

I am Chris Leeson and I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk to you today about the work of the charity that I run, the Griffins Society.

We are a national charity, dedicated to sponsoring research, specifically into the treatment of women and girls in criminal justice. Not just those who are already in the system but those in danger of becoming caught up in it.

Why just women? As you are no doubt well aware, the criminal justice system is very male focused, arguably not least because the numbers of men far outstrip those of women, but this has meant that much of the evidence base from 'what works' with offenders comes from studies of males not females.

Arguing for dealing differently with women who are such a relatively small population, purely on the basis of the numbers involved, is a difficult call, but we like many others have been arguing that despite the small numbers (in terms of prison, we are talking as of the 31<sup>st</sup> March, a population of just under 4,000, compared to 81,500), it is critical to adopt a different, gender-sensitive approach to ensure better outcomes for these women and to reduce the often-devastating inter-generational impact on their families.

There is no doubt that there has been a lot more debate in recent years on the importance of understanding that men and women are different and that their pathways into the criminal justice system and indeed their responses to it, can be very different.

So, put simply, we support research into the treatment of women only, because we believe that equality of treatment of men and women, does not ensure equal outcomes. A fundamentally different approach is needed and that requires supporting evidence.

To contribute to the debate on this, we sponsor a research fellowship programme in partnership with the Institute of criminology, at the University of Cambridge. Every year at this time, we invite practitioners working with young or adult women, in prison or in the community, to submit research proposals to us for consideration.

Our aim? To use practitioner research to influence practice and policy in the treatment of women, both at a local level and nationally. And it's practitioners like yourselves that enable us do that.

We have been working in this field now for over 15 years and despite the major review on women in criminal justice by Baroness Corston a decade ago, and some signs of greater interest in distinct, gender-based and more holistic approaches, there are still fundamental problems and issues that need addressing.

I think there are three things about our approach that are unique:

- Firstly, we are practitioner-led. We believe in a bottom-up approach to research, and so we fund practitioners, not academics or professional researchers, to research an area of concern that they have identified themselves, whether in practice, policy or both. This is because we believe that you are the ones who are best placed to see what is happening on the ground and what is and is not working
- secondly, these research studies are also usually qualitative rather than quantitative in approach. This is because we also believe that the women themselves – their voices – are too often absent. Qualitative interviews with women are an important approach when you are trying to understand the causes of female offending and their experiences of involvement in criminal justice. They provide a richer less superficial and more layered

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take on what is happening. All of which is crucial in the design of effective services.

Understanding the differences between men and women and trying to work out what actually works with women offenders is clearly critical, and it is gradually being understood that such things as outcome evaluations of interventions that neglect service users' insights, can lead to under-estimating resource needs, unrealistic target setting and indeed the eventual abandonment of promising approaches in favour of the next panacea.

- Thirdly, we make a virtue out of small-scale research, referring to our research findings as being indicative; we make no apologies about this – it is completed by working practitioners and usually in just a year, but this means that it is often timely, reflecting very real and current concerns and the recommendations that come off the back of the findings can serve as both an indicator of problems and a catalyst for change.

For those of us who have been around criminal justice for a few years we often have the debate around just how we can change things – just how do you bring about change with something as large, complex and amorphous as the criminal justice system. It is a daunting task, but increasingly I think the answer is in the small things; Identifying those things that though they maybe small in themselves can potentially leverage enormous impact.

We always ask our fellows to think about what would need to change to address the issue they have identified and it is not always about money and resources. Sometimes it is about smarter thinking and thinking about systems design. Finding those levers that can make a difference.

All our fellows are highly motivated individuals – they have to be. We don't fund sabbaticals. Their research is carried out alongside their day-job – a

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job – your job - that is often hugely challenging in its own right, without the additional demands of carrying out a research project.

Now I was looking on the government National Careers service website recently and found their short definition of what a probation service officer and indeed a Probation Officer does – ‘they supervise people serving community and prison sentences. They also help people get back into society after they have left prison.’ It has to be said it is short on words but LONG on expectations. The site goes on to a short description of what you will do in the role and the basic skills you will need.

There are two words that don't appear anywhere – stakeholder and designer.

Now, we would argue that as probation officers you should all be regarded as stakeholders in the system you work in, and that you should also be designers of it too. By designers, I am thinking of you as potential researchers who aim to influence the shape of the service you work in.

A definition of Action research is that it is either research to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving with the aim of improving how issues are addressed and problems solved.

It is about actively participating in a change situation and conducting research to solve the problems that you see in front of you – so both being an active stakeholder and also a systems designer.

This afternoon one of the breakout sessions you can attend has three of our recent fellows talking about their research and I would encourage you to go and listen and to talk to them about their experiences.

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You will also find in your packs/on your seats, a copy of our latest call for research proposals. Do have a look and think about whether this is something that you might consider at some point.

But I will end by encouraging you all to think of yourselves, not just as deliverers of services as the government would have you, but as stakeholders and system designers. If you work with women offenders, think about the Griffins Research Fellowships as an opportunity to bring about change – both in yourselves through the experience of undertaking research, but also with the aim of achieving systems change – something we should all be engaged in.

ENDS