Hope and Probation: Using the lens of hope to reimagine probation practice

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth justice services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth justice services.

This report was kindly produced by Adam Ali, Anita Dockley, Stephen Farrall, Sarah Lewis, Jake Phillips and Kam Stevens. They present the findings from recent research which focused on the concept of hope within the delivery of probation services, recognising that having hope is important for people who have a desire to change. There are differing types of hope and the importance of 'transformational' hopes, as distinct from 'institutional' hopes, is highlighted. A key finding from the research was how transformational hopes can be drowned out through the adoption of a tick-box culture (with a focus on technical compliance), an over-emphasis on risk management, and through practitioners' fears of making mistakes, with hope also being outsourced to other agencies. In terms of how to make probation a more hopeful experience for people on probation, it was recognised that high caseloads were problematic. At the same time, it was felt that hope could be facilitated through the adoption of person-centred, strengths-based practices and through a focus on localised delivery, service user engagement, and substantive rather than technical compliance.
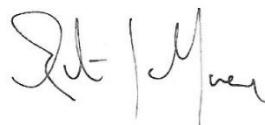
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1. Introduction

Hope, efficacy, optimism and positive expectations are connected to greater levels of psychological and physical wellbeing (Alarcon et al., 2013) and peoples' ability to change (Bartholomew et al., 2021). Hope is important for people who have a desire to change following a period of punishment or criminalisation (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Farrall et al., 2014). However, research on the concept of hope in criminology has tended to focus on prisons and – to a lesser degree – desistance from offending. Little research has focused on hope in the context of probation despite facilitating change being one of probation's central aims.

We thus undertook research to look at:

- how people on probation supervision and people who have experience of working in probation conceptualise hope
- how the Probation Service in England and Wales might facilitate hope
- what people hope to get from probation and what 'gets in the way' of probation supporting them to achieve those hopes
- what needs to happen to make probation a more hopeful experience for people on probation.

The most widely used definition of hope is the 'perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways' (Snyder et al., 2002: 249). So people need goals that are, at least to some degree, achievable and that they think or believe can be achieved. It is as a 'way of thinking' (ibid.) and is thus relevant to probation practice because it 'may be helpful in fostering adaptive rehabilitation processes through the use of intervention techniques aimed at creating clearer and more sustainable goals, increasing pathways thoughts, and instilling greater agency' (Snyder et al., 2006).

Moreover, to have hope one must feel like one has the agency to work towards and achieve those hopes (see Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2015:161-3). Considering the links between agency and desistance (Healy, 2013), we can further see the potential importance of hope for people on probation supervision.

Hope has been variously conceptualised in imprisonment studies. *Institutional hope* was seen as an adaptive strategy to cope with the challenges of imprisonment, as a 'key mechanism of psychological survival' (Crewe et al., 2020:126). It can also be a *protective factor* against the adverse effects of imprisonment (Wai-Ming Mak et al., 2021), that supports higher levels of wellbeing. While *deep hope* is transformational and involves moving away from previous ways of living. Seeds (2022: 241) suggests hope is 'sparked by the absence of an institutional apparatus, hope is a process of reorientation'.

In turn, hope might lead to a 're-narration' in which people in the criminal justice system reconstruct their own identities and commit to being better people (Seeds, 2022). There are clear links with desistance research which emphasises the role of redemption scripts enabling people to actively re-tell their lives and, crucially, their future (Maruna, 2001). Elsewhere, Farrall et al. (2014) point to the changing nature of hope that people experience as they desist from offending.

Hope has been incorporated into some models of criminal justice practice such as the Good Lives Model (GLM) (Ward and Brown, 2004) which focuses on developing peoples' 'goods' and creating a more hopeful outlook. The GLM asks practitioners to practice in a way which '*adds* to … personal functioning' rather than removing or managing problems (Ward et al., 2007). For

example, research with women in prison constructed hope as a belief in a better future and was 'heavily dependent upon outside sources that would provide structure and discipline', demonstrating the potential for probation services to provide strengths-based re-entry programmes, mentorship and goal-setting strategies (Stearns et al., 2018). Whilst these strategies can support people to be more hopeful, they tend to be specialist interventions and so are not widespread.

In this Academic Insights paper, we share the ideas, perceptions and possibilities found in our research for probation practice if hope were to be incorporated into its thinking and practice. A more detailed discussion of the research and findings can be found in Phillips et al. (2025).

2. Hope in probation practice

The research was undertaken when probation in England and Wales was subject to yet more reorganisation. The seemingly constant state of flux has no doubt contributed to probation being often understood – on a societal and political level – as lacking punitive rigour (Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012; Maguire and Carr, 2013), and possibly to adverse impacts for those under supervision (Hayes, 2018). Being aware of this context, the research team set about seeing what the concept of hope meant to those supervised by and working in probation as well as how that might translate into practice.

Data was generated through interviews with people representing a wide range of experiences of probation (see Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of interviews by participant 'group'

Participant group	Number of interviews
Former service users	24
Former probation staff	11
Current probation staff (or similar)	06
Working on the edge of the criminal justice system	02
Policy workers	05
Other stakeholders (e.g. politicians, sentencers)	04
All groups	*52*

The interview approach was co-designed and undertaken by the research team which included people with lived experience (Taleb 2014; 2018). We also sought more creative methods that sought to further diminish power imbalances between the researcher and researched. We thus adopted a walking methodology so that we would to be able to focus on space, time, and place (O'Neill et al., 2021). In this way we undertook group interviews as we walked to the village of Hope in the Peak District. The aim was to use the village as both a conceptual and geographical focal point for our discussions that we *hoped* would enable free-flowing conversations about hope in the context of probation. We analysed the interviews that then ensued using thematic analysis. This process was undertaken collectively, ensuring that the perspectives of the whole research team was integral to the process of generating themes from the data.

2.1 Types of hope found in probation

The interviews focused on what people on probation hoped to get from it. Three types of *hope* were evident: hopelessness, institutional hopes, and transformational hopes.

Hopelessness

Hopelessness brought to the fore the marginalised nature of people who find themselves on probation as well as the painful nature of penal supervision, with some people viewing it as just another form of formal social control:

> *"I had no hope at that time, I'll be quite honest with you. It was just basically the way I seen it was like they're just an authority figure over me. ... So I just seen them as police and that was it ... I didn't want to get anything out of it."*

People also talked about how life was so bad that they just lacked any hope; however, it seemed that being on probation had little to do with this:

> *"I was just a bad penny, really at the time. So, I didn't really have much hopes or dreams."*

> *"I think a lot of them in the state that they are in, they don't hope to get anything."*

Institutional hopes

Most participants' priorities (both staff and people on probation) revolved around getting to the end of the sentence or complying with minimum requirements: *institutional hopes*. This type of hope rests upon the institutional logics of probation, suggesting a reliance on engagement and practice which is technical rather than substantive in nature (Robinson and McNeill, 2008):

> *"Generally, it's hoping that I could attend these appointments, not get breached and it all go away."*

> *"Well, it can be so many things you know, for some people it's something simple ... [it] is just getting to the end of that period of being supervised or monitored."*

Having these types of hopes for a community sentence led to a form engagement that seemed to be superficial, technical and closed:

> Interviewer: *"What did you hope to get out of that sentence?"*
>
> Participant: *"I didn't. I just wanted to get it over and done with so I could carry on with my life. I didn't hope to get anything from it. It was an inconvenience."*

Moreover, this type of engagement seemed to be underpinned by a general distrust of the service:

> *"The purpose for me was avoid getting recalled. That was simply to avoid any sort of trouble ... I'd heard stories if you tell your probation if you get too angry or frustrated or whatever like that's enough for recall ... Make sure I tick the boxes necessary for me to get off licence as soon as possible."*

Transformational hopes

'*Deep (transformational) hopes'* were evident when our participants talked about moving away from harmful lifestyles to something more 'normal':

> *"To have a normal life, I said ...I really have an addiction with opiates and ... So get clean. I wanted to change my life and I wanted to ... Maybe I just wanted to be a normal 16–17-year-old girl, you know."*

Transformational hopes divided into formless and concrete hopes (Farrall et al 2014). The former involves hoping that 'things will be better' in 'the future', i.e. crime: *"It's about not ever going back to a situation where they're involved in the system again"*. Participants talked about how these hopes had their roots in having become tired of previous ways of running their lives and leaving behind lives which were structured by forms of behaviour which were illegal and harmful. Over time, formless hopes developed into more concrete (and distinctly ordinary) hopes:

> *"But in the end, it's more of a hope of just living quite normally. You know, just quite uneventful lives. … A lot of people would just like to have a job, would just like to have something where they don't feel really ashamed of the behaviour …"*

These hopes included getting married to a specific person, having a (second) child, getting a new job, going on holiday, or moving to a bigger home.

Fulfilling these deep hopes involves traversing 'an unmapped terrain towards a future that is not known' (Seeds, 2022: 241) and it is here where participants felt probation could play a role:

> *"I think for me, a lot of the, for me, the majority of offending behaviour is the by-product of other things. And actually, when you deal with the other things, the offending behaviour tends to go away because again, it's the hope of a better life. But for most people in their eyes they're making a lot of rational choices about the fact they can't. They can't. They can't hope for things that they see other people having day-to-day and that's even though that causes harm."*

There was consensus amongst participants that hope should be a central part of probation practice and that probation should support people to do this by inspiring people to change:

> *"I think there's just something about inspiring people …I think that's a really powerful narrative … hope for me is about instilling, in the person that you're supervising, that they are talented and skilled."*

2.2 Drowning out and outsourcing hope

Participants felt probation should be supporting people to achieve deep (transformational) hopes, but were concerned that it was failing to do this. Our analysis was able to shed light on some of the underlying reasons.

Tick-box culture

The most common theme here was that of a tick-box culture which our participants experienced as a dehumanising process:

> *"Probation is too focused on the tick-box checks. Have they been where they're supposed to be? Yes, right. Okay, job done, next person. Not in terms of, is there any quality or is there any change been there. Have they turned up? Yes or no, right next one. So, it's pile them high and sell them cheap at the moment, which is a bit understandable, given the high caseloads."*

Emphasising technical compliance and performance management over and above substantive engagement (Robinson and McNeill, 2008) and holistic approaches leads to what several

participants described as practice which 'drowned hopes'. Much of this was attributed to probation being part of a bureaucratic civil service that stifles innovation and local responsivity, reflecting findings from recent research in England and Wales (Millings et al., 2023). This tick-box culture and focus on technical compliance results – according to our participants – in a rigid service that fails to respond to peoples' individual circumstances:

> "Probably probation supervision may hinder rehabilitation because actually people are getting their shit together and actually having to constantly go to probation stuff or inflexibility means that it's interfering with them trying to maintain a job or maintaining family contact or things like that. Because probation is an unwieldy tool that says, "Don't care if you've got a job interview, You see me at 10 o'clock tomorrow morning" … it can hinder people … and that can diminish their hope because they see probation as more of a cruel punishment, if you get what I mean, Because it's not just "I've got to go, that's fine. But you seem to be purposely making it so; it doubly punishes me."

Risk management

Much of this was seen by participants to be rooted in the service's focus on risk. Risk management and desistance-focused practice are not mutually exclusive (see Academic Insights 2021/07 by Kemshall), but our research suggests that the pendulum is currently positioned too far towards risk management and that this comes at the expense of desistance-focused practice which emphasises building strengths and demonstrating a belief in peoples' ability to change:

> "I think people particularly in a very risk averse culture, are really struggling to kind of reconcile that … in practice that focusing on the risk means controlling the shit out of people. So you can do the nice, fluffy, huggy rehabilitation work but not if risk is a factor and risk has to come first. I still don't think that people have really managed to marry that up."

The effect of this practice is that "*we dash hopes all the time in terms of the way that we have to risk manage because … that's inherently against somebody's hope.*" These examples show how the emphasis on risk can serve to reduce practitioners' abilities to support people in believing that an event (their hope) is possible (Miceli and Castelfranchi, 2015).

Fear

When discussing what gets in the way of peoples' hopes, and especially deep hopes, we identified a common theme around fear. This tended to focus on processes of accountability which were experienced as blaming exercises rather than opportunities for learning (Mawby and Worrall, 2011; Petrillo and Bradley, 2022). Cultures of fear and blame were seen to quash peoples' hopes.

Practitioners felt this as a fear of making mistakes and, especially, serious further offences. As such, participants made direct links between the emphasis on risk, and a form of practice which limits peoples' hopes:

> "If I'm completely honest the whole risk thing, I think, and I don't blame probation practitioners themselves … I think they're scared of making any decisions. I think

> *they're scared of following their gut. I think they're scared of following their intuitions because if anything goes wrong they become accountable and from the impression ... I think there's kind of a culture of if you get something wrong and you make a mistake, you kind of hung out to dry."*

Probation policy has been increasingly punitive, largely driven by a perception amongst politicians that the legitimacy of probation rests on its ability to show that it is a viable alternative to prison by being a punishment in its own right (Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012). A probation service underpinned by the punitive principles of retribution and deterrence has to rely heavily on enforcement because this enables it to demonstrate efficacy. Participants saw this emphasis on punishment manifest in reduced levels of trust between practitioners and people on probation:

> *"Why would you trust somebody and share your hope with somebody? That's a really personal thing, hope isn't it? For somebody to say to you what they hope for means that they're putting a lot on the line. It is very difficult, particularly for a lot of people who may have experienced that and then not seeing things through, you know or not have professionals see things through with them."*

Trust is central to the 'working alliance' (Sturm et al., 2022) and is considered key to perceptions of procedural justice and legitimacy (Fitzalan-Howard et al., 2023). It is perhaps little surprise that methods of practice which create fear and distrust do little to foster hope and hopefulness.

Outsourcing hope

Probation alone cannot help people achieve their hopes (although many thought it should play an important role here) and probation services have long worked with a range of other services to support people on probation (Senior et al., 2016). Reflecting research on the impact of austerity on the provision of community services (Cummins, 2018; Jones et al., 2016), participants talked in depth about how services have disappeared in recent years.

As a result of this, probation practitioners and people on probation are forced to *outsource* hope to other services. Our participants' experiences suggest that the combined effects of systems of punishment which emphasise targets, risk and punishment, high workloads and hollowed-out community services means that probation in England and Wales works to a framework whereby a focus on technical compliance and institutional hopes drowns out and/or outsources deep (transformational) hope rather than builds and nurtures it.

2.3 Can the Probation Service become more hopeful?

Although our findings paint a generally negative picture of probation, our participants discussed aspects of practice which they felt could make penal supervision a more hopeful process. Unsurprisingly, workloads came up frequently in our discussion – both staff and people on probation recognised that workloads were just too high and that this impedes practitioners' abilities to work in meaningful ways. However, we also heard many examples of what probation could do differently, high workloads notwithstanding.

Person-centered probation practice

Person-centred practice underpins what it means to be professional (Tidmarsh, 2022). It is practice that instills deep hope which conveys a human-centred message rather than,

necessarily, practice which prioritises criminogenic risks and narrow sentencing aims of rehabilitation and change.

> *"To me, it will always be about advise, assist and befriend. It's about being there for people being alongside them, valuing them, you know, thinking about them, holding them in mind … it is also about starting where they are and working through on a journey that is not just informed by the service user, it's also informed by everything else we know about how things work in society and that notion of risk is still there."*

Probation should be able to capitalise on the fact that, for many people, their probation practitioner might be the only person who is willing to listen to them and see beyond them as an 'offender':

> *"For some of those individuals that come through the door … their probation officer, their probation practitioner might be the only person they have in their life that listens to them, or that they can talk to, or that they kind of have any prominent feature in in an individual's life in a positive way."*

Person-centred practice has long been considered key to probation practice although it has proven elusive in recent years (Sirdifield et al., 2024). Our participants consistently argued that such an approach can facilitate hope, especially, deep (transformational) hope, because being person-centred is one way of demonstrating an interest in people and supporting people to 'follow dreams'

Treating 'people as people' was central to what participants felt should underpin hopeful probation practice. Participants suggested that doing so creates respect and validation and whilst participants who had been under probation supervision were generally negative about their experiences, those who had positive stories focused on this:

> *"She actually sat and asked me what I wanted and how I could use those probation hours to do something … She treated me like a human being and she asked me what I wanted, what I was interested in."*

Service user engagement

Participants emphasised the importance of making more use of service user engagement across a number of levels. Firstly, in terms of individual co-production whereby people have 'a choice in and control over the type of support they receive' (Weaver et al., 2019):

> *"I think putting some kind of plan together. Understanding what someone's hopes and dreams are, identifying what that looks like. And then perhaps even going away and coming back with some possible options a bit like a mentor…"*

Secondly, 'collective' forms of co-production (ibid.) where people with experience of probation are involved in the development of policy and delivery of practice:

> *"It's just literally get to the end of order, "see you later". We don't want to hear it. We like to pretend we do. We don't really want to hear it. We don't do anything with it. … I think involving people with lived experience in probation in various ways and developing policies, that really would be the key for me."*

Involving people with experience of probation in the design and delivery of community sentences falls under a broader theme from our data: delivering probation differently. This spans a number of potential ideas including changing the environments in which probation is delivered and doing more to deliver probation in multi-agency, hub-type environments (Albertson et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020):

> "There's a hub that I've heard about in [city] for people to engage in a more holistic way in terms of things that are going to look at life stuff and it's those organisations that, if they're given space to work alongside us, gives me hope that actually we can offer more to people. I've got hope because I've seen the positive steps in terms of taking a more psychologically-informed approach to people, so we're recognising the importance of that and how to foster it."

A more local service

Participants also felt that a more local service, cleaved from the civil service, would allow probation to return to the community from which it retreated in the 2000s (Bottoms, 2008):

> "… we were local. The first office I worked in was two converted council houses put together in the middle of one of the biggest estates. We were there, we were in and amongst it and I think that really had some advantage of knowing what was going on for, for, for people, so starting from where, where people were. So, you know, let's move out of these great big offices where you have to, you know, travel for goodness knows what… let's make it local again. Let's connect people. Let's connect workers back in with the community and the resources that are there."

Substantive compliance over technical compliance

Participants felt that the emphasis on technical compliance was working to 'drown out' deep hopes and argued that people on probation would be better served by an organisation that was more focused on substantive forms of compliance. Indeed, the most prevalent theme across our data was that whilst probation *should* focus on supporting people to have and achieve transformative hopes, the system was not set up to do this:

> "I was hoping that probation … would be able to understand that, provide the appropriate support and mechanisms to process those thoughts and feelings. That's what I was expecting it but it wasn't really the case unfortunately … I kind of realised that that was never gonna happen and they're literally just there to put restrictions on me and to make sure that I don't do certain things. So my hope definitely went down to next to none to be honest."

Having hope requires people to feel like they have agency over their future: removing structural barriers may allow people feel as though have more agency. Secondly, giving people opportunities to do different activities is likely to make people feel more like they have some control over their lives.

Hope-based probation work was positioned as contrasting with the system's current emphasis on risk management and technical compliance which was summarised by one participant as 'basically to monitor risk and ensure compliance'.

Strengths-based probation practice

In the same way that an over-emphasis on risk was seen to 'dash' peoples' hopes, participants were unanimous around the idea that there should be a stronger emphasis on identifying and building peoples' strengths over assessing and managing risks. Participants reflected the idea that strengths-based work is fundamental to more hopeful probation practice:

> *"I think obviously understanding someone's strengths, making it strength based. Understand what they can/can't do and working with them on that basis would be really helpful."*

Such an approach is underpinned by the close relationships between hope and agency and 'future-oriented' thinking that defines hope (Snyder et al., 2002). It is clear from our data that the Probation Service in England and Wales has a long way to go before it can truly call itself a 'strengths-based' service. While the Probation Service is developing a new risk assessment tool called Assessment of Risks, Needs and Strengths (ARNS) (Hinds, 2023), caution is needed to avoid seeing ARNS as any form of panacea if staff do not have manageable workloads and access to resources and services.

3. Conclusion

Very little research has sought to understand what people on probation and people with experience of working in probation hope to get from probation, nor whether probation facilitates these hopes. Analysing hope in this way has exposed a significant gap between what people want from probation and what probation currently delivers in England and Wales.

By analysing what people hope for through existing thinking on the topic (Farrall et al., 2014; Seeds, 2022), our findings illustrate that different types of hope exist for people on probation. Our analysis points to the fact that there is scope for probation to be more focused on facilitating deep (transformational) hopes which, in turn, can be understood as 'a testament to the capacity of individuals to persevere and adapt, grow and change under extreme circumstances' (Seeds, 2022: 247). Our participants would suggest that encouraging deep hope is likely to lead to longer-term legal, substantive compliance rather than the technical compliance (Bottoms, 2001; Robinson and McNeill, 2008) that is linked with shorter-term, institutional hopes.

However, it would seem that the Probation Service in England and Wales is not currently in a position to support people to develop nor achieve their hopes and that structural and cultural factors can impede hopeful 'ways of thinking'. There was consensus amongst our participants that hopes are being drowned or dashed by practice which emphasises technical compliance and leads to a reliance on institutional hopes, hopelessness, and hope being outsourced to other agencies. At the same time, as set out below, participants identified ways for probation to move in a more hopeful direction.

Barriers

- Adoption of a tick-box culture (with a focus on technical compliance)
- An over-emphasis on risk management
- Practitioners' fears of making mistakes
- Hope being outsourced to other agencies

Enablers

- Adoption of person-centred practices
- Adoption of strengths-based practices
- A focus on localised delivery
- A focus on service user engagement
- A focus on substantive rather than technical compliance

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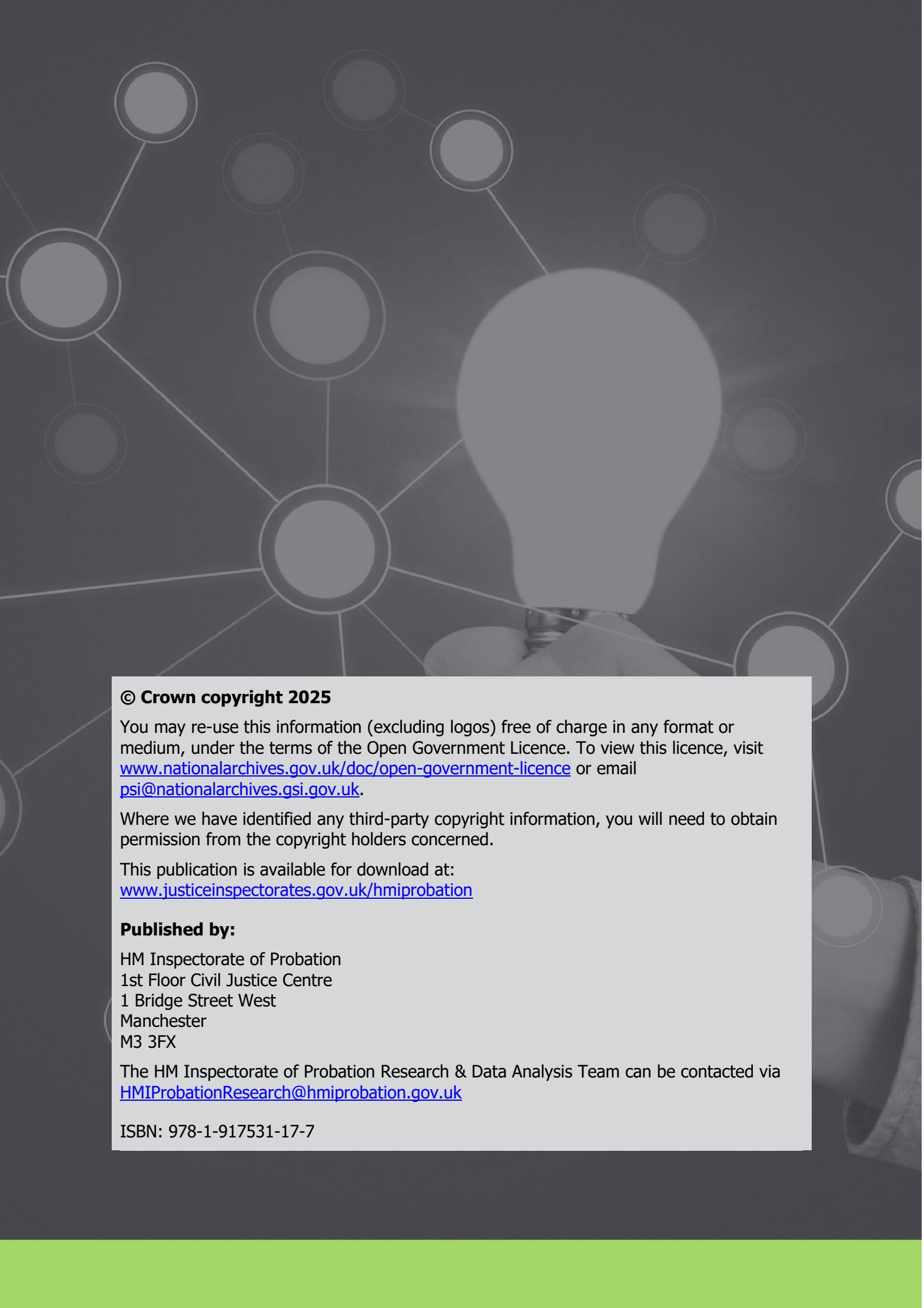Taleb, N.N. (2018). *Skin in the game: Hidden asymmetries in daily life*. Random House.

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