

Critically evaluate the achievements of the multi-agency public protection essay ...



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The issue of how the public should be protected from the most dangerous offenders has been highly debated since the early 1970s. Public protection has been high on the Government's agenda for many years and is now a formally stated aim of the National Probation Service. This essay will discuss the developments of risk assessments and management systems within the National Probation Service and particularly focussing on MAPPA. The main focus of the essay will present the findings of various studies of multi agency risk assessments and risk management procedures aimed at protecting the public from dangerous offenders.

The essay will then discuss two high profile murder cases and conclude with a general evaluation of MAPPA. The debate regarding Public protection became apparent in the early 1970s when a publicised case involving a mentally ill patient called for stronger preventative methods. This case involved Graham Young who had been committed to a mental hospital after poisoning members of his family. After his release he went on to commit murders using the same method. This case made it clear there was a need for longer prison sentences for those who posed the greatest risk to the public.

These proposals met objections especially from Criminologists who claimed this would threaten the basic principles of justice (Radzinowicz and Hood 1981). Despite these objections preventative methods grew during the 1980s. Parole was eventually restricted for sexual and serious violent offenders in 1983. The Criminal Justice Act 1991 which was originally to emphasise due process, fairness, consistency and proportionality was rapidly

swayed by public opinion towards controlling those who commit crime (Hudson 2001).

Longer sentences were now allowed on the grounds of public protection. During the 1980s there were concerns about dangerous offenders coming out of prison and how they were to be managed in the community. There was a growing recognition of 'risk management' as part of the core business of the Probation Service (Kemshall 1998; Kemshall and Maguire 2001). This led to managers within Probation working closely with prison staff to ensure that these offenders were identified and that plans were put in place regarding their resettlement and supervision.

Risk assessment tools and procedures developed and became standard practice; the concept of information sharing was developed, not only between Probation and the Prison service but other relevant agencies such as the police, social services, housing etc. During the 1990s an increasing number of areas took the idea further and set up formal 'public protection panels' which brought together different agencies that would assess the nature and level of risk posed by offenders and decide how to manage them.

These agencies included social services, police, prison staff, psychiatrists, housing and other key agencies. However as the years progressed attention became focussed on the risks that sex offenders posed, especially 'paedophiles' (Hughes et al, 1996; Heberton and Thomas, 1997: 22; Grubin, 1998). The government responded by passing the Sex offenders Act 1997, this gave responsibility to police in consultation with probation for managing and assessing the risk of sex offenders. Between 1998 to 1999 a study was

carried out in six police force areas which examined multi-agency procedures.

The specific aim of the research was to examine the differences and similarities between the areas. The study found that risk assessment and management systems were diverse in structure and variable in quality. They were either led mostly by Probation or Police who had a close harmonious relationship. The co-operation and commitment of other agencies were poor in areas. The regularity of meetings differed between areas; some would hold regular meetings and others on an ad hoc basis. The offenders covered would be of varying risk levels and the staff involved of different seniority levels.

Some meetings had little or no structure, with little direction and policies were left in the hands of individuals. One common problem throughout all areas was the issue of resources and the numerous amounts of cases that panels had to deal with. Some cases were not given proper consideration and there was often lack of monitoring and review of cases due to demands of practitioner's time. The recommendations made were that it was necessary for key agencies to be present at meetings as health and housing were often less represented.

It was also recommended that Home Office laid out guidelines that would promote the consistency and standardisation of meetings. In particular with regards to panel members, risk assessments and referral of meetings and improved conducts of meetings. It also felt that resources needed to be allocated for public protection work and that more attention should be given

to the managerial oversight, monitoring and accountability of public protection systems. This was deemed essential to the production of defensible decision-making in a difficult and controversial field of activity (Maguire et al 2001).

In March 2001 under the provisions of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, the Home Office was given greater powers to tackle the problems that I have just highlighted. Its aim was to eliminate inconsistency, uncertainty and to increase the quality of work surrounding public protection. In March 2001 it introduced a statutory duty on Probation and the police to make joint arrangements for the management and assessment of sexual offenders who may cause serious harm to the public. This placed a duty on Probation and police to set up Multi agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) and to involve key organisations.