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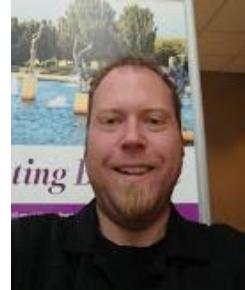
Returning to the Basics: A UK Case Goes Terribly Wrong

By David S. Prescott, LICSW & Kieran McCartan, Ph.D

A [BBC News](#) report from earlier this week tells a disturbing story: a man released from prison despite a number of warning signs abducts and sexually assaults women whose ages range from 11 to 71. He has now been given 33 life sentences. In a style telling of how people often respond in these situations, the third sentence of the article notes that "so far only one person has since been demoted." It seems clear from the article that much more is at play than the question of how many heads should roll.

What happened? A broader inquiry has just been published by [HMI Probation](#) has highlighted challenges within the local probation services, issues within the system, the impact of transforming rehabilitation, and funding. From the BBC report, it seems that Joseph McCann, 34 years old, had been convicted of burglaries. While in prison, there was considerable staff turnover, which people managing his case changing every year or so. Risk assessments examined his likelihood for further burglaries, while at the same time he sent letters containing threats of sexual violence to family members and his case manager. Reportedly, many of the professionals involved, already beset with high caseloads and other difficult workplace expectations, did not communicate all of the potential risks that McCann posed. Perhaps most telling is that although he had been seen by probation ten times in the two months after his release, he had been assigned three different probation officers during that time.

Obviously, we (the authors) are in no position to point fingers or place blame. In fact, we wish to underscore that what happened in this series of events is a tragedy that will likely forever alter the lives of all involved. It is not difficult to imagine some of the recommendations that will appear in the final report on this incident. Doubtless, caseloads, staff turnover, and other resourcing issues will receive a mention and may result in



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SAJRT Bloggers' Profile
We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

[The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers](#) is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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action. The authors believe that this case crystallizes the problems of and the fallout from the failed [Transforming Rehabilitation](#) agenda in the UK, the fracturing of probation service had a massive, [problematic impact](#) on the management of people with a criminal conviction. As we move towards the building of a new probation service this case highlights several concerns that we hope will be addressed:

The first is that when it comes to community supervision, supervision, and (risk) management, communication is vital. No amount of training, policy, or protocol is entirely helpful when the expectations of one's job preclude one's ability or proclivity to communicate. Our hope is that whatever measures are taken, they enable supervising agents and agencies to communicate meaningfully with one another.

It also seems that this tragedy poses an excellent opportunity to create training models that emphasize sharing information in general and communication skills specifically. Although we have no way of knowing, in our experience, training budgets are often among the first resources to be cut when political situations demand belt-tightening. The opportunity to re-create, or re-establish, a service enables us to put training, staff support, and political engagement at the top of the agenda.

The other challenge raised by the report was that McCann's perspective was taken at face value, that staff overemphasized his perspectives on this own rehabilitation and underplayed their critical edge. This presents a [challenge and an opportunity](#). In the UK we are moving towards a trauma-informed way of working, hearing the service user voice, and engaging the person with a conviction in their reintegration. But, how do we do this in a way that facilitates proactive risk management, staff security, service user engagement, and community safety?

Perhaps most importantly, though, is that when considering risk, it is essential that professionals ask, "risk for what?" Often, we label people who break the law in accordance with the laws broken, as if they were all specialists in one area of crime or another. In this instance, it seems that any discussions of risk were focused on crimes of record instead of the warning signs that were apparent to many involved in the case. Compounded with what appears to have been intensive staff turnover, much of this tragedy appears to have occurred not because people didn't have the right answers but because they weren't in a position to ask the right questions.