

Building Trust Without Lived Experience: Evidence-Based Approaches for Practitioners in the Criminal Justice System

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INTRODUCTION

In the criminal justice system, the progress of rehabilitation both leading up to and following release is largely influenced by the relationships they form with their professional and personal support network. During resettlement and rehabilitation, it is essential that ex-offenders build trust with allocated professionals so that a positive and supportive working relationship can flourish. Service providers that share lived experience with the service user offer a unique and valuable perspective. Their shared background can break down barriers, foster empathy, and create an immediate foundation for trust.

This can be especially powerful in settings where service users may feel misunderstood or judged by professionals without similar life experiences. Not all practitioners have lived experience, yet many still succeed in forming meaningful and effective relationships. This literature review explores how lived experience contributes to strong practitioner–service user relationships, and considers how practitioners without such experience can draw on interpersonal strategies and professional practices to build comparable levels of trust and rapport.

PEER MENTORING SCHEMES

Peer mentors are individuals with lived experience of the criminal justice system who work or volunteer in rehabilitative settings to support others navigating similar challenges (Buck, 2021). Their personal insight allows them to relate more closely to service users, offering practical guidance grounded in firsthand knowledge. For example, they may better understand the impact of substance dependency or the frustrations of navigating complex justice services, enabling them to tailor their support more effectively (Barrenger et al., 2019). One of the key benefits of incorporating lived experience into rehabilitation is the potential to improve engagement and reduce reoffending for individuals that often feel ostracised from society. Service users often perceive peer mentors as more approachable due to their shared experiences, which fosters a sense of trust and empathy sometimes lacking in traditional professional relationships (Chinman et al., 2014). This relatable perspective creates a unique dynamic, encouraging openness and deeper communication.

Peer mentors also play an important role in reducing stigma. By demonstrating understanding and respect for service users' journeys, they create a more humanised and non-

judgemental environment. This, in turn, helps service users feel less shame and more confident in their rehabilitation process (Davidson et al., 2012). As mentors often blend the responsibilities of caseworkers with the relatability of role models, their presence has shown particular effectiveness in working with individuals facing complex challenges such as mental illness or dual diagnoses (Rowe et al., 2007). However, the use of lived experience in criminal justice settings is not without challenges. One key issue is the difficulty some peer mentors face in managing professional boundaries. For instance, overidentification with service users or reluctance to disclose personal histories due to fear of judgment or repercussions can complicate the mentoring relationship (Davidson et al., 2012). These dynamics require careful support and supervision to ensure firm professional boundaries are established and maintained.

Another challenge relates to the institutional barriers that can limit the meaningful integration of lived experience roles. Peer mentors are sometimes undervalued or face unclear role expectations, particularly when transitioning from voluntary to professional positions (Porteous & Goodman, 2023).

The study found that in a youth justice service that embedded lived experience peer mentors, the mentors felt they were not treated equally to professionals. They also felt their involvement did not have genuine influence over decision-making and policy, which may result in feeling demotivated, stigmatised, and tokenised.

Broader systemic limitations also hinder the availability and inclusion of practitioners with lived experience. Risk management concerns - especially in justice settings - can restrict recruitment. Security clearance in the justice sector is often extensive and draws a blanket decision over not hiring people with past convictions. The vetting process for individuals who have offended can be complex and prolonged for those with criminal records. Concerns around safeguarding, risk management, and

public perception often slow down or restrict hiring, even when the individual's past experiences are directly relevant to their work. Disclosure of past offences can also be emotionally difficult and may deter some from applying, contributing to the underrepresentation of lived experience in offender rehabilitation. Vuolo, Schneider and LaPlant (2022) interviewed 303 adults with criminal convictions and found that criminal record questions in the application process significantly increases the likelihood that they would withdraw their application. This evidences that vetting processes, whilst important, prevent people with lived experience from engaging in careers in which they could provide invaluable insight and support. Vetting processes therefore need a reform to accommodate peer mentors with lived experience.

POSITIVE CRIMINOLOGY

The relatability that lived experience offers can be a powerful motivator for positive change and community reintegration. This aligns closely with the principles of positive criminology, which focuses on the strengths, positive experiences, and personal growth that help individuals move away from crime (Elisha & Ronel, 2022). Positive criminology provides a rehabilitative rather than punitive framework. It encourages practitioners to see beyond an individual's criminal behaviour and instead focus on their potential for change. This approach promotes

empathy, human connection, and personal development - elements that are also key to the effectiveness of lived experience in mentoring roles.

Several theories within positive criminology echo the values of peer mentoring, such as the importance of motivation, acceptance, and belonging. Peer mentors who share personal narratives of overcoming adversity create powerful examples of resilience and hope.

Their stories foster a sense of inclusion and acceptance among service users, reflecting the positive criminological principle that human connection can promote rehabilitation and reduce recidivism (Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ronel & Segev, 2013). Additionally, positive criminology's emphasis on personal strengths and resilience closely mirrors the role of lived experience in mentoring. Individuals with lived experience often use their own recovery and transformation to inspire others, showing that positive change is both possible and sustainable (Chinman et al., 2014). This strengths-based view shifts the focus from managing risk to nurturing an individual's capacity for growth—an essential element in effective rehabilitation (Ronel & Segev, 2013). Research further supports the effectiveness of environments that embody positive criminological principles. Harding (2014) found that rehabilitation programmes within prisons are more successful when they are delivered in supportive social climates. These environments, much like those fostered by peer-led initiatives, reduce hostility and promote cooperation, which can lower recidivism rates and improve outcomes for service users.

Restorative justice is a prominent example of a practice rooted in positive criminology. It centres on respect, responsibility, and empathy, aiming to repair harm rather than punish. Studies have shown its effectiveness in reducing reoffending and encouraging accountability (Fulham et al., 2023; Walgrave, 2008). Brierley, Best, McDermott and Woodfield (2025) conducted a systematic review into peer mentors and desistance. After synthesising 27 studies across a ten-year period, they found that peer mentors played a significant role in the rehabilitation of their mentees across the various studies.

such as giving back and repairing harm were deeply embedded in the peer mentoring roles, as well as recognising that peer mentors themselves can be healed by being enabled to help others, highlighting the importance of these roles in maintaining desistance for peer mentors and mentees alike.

Another strengths-based model is the Good Lives Model (GLM), which views individuals not as risks to be managed but as people with goals and aspirations. The GLM guides rehabilitation by focusing on building the capabilities needed for a fulfilling, pro-social life (Walgrave et al., 2019). Implementing a role model for a service user to see how their life can turn out if they work towards their goals is further reason to implement peer mentors alongside practitioners.

A unifying theme across these approaches is their rejection of the idea that people who commit crimes are inherently dangerous or broken. Instead, they are seen as individuals who—like anyone else—possess strengths, weaknesses, and the potential to make different choices. This perspective resonates with the core message of peer mentoring: empathy, connection, and hope are key drivers of lasting change.

In summary, the evidence shows that person-centred, non-judgemental approaches grounded in positive criminology are highly effective in rehabilitation. Practitioners can emulate the empathetic approach of lived experience by adopting a positive criminological lens—focusing on strengths, potential, and the human capacity for change. The following sections will explore how this can be applied by practitioners through pro-social modelling, personalised support, and reflective professional development.

STRATEGIES IN BUILDING TRUST

As discussed, building trust and rapport is critical for effective rehabilitation. For practitioners without lived experience, two key strategies that can help bridge this gap are pro-social modelling and empathy training. Both approaches have been shown to promote more humanising, strengths-based relationships with service users, which can support desistance from offending.

Prosocial modelling is when professionals demonstrate prosocial behaviours and values in front of service users, to act as a role model for adopting more prosocial behaviour (Trotter, 2009). Criminal justice staff can promote positive change by fostering human closeness and treating individuals not as inherently bad, but as people who have made poor choices (Braithwaite, 2000). Practitioners who model pro-social behaviours—such as being reliable, respectful, and honest—can help reinforce these same behaviours in service users. Key elements of pro-social modelling also include demonstrating warmth, using optimistic language, listening reflectively, and promoting positive life domains such as employment, positive friendships, and healthy family relationships (Ronel & Segev, 2013). These behaviours not only build trust but increase engagement, provide clear direction for change, and can ultimately reduce recidivism (Cherry, 2010). Importantly, showing hope for someone's future can strengthen their

self-belief and resilience, both of which are critical for lasting rehabilitation.

Developing empathy is also essential for practitioners working with justice-involved individuals. A study by Harney (2022) explored how different perspective-focused interventions could help staff and the public build empathy for people in prison. The study distinguished between perspective-taking (PT) and perspective-giving (PG). PT involves imagining what someone else is experiencing. For example, asking practitioners to reflect on what it might feel like to be incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic may help them empathise more with service users. PG, on the other hand, involves hearing directly from someone with experience—for instance, reading or listening to a formerly incarcerated person describe how prison affected their mental health. Both approaches were found to increase empathy and support for prison reform, although Harney noted that the effects were often short-lived. This evidences that approaching service users from an empathetic angle will elicit a stronger working relationship. Moreover, using PT and PG on a regular basis means someone without lived experience is still able to recognise the individual experiences of the service user and be motivated to support them through this level of understanding.

Other studies further support the value of empathy training in justice contexts. A recent systematic review by Lajante et al. (2023) identified four core empathy-related skills: communication, relationship building, emotional resilience, and counselling. Training programmes, ranging from simulation-based practice and reflective writing to mindfulness and communication workshops, were shown to improve both staff wellbeing and service user satisfaction. The review also emphasised the need for person-centred approaches, noting that empathy training should be tailored to the emotional needs and lived experiences of different service users.

Supporting vulnerable service users in any capacity requires Trauma Informed Care.

TIC refers to providing care to someone using an individualised, person-centred approach, with consideration of their personal experiences to prevent re-traumatisation (Forkey, Szilagy, Kelly and Duffee, 2021). TIC is crucial when supporting someone you do not share lived experience with as it recognises and validates their experiences, and builds trust through recognising someone's personal experiences and offering support tailored to them. TIC is evidenced in myriad studies, but research continues to emphasise the need for TIC in rapport building with people in the criminal justice system (e.g. McKenzie, 2025; Gonderman, 2025).

STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH

A core component of fostering positive experiences when supporting offenders is ensuring their reintegration programmes are both socially inclusive and person-centred. Lived experience builds rapport and trust between practitioners and service users, however an equally effective alternative is the implementation of strengths-based reintegration programmes which has been shown to effectively support these objectives (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). A person-centred or strengths-based approach shifts the focus from asking "what's wrong?" to "what's strong?",

emphasising autonomy, choice, self-determination, freedom, and responsibility (Saleeby, 1996). This approach is rooted in the principles of positive criminology and involves actively engaging individuals in defining their own goals, linking them with their local community and focusing on their desires in addition to their needs. Such engagement can significantly impact their motivation and self-efficacy, ultimately enhancing their capacity for successful reintegration into society (Hunter et al., 2015).

Expanding on the Good Lives Model (GLM) discussed earlier, the aim of strengths-based interventions is not only to reduce recidivism but also to enhance offender wellbeing by equipping them with the skills needed to meet basic needs and achieve personally meaningful goals. This in turn motivates and enables them to lead pro-social lives and integrate into the community effectively (Ward, 2002). The Fresh Start Prisoner Reentry Programme, as studied by Hunter et al. (2015), is an example of a practical application of these principles in a community re-entry setting. This programme provided pre- and post-release services that emphasised the strengths of individuals transitioning from prison to the community.

Focus group feedback from participants in the Fresh Start programme highlighted the programme's effectiveness in fostering a sense of agency and community connection, which are critical components of successful reintegration. Participants appreciated the strengths-based approach, noting that it helped them identify and build upon their capabilities, thereby facilitating their engagement with the programme and enhancing their readiness for reintegration (Hunter et al., 2015). By focusing on the strengths and positive qualities of offenders, the programme not only humanised the individuals but also empowers them to see their own worth and potential contributions to society.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

To further support the development of positive practitioner–service user relationships—particularly for staff without lived experience—reflective practice plays a crucial role. It complements strengths-based and person-centred approaches by encouraging practitioners to build self-awareness, emotional insight, and professional empathy. Reflective practice helps bridge potential gaps in understanding and enhances the relational depth needed to support rehabilitation effectively.

In criminal justice settings, reflective practice typically involves structured supervision sessions where practitioners

discuss complex cases, process emotional responses, and receive feedback on their approaches. This continuous cycle of self-observation and evaluation helps staff improve how they connect with and support service users.

Ainslie et al. (2022) explore a reflective supervision model used within the National Probation Service to enhance emotional wellbeing, professionalism, and autonomy. Designed to create a safe and supportive environment, the model encourages practitioners to reflect on their challenges, manage emotional demands, and improve how they engage with service users.

By increasing self-awareness, reflective practice supports staff in developing empathy and understanding—qualities that are especially important when lived experience is not shared.

Goldhill (2010) further highlights the potential of teaching reflective practice through distance learning. This method is particularly relevant in today's remote and digital learning contexts. While physical distance may seem like a barrier to reflective development, the study shows that with personalised support and targeted training, reflective learning can still be effective. This echoes the broader theme of tailoring

support to individual needs—key to both person-centred and strengths-based approaches.

Ultimately, reflective practice offers a pathway for practitioners to form meaningful, empathetic relationships with service users—even without firsthand experience of the criminal justice system. It reinforces the values of positive criminology by promoting emotional awareness, ethical engagement, and continuous learning in the pursuit of more humane, effective rehabilitation.

AMPLIFYING SERVICE USER VOICE

A final point that must be made is the importance of allowing service users to have a say in the care they receive. In order to provide a service without personal experience, collaboration and co-creation is vital. Smithson and Jones (2021) conducted a study working with young people in the criminal justice system. Participants co-created the research activities and participatory workshops before engaging in the workshops themselves. Results showed that participants were much more likely to engage meaningfully in the workshops if they were involved in their

creation. Smithson and Jones (*ibid.*) also noted that this was due to participants feeling seen and heard, but also feeling like the power dynamics between them and the staff were more balanced than in previous similar experiences.

Catch22 amplifies service user voice through their experts by experience podcast. Each episode they welcome someone that has experience of the criminal justice system and invite them to speak about their personal experiences.

This has successfully implemented a platform for service users to have their say on their own experiences, and broadcast this widely for other people with similar experiences to access. Additionally, within the Commissioned Rehabilitative Services, Lived Experience Consultants will be hired on a sessional basis to help shape, design and influence the future of Catch22's Justice Services.

To summarise, you can support someone without having experienced the same challenges as them by allowing yourself to be led by the voices of those who have.

Service users have also been directly involved in informing service operations at Catch22. For example, prisoners in HMP Thameside, Pentonville, Feltham and Wandsworth supported with developing the Resonance Impact Tool which is used across the estates to track progress. Similarly, people on

probation informed the development of a new initial assessment tool now used in Catch22's Commissioned Rehabilitative Services. Allowing service users to have a say in service delivery furthers their recovery by enabling them to feel valued and listened to, whilst genuinely enabling us to provide a service truly beneficial to our target service users. That being said, to make this truly effective, it is crucial that a feedback loop is implemented: service users must receive a follow up of how their engagement has supplemented and informed changes in service delivery. Whilst there is a breadth of research into lived experience frameworks and clarifying the importance of utilising lived experience in policy, there is little research establishing the need for a feedback loop. The issue of the lack of feedback is recognised (e.g. Suomi, Freeman and Banfield, 2017) but not provided with frameworks to improve the feedback loop.

CONCLUSION

While lived experience offers invaluable insights and helps foster immediate trust with service users, this literature review has explored several alternative strategies that can similarly support meaningful, empathetic, and effective relationships in criminal justice settings. Approaches such as reflective practice, pro-social modelling, empathy training, and strengths-based working provide practitioners without lived experience with practical tools to build trust, promote desistance, and support reintegration.

To implement these practices effectively, Catch22 staff should be encouraged to integrate regular reflective supervision into their routines. This can enhance emotional insight, improve decision-making, and foster professional growth. Likewise, ongoing training in pro-social behaviours and empathy-focused techniques—particularly those involving perspective-taking—can significantly improve practitioners' ability to connect with service users. Adopting a strengths-based approach, such as those informed by the Good Lives Model, shifts focus away from negatives and towards an individual's potential and capabilities, aligning with the principles

of positive criminology.

It must also be noted that lived experience is fundamental in policy making, but there are often obstacles to this. Particularly in the criminal justice system, vetting processes prevent peer support from services users with a criminal record. Changes in vetting processes to increase service user involvement is necessary to break down barriers and increase peer mentoring engagement. This would subsequently enable those with criminal records to engage in prosocial activity such as employment, meaning it is reducing recidivism for the peer mentor and mentee, emphasising the profound benefits of peer support systems in offender rehabilitation services.

Research advocates for a holistic, person-centred approach to rehabilitation—one that promotes inclusion, human connection, and personal growth. By focusing on empathy, understanding, and uplifting the voices of those with lived experience, practitioners can make a profound and lasting impact, even with people whose experiences differ to their own.

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The logo for Catch 22, featuring the word "catch" in a lowercase, bold, sans-serif font above the number "22" in a larger, bold, sans-serif font. The text is white and set against a dark blue background.

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