

Brief report

**Eleventh CEP Seminar
Developing and Evaluating Programmes for Reducing Offending Behaviour
Edinburgh, Scotland
24-28 September 1996**

***The full report of the Eleventh CEP Seminar 'Developing and Evaluating Programmes for Reducing Offending Behaviour' is available in English, French or German from:
The Secretariat
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The following is a brief report which appeared in the CEP Bulletin.

CEP Seminar in Edinburgh makes history

Community measures and sanctions are cheaper than prison and a great deal more constructive. For many this has been sufficient justification. Rises in crime, greater appreciation of the harm done to victims and constraints on public service expenditure have together changed that. Probation must now be able to demonstrate that it has a measurable effect on recidivism. The CEP seminar at Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh provided an excellent opportunity to examine the implications of this challenge. A personal account from John Walters, member of the Board of CEP.

What is effective in reducing reoffending - 'What Works' for short - has been well rehearsed in the academic literature and much discussed in probation services. It has been slower to work its way into practice in a convincing and sustained way. There is good reason to believe that those who write the history of community measures and sanctions in Europe will find that the Heriot Watt seminar changed that.

The seminar was attended by probation managers and practitioners and researchers from sixteen countries from Norway to Portugal to Slovenia, and with a significant contribution from Canada. The evidence about what is effective was first presented in authoritative papers from Gill McIvor of Stirling University and from Fiona Paterson and Jacqueline Tombs of the Scottish Office Central Research Unit. James Bonta and Michael Crowley from Canada gave added force to this with a vivid account of the high quality work Bonta has undertaken to identify which programmes are effective with which offenders.

Key principles

The answer to 'what works' is of course that different things work with different people in different circumstances. But there are key principles. Among those identified by McIvor were: identifying those most at risk of reoffending and concentrating on them, using techniques which focus on the context and reasons for offending and on changing behaviour and promoting reintegration into the community.

Bonta's contribution emphasised the importance of clear programme objectives, of good assessment tools so that offenders are assigned to the right programmes and of programmes which are clearly structured and target criminogenic need and which are run with enthusiasm and integrity. The exciting evidence is that programmes based on these principles are demonstrably effective in reducing offending. The sobering evidence is that programmes with loosely defined or no clear objectives, those focused on broad welfare needs or intensive programmes with low risk offenders are not just ineffective. They can make things worse. Peter van der Laan from the Netherlands addressed the importance of good systems to monitor and evaluate programmes. He shrewdly drew attention to the need to evaluate the way programmes are planned and run as well as to evaluate their results.

Altogether the seminar demonstrated the crucial role of monitoring and evaluation if we are to build our knowledge about what is effective.

Effective programmes

Workshops run by practitioners from all over Europe provided opportunities to learn about how effective programmes are being run: with persistent offenders in Northern Ireland, with drug mis-users in the Netherlands, in half way houses for prisoners in Portugal, in victim offender mediation in Germany, with sex offenders in England, with perpetrators and victims of domestic violence in Scotland and in employment programmes in the Netherlands.

Finally the already rich diet of the seminar was extended for those with enough remaining appetite by visits to offender projects in and around Edinburgh.

And yet this was only the beginning of a process. Those attending the seminar were each asked to identify a piece of work which they would take forward to apply the principles of effectiveness and to report back the results of their project. Each was offered an expert mentor. At the end of the seminar Martin Tansey, the President of the CEP, held out the prospect of a follow up event for those who take forward projects to apply what they had learned. If some part of this is realised the CEP will contribute greatly to our learning about 'what works' from a European wide perspective, an urgent need when so much of the research findings are from Northern America. What was perhaps most noticeable throughout the seminar was the keen attentiveness of participants and the high level of interchange between practitioners from different countries and different systems but all with a common aim to make community sentences effective.