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Peer mentoring in the criminal justice system

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CLiNKS
Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

About the author

Dr Gillian Buck is a senior lecturer in Social Work at the University of Chester. A qualified social worker with over ten years' frontline experience, she spent most of her career as a social worker in the Youth Offending Service. She has published extensively and is widely recognised as the UK's foremost expert on peer mentoring in the criminal justice system. She also volunteers on the advisory board of a not-for-profit peer mentoring organisation.

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Why read this evidence review?

This evidence review provides an in-depth look at peer mentoring in the criminal justice system. Peer mentoring involves community members, often with lived experience of criminal justice, working or volunteering in helping relationships and is now integral to the delivery of most services in the criminal justice system.

Dr. Gill Buck, Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Chester, reviews the current evidence-base – to which she is an important contributor – and covers a number of key issues:

How peer mentoring can:

- Help people to leave crime behind
- Connect them with services and employment opportunities
- Facilitate consciousness raising and collective system-reform efforts
- The barriers to effective peer mentoring and how to plan for and minimise these.

She also reviews the effectiveness of peer mentoring in promoting desistance to help voluntary organisations who are required to evidence reductions in reoffending.

Introduction

The voluntary sector has long been at the forefront of developing and delivering peer mentoring as an approach within criminal justice (see for example St Giles Trust; Princes Trust, Mosaic; Prisoners' Education Trust; Sacro).

Peer mentoring involves community members, often with lived experience of criminal justice, working or volunteering in helping relationships in the criminal justice system. It is now widely used in the UK, with peer mentors making up as many as 92% of criminal justice mentors in parts of England (Willoughby et al., 2013: 7).

Practice can differ depending on the setting, but often includes one-to-one sessions, informal and formal group activities and/or informal leisure activities (e.g. shopping, meeting for coffee, going to the gym). During the Covid-19 pandemic, some services have adapted to provide online support sessions or outdoor walks (see, for example, Community Led Initiatives).

This short review of evidence will consider how peer mentoring can help people to leave crime behind, connect them with services and employment opportunities and perhaps even facilitate consciousness raising and collective system-reform efforts. I will also briefly consider some barriers that can be met, in the hope they can be planned for and minimised.

Moving away from crime

I begin with a focus on 'desistance' (or leaving crime behind), not because this is the most important feature of mentoring, as I hope will become clear, but because voluntary organisations are often called to evidence reductions in reoffending to their funders or may indeed be in agreements where they are paid by achieving such 'results' (Albertson & Fox, 2018). There are indications that peer mentoring can reduce reoffending (Sells et al., 2020; The Social Innovation Partnership, 2012; Frontier Economics, 2009), possibly because mentors can inspire people (Buck, 2017), helping them to believe that personal change is possible and desirable (Kidd, 2011).

Mentors can act as inspirational role models who offer their lived example in prison (Nixon, 2020), community settings (Buck, 2017; Portillo, Goldberg & Taxman, 2017) and when working with young people (Creaney, 2020). Peer mentors can encourage self-confidence and hope for the future (Lopez-Humphreys & Teater, 2020; Barrenger et al., 2019) by employing care, empathy and manageable goals (Buck, 2019). They can also reduce feelings of isolation and increase feelings of self-worth and self-sufficiency (Lenkens et al., 2019; Pollack, 2004). These are important because leaving crime behind often involves having hope for the future and a sense of self-belief (Zdun, 2011; Maruna, 2001). Peer mentors can help people to see themselves in new ways and assist them to imagine lives away from criminality, given they offer a blueprint for prosocial roles (Lopez-Humphreys & Teater, 2020; Rumgay, 2004) and offer encouragement as steps are taken (Buck, 2020). They also often tolerate slip ups or mistakes as people make efforts to change (Buck, 2018). This works with, not against a 'zig-zag' desistance process which, like recovery from addiction, tends to be gradual rather than sudden (Farrall, 2013).

Desisting from crime can be terrifying and difficult, yet peer mentoring can reduce people's fears by evidencing that change is possible. Leaving a criminal lifestyle can be physically dangerous, financially costly, and emotionally isolating (Buck, 2019). Because of this – and the prevalence of (past) trauma in many criminalised people's lives – mentees often need to talk about and process suffering and grief. Peer mentors can encourage people to talk, given they have often survived similar experiences and are seen to 'genuinely care' (Buck, 2018).

There is often a view amongst practitioners and people using services that people need to be ready to change in order to benefit from peer mentoring and some coordinators prioritise services for those at this stage. There is a fear that including people who are not 'ready' can be detrimental to the mentees' impression of mentoring, and demotivating for mentors. However, motivation to change often arises when people feel confident change is possible (Worrall and Gelsthorpe, 2009). Indeed, there is some evidence that determination to change can be influenced by role models, who inspire and sustain a desire through their lived example (Buck, 2017).

One way of offering inspiration to those not consciously ready to change, without having a negative impact on perceptions of mentoring or volunteer motivation, is to offer peer led groups with a specific focus (e.g. sport, family life, recovery). Role models can still then be visible and available, without such a close one-to-one focus if this is not what people feel ready for.

A bridge to engagement and employment

Duvnjak and collagues (2021) studied how lived experiences may assist the helping process. They identified that workers with stigmatised identities (e.g. ex-prisoner; substance user) draw on 'insider knowledge' to create more equal power dynamics and higher levels of trust and openness within the helping relationship. As trust is built, peer mentors can be successful at connecting people to other services and programmes. Reingle Gonzalez et al. (2019) for example, found that 'peer' re-entry specialists assisted mentees to seek support for substance use and mental health conditions, housing and employment.

Peer mentors in health settings have also been found to help women to navigate health and social services during the transition from prison to community, which was critical to promoting health and well-being (McLeod et al., 2020), and mentors can be particularly successful in reintegrating "young people into education, training and the community" (Finnegan et al., 2010: 10). In terms of compliance with court orders, a UK inspection of resettlement services highlighted that mentoring facilitates "a greater level of cooperation with supervision than anticipated" (HMIP, 2016: 45), whilst peer mentors in the USA were also found to provide an important link between court workgroups and justice-involved military veterans (Jalain & Grossi, 2020).

Volunteering also offers peer mentors themselves (who are often excluded from employment due to criminal histories) a practical opportunity to prove themselves, gain new skills and in some cases move in to paid employment. As they make this transition, mentors make visible the positive potential of people with criminal histories, creating a stronger sense of hope among their rehabilitation colleagues and sometimes even challenging stereotypes and fears held by the wider community (see Buck, 2020; Duvnjak et al., 2021).

Working toward reform

In addition to the functional and inter-personal benefits outlined above, all of which have contributed to the popularity of peer mentoring, there are some less noted, but important effects to consider. For example, those involved with peer mentoring also often highlight flaws within the criminal justice system and undertake activities focused on reform. This includes publishing written work, contributing to conferences, and raising awareness of the experience of marginalised groups through public talks or professional networking, aiming to improve 'the system' from within (Buck, 2020). In these ways, those involved with peer mentoring critically question expertise and power in justice systems and strive for structural changes, which they see as needed for a fairer society (Buck, 2019). However, it is also argued that there are limitations to what such activity can achieve:

Peer work can aid in improving conditions in the short term… but in prison and the community, user involvement in service delivery is still focused on service delivery improvement. As such, user involvement can act to legitimise and assimilate critics into the existing system… 'User involvement' rarely addresses or educates prisoners about the wider structural issues which intersect with prison experiences. Therefore, in terms of shifting systems they do very little, but what they can do is offer a way in for people to activate lived experience and start to harness an energy/ appetite for change (Harriott, in Buck et al., 2020: 287).

A possible response to this bind is to work toward movement building or bringing together disparate actors for a common cause. Much like was seen in the Civil Rights movement or 'recovery movements' (Maruna, 2017), this involves identifying activists and leaders in marginalised communities and supporting allies from other sectors (e.g. the voluntary sector, academia), who can work toward a collective agenda (Buck et al., 2020). This would enable coproduction that sets rather than responds to the policy agenda (Buck et al., 2020), whilst also highlighting some of the structural obstacles to leaving crime behind and the macro-social changes necessary (Maruna, 2017). Voluntary sector organisations (particularly infrastructure organisations such as Clinks) are ideally placed to 'broker' such collective agendas by diffusing different ways of thinking and practising and establishing and supporting connections (Tomczak & Buck, 2019).

Overcoming problems

Whilst peer mentoring can be a powerful tool for inspiring and supporting individual change, challenging stereotypes, providing opportunities and occasionally providing a forum for consciousness raising and collective social action, there are also some challenges to consider to ensure services are as fair, safe and effective as possible.

Firstly, the criminal justice system is not always aligned with the values of mentoring. Hucklesby & Wincup (2014) found that punitive environments focused upon punishment and risk can cause mentoring to depart from core principles and values, extending the coercive reach of the criminal justice system. This may include, for example, mentors being asked to provide information to inform probation management plans or even information which could result in a person being returned in breach of a court order (Buck, 2020: 178). Such pressures can move mentors away from a person-centred, humanistic approach toward one of surveillance and management. Peer mentors themselves can also sometimes be blocked from working in criminal justice settings due to criminal histories (Buck, 2014) or met with objections from their peers who occasionally question their 'readiness' to help (Buck, 2020: 111).

Peer mentors working in prisons and through-the-gate services face challenges specific to the environment, including a high reliance on the support of prison staff (Buck & Jaffe, 2011) and prisoners being transferred frequently or at short notice (Clinks and MBF, 2012). HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2019: 7) recently revealed

that jails are "plagued by drugs, violence, appalling living conditions... [and] in too many establishments, drug-fuelled violence remains a daily reality". Volunteering in such environments can result in serious harms including burnout and secondary trauma (Perrin et al, 2018), post-traumatic stress, injury, or even death (Corcoran, 2012). Good quality training, support and supervision (which are mindful of the complexities of employing lived experience in penal contexts[1]) are therefore vital for the welfare of mentors and mentees, particularly where people are drawing upon their own (potentially trauma-invoking) life experiences (Buck et al., 2020).

Finally, there is the challenge of an insecure funding environment. Most voluntary sector project funding is short term, limiting the time it takes for projects to become established and effective (Boyce et al., 2009). When a charity loses its funding, it can result in losses of service, but a lack of stable funding also limits the potential for long-term work (Buck et al., 2015). Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found fewer psychosocial and behavioural outcomes for people in mentoring services of less than a year and that short-term support which 'closes prematurely' can have a detrimental effect on service users. Given these concerns, commissioners should plan and invest in services over the longer term.

Conclusion

Peer mentoring holds clear potential to assist people with the difficult process of leaving crime behind and to mediate some of the excluding elements of criminalisation. Peer mentors often inspire and support individual change and inclusion, challenge negative stereotypes and contribute creative suggestions to reduce excluding practices. However, challenges can also be encountered, including a resistance to empowerment based working within a predominantly punitive criminal justice system, the complexity of helping people to navigate difficult changes in punitive contexts, and a lack of consistent funding to deliver large scale, long term work. These problems can be mediated by mentors and voluntary sector organisations working collectively to coproduce more humanising, inclusive and empowering approaches and cultures; supporting all peer mentors with good quality (lived experience sensitive) training, support and supervision; and providing longer term service planning and funding.

Notes

1 The Peer Mentoring workbook may be helpful for mentors to work through with supervisors (or independently) to reflect on some of the unique elements of this work. Available to download free at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343556116_Peer_mentoring_in_criminal_justice_summarypdf

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Supporting the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

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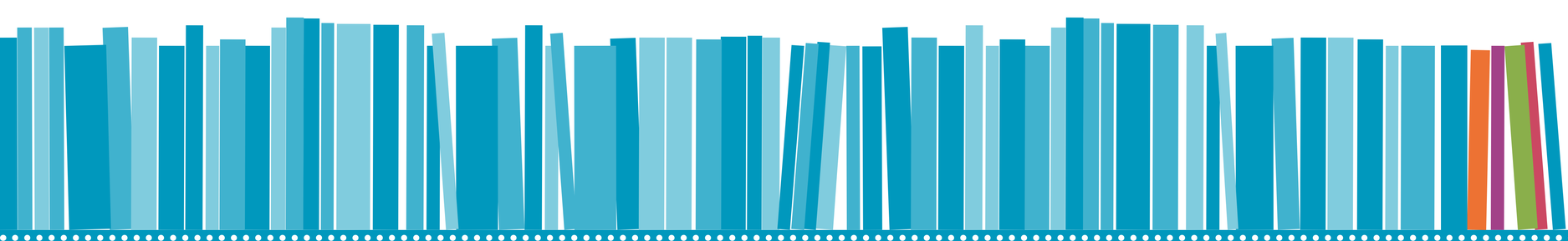

An online evidence base for the voluntary sector working in the criminal justice system

This article forms part of a series from Clinks, created to develop a far-reaching and accessible evidence base covering the most common types of activity undertaken within the criminal justice system. There are two main aims of this online series:

1 To increase the extent to which the voluntary sector bases its services on the available evidence base

2 To encourage commissioners to award contracts to organisations delivering an evidence-based approach.

Each article has been written by a leading academic with particular expertise on the topic in question. The topics are selected by Clinks' members as areas of priority interest. Clinks intends to build a comprehensive directory of the best evidence available across a wide range of criminal justice topics within the next three years (2020-2023). The online evidence base is co-ordinated by Russell Webster on behalf of Clinks.

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