

Guest editorial: Past, present and future – using the evidence base to support transforming delivery in His Majesty’s Prisons and Probation Service – Part 2

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Introduction

Welcome to Part 2 of the HMPPS Special Edition of the Journal of Forensic Practice, comprising research articles from psychology practitioners in His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in England and Wales.

Such was the interest from researchers in publishing their work in Part 1 that it resulted in more papers than could be included in a single edition! Part 2 continues with the aspiration to showcase the range of research undertaken in HMPPS National Psychology Services. It demonstrates the commitment of colleagues to better understand HMPPS processes and services, people’s experiences and outcomes and to explore how research findings can be embedded into policy and practice.

The Editorial Team has reflected on learning from Part 1, particularly around the importance of researchers articulating how findings from their study can be operationalised, and how these are shared with policy and operational colleagues to develop and improve HMPPS services.

In simple terms, this is about researchers being able to answer the “so what?” question in their research design and outputs. It therefore seemed fitting for the focus of this foreword to be on the value and impact of effective research dissemination. This includes the importance of researchers building a dissemination strategy into the design of their study from the outset. With resources invested in the approval and facilitation of research, it is crucial that HMPPS benefits from the developing evidence base to improve outcomes for staff and service users.

This edition has been brought together by an editorial board led by Glenda Liell from the HMPPS National Psychology Services Safety Team, accompanied by colleagues Karen Morgan, leading the National Research Committee (NRC) in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) Evidence and Partnerships Hub, and Dr Sarah Edwards and Martin Fisher from HMPPS National Psychology Services. As with Part 1, it would not have been possible without their commitment and expertise. Our thanks to the Editors in Chief and our support team at the Journal for agreeing to and supporting us with the publication of Part 2 of this Special Edition.

Differentiating research dissemination from research impact

“Dissemination” and “impact” are often used in similar contexts when discussing research findings or outputs, and sometimes interchangeably, although they mean different things.

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Bristol University's online resources define dissemination as "the process of sharing research findings with specific audiences using targeted channels and planned strategies."

There are several definitions of research "impact", including from [Bayley and Phipps \(2023\)](#), who described it as the "probable effects of research in the real world" (p. 3). [McKenna \(2021\)](#) stated that research impact is "the benefit, effect or change on a variety of people and things, including the economy, society, culture, health or quality of life, as a result of the influence or action of implementing research findings" (p. 1).

Dissemination and impact are linked, in that targeted dissemination, via engaging channels to relevant audiences or decision-makers, can help make sure the right evidence reaches the right people at the right time to make a difference. Effective dissemination can improve the impact of research for real-world change.

Typically, dissemination occurs at the end of the project, and impact may be measured afterwards. However, it is crucial to ensure a dissemination strategy is considered at the start of a project, and that researchers think about their outputs and their timing beyond the publication of a final research report.

The [Government Communication Service, 2024](#) (GCS) Evaluation Cycle (2024) provides an agile framework comprising of six stages for measuring effectiveness and impact. Whilst the focus of the framework is primarily on effective communication campaigns, the principles are relevant to research. These stages include inputs, outputs, outtakes (audience views), outcomes, impact, learning and innovation.

The research dissemination pathway

The nature of research dissemination has changed in recent years, partly due to the emergence of new technologies which offer more opportunities for reaching and engaging with broader audiences than "traditional" research reports or academic journals.

The development of what has been termed "innovative dissemination" was helpfully described by Tony Ross-Hellauer and colleagues in their 2020 paper. Their "10 Steps to Innovate Dissemination" includes some of the standard principles of effective dissemination such as developing a plan, mapping your audience, and defining your objectives. They also include additional considerations such as "remixing traditional outputs," which involve not only traditional research outputs such as articles and books, but also non-specialist summaries, press releases, blog posts, or video abstracts. Which of the increasing range of options will be most effective will depend largely on the intended use of the evidence, such as to inform policy decisions or to increase awareness within the general population.

The "10 steps" constitute one of many available sources of information on dissemination. Organisations such as the ([National Institute for Health and Care Research \(NIHR\), 2019](#)) or companies including the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI), which aim to enable the translation of research into practice have also produced easy-to-follow dissemination guides, including addressing challenges.

Stakeholder engagement

Methods for effective dissemination planning should include a stakeholder analysis exercise. Stakeholder engagement in research ensures that appropriate people are identified and involved throughout the research process. They may contribute to study design and implementation and then make use of the findings when a study is complete ([Huzzard, 2020](#)).

There are different approaches to choosing the most relevant stakeholders and securing their engagement, and this is dependent on a range of factors. In his 2020 paper, [Huzzard \(2020\)](#) reflected that an ad-hoc (and dynamic rather than systematic engagement)

approach can be a more realistic and productive approach in a collaborative project, whilst also acknowledging the challenges of maintaining stakeholder engagement, especially for large-scale and lengthy projects. [Parsons et al. \(2022\)](#) also discuss the importance of frequent, ongoing communication with evidence users or stakeholders throughout research to keep them engaged, rather than waiting until a report is published.

Within the HMPPS context, stakeholders should also include services users – prisoners and people on probation. Researchers should give careful thought to the most effective methods for engaging with this group of stakeholders, taking into account the operational and security measures of their environment and any accessibility needs.

The positive impact of involving stakeholders throughout projects and developing operationalizable recommendations was recognised in the [Edgell and Lorimer \(2025\)](#) paper in Part 1 of the Special Edition. The researchers' dissemination strategy considered the needs of a wide range of stakeholders; having engaged with prison staff throughout the initial research phase, their follow-up study found evidence for both the practical application of their recommendations at a local prison level and where their findings had influenced relevant policy.

Shaping dissemination to maximise research impact

The process of compiling these two Special Editions provided the Editorial Team with the opportunity to reflect on the shape of research dissemination within HMPPS. Research in prisons and probation is undertaken by HMPPS and MoJ staff, and external researchers. How to effectively disseminate findings and recommendations presents an interesting challenge to mapping what a dissemination pathway should look like.

Researchers should consider how evidence can be disseminated both *internally* (within HMPPS/MoJ) – to inform local practice or policy decision-making – and *externally* to contribute to the wider evidence base.

Internal dissemination

The dissemination strategy should consider the diverse needs of the stakeholders and researchers should develop outputs that clearly communicate their research findings and the implications for practice. For example, will a lengthy research report landing in the inboxes of busy policymakers have the intended impact, or are there more effective ways to facilitate engagement?

This final step of enabling recommendations to be understood and implemented is crucial. Setting aside time to collaborate with policy and operational colleagues can increase the likelihood of recommendations being adopted into practice. This also contributes to realising the benefits of the HMPPS vision of creating an “Open, Learning Culture”. This is where research should have “impact” beyond the number of times a paper is downloaded from a website. Consideration should also be given to communicating methodological and technical outputs to aid analysts in the design of future studies.

External dissemination

Researchers should also consider how findings will be shared outside of MoJ and HMPPS to contribute to the wider academic literature. This could be via submission to academic journals, presenting at conferences and/or blogs, for example. As outlined above (i.e. [Ross-Hellauer et al., 2020](#)), there are many options for creative dissemination for researchers to consider.

Sometimes overlooked is how to share research findings with our service user stakeholders. This can demonstrate to participants the value of their contribution to a study and increase

engagement with future research. There is a substantial literature base around effective methods for sharing research findings with participants, and those conducting research within HMPPS should be encouraged to build this into their dissemination approach. The [Health Research Authority, 2025](#) (HRA), for example, provides detailed guidance on communicating study findings to participants.

The MoJ Evidence and Partnerships Hub provides opportunities to enhance the dissemination and impact of research for MoJ decision-making. Activities facilitated by the Hub, via the MoJ academic network, include embedding academic researchers in MoJ research via secondments, holding roundtables, and facilitating an academic seminar series. This approach brings together internal and external researchers with policymakers and practitioners to share evidence, discuss their implications for policy and practice, and work together to address evidence priorities. Evidence is also disseminated externally via the Statistics at MoJ (Statistics at MOJ – Ministry of Justice – GOV.UK) and the Research and statistics (Research and statistics – GOV.UK) webpages.

Part 2 of this JFP Special Edition. These two Special Editions have provided a good opportunity for research by HMPPS psychologists to reach a wider audience. It has also fuelled a greater interest in publishing. We are aware of the need to develop our dissemination pathways to ensure anyone undertaking research across HMPPS understands the need for thoughtful dissemination, to increase the impact of research, and how to measure this.

As with Part 1, we have chosen to include studies covering a wide spectrum of topics to showcase the variety of research conducted within prisons by our forensic psychologists.

Through the exploration of perceptions and narratives of a sample of prisoners who have absconded from an open prison, Megan Harrington-Fletcher identified some of the reasons why prisoners abscond. These findings also partly informed a conceptual paper included in this special edition by Tom Bonser, Megan Harrington-Fletcher, Katy Lingham, Rejoice Tshabangu and Leigh Turner outlining an integrated model of absconds. This model considers the interaction between psychological and environmental factors to guide and support prisons to developing and piloting solutions.

The experiences of people with a formal diagnosis of ADHD are explored by Kayleigh Roberts. This study raises implications for practice to help improve the prison environment for neurodiverse individuals. Kelly Mulligan examines the potential impact of applying the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) with those serving Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection (IPP), where there have been concerns with sentence progression. Two studies led by Gavin Frost provide early evidence that participation in the “Stoicism” programme run in a prison for male foreign national offenders can achieve changes in wellbeing and self-reported aggression.

Glenda Liell’s paper brings together the outcomes of three studies completed by the paper’s co-authors on fire setting in prisons. They explore the characteristics of known fire setters; the act of repeat fire setting and its relationship to fire severity and level of injury; and the triggers for fire setting incidents in prisons. These studies on fire setting are some of the first of their kind in HMPPS. Recommendations highlight how physical control measures alone are not sufficient for fire prevention, but should be considered alongside interpersonal difficulties, both in relation to well-being and response to prison procedural concerns. This research journey articulates the importance of collaboration with research commissioners and demonstrates how ongoing support with the interpretation and application of the findings added value to the research and increased its impact.

Finally, the evidence base specific to the desistance journey and an individuals’ self-narrative around risk assessment and management is revisited by Karen Johnson and Caroline Falgate. This discussion paper considers how integration of the desistance

literature and supporting practitioners to incorporate this evidence into their practice can transform how they work with those under HMPPS care and supervision.

All papers highlight valuable new insights and the importance of ensuring research is disseminated effectively. When this happens, our research can make a real difference to improving HMPPS services, as well as the experiences of people under HMPPS supervision and our colleagues who work within the system.

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Further reading

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