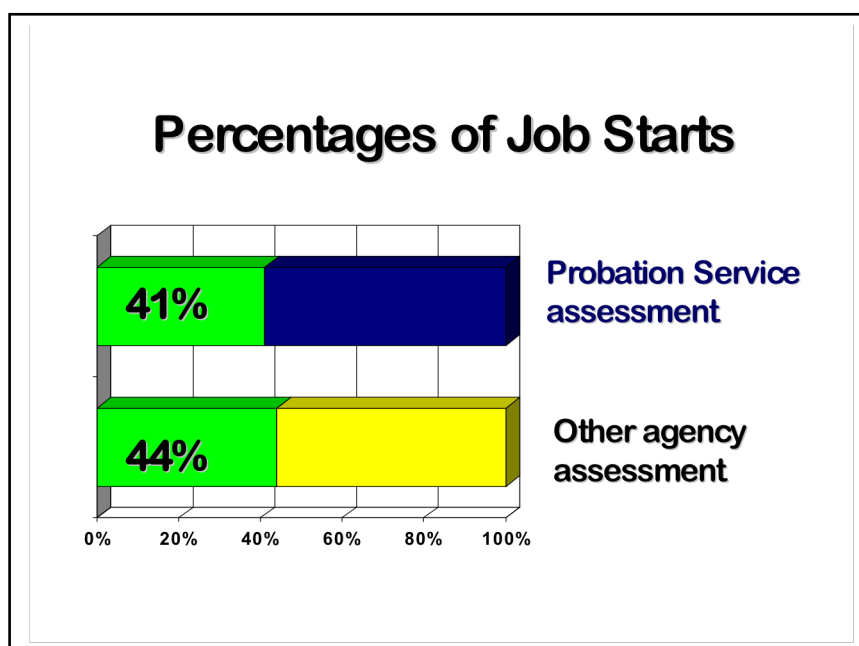
e) Providing versus purchasing

It is often asked: should probation services undertake employment work themselves or pay other people to do it? It should be emphasised here that this research was not designed for the specific purpose of evaluating all the benefits and costs of either providing or purchasing offender employment services. Nevertheless as a by-product of this inquiry the following analysis can be offered.

The sample of 218 cases where an EI was attempted with an offender who was unemployed both at and soon after commencement of supervision contained a sizeable proportion of cases (29 per cent) where a specialist employment assessment was undertaken by a probation service member of staff. In another sizeable proportion of cases (27 per cent) such an assessment was undertaken by another agency – making a total of 123 cases which had been assessed by a specialist in one way or another.³⁸

In terms of jobs started by people under supervision, the outcomes were remarkably similar as can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2



- **This strongly suggests that it is the employment work actually done that counts, not who it is done by.**

³⁸ In the remaining 95 cases of the 218 subset the intervention(s) attempted did not include such a specialist assessment.

CHAPTER FOUR

Potential for Development

In this chapter the analysis moves on from what was achieved by probation services to what might have been achieved. Given that no interventions were attempted with 55 per cent of the offenders who were unemployed at and soon after commencement of supervision, it might appear that many opportunities to be even more effective were missed. The cases were therefore analysed in a number of further ways to discover why EIs were attempted in some cases and not in others. Was the reason for difference in treatment received by these two groups of offenders due to some features about the offenders concerned, or was it more due to the behaviour of the supervising officer?

There is a widely held view among many specialist ‘offender employment’ staff, and among many probation service managers, that a large proportion of main-grade probation officers are either diffident, reluctant, or even overtly resistant to provide or arrange for employment-related interventions (EIs) for offenders under their supervision. As has already been noted, this phenomenon was very evident in Diana Fulbrook’s³⁹ research, which had been carried out in a probation service where employment work was positively encouraged. However, this predated the considerable changes in probation service policy and practice nationally which have been described in the opening chapters of this report.

Accordingly this chapter offers: first, some further analyses of the characteristics of the offenders in this sample; and second, an examination of the apparent practice of the supervising probation officers. The purpose is to see if non-intervention could be justified on the grounds of:

- high unemployment in the community
- poor motivation by the offender
- other inhibiting factors.

1. HIGH RATES OF UNEMPLOYMENT

It has sometimes been asserted that it unfairly raises the expectations of offenders to undertake ‘employment work’ with them when high rates of unemployment in the local community appear to make finding a job unrealistic. Certainly it seems critical to keep the intervention and aspirations realistic, bearing in mind the conclusion of Lipsey that vocational guidance that does not lead to employment is counter-productive. However, it is also clear that much more is realistically achievable than many people had previously thought possible.

³⁹ Diana Fulbrook, (1990) *op. cit.*

It was not only in the relatively prosperous south-east of England that a high rate of job-finding was achieved among unemployed offenders under supervision. The English probation area with the highest rate of unemployment in the sample – in the north-east – achieved 23 per cent job starts.⁴⁰ Although this is a lower figure than for the total sample, it still means that in one of the most economically bleak areas of England nearly one in four offenders gained employment following an EI while under probation service supervision. More tellingly, this figure was nearly double the 12 per cent job starts achieved by those who did not have an intervention in that area.

The lesson from Northern Ireland is even more striking. Although unemployment rates were the highest of all for this area, the level of probation officer activity and commitment to offender employment work has been markedly higher than that in England and Wales for many years, as has the provision of special government measures to help employment and training. This was confirmed when it was found that in the Northern Ireland subset, at least one EI was attempted with 60 per cent of the unemployed cases (compared with 45 per cent for the total sample). Fifty per cent of those receiving an EI started a job during supervision, and in 83 per cent of cases at least one EO was achieved (compared with 40 per cent and 61 per cent for the total sample). Probation officers in Northern Ireland are not put off undertaking offender employment work by high unemployment rates, and achieve good results.

- **Thus evidence from both Northern Ireland and the north-east English area suggests that a high rate of unemployment need not prevent probation services increasing the employability of a significant proportion of offenders under supervision.**

2. POOR MOTIVATION BY THE OFFENDER

Another understandable assertion has been that it is often very difficult in practice to overcome the poor motivation of many offenders under supervision to co-operate with any planned employment intervention.⁴¹ It is widely known that many offenders fail to keep appointments when referred to others by their probation officer, and this includes specialist employment work.

Nevertheless, dealing with reluctant participants is part and parcel of the probation officer's normal work. With other forms of probation intervention officers have become increasingly skilled at encouraging, motivating, cajoling and driving offenders into activities that they – the officers, clearly perceive to be important. It will be shown below that at least some of the failures to undertake EIs were due to officer diffidence as well as to offender reluctance. But to what extent might such diffidence by the officer be justified by their assessment of the offender's poor motivation?

⁴⁰ This figure compares directly with the figure of 40 per cent job starts for the total sample where an EI was undertaken with offenders who were unemployed at and soon after commencement.

⁴¹ At the data collection stage I formed a view about the level of motivation of each offender to engage in employment work (where this was potentially applicable), and 27 per cent of the total sample were recorded as falling into the category of 'poorly motivated'. 17 per cent appeared to be particularly well motivated, and the remainder were either 'medium motivated' or not applicable.

To answer this an analysis was made of the unemployed offenders who had in my view revealed poor motivation, a subset that numbered 166. EIs were attempted with 58 cases – 35 per cent of the subset (it will be recalled that it was 45 per cent for all unemployed cases). This could be regarded as creditable – and it also indicates that officer diffidence was not quantitatively widespread. But what outcomes were achieved in terms of jobs started?

- **Of the 108 cases without an EI, just six (5.6%) started a job,**
- **Of the 58 cases with an EI, nine (12.5%) did so.**

Clearly, poor motivation is a substantial obstacle to increasing an offender's employability and it reduces the rate of success. Nevertheless, once again the rate with an EI was double that where there had been no EI.

3. OTHER INHIBITING FACTORS

A number of other circumstances which might either reasonably or understandably be thought to inhibit the prospect of undertaking EIs with offenders during the initial stages of supervision were identified at the research design stage. These were called inhibiting factors⁴², and among those unemployed on and soon after commencement 79 per cent had at least one of them. However, 50 per cent of the employed offenders had at least one of them too, as can be seen from the factors listed in the following table.

Focusing on the unemployed sample, the questions once again are: how many had an EI, what was the rate of job-finding of these compared with those without an EI? The findings are interesting.

- **Of the 379 cases who had at least one inhibiting factor, 156 (41 per cent) had an EI.**
- **Of the 223 who did not have an EI, 16 per cent started a job.**
- **of the 156 who did have an EI, 34 per cent started a job.**

Accordingly, it can be shown that these other inhibiting factors reduced the rate of success, but again job-finding results doubled when an employment intervention had been attempted.

⁴² Six specific inhibiting factors were identified, plus an 'other' category. In each case I used my own judgement to decide from the evidence of the case record which if any factors applied to that case.

Table 2**Inhibiting factors with the unemployed and with the employed offenders**

Inhibiting factor	Of 480 cases unemployed on or soon after start of supervision (%)	Of 139 cases employed or in education/training at start of supervision (%)
Accommodation problems	11	7
Chaotic lifestyle	16	9
Mental disorder	6	2
Dependent children (main carer)	3	4
Compliance problems	17	6
Alcohol or other drug misuse	48	35
Other inhibiting factor	18	7
Any one or more of the above inhibiting factors	79	50

4. PROBATION OFFICER PRACTICE: ASSESSMENT OF INDIVIDUAL OFFENDERS

The above analysis might be taken to imply that the apparent under-deployment of EIs is due to a large extent to the diffidence of some probation officers. It is hard to substantiate such an interpretation, because there are real difficulties for any researcher in trying to categorise, quantify and aggregate a host of assessments made by individual officers in respect of a wide variety of individual offenders. Merely reading the case files brought to life the immense variation in the human condition managed by probation officers every day – so it was not easy to make an assessment of the extent to which individual case decisions were being made appropriately.

One attempt to answer this question was to build into the research design a category ‘Should an EI have been attempted in this case?’ This was of course, as with many of the other questions at the data collection stage, a question dependent on my judgement as the researcher reading the file. Nevertheless, it appeared that 88 per cent of the subset of 480 cases where the offender was unemployed at and soon after commencement of supervision had characteristics which indicated that an intervention to improve employability should have been made, whereas in practice it was only undertaken in 45 per cent of cases. Looked at another way, it means that of the 55 per cent with no intervention, 73 per cent of them (40/55) were judged by me to be in need of such help.

a) Plans – but no action taken

A further disparity arose at the next point in this line of inquiry. Where some form of employment-related action was planned in 58 per cent of the unemployed cases, according to the supervising probation officer’s own record, in only 41 per cent of cases did the same record reveal any evidence of any attempt to implement such action. This represented only 70 per cent of plans being turned into action.

Table 3**Planned and actual interventions for unemployed offenders (n=480)**

	Number	%
EI Planned by the supervising PO ⁴³	279	58.1
EI put into action by the PO ⁴⁴	195	40.6

This substantial disparity may be due to a combination of factors. Some of it can be traced to an implied attitude to employment work by some probation officers and some to the substantive difficulties experienced by and with some individual offenders. It might be appropriate to acknowledge that for a number of years inspections of probation case records have tended to reveal a disparity between plans devised and plans actioned in relation to other forms of probation intervention. As with specifically employment-related interventions (EIs) these apparent failures to implement self-made plans can also sometimes be traced to the officer and sometimes to the offender. It appears therefore that some probation officers showed a poor ability to follow through their own plans – but this, as we shall see, was probably not the whole story.

b) Probation officer diffidence

An additional factor identified from reading all 739 case records was one that could not be readily quantified but which could be readily illustrated – this factor is here named ‘diffidence in making referrals.’

This means that in a significant number of cases there was evidence that the officer treated the issue of employment in a diffident way, a different way from how they treated other interventions. In such instances it would have been clear to the offender that the officer placed importance on the offender participating in, for example, an offending behaviour group, a sex offender programme, or substance misuse treatment – but that measures to improve employability were not treated as important.

For illustration, reference can be made to a probation area with high unemployment where such work was positively encouraged by management and also where there were at least two specialist projects whose services had been purchased to undertake employment-related intervention. The case files showed that supervising probation officers who worked vigorously to sell the benefits of other forms of intervention to the offender often merely ‘offered’ employment intervention.

⁴³ This row and the next are aggregated figures about EIs in general. They provide a useful starting-point for looking at the pattern of probation service interventions attempted. Any reference by the supervising probation officer, usually in the initial supervision plan, to an intention to engage with the offender’s employment needs (even simply a plan to refer the person to a colleague or other agency), qualified the case for inclusion here.

⁴⁴ It should be noted that any recorded attempted action was counted as an action. For example, if the planned action was to refer to a specialist colleague or agency this plan was counted as having been actioned if there was an entry or any kind of evidence in the file to show that the referral had been made – even if the offender failed the appointment.

In one example⁴⁵ the officer stated in the assessment that the person under supervision was ‘not keen on the ____ project at present’ and no further reference to employment work was then made. In another case the officer expressed a plan to ‘perhaps refer him to ____ project, *if he finds that this is suitable for him*’ (my italics). My note continues that the record suggested that the officer never seemed to get round to this plan, and subsequent intervention consisted only of ‘support.’ In another case the officer wrote of the need to be ‘realistic’ about the individual’s job prospects, and that he was not ready for intervention – and yet just after the end of the period of supervision the offender found a job by his own efforts.

An entry in another case stated

...talked about ____ and ____ [the two local projects], he will let me know, he doesn’t want to commit himself at the moment ...

In yet another example, the officer gave employment as the ‘top priority’ in the initial supervision plan, but subsequently wrote that the offender had ‘declined [the] offer of a referral to one of the projects’. Later in the record the officer stated,

Although I would like to refer him to the ____ [project], if he feels that he can gain employment himself then I would think he can take responsibility for doing that.⁴⁶

Finally in this case, where there was no record of an employment intervention or outcome, there was no mention of employment in the closing assessment. Comparable examples were found in almost all the other probation areas.

Probation officers’ low expectations of the offenders’ employment prospects (excessively low in at least one of the examples cited above) may stem from the continuing sense of hopelessness still experienced by some officers years after this phenomenon Fulbrook first described. It could also be argued that in turn it reinforces the low expectations that many offenders already have of themselves – if this person in authority thinks you have no feasible job prospects, why should you think differently?

Some final remarks can be made here contrasting this diffidence with the more positive attitude displayed by the officers supervising the Northern Ireland cases.⁴⁷ The province has a particularly high rate of unemployment in the general population, but it has already been noted that, with EIs, job starts⁴⁸ were achieved in 50 per cent of cases.

⁴⁵ With almost every one of the 739 cases examined, in addition to the collection of quantifiable data I recorded in the form of between one and three sentences a description of any salient point(s) about the case as seemed significant to me at the time. The following illustrations are taken from these notes made at the time of reading the files.

⁴⁶ This echoes the officer quoted by Fulbrook earlier who considered it entirely the offender’s responsibility, unguided by the officer, to seek employment.

⁴⁷ With the exception of Northern Ireland, which the Chief Probation Officer agreed could not be discussed without being identified, other individual probation service areas have not been named in this report, although some of the key figures for individual areas have been conveyed separately to the respective senior managers.

⁴⁸ Job starts were not intended to include starts on training schemes, and to my knowledge these were not counted in the Northern Ireland figures either. However, due to the considerable variety of schemes available in the province, many of which were not immediately recognisable as such from the reference in the case record. It is more than possible that some training or work experience schemes were inadvertently counted by me incorrectly as job starts in the Northern Ireland figures. This error is much less likely to have occurred with the English and Welsh areas as the schemes were much fewer and easier to identify. Having allowed for that, the Northern Ireland figures are still impressive!

A number of circumstances were special to Northern Ireland which deserve a much fuller discussion than can be attempted here. In the province as a whole, unemployment was perceived as a major social as well as economic problem and relieving it has been regarded as a potential contribution to the peace process. Consequently, government policy has for some years operated quite differently in Northern Ireland compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. Considerable direct economic support has been given to job creation, coupled with a regulation of employer behaviour under the Fair Employment Act that would be considered unthinkable on the British mainland.

In this climate the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) has promoted itself as a statutory agency that involves itself closely with local communities, and is consequently regarded by all as being non-sectarian. It has also invested much more heavily than any other probation service in purchasing services from community and other organisations, and this long-established policy and practice has contributed heavily to the development of its offender employment work, as was evident to me on my visit there.

This background may help to explain one further special feature of Northern Ireland practice. From reading the PBNI files it was evident that a far higher proportion of supervising probation officers than in any of the other areas treated employment intervention as an integral part of mainstream probation supervision rather than as if it were an optional extra.

In conclusion, there is evidence to suggest that a significant number of probation officers treat employment interventions with diffidence, and may be doing so because they have low expectations of what can be achieved in terms of employment outcomes by offenders.

These low expectations are not supported – and indeed are contradicted – by the evidence presented in this report. In relation to each of the variables examined in this chapter the analysis has revealed a similar picture.

High rates of unemployment, poor motivation by the offender and a range of other inhibiting factors each reduced the rate of return in terms of jobs started for intervention undertaken. Nevertheless, where these factors existed, the rate of job starts when an employment intervention had been made was still twice the rate as when no employability action had been taken.

On this basis there is every reason to believe that if interventions were undertaken with a much higher proportion than the current 45 per cent of unemployed offenders, a substantially higher rate of job starts and other employment outcomes could be achieved.

5. CONSECUTIVE *VERSUS* CONCURRENT INTERVENTIONS

To conclude this chapter, an area of potential development is identified. This relates to how employment work is currently managed alongside other probation interventions and how practice in this regard might be improved.

The files conveyed the impression that officers appeared to put off the question of employment interventions, often with references to the offender being 'not ready'. In short, it appeared that many officers operated – at least half-consciously – a system where the different probation interventions were deployed in a procession of consecutive initiatives.

It could be argued that there is nothing wrong with this approach where time permits it to operate. However, it seemed to me that in many cases this was not the case. Many of the offenders who did not experience an EI perhaps missed out because the officer deployed probation interventions in a consecutive series – and time ran out before employment interventions could be deployed. If average lengths of orders continue to decrease, if officers are advised to focus their work on other issues in the early months of orders, this will become an increasing problem.

An alternative approach would be to deploy interventions concurrently, alongside each other, instead of consecutively. It could, of course, be objected that only a finite amount of work can be undertaken by the officer, and coped with by the offender, at any one time. But a case management approach does not require each intervention to be undertaken by the officer in person and furthermore, research findings concerning effective supervision suggest that a 'multi-modal' approach is a key factor in reducing offending behaviour.

This can be illustrated by reference to offenders where both employment and substance misuse are factors in their offending. An approach taken now by some officers is that only when the offender has overcome the substance misuse is he or she 'ready' to tackle the problem of employment. An alternative approach, already recognised by some officers and by some specialist projects, is to have both forms of intervention operating concurrently alongside each other and to regard each area of the work as helping with the other. For example, in cases of substance misuse, alcohol or another drug may be used as a form of self-harm, and this may be a symptom of the person's very poor self-esteem. It may therefore be particularly beneficial for the person's self-esteem in many such cases if they are encouraged to undertake practical activities to improve their employability, alongside the other treatments for their condition.

In summary:

- **This chapter has shown that there is substantial scope for undertaking employment interventions with many unemployed offenders who do not at present receive such help from the probation service. If this assistance were to be given there is every prospect of a higher rate of success in terms of job starts achieved. There is good evidence to suggest that this would lower the rate of offending of offenders subject to probation supervision.**

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions

The starting point for this inquiry was that research by others, notably Farrington *et al* and Lipsey, had demonstrated that with known offenders the gaining of employment substantially reduced their offending behaviour. It is furthermore known from ACOP's regular surveys that six out of 10 offenders at the pre-sentence report stage are unemployed and available for work. Accepting it as a premise that increasing the employability of these offenders would reduce their likelihood of re-offending, this research project therefore sought to measure probation service effectiveness at intervening with them and achieving employment outcomes.

However, with offenders who were unemployed both at and soon after they commenced probation service supervision, no employment-related interventions (EIs) were attempted in 55 per cent of cases and in such circumstances only 20 per cent of offenders started a job during these supervisions. On the other hand, in the 45 per cent of cases where EIs were undertaken, a much higher rate of job starts – 40 per cent was achieved –double the figure for those where no EI was attempted.

A number of difficulties, such as poor motivation by the offender, reduced the level of successful job starts. Nevertheless, even in such cases the level of job starts was significant, and the rate of job starts for those with an EI was still double that achieved where no EI had been attempted. There is every reason to believe that a higher level of intervention would lead to further success in terms of job starts and other employment outcomes.

An increased commitment by all probation service staff to offender employment work as an integral part of mainstream probation supervision would help to bring about this increased success. If this were achieved we would expect – on the basis of the research of Farrington *et al* and Lipsey – that the level of offending by people under probation service supervision would be reduced.

Hence the evidence in this research strongly suggests that probation services can increase offender employability, aiding the objectives of both the Home Office and the DfEE, but that they could become even more effective.

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APPENDIX: I

Database: Lists of Case Details, Interventions and Outcomes

For reference, listed here are the key variables taken for each of the 739 cases at the data collection stage. Some variables were in fact further subdivided, for example to separate self-employment as an outcome, but these lists convey the overall picture of the depth of information collected and collated in the SPSS database. Detailed explanations and/or discussions of some of these variables will be found in footnotes earlier in this report.

1. LIST OF CASE DETAILS

- Probation service area
- Case identification number
- Officer identification number
- Team identification number
- Type of supervision
- Date of termination of supervision
- Length of supervision in months
- Gender
- Skin colour (white, black or other)
- Age at termination of supervision
- Offence type (dishonesty, violence, sex or other)
- Employment status on commencement
- Employment status at termination
- Other employment status experienced during this period of supervision
- Was employment issue assessed as significant by the supervising PO (no, yes, or very)?
- Was any employment intervention planned by the supervising PO?
- Was any employment intervention actioned?
- Was there an early change in the offender's employment status (no, for the worse, for the better)?
- Did the offender appear to be poorly, or well, motivated for employment intervention?
- What factors were there inhibiting the prospects of undertaking employment interventions?
- In the researcher's opinion, should any employment intervention have been attempted in this case?

2. LIST OF EMPLOYMENT-RELATED INTERVENTIONS (EIs)

- Referral for a specialist assessment by a colleague within the probation service
- Referral for a specialist assessment by another agency
- Specialist assessment undertaken by a colleague within the probation service
- Specialist assessment undertaken by another agency
- Employment assessment undertaken by the supervising probation officer in person
- Employment assessment undertaken by the prison service
- Structured capability assessment undertaken
- Vocational training attempted
- Course of further or higher education attempted
- Remedial help/training attempted
- Training for 'world of work' attempted
- Training in job search skills attempted
- Training in disclosure of precons
- Coaching
- Any EI at all

3. LIST OF EMPLOYMENT-RELATED OUTCOMES (EOs)

- Person is now able to complete a competent job application or curriculum vitae
- Person has achieved a Number Power qualification
- Person has achieved a Word Power qualification
- Person has attained GNVQ unit(s)
- Person has attained NVQ unit(s)
- Person has achieved a vocational qualification from a TEC sponsored programme
- Person has achieved a vocational qualification from a FE or HE programme
- Person has achieved some other vocational qualification
- Person has achieved some other (not directly vocational) qualification from a FE or HE programme
- Person is actively engaged in an activity that recognisably makes constructive use of their 'leisure' time
- Person is now 'job ready'
- Person has been offered a job interview
- Person has attended a job interview
- Person has been offered a job
- Person has started a job (including self-employment)
- Person has now sustained employment (or self-employment) for at least three months
- Person has now sustained employment (or self-employment) for at least six months

APPENDIX II

Increasing offender employability: some key findings for reference

	No. cases in subset	No. found	%
<i>N.B. Sample was representative, except there were extra 'unemployed at commencement' cases</i>			
Feature of sample:			
<i>Frequency of unemployment at commencement in this sample</i>	739	550	74
<i>Frequency of female cases</i>	739	78	11
<i>Frequency of black or other cases</i>	739	77	10
Findings:			
Of female cases: frequency of unemployed on commence	78	51	65
Of black/other cases: frequency of unemployed on commence	77	52	68
Of unemployed on commence:		398	72
frequency of employed being significant	550		
frequency of early job start	550	70	13
Of unemployed, and no early job start:			
frequency of female cases	480	48	10
frequency of black + other cases	480	51	11
frequency of any inhibiting factors	480	379	79
frequency of alcohol/drugs problem	480	230	48
frequency of mental health disorder	480	29	6
frequency of chaotic lifestyle	480	75	16
frequency of main responsibility for childcare	480	15	3
frequency of accommodation problems	480	51	11
frequency of poor compliance with order/licence	480	82	17
frequency of other inhibiting factor	480	85	18
frequency of any EI	480	218	45
female: frequency of any EI	48	14	29
black/other: frequency of any EI	51	19	37
with alcohol/drugs problem: frequency of any EI	230	102	44
no EI: frequency of any EOs during supervision	262	54	21
no EI: frequency of any job starts during supervision	262	51	20
with EI: frequency of any EOs during supervision	218	132	61
with EI: frequency of any job starts in supervision	218	87	40
with EI, female: frequency of any EOs	14	8	57
with EI, female: frequency of any job starts	14	5	36
with EI, black/other: frequency of any EOs	19	9	47
with EI, black/other: frequency of any job starts	19	6	32
with EI: frequency of specialist assessment by probation service staff	218	64	29
Of the above sample: frequency of any job starts	64	26	41
with EI: frequency of specialist assessment by staff of another agency	218	59	27
Of the above sample: frequency of any job starts	59	26	44

(Total sample of terminated cases was from 11 probation areas in England, Wales & Northern Ireland)

APPENDIX III

Employment-related interventions attempted during supervision

Types of EI:	No. (out of 480)	%
Referral for a specialist assessment by a colleague within the probation service ⁴⁹	117	24.4
Referral for a specialist assessment by another agency ⁵⁰	91	19.0
Specialist assessment undertaken by a colleague within the probation service ⁵¹	67	14.0
Specialist assessment undertaken by another agency	60	12.5
Employment assessment undertaken by the supervising probation officer in person ⁵²	14	2.9
Employment assessment undertaken by the prison service ⁵³	6	1.3
Structured capability assessment undertaken ⁵⁴	8	1.7
Vocational training attempted ⁵⁵	51	10.6
Course of further or higher education attempted ⁵⁶	8	1.7
Remedial help/training attempted ⁵⁷	9	1.9
Training for 'world of work' attempted ⁵⁸	18	3.8
Training in job-search skills attempted ⁵⁹	19	4.0
Training in disclosure of precons ⁶⁰	3	0.6
Coaching ⁶¹	24	5.0
Any EI at all ⁶²	218	45.4

⁴⁹ Whether a referral is made to an in-service colleague or to another agency is almost always entirely determined by the arrangements established by the individual probation service – there is very rarely any individual officer choice about referral. The split between these first two figures reflects the fairly even split between services with in-service arrangements and services with a purchasing arrangement for these assessments. It is worth noting that a total of 43 percent of all cases was referred for a specialist employment assessment, reflecting its growing recognition as a mainstream part of what might be termed 'normal' probation service supervision.

⁵⁰ See preceding footnote.

⁵¹ It is evident that there is a big difference between referring a case for a specialist assessment and the assessment actually being undertaken. In all these cases there was evidence in the file of the referral actually being made. However, many offenders simply do not keep the appointments made for them. The question of probation officers not putting into action the referrals they have planned is a separate subject in chapter four.

⁵² It was the author's judgement that determined whether or not a case qualified for this category. Only where there was clear evidence that the supervising officer had had a structured discussion with the offender, **and** that this had led to further intervention without going through another specialist assessment, did it qualify.

⁵³ It is difficult to know to what extent this figure indicates the prevalence of employment assessments undertaken by the prison service. Through-care cases were only a minority of this sample, and it is possible that for a variety of reasons there is under-recording of this prison-based work in probation service files.

⁵⁴ This is a psychometric test of someone's potential skills and abilities (not their attitudes).

⁵⁵ 17 (3.5 percent) cases actually completed such training; 10 (2.1 percent) of the cases started but did not finish it, and in 24 (5.0 percent) cases the planned course or programme was not in the end actually started for a variety of reasons.

⁵⁶ Three cases completed such a course; three of the cases started but did not finish it, and in two cases the planned course was not in the end started for a variety of reasons.

⁵⁷ This was usually training in basic literacy or numeracy. Three cases completed such help or training; two of the cases started but did not finish it, and in four cases the planned course was not in the end started for a variety of reasons.

⁵⁸ 'Training for Work' is an example of such a course in workplace skills. Five cases completed such a course; eight of the cases started but did not finish it, and in five cases the planned course was not in the end started for a variety of reasons.

⁵⁹ Job clubs, or job-search skills courses, are periodically run in prisons, probation offices, employment offices etc. Three cases completed such a course; 10 of the cases started but did not finish it, and in six cases the planned course was not in the end started for a variety of reasons.

⁶⁰ Only a formal record of a structured discussion or course on the subject of how to discuss one's criminal record with a prospective employer was counted here, and it rarely appeared in probation officers' case records.

⁶¹ 'Coaching' was where there was evidence that the offender was receiving regular discussions reviewing his or her job-search, education or work experiences, with ideas and encouragement being offered so that steady improvement could be made. In 17 cases this was being done by the supervising probation officer in person, in seven cases by a specialist probation service worker, in one case by another worker, and in one case by a volunteer. (This total exceeds the given total of 24 because some cases had coaching from more than one person.)

⁶² The figure for 'Any EI' is less than the total of the separate EIs because many cases had more than one EI.