

Reducing reoffending and increasing community (re)integration: effective practice when people have a sexual conviction



Professor Belinda Winder

Research Director

Centre for Crime, Offending, Prevention and Engagement (COPE)

NTU Psychology, Nottingham Trent University

April 2022

CLINKS

Supporting the voluntary sector
working in the criminal justice system

About the author



Belinda Winder is Professor of Forensic Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. She is also Research Director of the Centre of Crime, Offending, Prevention and Engagement, and part of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit. Working with people with lived experience, she seeks to make a difference in the world by designing and undertaking mixed-method research to inform and provide evidence-based practice and policy. Her primary field is sexual offending, but she also has a particular interest in life after prison and the reintegration of people into the community.

Published by Clinks © 2022. All rights reserved.

Unless otherwise indicated, no part of this publication may be stored in a retrievable system or reproduced in any form without prior written permission from Clinks. Clinks will give sympathetic consideration to requests from small organisations for permission to reproduce this publication in whole or in part but the terms upon which such reproduction may be permitted will remain at Clinks' discretion. Clinks and the author are not legally trained or qualified. Any information or guidance given in this publication should not be taken as a substitute for professional legal advice. Clinks is unable to accept liability for any loss or damage or inconvenience arising as a consequence of the use of any information provided in this guide.

Cover photo

© Ranta Images / shutterstock.com



**EVIDENCE
LIBRARY**

Reducing reoffending and increasing community (re)integration:
effective practice when people have a sexual conviction

CLINKS

Why read this evidence review?

This evidence review provides an in-depth look at the issue of reducing reoffending and increasing community (re)integration for people who have a sexual conviction. Professor Belinda Winder has been a prominent researcher in this area for over 15 years. She is also a co-founder of the Safer Living Foundation, a charity set up in 2014 to conduct (and evaluate) initiatives that help to prevent further victims of sexual crime. The review sets out in detail the 13 key factors that are relevant in creating effective practice to reduce sexual recidivism and promote community integration. Professor Winder shows how these two aims are closely aligned and the review makes an excellent benchmark for those looking to establish, improve or evaluate a service targeted at people who commit sexual offences.



Introduction

Over 99.8% of people who serve custodial prison sentences for a sexual crime will leave prison and seek to integrate into the community. While sexual recidivism is very low, it is crucial that we understand how to prevent any further sexual offences. Analysis of recidivism data demonstrates that people are more likely to commit a further sexual offence shortly after release from prison, with the probability of reoffending decreasing over time (Hanson et al, 2014). The need for support is thus highest in the period immediately after release, especially following a long custodial sentence when people emerge to a frightening new world. This paper delineates 13 factors that are relevant in creating effective practice to reduce sexual recidivism and promote community integration - aims which are in fact closely aligned.

1. State of exit

In order to integrate¹ people with a sexual conviction effectively into the community, we need to consider who they are, and how they are, at the point of release; that is, their state of exit. Given changes to legislation increasing minimum terms before eligibility for parole, increasing use of extended determinate sentences and disruptions to prison regimes, people convicted of a sexual offence are spending longer in prison. Yet, the more time a person spends in prison, the less equipped for life on release they will be. Further, the experience of prison is a painful one and invokes a state of learned helplessness – a term used to describe the impact of uncontrollable trauma (in this instance, from living in prison) which undermines people’s capacity to respond adaptively and to problem solve (Seligman, 1972).

Age and health are further considerations. Being in prison for any length of time ages people prematurely by approximately 10 years (Price, 2006). On release, individuals will require more support both because of their age, and because of the physical health conditions they are prematurely suffering from (Leeder, 2012). There may also be mental health difficulties which have arisen from, or have been exacerbated by, the pain and trauma of living in prison. Effective practice necessitates the availability of specialist services to support people leaving prison with a sexual conviction, with the additional layers of complexity that having a sexual conviction invokes. For example, providing a realistic release plan for an aged man with dementia and a sexual conviction with the need for 24-hour care is extremely challenging, given the safeguarding concerns care homes will have.

2. Restrictions, conditions and limitations

People who have committed a sexual offence are managed in the community via a range of measures, two of the key ones being supervision by probation and licence conditions.



Supervision by probation

The relationship between a person and their supervising probation officer is an important one for both parties. The probation officer may be held to account for perceived failures in supervision if reoffending occurs. For the person being supervised, the probation officer holds the power to return them to prison. Yet it is possible for them to create an honest and safe space in supervision where difficult subjects can be discussed, and problems addressed. Ideally practical support, signposting regarding accommodation, employment, financial services, and social integration opportunities would all be provided. In the utopian vision presented by Patton and Farrell (2021), supervising officers would act as 'meso-brokers' (ibid, p.214) facilitating access to social and community capital.

So, what makes for an effective pairing? Matching by ethnicity, age, and gender would be helpful, albeit potentially difficult to achieve since most people convicted of a sexual offence are male, while probation staff are more likely to be female. The extent to which the probation officer can demonstrate empathic concern and genuineness, together with their capability to engender trust in the person they are supervising, are also key. Trust has been promulgated as critical in the probation supervision relationship since it is a 'pre-requisite of the willingness to travel together, especially through unfamiliar and discomfiting places' (McNeill & Weaver, 2010, p.7). This captures the supervision task beautifully – with an individual trying to navigate a new path after prison, with a new sense of self, under the watchful eyes of a probation officer who will both want to encourage the individual while also seeing any behaviour or novel situation through the lens of potential risk. Effective practice also requires probation officers to have sufficient time and motivation to get to know the individuals they are supervising.

Licence conditions

Licence conditions should be 'preventative, proportionate, reasonable and necessary' but not 'punitive' (Ministry of Justice, 2021, p.6). For licence conditions to be effective, there needs to be a robust and current evidence base that can be used to support probation officers in their decision-making, with selection on an individual basis following Risk-Need-Responsivity principles (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Without an evidence base, the anchoring will be towards the risk averse, with the assumption that more licence conditions = safer supervision. Yet having numerous licence conditions can cause confusion, increase stress, and inadvertently increase the risk of recidivism (Kras, 2019). In addition, what may be termed as a reducing risk by a numbers approach to licence conditions fails to account for their counter-productive, even harmful, impact. For example, there is a no-association licence condition given to many people with a sexual conviction whereby the person on licence is not permitted to knowingly interact with another person with a sexual conviction. Where people were convicted of offending alone this is unlikely to reduce risk, but it will increase social isolation in an already isolated population, thereby actually increasing the risk of recidivism. Licence conditions can cause harm, can isolate and separate people from their support. They are not guaranteed to protect the public. The impact of social and emotional isolation is highlighted in sections (iv) and (v) below.



3. Gaps in provision

There remains a significant gap in provision of post-release services, which ultimately 'sets both the community and the offender up for failure' (Wilson et al., 2007, p.3). Some provision does exist, including community interventions (such as Inform+), and tools for probation officers (i.e., Maps for Change) to promote factors that have been empirically linked to desistance, and to encourage engagement and interaction between individuals and supervising officers.

There are also some charitable initiatives, the primary one of which in the UK is Circles of Support and Accountability.² This is a community initiative utilising volunteers to help prison leavers settle into the community. Circles have a robust evidence base (including a randomised control trial) demonstrating reductions in sexual reoffending (Duwe, 2018) and improved social integration. Other initiatives include the Safer Living Foundation's Corbett Centre; this community centre in Nottinghamshire provides social and practical support for anyone with a sexual conviction via workshops, courses, and with a range of training and educational opportunities.

Clinks,³ a charity set up to support voluntary organisations working with people in the criminal justice system, provides comprehensive details of other organisations who provide support services to this population.

All of these organisations face challenges in doing so, including difficulties securing funding for services, the comparatively excessive cost of insuring an organisation to work with people with a sexual conviction, the actual (or feared) harm that public opinion and the media could have on their organisation's reputation, and potential challenges staffing these services.

4. Partners, family, and friends

Social ties and social support improve physical and mental health, while simultaneously performing a buffering effect on stress (Thoits, 2011). Positive links with family, partners and friends are even more important for those with a conviction, since this support is a protective factor against reoffending (Farmer, 2017). Where individuals have a sexual criminal conviction, they are likely to have greater difficulties maintaining these close interpersonal relationships. The challenge for practitioners is to navigate this more complex landscape with someone convicted of a sexual offence, and to encourage and foster relationships that can provide the benefits delineated above.

5. Social capital

Social capital arises from our networks of relationships which helps us to secure resources and solve problems. Maintenance of personal change requires membership of supportive networks. Access to these networks is inhibited



by sexual convictions so in addition to the isolation and alienation which are typical experiences of people with a sexual conviction, opportunities to build social capital are likely to be absent and support must be provided so they can be developed. Albertson (2021) reflects those opportunities must be taken so the person can build social capital which will itself support desistance. Although social capital is essential to build networks and achieve goals and hopes, care must be given to the difficulties in building positive capital on licence and living with a sexual conviction. For example, consideration must be given to whether 'traditional' models of social connections like families, colleagues and friends-of-friends will be achievable and sustainable. Care should be taken over assuming that a non-traditional, or a limited social network, is inherently 'risky'. People with a sexual conviction building social networks need support on release, including from peers; their peers may be able to help them considerably, as they will have first-hand knowledge on handling sensitive issues, such as disclosure, appropriately.

6. Home

Having somewhere suitable to live is unsurprisingly associated with better physical and mental health. For people leaving prison, it is a fundamental ingredient for reintegration (Boer, 2013). But it is not a magical elixir; having somewhere to sleep (accommodation) is not the same as having somewhere to live (a home). Accommodation does not provide the same psychosocial benefits of having a 'home' where one can express one's identity, have independence and control, and which is a haven for oneself (see Lomas, 2021). These psychosocial aspects provide the optimal conditions to improve social integration and reduce reoffending (Willis & Grace, 2008; 2009).

7. Purposeful activity

The protective effect of employment of has been demonstrated and replicated world-wide, yet there are numerous barriers to employment for people with a sexual conviction (see Tovey et al, 2022 for an analysis of these). Not having something purposeful to do each day reinforces social and emotional isolation; people leave the crowded environment of prison and face long stretches of time alone, with few if any social and financial resources.

What needs to be available in prison is realistic employment advice including information about starting a business and self-employment, a broad (and free) range of educational and upskilling opportunities, work experience and peer mentoring roles that remain viable in the community (i.e., with businesses that offer a post-release version of the roles that people have been trained to do in prison). Work, any work, offers financial and social rewards; work that is fulfilling and personally meaningful is most effective at reducing reoffending and improving community reintegration.



8. Finding an acceptable sense of self

The label 'sex offender' takes over people's identities, becoming, what Goffman termed, their master status (1963); that is, the key label that overshadows everything else about the person (Blagden et al, 2011). Effective practice here means supporting an individual in finding an alternate, pro-social, identity, one that contributes to their social integration. For some, this may be about reconstructing their former lives through a redemption script, or it may be about shaping a new self and 'knifing off' the old one (see Maruna & Roy, 2007). This relates to the concept of secondary desistance, that is a change in the way that an individual with a conviction view themselves (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Secondary desistance is about not regarding oneself as an 'offender' but finding a more positive identity; it is about moving away from the pejorative label.

9. Language and terminology

The words we use to describe others, and indeed ourselves, have a significant impact on how we think about ourselves, and how others think, act, and react to us. Colleagues and I developed a guide to recommended terminology for people with a conviction, discussing how damaging labels and language can be, and how inclusive language supports the social integration of those with a conviction (see Winder et al., 2021).

10. Fear and loathing

High levels of anger, fear and disgust towards people convicted of a sexual offence, co-exist with a strong public appetite for media coverage of sexual crime. The disproportionate and sensationalist reporting of stranger rape and child abduction in the media has resulted in unhelpful inaccuracies in public knowledge. This undermines effective practice in the prevention of first offences, inhibiting people from coming forward for help. It also obstructs the community reintegration of individuals with a sexual conviction as the public believe that people who commit sexual offences are immune to treatment and are certain to commit further offences (despite sexual crime having one of the lowest recidivism rates).

11. Unresolved trauma

Trauma is increasingly recognised as an important consideration in forensic work. Primarily, it is considered in the terms of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and the aetiology of sexual offending. A second source of trauma that is invariably overlooked is Perpetration-Induced Stress (PITS; MacNair, 2002); many people who



commit a serious offence are traumatised by what they have done (Evans et al, 2007) but rarely will this be acknowledged or treated since the presumption is that people enjoy committing offences. Finally, there is the trauma of living in a prison environment (see Crewe 2011, Sykes, 1958). Effective practice to reduce reoffending and support community integration would see every prison adopting a trauma-informed approach as proposed in the 2021 Ministry of Justice Prisons Strategy White Paper, and for individual trauma support to be available to individuals while in prison and after release. There should also be constraints on sensationalist and prurient journalism, and the rehashing of historical 'news' which causes trauma to all connected with a crime.²

12. Reality of a new status

While in prison, people will focus on surviving their sentence, seeing the end of it as the point at which they are released. But few understand the reality - that while the custodial part of a sentence may have ended, their life (work, leisure, travel, relationships) will be constrained by supervision. The ongoing demands of disclosure of one's past, shameful, actions will impact people, and the supervising probation officer should be clear about when disclosure is necessary and helpful, and when it is not.

13. Hope

Hope has become a much-touted buzzword in criminal justice work, understandably, as hope provides us with a better path forward in life, a positive alternative to where we are at now. It plays a key part in desistance (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). If we are hopeful, we are more likely to reach for opportunities and navigate disappointments (Le Bel et al., 2008); it gives us a future to aspire to, one that is achievable.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted 13 factors that are pivotal for the reintegration of individuals with a sexual conviction into the community, and their desistance from reoffending. Many of the factors focus on the individual's needs, perceptions, attitudes, and aspirations. And it is easy to see why Nugent and Shinkel assert that desistance is 'an endurance test' (2016, p.13). However, desistance is not solely the remit of the person with a conviction. The supervising probation officer has a pivotal role in how successful their efforts at community reintegration are. Less obvious, but more difficult to impact, is the role of the community, and society's responsibilities in allowing a space for individuals. For as McNeill (2012, p.14) points out desistance is a 'social project as well as a personal one'. We need to take this on if we wish to maximise effective practice at rehabilitating and integrating people with a sexual conviction.



References

- Albertson, K. (2021). *Probation Insights: Social capital building supporting the desistance process*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/06/Academic-Insights-Albertson-KM-design2-RM.pdf>
- Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2010). Rehabilitating criminal justice policy and practice. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 16(1), 39. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232592251_Rehabilitating_Criminal_Justice_Policy_and_Practice
- Blagden, N. J., Winder, B., Thorne, K., & Gregson, M. (2011). 'No-one in the world would ever wanna speak to me again': an interpretative phenomenological analysis into convicted sexual offenders' accounts and experiences of maintaining and leaving denial. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 17(7), 563-585. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271992862_'No-one_in_the_world_would_ever_wanna_speak_to_me_again'_An_interpretative_phenomenological_analysis_into_convicted_sexual_offenders'_accounts_and_experiences_of_maintaining_and_leaving_denial
- Boer, D. P. (2013). Some essential environmental ingredients for sex offender reintegration. *International journal of behavioral consultation and therapy*, 8(3-4), 8. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275724712_Some_Essential_Environmental_Ingredients_for_Sex_Offender_Reintegration
- Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2004). So 'prison works', does it? The criminal careers of 130 men released from prison under Home Secretary, Michael Howard. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43(4), 390-404. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228225891_So_'Prison_Works'_Does_It_The_Criminal_Careers_of_130_Men_Released_from_Prison_under_Home_Secretary_Michael_Howard
- Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509-529. Available at: <https://www.compen.crim.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/Revisitingthepainsofimprisonment.pdf>
- Duwe, G. (2018). Can circles of support and accountability (CoSA) significantly reduce sexual recidivism? Results from a randomized controlled trial in Minnesota. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 14(4), 463-484. Available at: <https://cosa-ottawa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Duwe-2018-Minnesota.pdf>
- Evans, C., Ehlers, A., Mezey, G., & Clark, D. M. (2007). Intrusive memories in perpetrators of violent crime: emotions and cognitions. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 75(1), 134. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6508907_Intrusive_memories_in_perpetrators_of_violent_crime_Emotions_and_cognitions
- Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime*. Ministry of Justice. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/642244/farmer-review-report.pdf
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Available at: <https://www.freelists.org/archives/sig-dsu/11-2012/pdfKhTzvDli8n.pdf>



Hanson, R. K., Harris, A. J. R., Helmus, L., & Thornton, D. (2014). High-Risk Sex Offenders May Not Be High Risk Forever. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(15), 2792–2813. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260514526062>
https://docksci.com/high-risk-sex-offenders-may-not-be-high-risk-forever_5af233b1d64ab2491b55c203.html

Home Office (2021). *Changes to release and sentencing policy governing serious and dangerous offenders: Equalities Impact Assessment*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-crime-sentencing-and-courts-bill-2021-equality-statements/changes-to-release-and-sentencing-policy-governing-serious-and-dangerous-offenders-equalities-impact-assessment>

Kras, K. R. (2019). Can social support overcome the individual and structural challenges of being a sex offender? Assessing the social support-recidivism link. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*, 63(1), 32-54.

LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The 'chicken and egg' of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), 131-159.

Leeder, E. (2012). *My Life with Lifers*. Ebooks unbound: New Mexico.

Lomas, J. R. (2021). *House, home, and hope: exploring the accommodation needs and experiences of people with sexual offence convictions*. Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom). Available at: <http://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/43366/>

Maruna, S., & Roy, K. (2007). Amputation or reconstruction? Notes on the concept of "knifing off" and desistance from crime. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 23(1), 104-124. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/238431818_Amputation_or_Reconstruction_Notes_on_the_Concept_of_Knifing_Off_and_Desistance_From_Crime

McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of 'offender' rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 17(1), 18-36. Available at: <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/59166/1/59166.pdf>

McNeill, F., & Weaver, B. (2010). *Changing lives? Desistance research and offender management*. Available at: <https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/publications/changing-lives-desistance-research-and-offender-management/>

Patton, D., & Farrall, S. (2021). Desistance: A utopian perspective. *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 60(2), 209-231. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hojo.12406>

Price, C. A. (2006). *Aging inmate population study*. North Carolina Department of Correction, Division of Prisons. Available at: <https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/AgingStudyReport.pdf>

Seligman, M. E. (1972). Learned helplessness. *Annual review of medicine*, 23(1), 407-412. Available at: <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.me.23.020172.002203>

Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society of Captives*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thoits, P. A. (2011). Mechanisms linking social ties and support to physical and mental health. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 52(2), 145-161.



Tovey, L., Winder, B., & Blagden, N. (2022). 'It's okay if you are in for robbery or murder but, sex offenders, that's a no no': A qualitative analysis of the experience of seeking employment by individuals with a sexual conviction.' *Psychology, Crime and Law*. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1068316X.2022.2030736>

Willis, G. M., & Grace, R. C. (2008). The quality of community reintegration planning for child molesters: Effects on sexual recidivism. *Sexual Abuse*, 20(2), 218-240.

Willis, G. M., & Grace, R. C. (2009). Assessment of community reintegration planning for sex offenders: Poor planning predicts recidivism. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 36(5), 494-512. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247744860_Assessment_of_Community_Reintegration_Planning_for_Sex_OffendersPoor_Planning_Predicts_Recidivism

Winder, B., Scott, S., Underwood, M., & Blagden, N. (2021). *Recommended Terminology Concerning People with a Criminal Conviction*. COPE. Practice Brief 01/21. NTU Psychology, Nottingham Trent University. Available at: https://www.ntu.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0022/1625512/COPE-PB-01-Terminology-Concerning-People-with-a-Criminal-Conviction.pdf

End notes

- 1 Integrate is used here rather than reintegrate since the person leaves prison as a new person with the now sullied identity of 'sex offender'
- 2 <https://circles-uk.org.uk>
- 3 <https://www.clinks.org/about>
- 4 See the interview by Richard McCann on hearing about the death of Peter Sutcliffe. <https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/uk/son-of-ripper-victim-called-sutcliffes-brother-to-offer-condolences-39742926.html>



Our vision

Our vision is of a vibrant, independent and resilient voluntary sector that enables people to transform their lives.

Our mission

To support, represent and advocate for the voluntary sector in criminal justice, enabling it to provide the best possible opportunities for individuals and their families.

Join Clinks: be heard, informed, and supported

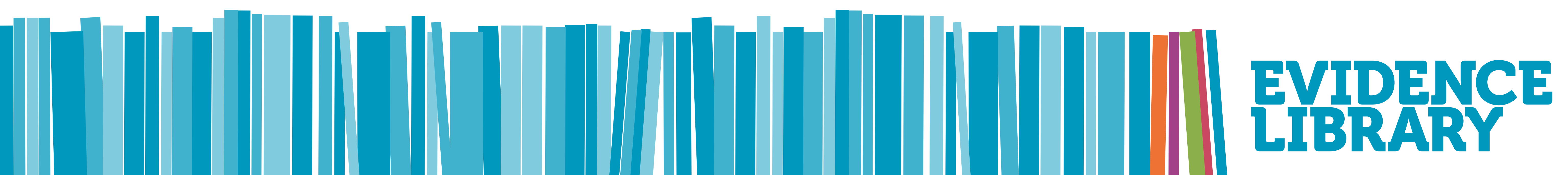
Are you a voluntary organisation supporting people in the criminal justice system?

Join our network of over 600 members. Clinks membership offers you:

- A voice to influence change
- Practical assistance to be effective and resilient
- Support from a community of like-minded professionals.

Membership starts at just £20 per year and is free for organisations with little income.

www.clinks.org/membership



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.

Clinks

82a James Carter Road, Mildenhall, Suffolk IP28 7DE

☎ 020 4502 6774 ✉ info@clinks.org 🐦 @Clinks_Tweets

🌐 www.clinks.org