

Running on the treadmill: Practitioner experiences of mass supervision

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Abstract

This article explores the impacts that the addition of individuals serving short sentences has had on daily practice and working culture for probation workers. These practitioner perspectives are explored through the lens of ‘mass supervision’, providing a new insight into the harms and implications for its inherent deskilling qualities and constraints. This empirical research underlines three main themes related to the harms caused by mass supervision: firstly, that it inhibits innovative practice; secondly, that it necessitates a more limited model of supervision that undermines practitioner autonomy and the reach and scope of the supervisory relationship; and thirdly, that mass supervision corrodes the values of probation staff, leaving many experienced practitioners struggling ethically, practically and emotionally. The experience of mass supervision is compared to a treadmill by several practitioners and employed as a metaphor to analyse practice in the confines of mass supervision as generic, monotonous and relentless.

Keywords

resettlement, short sentences, The Offender Rehabilitation Act, the treadmill, Transforming Rehabilitation, mass supervision

Introduction

Introduced as a central part of the *Transforming Rehabilitation* (TR) reforms,¹ the Offender Rehabilitation Act (ORA) 2014 extended post-release supervision in England and

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Wales to the short sentence population; a cohort who have historically been neglected in penal discourse.² Previous research on the short sentence cohort outlines this group as particularly complex, often entailing the most multi-systemic needs in the system, with the highest rates of re-offending (Trebilcock, 2011). However, previous to the ORA 2014 reforms, individuals serving a short sentence were released unconditionally with no statutory probation involvement. This was primarily because the offences committed by the short sentence cohort were often labelled as ‘petty-persistent’ low-level acquisitive crime, and resources have predominately been reserved for high risk of harm and public protection cases. This often left the short sentence cohort in a cycle of ‘revolving door’ short prison sentences, termed serving ‘life by instalments’ (Armstrong and Weaver, 2013).

The ORA 2014 reforms have sought to address this issue, and mean that upon release from custody, individuals subject to a short sentence now serve a period on licence,³ followed by a ‘top up’ period of post-sentence supervision, ensuring 12-months supervision in the community⁴ (Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 2013). A further feature of the TR reforms involved using the logic of risk to split the previously unified probation service into two separate organisations. Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) consisted of a mixed-market of private contractors. They were made responsible for an estimated 200,000 low and medium risk individuals throughout England and Wales. Work undertaken by CRCs was measured via a payment-by-results model, which only paid on their ability to meet pre-prescribed targets of lowering re-offending. The National Probation Service (NPS) remained as a public sector organisation and became responsible for the remaining high-risk individuals, as well as other core functions including court work, parole reports and pre-sentence reports. The majority of individuals subject to the ORA 2014 have been supervised by community rehabilitation companies (CRCs), adding an additional 45,000 individuals onto the caseloads of these practitioners (MoJ, 2014b).

A recent HM Inspectorate of Probation thematic report on staff workloads (HMI Probation, 2021), noted that TR has been a key driver in relation to changes in caseloads, and specifically referenced how the ORA 2014 has led to a considerable increase in the number of service users managed, rising by over 74% since its introduction. The report notes the pressures and stresses this has placed on staff and has subsequently led to lower quality work undertaken – meaning staff were often unable to provide meaningful support and engagement and meet the aims of public protection and rehabilitation. This article seeks to understand the impacts that the ORA 2014 has had on probation practice, with a particular focus on the perspective of frontline CRC practitioners.

These frontline perspectives will be explored through the lens of ‘mass probation’ (Phelps, 2013), or ‘mass supervision’ (Robinson et al., 2013) – scholarly work that is concerned with the continued reach and expansion of probation supervision into the lives of individuals subject to this unique form of penal control. Work on mass supervision has attracted academic interest in Europe in recent years (Aebi et al., 2015; McNeill and Beyens, 2013) and the ‘net widening’ (Cohen, 1985) effects of the expansion of penal supervision.⁸ McNeill’s (2018) recent work on *making sense of mass supervision*, demonstrates several ways in which we should interrogate mass supervision, this includes: its scale and distribution; the consequences of the burdens of mass supervision on

its subjects; and how mass supervision can cause ‘aggregation’ and a failure to individualise people subject to punishment, leading to individuals becoming processed masses. It is this latter interpretation of mass supervision that this article seeks to explore in more depth. Focused from a practitioner perspective, this article will consider the harms caused by mass probation, expanding our understanding of the implications this has for practice.

After introducing the methods for this empirical study, the findings section will then outline three harms caused by mass supervision. Firstly, how initial attempts of innovative practice at the CRC were undermined by the introduction of the short sentence cohort onto staff caseloads. Practitioners found working with individuals subject to short sentences as unappealing; they often entailed the most needs, yet their mass numbers meant there was a lack of resources and time to provide meaningful support for this group. Secondly, in place of a more innovative programme of support, practitioners enacted a simplified and highly regimented form of practice, narrowing the role and scope of the probation worker role. Thirdly, mass supervision constrains the rehabilitative ethos and values that experienced practitioners had embodied and was likened to a ‘treadmill’; a relentless, yet monotonous experience of everyday practice. These experiences are characterised here as a significant challenge to the durable values, organisational identity and working culture of probation practice. This article will conclude by discussing the implications for future practice in the newly reunified probation service. Firstly, a brief discussion below explores what these enduring values are, and how they have been eroded by an entrenched ‘managerial continuum’ (Tidmarsh, 2021) in probation practice.

Exploring the values of the probation service

There have been extensive contemporary contributions to research regarding the organisational culture of the probation service (see e.g.: Deering, 2016; Grant, 2016; Mawby and Worrall, 2013). These findings suggest that although there is no singular monolithic culture, there is a shared set of intrinsic values within probation. These values are primarily based on an approach to practice that has a principled rehabilitative ethos that is committed to social justice (Canton and Dominey, 2018), and promotes desistance through building positive professional relationships (Mawby and Worrall, 2013). This has helped give the probation officer role a distinct sense of cultural capital that has remained durable over many years (Grant, 2016).

Promoting practitioner skills have also been a central part of maintaining and enhancing the organisational culture of probation. Raynor and Vanstone’s (2018) review of the use of skills in probation practice provides a helpful analysis of their central value in historical and contemporary probation, demonstrating that effective supervision requires the probation worker to utilise an array of therapeutic and motivational tools. This includes the use of ‘core correctional practice’ (Dowden and Andrews, 2004) that involves problem-solving and building positive relationships, alongside pro-social modelling skills (Trotter, 2006). It also involves using skills such as empathy and motivational interviewing (Porporino and Fabiano, 2007). Rex (1999) emphasises an approach that is active and participatory and the practitioner shows personal and professional commitment,

which is realised through a meaningful, understanding, respectful and collaborative relationship. The principles of desistance (Maruna et al., 2004) are also encouraged in probation practice through the use of a strengths-based approach, this involves helping to develop the individual's capacities. More recently, Anderson (2016) advocates for a trauma-informed approach, where the probation worker 'bears witness' to the service users' lived experience. These array of skills should be taught to probation workers in their training, which should be viewed an important resource to enhance the professional status of the service (Canton and Dominey, 2018). Summarising this growing evidence of the importance of skills for probation practice, Raynor and Vanstone (2018: 205) find that, 'people who are supervised by more skilful staff tend to re-offend less, and staff who are trained to be more skilful achieve better results than those who have not been trained'.

However, the multiple 'penal turns' of late modernity (Garland, 2001) have seen a gradual erosion of the probation skills base and practitioner autonomy. This can be traced through the restrictions on practitioner autonomy enforced through the eradication of voluntary casework and further erosion through the introduction of the National Standards framework (Goodman, 2012), to the pervasive risk assessment culture that was introduced into probation leading to the deskilling of professional staff (Fitzgibbon, 2007, 2008; Robinson, 2002, 2003). It further includes the increasingly centralised NOMS (National Offender Management Service) control (Robinson and Burnett, 2007), as well as the impact of technicizing and depersonalizing audit tools which have led to a more office-bound culture (Phillips, 2014). Phillips (2011) also emphasises the impact of managerialism, noting the role that top-down managerialist pressures and inflexible targets can play in modern probation practice. These pressures can take individualised decision making and autonomy out of the hands of practitioners, reducing their role into ensuring targets are hit.

Assessment tools have also become a dominating force within the contemporary probation field as a means of assessing risks and needs and have had a significant impact on working practices (Hannah-Moffat, 2005). These tools should not just be viewed as technical apparatus, but have had a deep cultural impact, that has altered professional outlooks and orientations and has contributed towards the erosion of professional discretion and have become a prevalent part of modern probation practice in England and Wales (Robinson, 2016). There are four risk categories that all offenders are assigned: very high, high, medium or low risk. Risk in this instance refers to *risk of harm*.⁵ Risk is primarily determined through an assessment tool OASys (the offender assessment system) which measures static, actuarial and dynamic risk factors. The 'Offender Management Model' implemented under NOMS in 2007, reinforced the central role of risk in determining the level of resources and support each individual received, with the idea that the higher the risk of harm one was deemed to inhabit, the more resources they would receive (Robinson, 2016). This model still forms part of accepted thinking today, demonstrating the structural role risk plays in the planning and organisation in modern probation practice.

The latest 'penal turn' of TR, has also used risk as a central logic to split the formally unified probation service. In-turn, this has caused considerable fragmentation between probation staff (Burke et al., 2017; Deering and Feilzer, 2015). Indeed, this has even led to

an unfair perception that the NPS held a more elite role, based on the respective risk levels each organisation was responsible for (Clare, 2015; Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). Burke et al.'s (2017) empirical research sought to understand how probation workers moving to the privatised CRC adapted to their changed circumstances. Their study underlines the sense of loss and liminality staff experienced as they adapted to their new realities as a fragmented 'probation diaspora' (Burke et al., 2017: 194) and have also led to shifts in occupational cultures. Their work found three emergent identities in CRC practitioners: firstly, 'pioneers' who welcomed a move to the private sector and saw it as an opportunity for innovative practice; secondly, 'guardians' who viewed change as an opportunity to build a new organisational culture that was still true to the traditions of probation culture; and thirdly, the 'marooned' who felt abandoned in the new CRC organisation and were struggling to adapt to their new identity and were often nostalgic about their former employer status.

This article will consider how experiences of 'mass supervision' have further influenced the perceptions of practitioners' organisational identities previously discussed by Burke et al. (2017), as well as highlighting the arbitrary logic of 'resource follows risk' and how this leads to a discrepancy between the level of need of the short sentence cohort and the often inadequate technical and routinized work that is available.

Methods

This research is based on the findings from one empirical chapter of a PhD. The central aim of the thesis was to explore how resettlement is enacted and experienced by practitioners and individuals serving short sentences in relation to the ORA 2014. The research was gathered using a case study approach (Creswell, 2013) with the specific case study area consisting of one 'local' category B prison⁶ and one CRC probation office based in England. This case study provides a time-bound snapshot of the TR reforms in one area at one particular point in time, so is not attempting to make wider generalisations to other CRCs. Indeed, there were various providers of probation services, with each provider having a different approach to practice.

Access to the case study area was firstly negotiated and approved by the NOMS National Research Committee, before the research officer for the specific CRC granted access. A gatekeeper from the CRC was assigned to the author and played an intrinsic role in gathering participants. Reliance on the gatekeeper for arranging suitable participants meant that they played a very powerful role in shaping the sampling of the research. However, the powerful control gatekeeper exercise when accessing a closed environment has been extensively noted by penal researchers (Reeves, 2010). Before fieldwork took place, ethical approval was gained from the university the thesis was supervised from.

In total for the thesis, 35 semi-structured interviews took place in the prison and the community, however, this paper draws from 9 interviews within the CRC probation office. This includes three probation officers and two probation service officers (PSOs),⁷ two third-sector practitioners involved in offender pathways, and two individuals who had middle management responsibilities for the CRC. Three participants identified as male and six as female; this approximately corresponds to the wider gender representation of

probation staff (Kirton and Guillaume, 2015). Five participants had been part of the probation service before TR and the implementation of the ORA 2014, whilst four participants had joined the service after the implementation of TR – meaning there was a range of experiences and perspectives regarding the ‘institutional memory’ (Grant, 2016) of the probation service.

These interviews took place during multiple site visits between June – September 2018. Alongside these interviews, observations took place of the ‘backstage’ environment of the main open-plan office where CRC practitioners spent most of their time (Phillips, 2014). This afforded the author the opportunity to talk informally with staff on their views and perspectives and observe their work. All interviews were undertaken and transcribed verbatim by the author, and lasted between 40 and 60 min. All participants signed consent forms to partake in the study, and were given anonymity to protect confidentiality – this anonymity extends to the identification of the particular CRC. All coding was completed manually, with data analysed using a three-stage grounded theory method (Strauss, 1987).

Findings

Mass supervision and the undermining of innovative practice. The MoJ promoted TR as an opportunity for renewed creativity and innovation, where CRCs would be free from the constraints of centralised top-down management, bureaucracy and report writing (MoJ, 2014a). This led to the hope that CRCs would have the most scope to undertake ‘edgework’ in practice (Burke and Collett, 2015). Worrall (2015) describes edgework as the opportunity for probation workers to put their skills to the test and have creative freedom in their supervisory relationships. One of the principal means of innovating probation work in the case study area involved re-organising the areas’ entire caseload (approximately 20,000 individuals) into five categories, with practitioners working within one of the five cohorts:

1. Women
2. Young Men (aged 18–24)
3. Adult Men (25–49)
4. Older Men (50+)
5. Mental Health

However, there were several failures regarding the cohort model. Principally, the inconsistency in caseloads between the different cohorts. The mental health cohort had a very small number of individuals (one business manager estimated less than 90 for the entire CRC), which barely justified its status as a separate category, whereas the adult male cohort became the most populous cohort. One CRC business manager estimated that contained within the adult male category, were:

About 70% of all service users. It just became this generic catch-all they got thrown into (CRC business manager).

The bulk of the total CRC caseload ended up in one cohort and the majority of this work was labelled as 'generic'. Frequently, it was those serving short sentences who would be penned into this large catch-all cohort. However, these were still service users that required a lot of resources, time and effort, but due to the large cohort these individuals were allocated to, there often was not sufficient time for the probation worker to build relationships or address all needs. This demonstrates the consequences that 'aggregation' (McNeill, 2018) can entail, as individuals subject to this cohort became an indivisible mass.

Furthermore, the cohort system reinforced the encultured thinking that 'resources follow risk', and demonstrates the arbitrary nature of how risk is quantified and has been used to divide probation work. principally as the needs of the short sentence population often did not translate into an identified high risk of harm, this could leave CRC practitioners to manage this population alone. Reflecting the views of other respondents, a probation officer explained how individuals subject to short sentences did not attract the additional support that higher-risk individuals might receive:

In general short sentence people tend to be more problematic than higher-risk people, you tend to do more work with them. With a higher risk person there tends to be more agencies you're working with. With the lower-risk people, they tend to have no job, no home, so there's a lot more practical work that you've got to do. (Probation officer).

The extent of the 'practical work' needed with this cohort presented as a particular challenge and contributed towards the difficulties probation workers faced in their supervision of individuals on short sentences. The multi-systemic issues that many individuals serving a short sentence presented with, labelled this cohort as particularly unique and challenging within the system, requiring unique levels of support in turn. However, simultaneously the short sentence was often the most common sentence on practitioners' caseloads, making them extraordinary in needs, yet ordinary in numbers. This was compounded by the lack of resources the CRC had to adequately address these needs, relegating the short sentence cohort as an undesirable figure of practice. Many probation workers outlined a perceived difference in approach to cases within the NPS and practice in the CRC, again drawing distinctions through the lens of risk, for example one officer noted:

It is a lot harder because NPS clients have access to a lot more resources. They have approved premises and there's a lot more planning in regards to their release. Because they often have to go through parole and because they're higher risk, people want plans to be in place. Whereas for our clients on shorter sentences, they don't necessarily get that, it's more like, 'ok you've done your 6 weeks, off you go' and that's it. (Probation officer).

Practitioners often distinguished the differences in attitude and approach to resettlement for individuals serving short sentences, from those serving longer sentences with the NPS. This perception was borne out of two distinct measurements in facilitating resettlement; resources and time. CRC practitioners held a view that NPS service users

retained more value in terms of resources, because they were assessed as higher risk of harm. This included specialist and dedicated planning pre-release, in order to mitigate risks in the community. However, practitioners felt that individuals serving short sentences did not receive the same level of support, despite their high re-offending levels, because of their lower risk of harm assessment and the sheer volumes within practitioner caseloads.

The longer sentences of NPS clients, also afforded these practitioners more time to form resettlement plans and to build a professional relationship. However, the brevity of the short sentence meant this was not a possibility and CRC practitioners complained of very limited timeframes to put resettlement plans into place.

This distinction further highlighted the presumed disparity between the CRC and NPS and meant practitioners were constrained in what they were able to achieve with these service users as the support and time was not available. This further contributed towards the devaluing of the work, the staff and the people being supervised.

In this context, working with individuals on short sentences, with their array of attendant needs, mass volumes and high rates of re-offending, exemplify the increasingly degraded 'dirty work' (Mawby and Worrall, 2013:8) (meaning work that is necessary for society, but is becoming devalued and viewed as unpleasant) of CRC practice in comparison to the high risk and high-value work of the NPS. Within this impaired and under-resourced practice, many serving short sentences were left to churn and recycle through practitioners' caseloads. Practitioners seemed unsure of how best to support these individuals and provide adequate resettlement support to stop the revolving door of re-offending, further demonstrating that risk does not always represent complexity in the work that is done with a service user, this was illustrated by one officer:

I've got one at the moment... Soon as he goes in, he comes out, soon as he comes out he's back in. He came out again last week and in less than a week he's back in again. That's because the licence period isn't long enough and there isn't much you can do on it. (Probation officer).

The exasperation of working with individuals serving short sentences and their relative unattractiveness as a type of sentence to effectively engage had also been realised on a wider level by the managerial team of the case study CRC. A partnership manager outlined the difficulties the CRC had in effectively managing this group, the uncertainty regarding what worked to reduce re-offending and the negative impact of the inability to achieve any tangible results in reductions in reconvictions:

This service user group has the highest and most prolific offender characteristic set, 60-70 previous offences sometimes. disproportionately most of the re-offending is coming from this group, which has been over and over through the prison revolving door and no one can ever really figure out what to do with them... I don't think any of these CRCs have really found their attempts at being innovative have been that fruitful. I think most CRCs are just trying to retract a little bit. (CRC partnership manager).

The inability to ‘figure out what to do’ regarding the engagement and management of the resettlement needs of short sentence individuals, resulted in a curtailment of the innovative approach previously envisioned for the CRC, with a return to a more prescriptive and bureaucratic system to manage the demands of mass supervision.

The retraction of innovative practice: adapting to the realities of the short sentence caseload and mass supervision

The realities of caseload numbers and the inherent difficulties of managing the short sentence cohort, meant that the ambitious plans for autonomous staff operating away from central government oversight was replaced with a more centrally accountable administrative system. The model that replaced it was reported by practitioners as having led to an overtly office-based and desk-bounded administrative staffing culture, ultimately serving to restrict practitioner autonomy. This system ensured that officers were primarily tasked with producing timely statistical inputs and ensuring all IT data systems were accurately maintained. These activities took precedence over meaningful engagement with service users.

One of the primary indicators which encapsulated the re-configuration of the practitioner role as administratively focused, was through the implementation of a planning and engagement system called plan, meet and record or PMR. This included: planning the meeting with the service user, meeting the service user and then recording the meeting. All three parts should have taken place within a 1 hour window to ensure practitioners time was used productively. The use of this system indicated a move towards efficiency as a priority in CRC practice. This further signifies the prevalence of entrenched managerialism in probation practice (Tidmarsh, 2021).

A consequence of the implementation of the PMR 1 hour window, was its restrictions upon the scope and remit of the supervisory relationship, limiting it to a highly regimented and transactional practice, which rarely provided opportunities to explore anything beyond signposting to address immediate practical problems. This resulted in relegating the importance and centrality of supervision within probation practice and ensured supervision became a more clinical undertaking. For example a PSO provided an overview of what supervision sessions usually consisted of with her service users and what the aims and scope of these sessions were:

See where they are, see if they’ve had their housing sorted out, see if they’ve had their benefits sorted out, see if there’s issues with their accommodation, see if they are attending their appointments with the drugs agency and they are engaging. (Probation service officer).

Many of the individuals interviewed also shared similar experiences of supervision practice. This has often left the relational aspect of supervision to be replaced with a more distant experience, where the practitioner operated a series of pulleys and levers to ensure the service user was redirected towards the most appropriate agency. By concentrating on practical issues and breaking resettlement down into a disparate set of needs to be met, important elements of skilled practice, such as the motivational and therapeutic aspects of

supervision became neglected. These are aspects that [Maguire and Raynor \(2017\)](#) contend are crucial for effective resettlement.

The priorities of the supervising officer could shift away from facilitating meaningful and long term change, towards fulfilling a far more modest set of administrative inputs and processes, ensuring the basic management of the case. This altered supervision to a means to an end to meet central MoJ targets. The signposting system also limited the role of the practitioner, making their former position as an agent of change redundant and re-configured their role into a broker and facilitator that redirected the service user to the most appropriate resettlement expert. This served to foster a sense of detachment between the service user and practitioner, which did not provide a positive grounding for a meaningful therapeutic relationship. This further demonstrates inherent harms caused by the ‘aggregation’ of mass supervision ([McNeill, 2018](#)), which narrows and reduces the role of the probation worker and the importance of the supervisory relationship.

It is within this context that PSOs became a more central part of CRC practice. [Canton and Dominey \(2018: 273\)](#) describe PSOs as ‘paraprofessionals’ who do not have the training and qualifications or hold the same responsibilities as probation officers. In the case study office, TR also oversaw a realignment of job roles and the case administrator role was abolished; these former administrators were retained as PSOs. This reflected the new realities and shifting priorities of CRC practice, away from the relational aspects of engagement and towards a tightly constricted and standardised processing model of management. It is within this model that the former case administrator staff were perceived as best placed to efficiently perform these new core requirements. Several practitioners outlined concerns regarding the proficiency of some of the new PSOs. Reflecting this, a business manager outlined the lack of relational and supervisory skills that the former administration staff possessed:

They had 2 weeks of training and that's it, they hadn't had any training as far as the essential skills of probation. The training is just the bare minimum and they're asked to adhere to these standards, these timescales. They wanted staff to be managers of stuff, rather than engaging service users because that's just so much more time consuming. (CRC business manager).

Here, training was focused on the basic procedures of managing cases and instilling the importance of timescales and standards, reflecting the back to basics core priorities of the case study CRC. [Canton and Dominey \(2018\)](#) assert that probation training can serve to sustain and transmit probation organisational culture. However, the emerging administrative top-down culture of the case study CRC no longer required the training of practitioners to be skilled in the ethos of engagement and rehabilitation. This was because it was not a core requirement of the CRC practice. This could create a culture of practitioners less willing (or able) to be flexible in their approach or focused on building a professional relationship.

Many practitioners, particularly those with extensive experience pre-TR, struggled to adapt to the new realities of practice in the CRC. For these experienced officers, this caused tension between personal values and the organisational imperatives of the restrictive CRC framework. Numerous officers in the case study CRC articulated a struggle

to maintain a way of working which was consistent with a set of values and beliefs centred on rehabilitation and engagement. These values often seemed incompatible with the new administrative and technical imperatives of mass supervision. Robinson (2003) refers to this process as ‘technical proleterianization’ which relates to the practitioners loss of control over the labour process and prescribed and routine practices that are imposed on probation workers.

The struggle of maintaining ‘old school’ probation values, within the new realities of mass supervision. Many practitioners articulated a concern that the operational imperatives of the CRC, including the extensive caseloads of officers and the resulting data inputting administrative processes, seriously curtailed the ideals of the therapeutic principles of supervision. Instead, there was an expectation to undertake tick-box work and appointments were formulated into a conveyer-belt of continuous limited check-in appointments in order to meet the large volumes of cases that practitioners were tasked to supervise. A business manager explained how this operated in practice:

We’re forced into a model now of everyone gets seen for 15 minutes, then the next one, then the next one. That’s because of the volumes we have. We had to reduce staff and so everybody has huge cases now and nobody has time for anything else beyond tick-boxing. Even though a lot want to do more of the therapeutic engagement stuff, actually working with someone to help change their lives. That’s why a lot of them got into it in the first place. (CRC business manager).

The realities of mass supervision necessitate a conveyer-belt model of case management which had severely limited and standardised supervision into a one size fits all framework. Within this model, probation practitioners with experience pre-TR struggled to adapt to these new realities and faced considerable barriers to maintaining an ethos conducive to their values and beliefs. Experienced officers outlined some of these challenges, as the current conditions of CRC practice enforced limitations within which practitioners must conform in order to operate. For one officer, this meant limiting the scope of probation appointments, which he worried would harm the value of supervision and inhibit trust and communication with the service users on his caseload:

I used to see everyone for an hour. Because that was the ethos of how you work with them. But now, it’s just not possible. It’s hard for me and a lot of colleagues to change the way we work. My training was about rehabilitation and now you’re telling me I’ve got to work differently. (Probation officer).

Other experienced practitioners in the case study CRC, including a PSO with over 14 years’ experience, also appeared to struggle with this conflict between the new practice model and the value base of traditional probation training. The PSO articulated a struggle where the day-to-day realities of CRC practice conflicted with his value base and even inhibited his motivations for the job:

You've got certain targets that you need to meet. They say on one hand to spend less time with the service user, but also you still need to produce quality work and it's just not possible. I'm from the old school where I feel like I need to do quality work with people. These are people's lives we're dealing with. I want to go home in the evening and say 'you know what, I did something good'. (Probation service officer).

Several experienced practitioners outlined a struggle to make practice meaningful and fulfilling. They felt restricted in their ability to affect change and this led in some instances to dissatisfaction with the job. This struggle existed in a system of practice where service users' needs were secondary to practice imperatives. Their realities and issues were subsequently reduced to a series of needs identified in tick-box risk assessments, which the practitioner monitored and managed in 15 min check-in sessions and then portioned these issues off to an appropriate expert. This indicates that the aggregating features of mass supervision frustrated and dissatisfied these experienced probation workers and demonstrates that there is a burden felt not just by service users, but also the practitioners who are responsible for their supervision. Fenton (2015: 1415) in her study of criminal justice social workers in Scotland refers to this as 'ethical stress', which is generated by the inability of workers to base their practice on social work values.

The relational value of supervision was clearly still central to several practitioners practice and one officer referred to himself as 'old school' probation, viewing probation practice as a vocation that placed importance on the individual and making a positive change. In this respect, these practitioners' experiences and value base were in line with what Burke et al. (2017) term the 'marooned'. However, increasingly the case study CRC leaves limited space for probation workers who exuded 'old school' probation values. Instead, the realities of mass supervision are more predisposed towards the more pragmatic and adaptable individuals who were more office-bound, comfortable with ICT systems dominating their working practice and ambivalent about offender engagement. It was these individuals that better fit the needs and requirements of mass supervision.

In this context, 'old school' probation values and practices were struggling to survive and experienced officers felt uncomfortable in adapting to this new culture of practice, as it conflicted with their values. This resulted in experienced practitioners becoming part of a marginalised 'probation diaspora' (Burke et al., 2017: 194) who were expected to conform and adapt to these new realities. This ongoing struggle took place against the more adaptable probation practitioners who had not been exposed to probation practice pre-TR and were comfortable operating within the existing managerialist target culture.

Running on the treadmill: Conceptualising mass supervision

Commenting on the effects of a target-based culture on CRC practice, then HM Chief Inspector of Probation, Dame Glenys Stacey (2019: 3) stated that 'CRCs are understandably focused on meeting those transaction-based targets. They are kept very busy, doing that. Many are running to keep still. Running on the treadmill'. The metaphor of 'the treadmill' had also been used by various practitioners in the case study area to describe the nature of their work.

A conventional definition of a treadmill would describe it as a machine powered by a conveyer-belt, commonly used to run, walk or climb at a controlled and measured pace whilst staying in the same place. Unlike conventional running, this activity lacks any conventional end-point. It is often critiqued as a monotonous and generic activity not requiring any particular skill. The use of the treadmill also takes place in an individualised ‘atomised space’, where the human is reduced to ‘machinelike processes’ (Greif, 2016: 360). However, in this context, the treadmill is used here as a fitting metaphor to identify the relentless, yet monotonous and often repetitive nature of mass supervision. The treadmill encompasses the conveyer-belt of repetitive assessments, standardisations and target hitting data-inputs. It is used to explain the frustrations of constantly working to keep up, but not achieving any significant progress or tangible end-result from the often exhaustive work. The treadmill metaphor helps to describe the atomised nature of supervision practice, which has become disconnected from its intended relational and therapeutic meaning, to become a less skilled practice. The treadmill also denotes the constraints placed on practitioners, where practice was no longer allowed to deviate from the pre-determined path laid out in front of them. Finally, the treadmill represents the increasingly generic and de-skilled nature of the job.

A probation officer used the treadmill metaphor as a way to describe the almost frantic nature of her daily practice, constantly working to keep up, but feeling like she was not able to undertake any meaningful work or achieve any tangible outcomes. This could be a frustrating and often futile experience:

I'm trying to do everything on a treadmill. They're just in and out and it can be frustrating as you can't do any meaningful work with those that might need it. Those with the shorter sentences you're always on the treadmill - if they want someone met at the gate, if they need an appointment and support for housing if they need their benefits started. You're constantly on the go of trying to make sure each person sees everyone that they need to see, whether it means anything to them or not. (Probation officer).

For many practitioners work was paradoxically generic and de-skilled, as it was simultaneously exhaustive and relentless. In this respect, it was the extensive needs of individuals serving short sentences, combined with the external pressures of high volume caseloads and meeting targets, which inhibited and devalued CRC practice into a treadmill. Practitioners were rarely able to identify any positive achievements or end-results with the short sentence cohort, as the limited time and space did not allow for creative or meaningful skilled work, set outside of the limited managerialist parameters and pressures. Exemplifying the views of other practitioners, a PSO outlined her experiences of running on the treadmill. She captured the lack of autonomy and agency in being able to provide meaningful support for individuals serving short sentences. Instead, the relentless levels of work leave the PSO just trying to keep up with her workload:

When it comes to really short-term sentences, we don't have time. We have really big caseloads, we've got to get around everyone...When you think you've cleared it, a whole new heap comes on, it's just continuous.(cracknell, 2018) (Probation service officer).

Discussion: The future of probation practice in the era of mass supervision; How do we get off the treadmill

This article has sought to make an empirical contribution to our understanding of ‘mass supervision’ and how its impacts reach beyond the type of supervision that service users are receiving, but also directly effects probation workers, who suffer ethically, practically and emotionally from a relentless persistence to do more with less. This research has also highlighted a discrepancy between the level of need and complexity of the short sentence cohort, and the inadequate time and resources practitioners are provided to undertake effective work with this group. The inability to provide support beyond routinized and technical work, has serious detrimental consequences. Indeed, the Probation Inspectorate (HMI Probation, 2020) found that 40% of serious further offences came from CRC service users. This demonstrates the significance of this work and the dangers of not properly equipping staff with the time and space to build relationships with people to protect the public, when scaling up supervision to a new group.

Returning again to McNeill’s (2018) understanding of mass supervision and aggregation, this research underlines the consequences for the mass processing of individuals, demonstrating that alongside curtailing innovation and limiting the probation worker role, it further corrodes the values of many officers. This can have serious negative outcomes to the service, and serves to undermine public protection and rehabilitation.

This article focuses on practice in one probation area, at one particular point of time. As such, further research is required in order to develop a national picture of what may be occurring at the frontline in other areas. However, empirical research on TR demonstrates an emerging pattern of considerable constraints on effective practice in multiple areas of modern probation. This includes the ‘relentless’ nature of high-risk work in the NPS (Phillips et al., 2016); the increased growth of standardised office-based work in the CRC (Tidmarsh, 2021); the ‘McDonaldization’ of court-based work (Robinson, 2017); the challenges to supervision practice (Dominey, 2019; Robinson and Dominey, 2019); how payment-by-results has centralised practice, inhibited practitioner autonomy and innovation and entrenched a ‘box-ticking’ culture (Tidmarsh, 2020); and an interlinking set of work-based harms caused by TR and the wider conditions of austerity (Walker et al., 2019). Collectively, these findings suggest that the impacts of ‘mass supervision’ became a structural issue for probation practice during TR, and that the Government should be held accountable if staff are not provided the means to provide meaningful and effective support.

The recent reunification of the probation service provides a unique opportunity to re-imagine probation practice into a framework that places the relational aspects of probation as central to practice. The recent HMPPS, *Target Operating Model for Probation Services in England and Wales* (2021) outlines three ways that could potentially mitigate the harms of mass supervision: the ‘probation workforce programme’; the ‘short sentence function’ and a ‘national culture implementation plan’.

Firstly, a ‘probation workforce programme’ has been implemented, with plans to recruit an additional 1000 new probation officers. A central aim of this programme is to bring caseloads down by 20% (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2021) to ensure

officers across the service have sustainable caseloads. However, it will take time and resources to recruit and train these new officers, so it will certainly not be an instant solution. Indeed, it is estimated that it will take until 2023 to reach this aim, and initial caseload allocations in the newly reunified service have been described as ‘enormous and unworkable’ (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2021: 35). Furthermore, it is important that when these new staff are recruited, that they are properly supported in order to help retention. To address this a peer support programme is being implemented but does not appear to be fully utilised yet (Ibid).

Secondly, the new operating model has also designed a specialist ‘short sentence function’, where each probation region will have a dedicated team that works with individuals serving sentences of 10 months or less. These teams promise to promote a way of working that values intensive community work, alongside a flexible and responsive approach and building a trusting relationship (Insights, 2021). Notwithstanding the difficulties of achieving this with an inherently complex and challenging group – often distrustful of probation services (Trebilcock, 2011), it is important that the short sentence teams do not become a generic catch-all as we saw in the case study area, and that the practitioners who work within these teams are provided with the time, space and skills to work effectively with individuals subject to short sentences.

Thirdly, the model outlines a ‘national culture implementation plan’, which aims to ensure concerns around the fractured relations between CRC and NPS staff caused by TR are addressed. The model highlights professionalism as a central theme in staff development and seeks to implement Professional Standards alongside a professional register framework of probation practice, in order to safeguard these standards. The model also promotes a new integrated programme of training – however, it does not specify if staff who are migrating from CRCs – particularly those with no practice experience pre-TR – will receive adequate training to ensure they can work with a wider variety of clients.

Although these reforms should be viewed with cautious optimism as a means to promote the probation value base, it remains to be seen if this alone will be enough to help practitioners to step off the treadmill. Indeed, the most important factor for a sustainable probation service is to now provide a period of sustainability for the service after the numerous penal turns it has faced, and provide practitioners with the space, time and skills to provide meaningful change to the individuals they supervise.

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Notes

1. A full analysis of the TR reforms is not provided here. Please see [Cracknell and Trebilcock \(2020\)](#) for an overview of the rise and demise of TR.
2. A short sentence is a prison sentence of less than 12 months. Please see [Maguire and Raynor \(2017\)](#) for an overview of previous attempts to reform short sentences in England and Wales.
3. Being on licence means that there are a set of conditions prisoners must follow when they are released from prison whilst serving the remainder of their sentence in the community. A probation worker will supervise an individual in the community, in order to ensure a person is complying with their licence conditions. A person can be returned to custody if they are deemed to have broken these conditions.
4. See [Cracknell \(2020\)](#) for a critique of post-sentence supervision.
5. A working definition of risk of harm in probation practice is 'A risk which is life-threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible.' ([HMPPS, 2020: 4](#)). A key element in measuring risk of harm is the *imminence* of the harm occurring.
6. In England and Wales, there are four security categories of prison: A, B, C and D, with A as the highest level of security and D the lowest. Category B prisons are often referred to as 'local' prisons, as they are typically based close to a court, and it is the first prison individuals are allocated to after their sentence.
7. A PSO is a probation worker who does not hold a probation qualification. PSO's still have caseloads and supervise individuals, but typically have less responsibilities.
8. Please see [Cracknell \(2018\)](#) for commentary on the ORA and its net widening capacities. Please also see [Cracknell \(2021\)](#) for recent empirical research on how service users experienced this net widening in reality.

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