

J-ARC: An Interagency Initiative to Reduce Prolific Offending

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Summary: The Probation Service has been a partner in the Joint Agency Response to Crime (J-ARC) programme since its establishment in 2014. This paper provides an overview of how the programme was introduced in Waterford city¹ in 2016 as an interagency initiative that aims to intervene with prolific offenders and, in particular, to reduce the incidence of burglary offences. It details how the programme works from an operational perspective and discusses its use of a formal structure to support agencies in working collaboratively. The focus on work that supports the social inclusion of participants is highlighted, and an analysis of the strengths and challenges of multi-agency working is set out. The article concludes with some general reflections on the impact of the programme on offending behaviour, and areas for consideration as part of the next phase of implementation.

Keywords: J-ARC, joint agency response to crime, burglary, interagency, collaboration, probation, prison, recidivism, integrated offender management.

The Rationale for J-ARC

The Joint Agency Response to Crime (J-ARC) is a strategic offender management initiative led by An Garda Síochána (Police Service), the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service. The Department of Justice is also involved through oversight and policy functions. The programme provides a framework and strategic umbrella that brings together agencies in order to prioritise tailored interventions with the offenders who have been identified as causing the most crime within their locality.

Effective collaboration between justice agencies is recognised across various jurisdictions as a critical factor in working to reduce reoffending. The J-ARC programme is modelled on the Integrated Offender Management approach which 'seeks to reduce crime, reduce re-offending, improve public confidence in the criminal justice system, tackle the social exclusion of

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¹ Waterford is located in the southeast of Ireland and has a population of 116,176, with 82,963 residing in Waterford city (Census, 2016).

offenders and their families and drive organisational performance delivery improvement' (Annison *et. al*, 2015, p. 389).

Recidivism studies completed by both the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service highlight that burglary has the highest rate of recidivism of all offence types. The Probation Service report found that offenders who had committed burglary offences, although a relatively small group within the population of this study, had the highest recidivism (for any offence) at 41.4% after two years and 49% after three years. Of those who did reoffend, one-third were reconvicted for a public order offence and 10.7% were reconvicted for a further burglary offence (Probation Service, 2013).

Equally, the Irish Prison Service report noted that burglary offenders, while a relatively small group within their study, had the highest rate of reconviction at 79.5% (Irish Prison Service and CSO, 2013).

Background

On 21 November 2014, a joint protocol was signed by An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, establishing the J-ARC programme. The J-ARC strategy reflects a joint agency commitment to targeting nominated prolific offenders who are responsible for high levels of community harm, in order to reduce crime and enhance public safety.

It seeks to do so by strengthening the co-ordination and integration of policy, practice and research between the three criminal justice organisations. The overall strategic objectives are:

- To develop and strengthen a multi-agency approach to the management of crime,
- To prioritise prolific² offenders
- To reduce crime and increase public safety in local communities.

Introduction to Waterford

J-ARC was launched in Waterford in 2016 with the aim of managing identified prolific offenders through a multi-agency approach. It is one of eight operational initiatives, with similar projects launched in Dublin in 2015 and extended to Dundalk and Limerick in 2016. There are also two Youth J-ARC initiatives operating in Dublin and Cork.

² J-ARC targets prolific offenders, which is different from recidivist offenders who are likely to reoffend, but it is unknown to what extent prolific offenders typically have a large number of charges against them.

The project began in Waterford with the selection of a list of potential clients who met the criteria of 'prolific offenders'. Selection criteria targeted offenders aged 18 or over residing in the city and with a history and pattern of burglary-related offending. These included individuals in the community, either before the courts or subject to probation; those in prison but who might be eligible for temporary release;³ and those with a history of offending and in contact with the criminal justice system, as identified by An Garda Síochána. Each organisation nominated clients for inclusion at a preliminary referral and selection meeting, which resulted in 22 individuals being considered. Initially, ten participants were selected, comprising eight men and two women. Waterford is the first of the projects identified above to include female participants. All selected participants were known to all three agencies, had significant patterns of offending behaviour, and all had experienced periods of imprisonment. At time of writing, 13 individuals in total have participated.

While J-ARC is supported by an overarching structure nationally that includes multi-agency working both at strategic level and operational level, this paper focuses solely on the operational level in Waterford.

Core elements of the J-ARC project include:

- Intensive oversight by An Garda Síochána,
- Intensive supervision and support by the Probation Service,
- Use of rewards and sanctions to motivate and affirm behavioural change,
- Improved information-sharing between agencies,
- Additional service support located in funded projects.

In Waterford, the local multi-agency operations team comprises a Garda Case Manager, a representative from the Irish Prison Service (IPS) and the dedicated J-ARC Probation Officer. Each participant is assigned a Garda Case Manager and a Probation Officer. Participants are met by the operations team and invited and encouraged to sign up to the programme. A case management plan is developed, which is tailored to individual risk and need, providing the opportunity to tackle underlying issues such as addiction,

³ Temporary release plays a very important role in the gradual and supervised re-entry of an offender to the community. Under the Criminal Justice (Temporary Release of Prisoners) Act, 2003, 'a person who is serving a sentence of imprisonment ... shall be released from prison for [a] temporary period, and subject to ... conditions' (available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2003/act/34/section/1/enacted/en/html>).

mental health problems, alcohol and drug misuse. All participants are offered enhanced support to help address their offending behaviour and to encourage them to desist from crime.

An Operations Meeting is scheduled regularly, which includes the operations team and senior representatives from An Garda Síochána, the IPS and Probation. A report is produced for each meeting, co-ordinating information from the three justice agencies. The meeting provides a formal structure for pooling information, which means that a more comprehensive assessment of participants and their progress is available. This team reports to a Steering Committee, which is the regional multi-agency management team charged with oversight.

Central to integrated offender management design is a 'carrot and stick' approach, whereby offenders who engage with the scheme are provided with interventions and support, while those who fail to engage with the scheme should expect:

robust policing with regards to their offending – to prevent further offending through police monitoring and speedy apprehension. Implicitly a further carrot is that compliant offenders will be treated less robustly by police officers whom they may encounter, and indeed can expect to be intercepted by officers on a less frequent basis. (Annison *et al.*, 2015, p. 391)

Participants remain subject to J-ARC until they have reached a point where they are offence-free over a two-year period; they are then deselected from the programme.

The role of social inclusion

The role of social inclusion in working with offenders is well documented in the literature. In 1999, Martin Tansey⁴ described how 'Crime is best reduced through adherence to the principles of social inclusion, this is the best way to provide protection for communities from the harm and distress caused by crime' (Senior, 2014, p. 8). Similarly, Forde (2015, p. 198) states: 'if the route into crime involves complex processes at individual, family community and societal levels surely effective supporting desistance from offending also requires intervention at those levels.'

One of the themes in desistance theory is that interventions based only on

⁴ Martin Tansey (now deceased) was Chief Probation Officer until his retirement in 2002. He was also a founding member of the Association for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD).

the development of the skills and capacity of people who have offended (human capital) are not sufficiently impactful. There is also a need to work on developing social capital in providing opportunities to apply these skills and to practise newly formed identities like 'worker' or 'father' (McNeill *et al.*, 2012).

A core element of J-ARC Waterford is the access that participants have to training and education programmes that support a more structured and pro-social lifestyle. That service is provided by two projects, U-Casadh and Treo. These community-based organisations, funded by the Probation Service, provide a suite of services that facilitate more positive lifestyle choices and support progression to education and training programmes. The projects work in collaboration with the local J-ARC operational team. Project staff mentor and support the participants to make changes in their lives, and a learning environment is promoted, encouraging clients to try new and more mainstream activities. Communication and engagement strive to recognise and validate individual strengths and potential, and avoid identifying people with negative behaviour patterns that should no longer be part of a new narrative.

The projects also have a role in delivering structured interventions to help challenge the thinking, attitudes and behaviours underpinning criminal behaviour. The Probation Service 'Choice and Challenge' programme is a 12-session offending-behaviour programme, based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT); it has been delivered jointly by a project staff member and the J-ARC Probation Officer to participants in a group setting. Choice and Challenge includes a victim-awareness input as part of its sessional content, which helps raise awareness for participants of the harm caused to victims and the wider society.

Strengths and challenges of multi-agency collaboration

For service-providers

From a practitioner perspective, increased communication and information-sharing are key strengths of the J-ARC programme. A formal structure for information-sharing between the justice agencies, underpinned by agreed protocols, is of enormous benefit. Prior to the introduction of J-ARC, agencies often worked independently of each other with the same service-users. Information-sharing, when it happened, often occurred in a more piecemeal fashion. The evident benefit of information-sharing through a formal process is seen in the context of a shared understanding of the participant's situation

that enables a more holistic and integrated approach to problem-solving and the provision of support. The rapid and timely exchange of information means that support is available to respond to crises or can sometimes even lead to the crisis being averted. It also provides a more transparent and pro-social model of engagement that reduces the opportunity for offenders to manipulate or 'play' agencies off against each other. Participants are aware that information-sharing is now part of the process when they are subject to J-ARC, which can in itself be a deterrent to anti-social activity.

Another benefit of multi-agency collaboration is that the three agencies are working from a common case-management plan. Traditionally, each agency focused solely on its own separate priorities; however, a common plan reduces duplication of work and brings clarity to roles and responsibilities. Improved co-ordination of efforts appears to be more effective and it is seen generally in the literature on human services that 'The synergistic quality which emerges from the relationship is greater than what each of the stakeholders could have accomplished individually' (Longoria, 2005, p. 126).

For participants

A key benefit is that J-ARC provides participants with an opportunity to engage in a different way with criminal justice service-providers. Each of the participants had prior experience of working with the justice agencies individually. However, the difference with J-ARC is that the contact they now have with any single agency contributes to the joint plan. By engaging in a programme with one tailored plan specific to their criminogenic needs, the focus of intervention becomes more targeted and consistent.

Support is provided as a preventative measure and is both dynamic and responsive. When plans do not succeed, a problem-solving approach is used to see how the plan can change and adapt to emerging needs and risks. Persistence in offending is matched with persistence from services, and a high level of support is provided through the joint endeavours of all agencies.

This programme is also more focused on relationship-building with each individual. While this is an integral part of Probation practice, it does involve something of a shift of emphasis for the Garda Síochána. Traditionally, police contact with offenders would in the main revolve around the investigation of a crime and possibly the arrest of an individual. On this programme, individual Garda officers meet participants to offer support with the programme and to provide positive feedback. This allows people to see the police in a different

light, and shifts the emphasis from a criminal in the system to a participant on a rehabilitation scheme.

For communities

A multi-agency approach to crime can increase public confidence by ensuring that high-risk offenders are placed under intensive supervision and monitoring. Ensuring that participants are attending projects on a daily basis, in compliance with mandated conditions, helps increase public confidence in the management of prolific offenders.

Working collaboratively can also lead to increased public safety, due to prompt response to transgressions. For those who continue to offend, information is gathered and reported at the operations meeting, with the multi-agency team agreeing next steps and providing a swift response to non-compliance.

Challenges in implementation

A challenge that arises in the programme is the management of non-statutory orders. The experience from Waterford is that the mandated nature of orders such as Temporary Release or court-ordered supervision, which place clear parameters around attendance at onsite activities, does contribute to higher levels of co-operation and compliance. However, once these orders had expired and voluntary participation was introduced, there was a noticeable drop-off in attendance. Concern is raised in the literature that targeting those who have completed their sentence or who are no longer subject to orders as a preventive measure can be seen as an infringement of human rights (Senior, 2014, p. 14). The shift in approach towards identifying potential participants who are not subject to probation or statutory orders is a new departure, possibly more aligned with a newer culture of crime control as opposed to penal welfarism (Garland, 2002). The ethics and implications of this need to be carefully considered from a Probation Service perspective.

In the literature, criticisms of multi-agency working reveal that it is frequently a challenge for professionals to remain clear about their role when working within these structures. Nash (1999) introduces the concept of the 'polibation officer' to denote the perceived fusion of police and probation roles and to reflect the concerns that Probation Officers could become increasingly focused on control and surveillance, to the detriment of their welfare-oriented objectives. The idea suggests that increasing collaboration

between police and probation services, under the umbrella of public protection, takes individual practitioners away from their roots in terms of professional practice and culture. Does the blurring of the roles and sharing of information undermine social-work values, and how easy is it to maintain professional identities and keep Probation Service ethos and objectives to the fore? In Waterford, one of the ways that professional identity is maintained is by continuing to work in our respective agencies. While the operations team meets regularly, staff remain within their agency, which helps to reinforce professional identities and shared values and to keep agency objectives central to practice. This is in contrast to the offender-management model in the UK where staff of the programmes are located together under one roof and operating under a brand. The role of 'the brand' in criminal justice contexts has remained largely underexplored and it is clear that further research is required on this subject.

A further concern in the literature surrounding multi-agency working is that while there is an appeal to the notion of multi-agency working with a common goal, ideological conflicts and power struggles can arise (Cram, 2020). Similarly, Mawby and Worrall (2011) noted that increased collaboration and communication can lead to conflict between agencies.

An additional focus relates to levels of cost and resources. The intensive nature of the programme brings with it a far greater resource implication, in terms of both the monitoring level and the intensive support provided. It can be time-consuming to build a relationship of trust and to engage at a measured pace consistent with the participant's capacity. However, in Waterford, while there was a significant initial investment of time to build the structures and develop agency relationships, once the structures were established, the demands of the programme became less resource-intensive. The organisational structures in place from the outset of the initiative have remained robust, despite changes of personnel, with consistency in the ongoing delivery of the programme.

A particular challenge in the Waterford context arises in relation to intervening effectively with those who have a lengthy history of addiction. Chronic drug misuse and gambling issues have meant that, for some, engagement with the programme has been really difficult. Limited availability of access to rehabilitation treatment facilities further compounded this. In considering improvements and recommendations for the future, there needs to be a greater focus on ensuring a priority/fast-tracking mechanism for participants to access community and residential treatment facilities.

A final consideration in terms of implementation is the need to raise the profile of the J-ARC programme. While those involved in the project are aware of its development, further work could be done to raise the profile of J-ARC within each agency, but also externally — for example, in the courts. While judges locally appear to have a keen interest in the approach and in those who are participating in J-ARC and have recognised their positive engagement in the context of further court appearances, additional formal engagement could increase understanding of the aims, the strengths and the challenges of the programme.

Conclusion

While formalised collaboration and co-ordination between agencies has many advantages, the real question has to be whether it works; what is the overall impact on crime, specifically burglary, and on public safety?

Figures available from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) indicate that burglary has reduced since the programme commenced. Incidence of burglary has been falling steadily in Waterford since 2016, to roughly about 50%, coinciding with the early stages of J-ARC. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: *Recorded incidents of burglary in Waterford city, 2015–2020*

Year	Recorded incidents of burglary
2015	544
2016	345
2017	361
2018	263
2019	236
2020	123

However, it is difficult to link the change in offending behaviour patterns directly to the impact of the J-ARC interventions, particularly in the absence of any randomised control trials. While there is no doubt that J-ARC had a positive influence on participant behaviour, there are many other potential reasons for this reduction, including high-visibility police checkpoints, the role of intelligence-led policing and, more recently, the impact of COVID-19.

Nevertheless, J-ARC does appear to have had some success in curtailing the criminal activities of participants and preventing the occurrence of crimes such as burglary. In some instances, participants have discontinued their life of crime, while others have reduced their level of activity. Of the thirteen participants who 'signed up' to J-ARC since its inception, seven remain in the community, four have been returned to prison for ongoing offending, one is currently in a residential treatment programme as part of his integrated case-management plan, and one has been deselected, having successfully completed the programme.

While further evaluation is clearly required, the overall response from participants has been promising, particularly when considered in the context of entrenched patterns of criminal activity. While desistance was not achieved with all participants, those who did reoffend committed offences that were less serious. An evaluative study would need to measure the level of desistance as well as the seriousness of reoffending.

The *Critical Review of Initial Evaluations on the Three J-ARC Pilot Projects*⁵ undertaken in 2018 focused on the commonalities and the lessons learned, and it provided an interim assessment of the progress of J-ARC. Overall, the findings indicate that the multi-agency approach of J-ARC is worthwhile. Specific recommendations from this report include a continuation and potential expansion of the programme, improved evaluation, monitoring and data collection, an analysis of the costs of the J-ARC project and an increased effort to raise awareness of J-ARC through training and communication. The progression of some of those recommendations would serve to support and inform the further development of J-ARC Waterford.

Over the past four years, J-ARC Waterford has been an interesting, challenging and thought-provoking project in which to be involved. It is hoped that this paper provides some insight into how the project has operated, and highlights the benefits of multi-agency working. In conclusion, and in reflecting on the experiences over the last four years, I suggest that further evaluation/research might look at the following areas:

- Measurement of attrition on the programme to identify patterns of 'those who disengaged'. As described in the 'review' undertaken in 2018, another aspect of this might be to evaluate pre-programme

⁵ The evaluation is available at http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Final%20Desktop%20Evaluation%20of%20JARC%20Pilot%20Projects_18.9.18.pdf/Files/Final%20Desktop%20Evaluation%20of%20JARC%20Pilot%20Projects_18.9.18.pdf (accessed 29 July 2021).

differences between those who completed and those who opted out. This would help to tailor the programmes to meet an individual's needs, rather than the individual fitting the needs of the programme;

- Further consideration of the use of electronic monitoring. A small proportion of the participants leaving prison to engage with J-ARC in Waterford were subject to electronic monitoring for a set period. This proved to be a useful tool in enforcement and appeared to encourage compliance. Studies in Sweden and the US indicate that 'Electronic Monitoring can produce a positive effect increase if it is employed within the framework of a programme that also includes other measures such as an individual treatment plan' (Best, 2009, pp 91–6);
- An exploration of the potential for wider engagement with family members and significant others to support the desistance journey;
- Consideration of the specific needs of women and how these might best be met within the J-ARC model, with due regard to the Probation Service commitment to further enhancing a gender-informed approach in responding to the needs of women in the criminal justice system.

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