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Embedding Trauma-Informed Approaches in Adult Probation

Dr Alexandria Bradley, Leeds Beckett University
Dr Madeline Petrillo, University of Greenwich

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Within the last decade, awareness around the impact and pervasiveness of trauma across an individual's life course, has become an expectation, rather than an exception within many human service systems (Fallot and Harris, 2009; SAMHSA, 2014). The emergence of trauma-informed approaches (TIA) began in American addiction and mental health services over 20 years ago (Harris and Fallot, 2001). The key principles underpinning TIA are Safety; Trustworthiness; Choice; Collaboration and Empowerment (Fallot and Harris, 2006) and these are to be embedded within the culture, practice and policies within a service. Crucially, those implementing TIA are not seeking to treat or directly support healing from trauma. Alternatively, TIA aim to increase staff knowledge around the legacy of trauma and how this impacts behaviour. This enables organisations to develop a culture that encourages greater engagement and access to services for individuals with trauma histories. However, within the context of the United Kingdom, more focus is being placed on embedding trauma-informed practices across various contexts. This includes a range of large-scale institutions, for example: the Criminal Justice System; Schools; Universities and Health Care settings (Emsley, Smith, Martin and Lewis, 2022; Thomas, Crosby and Vanderhaar, 2019). The implementation of TIA across such diverse institutions, services and disciplines, highlights some crucial factors:

1. Trauma is a public health crisis;
2. Trauma-Informed approaches are required in every service which comes into contact with children, young people and adults.

More recently, some services and organisations within the Criminal Justice System have begun to embed TIA. Some examples include probation; prisons; youth services; addiction services; mental health services and police. These organisations recognise the prevalence of trauma histories within the lives of the individuals accessing their support (Bateson, McManus and Johnson, 2019; Bradley, 2021; Sweeney, Filson, Kennedy, Collinson and Gillard, 2018).



Dr Alexandria Bradley
Leeds Beckett University



Dr Madeline Petrillo
University of Greenwich

This article will introduce key findings from a bulletin published by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, which examined 'Working with trauma in adult probation' (Petrillo and Bradley, 2022). The bulletin included the voices of 38 probation practitioners and managers. Data were collected between April and November 2021, using qualitative methods including twenty-seven individual semi-structured interviews and two focus groups with eleven participants. More specifically, this article presents a theme relating to the implementation of trauma-informed practice/approaches across the Probation Service.

Implementing a Comprehensive Trauma-Informed Approach in Probation

The implementation of TIA requires consistency, commitment and regular reviews of practice (Covington, 2016). McCartan (2020) suggests that, in order for probation staff to succeed in embedding TIA, they require effective support, encouragement and supervision. In addition to this, an implementation strategy is required to provide a flexible framework which encourages organisational change, leaders to champion TIA and the appropriate space to identify barriers/stagnation within the implementation journey (Fallot and Harris, 2009; Triesman, 2021). The probation practitioners who took part in the research felt that some practices associated with assessment and enforcement conflicted with TIA. However, staff demonstrated innovation and provided tangible and easily replicated examples of TIA within sentence management aspects of their roles. These included:

1. Re-wording warning letters to better express empathy and providing an invitation for an individual on probation to re-engage.
2. Establishing openness and transparency within breach and recall processes that focus on enforcement as a mutual acknowledgement of immediate challenges and opportunities to co-produce in a more meaningful way.
3. Developing a trauma-informed wording template for the free text sections of OASys, to enable probation practitioners to assess an individual's behaviour within the context of their histories and experiences of trauma and victimisation (Petrillo and Bradley, 2022).

Working in a relational way with individuals accessing probation could support more meaningful engagement in the support they are receiving. Staff stated that adopting TIA within probation meant that the focus of their work was shifting away from 'managing' people towards 'helping' people:

"It's giving permission to work in a way that maybe feels more rooted to actually the principles of working well with people and in a relationship-oriented way where it's not just about risk and public protection, it's actually about the quality of that interaction and using that as a means in itself to be able to help that person move down that rehabilitative journey."

(Participant 9, Senior Probation Officer).

This approach could improve the engagement of people accessing probation. In addition, many probation practitioners highlighted that TIA increased their job satisfaction, as this enabled them to fulfil the relational roles they had envisaged when joining the probation service.

Top-Down Trauma-Informed Probation Practice

The findings of the bulletin highlight that the Probation Service as an organisation and the teams within it, are at different places and are progressing at different speeds along the journey of becoming trauma-informed (Petrillo and Bradley, 2022). For some of the probation practitioners, trauma-informed practice (TIP) represented little more than new or retranslated terminology for treating people respectfully. However some staff demonstrated a deeper understanding and examples of inspirational pockets of good practice when working with trauma (See Petrillo and Bradley, 2022).

Within the context of strategic implementation and governance relating to TIA, the probation service has worked hard to embed TIP alongside gender-responsive approaches across many areas of service, including courts, assessment, supervision and compliance. The staff highlighted the prevalence of trauma within the lives of women on probation and explained:

"it's like breathing in and breathing out when you work with women"

(Participant 25, Senior Probation Officer).

There is commitment at a strategic level to keep pursuing the implementation of TIA when working with justice-involved women. For example, a Director has overarching responsibility for women across prisons and probation who is supported by a Deputy Director for Women and the Head of the Women's Team. The development of a specialised team is intended to encourage organisational accountability across prisons and probation. The strategy for women on probation is led by a Community Lead, who collaborates with various probation regions through specific role holders, such as Senior Women's Leads and Senior Probation Officer Women's Leads. Across each region, there are a number of Women's champions and single points of contact, who work collaboratively within the structure, to anchor their trauma-informed purpose and drive the women's agenda forward. The strategic structure and specialist roles helps to support the consistency of trauma discussions and commitment within the journey of becoming trauma-informed. The above strategy aligns with TIP implementation recommendations, encouraging organisations to establish a top-down approach (Senior Management, Stakeholders and Leaders directing the changes) and includes specific roles and 'champions' to drive the change (Covington, 2016).

Unification and Trauma-Informed Practice in Probation

The majority of the probation practitioners interviewed, believed that the Probation Service has the potential to be trauma-informed. Prior to the unification of probation services in June 2021, a former Community Rehabilitation Company, had been delivering *Healing Trauma*, a six-session trauma-informed and gender-responsive intervention for justice-involved women (Covington and Russo, 2016). Staff overseeing the delivery of this programme felt that it generated momentum for the implementation of TIP within their service. However, following unification, many of the staff interviewed, shared mixed feelings around the future of TIP within the Probation Service. For some staff, they felt that the unification brought an opportunity for the service to redefine itself as a trauma-informed organisation and make progress. However, many other staff shared concerns that TIP and the implementation had stalled and fallen behind other transitional priorities.

"My hope would be that moving forward, especially in the reunification, it will be implemented and underlie every kind of intervention that's delivered, whether that's kind of bread and butter one-to-one work with people on probation or more formal accredited programmes. And that every staff member in the organisation has an understanding of TIP. So, it's got that top-down and bottom-up approach, it's flowing right through the organisation. Everybody is aware of it, and everybody is aware of the difficulties in applying it sometimes, and how we can make that fit in the organisation. And so, I just hope it is implemented right through so the hard work that a lot of people have done isn't lost, it's accelerated."

(Participant 4, Head of Service)

Whilst the future of TIP within the Probation Service feels fragile, the bulletin highlights many areas which had achieved a level of practice which could be considered trauma-informed (Petrillo and Bradley, 2022). Future research in this area should revisit probation practitioners, once the unification process has settled, to capture the collective institutional commitment of the Probation Service's journey towards becoming trauma-informed.

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