

Knowledge partnerships in youth justice: Building learning and evaluative cultures

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Knowledge partnerships in youth justice: building learning and evaluative cultures

Sean Creaney and Jayne Price

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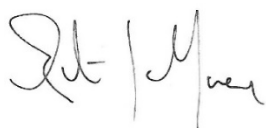
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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Dr Sean Creaney and Dr Jayne Price, highlighting the purpose, value and functioning of knowledge partnerships in youth justice. These partnerships involve the sharing of ideas, insights and experiences between members of the research/academic community and youth justice professionals. Through aligning the worlds of academia/research and practice, the partnerships can be mutually beneficial, bridging gaps between evidence and action while also facilitating the further development of the evidence base. Furthermore, the partnerships can help to build evaluation/research cultures across the youth justice sector, with research and evidence moving from a marginal to more central role within organisations and services. For the partnerships to function effectively, meaningful participation and reciprocal collaboration are essential components, enabled through trusting and respectful professional relationships, with everyone recognising each other's areas of expertise, experiences, interests and priorities.

Within the inspectorate, we collaborate with academics and external researchers in numerous ways, looking to utilise and maximise the knowledge, experience and skills across the research community, helping to produce a rounded and balanced view of the evidence base, while also recognising that the evidence base never stands still. Critically, knowledge partnerships and research collaborations can help drive the continuing development of rights-respecting, child-centred practice.



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Dr Jayne Price is Deputy Head of Division and Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of Chester, UK. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (Advance HE). Jayne's research interests include the lived experience of children, young people and young adults within criminal justice settings, especially upon transition at adulthood, and how these might be improved. She is a trustee of YMCA Together and sits on the Executive Committee of the British Society of Criminology. For over ten years, Jayne has volunteered within her local Youth Justice Service, working with children and young people, practitioners and other volunteers.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation

1. Introduction

Professionals should engage with the broader research knowledge base when seeking to align practice to evidence in youth justice. However, this is not always easy. It can be difficult for professionals to navigate competing/differing academic perspectives (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024; Price and Creaney, 2024) and embed quality empirical research into practice (Hampson, 2024). The wealth of research evidence and academic ideas presented to youth justice professionals can be perceived as 'a multitude of noisy, argumentative criminological perspectives' (McLaughlin and Muncie, 2006: xiii) which can stymie effective practice in youth justice. Academics may also be too remote from practice/coalface youth justice delivery, due to a lack of insider or tacit knowledge about what is happening within youth justice services (Price and Creaney, 2024).

Crucially, knowledge partnerships can act as a bridge between the worlds of academic theory and youth justice practice, even catalysing research/evaluative cultures within youth justice settings. This can help to drive positive change by making academic insights and research evidence on contemporary frameworks, models and practices accessible to professionals (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024; Taylor, 2010).

This *Academic Insights* paper looks at the meaning and value of knowledge partnerships in youth justice and how they can help to address the theory/practice nexus. Knowledge partnerships have been the subject of interest in recent times both nationally and internationally (Price and Creaney, 2024; Clancey, Drumore and Metcalfe, 2024:2; Brancale et al., 2021). The paper discusses the formation and operation of knowledge partnerships within the youth justice context, offering original insights into the principles and resources necessary to build learning and research cultures within youth justice services. It is divided into three sections:

1. knowledge partnerships for building synergies between academia and practice
2. enablers and barriers to the development of knowledge partnerships
3. building evaluation/research cultures across the youth justice sector.

The paper draws on key ideas from the book titled *Knowledge and Skills Partnerships in Youth Justice* (Price and Creaney, 2024), which presented expert analysis of knowledge/evidence production and utilisation in youth justice, using case studies and empirical research to showcase insightful, progressive examples of knowledge partnerships and research collaborations in practice.

Whilst knowledge partnerships can vary in approach and function, they comprise members of the research/academic community and youth justice professionals. These collaborations can help to identify and bridge gaps between practice, learning and research (Clancey, Drumore and Metcalfe, 2024; Price and Creaney, 2024; Gibson, et al., 2024). The partnerships can be 'mutually beneficial' (Brancale et al., 2021: 881) to both academics and professionals, helping them to keep abreast of the research evidence base and relevant policy/practice developments.

2. Knowledge partnerships in youth justice

2.1 Knowledge partnerships and the building of synergies

Knowledge partnerships are associated with the sharing of ideas, insights and experiences amongst academics, educators, professionals and sector leaders alike. There is no single formula for knowledge partnerships in youth justice as they can develop organically or deliberately depending on the preferences and interests of those involved (Bond-Taylor, 2024). Yet, such arrangements can be defined as a collaborative process that brings together non-academics (educated experienced professionals) and practice-facing criminologists with an interest in using knowledge to enhance youth justice practice. Social science scholars, educators and professionals alike can contribute towards the construction, dissemination and application of knowledge/evidence to facilitate positive outcomes (Price and Creaney, 2024; Case and Haines, 2014).

As Clancey, Drumore and Metcalfe (2024) note, knowledge partnerships should be reciprocal, enabling youth justice professionals to access and contribute to current knowledge, 'best practice' guidance and exemplars (see also Smith-Yau, 2017). Participants can work together to identify the issues, conceptualising novel approaches to problems detected or uncovered through the collaborative partnership working arrangement (Price and Creaney, 2024). There may be opportunities to explore mutually beneficial areas of interest, collaborate on initiatives or bespoke guiding frameworks, and/or open-up research opportunities for scholars and practice-focused academics alike (Smith-Yau, 2017). Through consultancy, evaluation work and training, empirical evidence and criminological theories can be applied in practice and used to inform or influence policy developments across services (Bond-Taylor, 2024).

For example, in Cheshire a research group has been developed as a forum to exchange ideas, evidence and expertise. The group is responsive to issues that emerge or challenges that arise affecting professional practice. This pragmatic and forward-thinking research into practice group is a mechanism within which any disconnect between academic research and policy/practice is to be addressed, encouraging reflection upon the nature of criminal justice interventions (Price and Creaney, 2024). Figure 1 is used as guidance to acknowledge and value a greater range of knowledge, with research, expertise and experience viewed as key elements of an evidence-informed approach. When framed around these components, knowledge partnerships have potential to assist the development of rights-respecting, child-centred practice. This means not only focusing on the use/value of empirical research but learning from inspection/other findings and knowledge from the lived experiences of various stakeholders, whilst drawing upon professional expertise or practice wisdom (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024; Howard, 2024; Gibson, et al., 2024).

Furthermore, it is important that those involved in knowledge partnerships take account of the dynamic principles of knowledge translation and mobilisation which illustrates the 'two-way' non-hierarchical nature of the process (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024; Bond-Taylor, 2024). These concepts can be utilised and employed to foreground the exchange and dissemination of knowledge to help ensure diverse forms of evidence are used to inform or influence practice.

Figure 1: Evidence-informed approach (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024)



Further information on the approach in Cheshire and some other areas is set out below:

Cheshire Knowledge and Skills Partnership: the partnership between Cheshire Youth Justice Services, Edge Hill University and the University of Chester has used its research group as a mechanism to nurture a culture of knowledge exchange and operationalise a commitment to evidence led practice. The group comprises practitioners, volunteers and academics who meet remotely to share insights into the use of theory and contribute to discussions around the development and efficacy of differing approaches to practice. There are external guest speakers sharing practice and research insights, including new innovations, in an accessible way, thus inviting members of the group to interrogate the evidence-base and scrutinise the principles of effective practice. This initiative has paved the way for the development of 'participatory principles' (Creaney, et al., 2024) and 'creative interventions' (Price, et al., 2023), to maximise children's involvement in decision making processes.

Greater Manchester Youth Justice University Partnership: another progressive example is the long-established partnership in Greater Manchester which champions a synergy between academia and practice. A framework was co-produced to facilitate young people's participation in decisions that affect their life, thus enhancing links between research findings and practice (Smithson and Jones, 2021; Smith-Yau, 2017).

The Dyfed Powys Hwb Doeth partnership: in Wales, Hwb Doeth has fostered strong links between policy, practice and academia, facilitating knowledge exchange between key stakeholders to enhance opportunities to apply evidence-informed practices, to work more participatively and effectively with children, and better meet the needs of marginalised and disadvantaged members of society, making a difference to their lives/safety (Hampson, 2024).

New South Wales (Australia): outside of the UK, a knowledge partnership in New South Wales has become a platform to 'infuse the wider scholarship with insights from policy and practice of youth justice workers' (Clancey, et al., 2024:10).

2.2 Enablers and barriers to the development of knowledge partnerships

There are many benefits associated with knowledge partnerships and research collaborations, not least opportunities for academics to acquire access to data and engage with the 'real world' experiences of youth justice professionals (see Clancey, Drumore and Metcalfe, 2024:2; Price and Creaney, 2024). This is a reciprocal arrangement in the sense that professionals have access to academic knowledge, which can help them to keep abreast of the research evidence base.

However, it must be acknowledged that there can be challenges to knowledge exchange activity in youth justice. There can be differences of perspective on the rudiments of effective practice, resistance amongst professionals to alter or adapt existing practices, and time constraints or workload pressures, which may inhibit valuable opportunities for blue sky thinking (Price and Creaney, 2024; Palmer, 2011). There may be reductions in the workforces due to funding cuts or colleagues leaving institutions for pastures new, which can result in heavier workloads and stymie relationship building. More generally, it needs to be recognised that while evidence and experience are drivers of policy and practice, they sit alongside judgement, values, resources, ideologies and interests (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The drivers of youth justice policy and practice (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024)



Some of these challenges may be addressed through continually engaging relevant stakeholders in meaningful discussions about the value of knowledge partnerships, and 'some give and take in both directions' (see Bond-Taylor, 2024:82). It is important to be mindful of, and strike a balance between, the preferences and interests of both academics and

practitioners (Hampson, 2024). The former may be interested in more longitudinal or exploratory research studies that have potential to be included in research exercise submissions, whilst the latter may prefer generating data and implementing recommendations in a timelier fashion to address pressing issues and to satisfy operational goals (Clancey, et al., 2024). To facilitate engagement, nurture critical thinking and reflexivity, the research group in Cheshire, similar to the practice/academia group in Hwb Doeth (Hampson, 2024), circulates a roundup of new research, inviting practitioners to nominate topics of interest to them and engage in learning/practice development (Price and Creaney, 2024).

2.3 Building evaluation/research cultures

For knowledge partnerships to function effectively, there must be a commitment to build and maintain working relationships – in an open and reciprocal manner – allowing for discussion around mutually beneficial areas of interest (Hampson, 2024). Professional relationships, built upon trust and mutual respect, are vital to the success of knowledge partnerships and research collaborations (Clancey, Drumore and Metcalfe, 2024; Pesta et al., 2017; Brancale et al., 2021). Whilst there can be challenges due to varying professional backgrounds and experiences, collaboration is a useful principle to cultivate, inviting those at the ‘coalface’ (Gibson, et al., 2024:102) of youth justice delivery, academics, students, and others, to join in a reflective dialogue. Similarly, Kilkelly, (2023:11) notes that it is important to embrace:

‘an approach to evidence-based policymaking as a collaborative endeavour, one that is shared between academia and decision-makers in youth justice practice and policy, with a focus on the young people at the heart of this process’.

Evaluation/research cultures within settings can maximise opportunities for the development of evidence-based policy and practice. For this rhetoric to become reality, investment in resources is necessary to allow professionals the time and space to undertake meaningful work and engage in a reflective dialogue. It is also important to nurture a culture that values research, which moves from occupying a marginal role within a setting to becoming ‘hardwired into the organisation’ (Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024:59). A learning culture should be developed where professionals reflect on how they think and act; strengthening valuable dissemination opportunities to share candid insights into the value and efficacy of youth justice service interventions and practices.

Youth justice responses can be problematised as part of networks or practice/academia forums, which can help to generate discussions around research-informed practice across services – a useful mechanism to synthesise the evidence and facilitate knowledge-exchange activities with a view to enhancing practice (Hampson, 2024). As Bond-Taylor (2024:75) notes, independent researchers can provide consultancy/evaluation and judge the efficacy of service developments. Supporting professionals to make sense of research evidence and evaluating their practice are significant aims of knowledge partnerships. It is also important to promote and value the experiences and expertise of frontline practitioners who possess tacit knowledge around the factors that help or hinder work with children, families and victims, and ideas to share about the likely implications of applying evidence into practice within criminal justice settings (Gibson, et al., 2024; Price and Creaney, 2024).

To counter knowledge hierarchies and paradigm wars, academic scholarship and empirical research should be treated on a par with professional values, principles, practice-knowledge and ‘lived experiences’ (Gibson, et al., 2024), which are ‘equally valid and valuable evidence for

practice' (Whyte, 2009:48). Whilst there may be differences of opinion regarding key priorities, the most pressing questions or concerns that have potential to impact on policy and practice, should be the focus of any potential research collaboration – this could mean working together to decide upon which project or intervention is in need of being evaluated (Hampson, 2024). A quid pro quo relationship is required where decision makers and researchers can interact and engage with differing agendas. There must be an ability to recognise the mutual benefits to each service/academic institution and communicate when challenges arise. Reciprocity is key, where practitioners and academics hear and understand one another (receptive of somewhat differing contexts and priorities).

A commitment to organise or facilitate workshops centred around policy developments or practice issues can be helpful. Practice-focused conferences or webinars can be organised in line with workforce development initiatives, to exchange knowledge and showcase impact to a wider audience. Negotiating terms of reference or co-developing a memorandum of understanding, that can act as guidance for academic practice partnerships, is potentially useful to prevent conflict or power struggles, helping to maintain professional relationships, nurturing trust and mutual respect (Price and Creaney, 2024). To ensure sustainability of knowledge partnerships and to maintain trusting relationships and prevent conflict, stakeholders should review partnership activity and working arrangements periodically to ensure meaningful dialogue and critical reflection remain at the heart of the approach (Rudes et al. 2014; Brancale et al., 2021). It is important that academics and professionals engage in meaningful conversations to explore mutual interests, such as training on the implementation of models of practice or opportunities for research/practice placements. Establishing a steering group could be useful to set and review objectives/priorities.

3. Conclusion

This *Academic Insights* paper has explored the purpose and function of knowledge partnerships between academia and practice in the youth justice context. The paper was divided into three sections: knowledge partnerships and the building of synergies; enablers and barriers; and building evaluation/research cultures. As alluded to, academics are somewhat relatively detached from the everyday struggles of practitioners, especially the realities and complexities of decision making within youth justice agencies (Price and Creaney, 2024). Therefore, partnerships between academia and practice, characterised as the 'golden ticket for youth justice' (Jones, 2024), are an antidote to 'ivory tower' academia.

These partnerships are future-facing collaborations, capable of bridging gaps between evidence and action, enhancing opportunities for the conceptualisation and implementation of principled and progressive practices (Bond-Taylor, 2024; Hampson, 2024). The joint working arrangements provide fertile ground to 'fill critical evidence gaps' (Butts et al., 2024: 215 see also Moore, Brazier, and Mercer, 2024 and Clancey et al., 2024) in policy and practice, as knowledge and insights can be transferred from academia to industry, and vice versa. Arguably, meaningful participation of stakeholders and beneficiaries involved in university/industry collaborations is more likely achieved when there is a commitment to the exchange of ideas, evidence and expertise (Gibson, et al., 2024; Case and Haines, 2014). To an extent, academic ideas should be aligned to contemporary policy and practice developments, cognisant of the preferences and interests of professionals working within different parts of the youth justice system (Brancale et al., 2021; Clancey et al., 2024, Stout, et al., 2008).

There may be a level of disconnect between academic perceptions/ideas and the lived realities of professionals who are immersed in day-to-day tasks (Howard, 2024). As Creaney and Price (2024) have observed, practitioners may feel disempowered if their practice expertise, experience of working in the field, or professional judgement appear to be devalued by 'ivory tower' academia or the armchair theorist. This is perhaps especially the case if they feel compelled or are instructed to comply with certain agendas that they characterise as futile or bureaucratic. To address any disparities and/or concerns about policy/practice relevance of criminological research, knowledge partnerships can facilitate rich and meaningful conversations to drive the use of evidence into practice, facilitating the dissemination and application of key messages from contemporary empirical research.

This *Academic Insights* paper has provided a concise overview of academic/practitioner knowledge partnerships, placing high value on research/evaluation cultures within youth justice settings. The paper has demonstrated the value of such partnership arrangements that seek to assist applications of criminological theory/evidence into practice. In setting out the rationale for knowledge partnerships, it is hoped they may be adopted more widely across the youth justice sector.

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