



## Supervisable: Exploring community supervision using photovoice

# the Howard League for Penal Reform

### Key points

- The emergence of 'mass supervision' has largely escaped the attention of legal scholars and social scientists more concerned with the 'mass incarceration' reflected in prison growth
- Supervision in Europe has developed rapidly in scale, distribution and intensity in recent years. In England and Wales government figures show that in March 2014, 218,671 people were under probation service supervision (MoJ, 2014: 11). Following the Transforming Rehabilitation reforms this number is expected to increase by at least 45,000 due to the extension of supervision to those completing a prison sentence of under 12 months
- The statistics highlight the scale and scope of supervision. They do not, however, provide an insight into the supervisee's lived experience of it. Supervisable is a pilot study funded by the Howard League which uses photography to understand the experiences of people who are supported and supervised in the community either before or following engagement in the criminal justice system
- The findings suggest that photovoice methodology is effective in raising self esteem and improving potential outcomes for individuals, as a tool for practitioners to engage with people, and in enabling the public and policy makers to understand the potential for support and supervision in the community
- This approach is effective with those at risk of getting caught up in the criminal justice system as well as with those already sentenced.

## Introduction

Supervisible, a photovoice research project, grew out of the work of the COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) Offender Supervision in Europe Group. The idea was to adopt a new visual method to explore the impact and experience of people being supervised in the community. Supervision has too often been framed as something which is done to people, and the views and narratives of those subject to supervision have in the main been unheard. This has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the 'dynamics' of the supervision process, which are just as much about how it is perceived by those on the receiving end of it as by those who supervise it. It was thought that being involved in a creative research project would empower and enrich participants. It was noted that people being supervised in the community, as with other marginalised groups, often have low educational achievement and poor literacy skills (McNeill et al., 2011), which can inhibit their confidence and ability to verbally articulate their experiences and feelings. Creative interventions can enable participants to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as develop new skills with which to communicate and share their emotions and experiences with others (Palibroda et al., 2009).

Photovoice is an established method developed initially by health promotion researchers (Wang and Burris, 1997). People who engage with the photographs taken and selected by participants can reflect upon and explore the reasons, emotions and experiences that have led to the creation and selection of the chosen images. This visual approach is a potentially powerful and engaging research tool that can reveal how people experience supervision in the community.

## Methodology

This pilot study was undertaken with volunteers from Alana House Women's Centre in Reading. Ten women participated and took photographs over an 8 week period. This was followed by group discussions, supported by an experienced artist, to reflect upon and explore the reasons, emotions and experiences behind the photographs. During these discussions it was agreed that captions chosen by the women would accompany the photographs to provide context. For more information about the methodology see the online photovoice factsheet.

## The women's experiences

The participants' discussions revealed the following themes:

- Rubbish
- Health and wellbeing
- Judgement and representations
- Help and support
- Time
- Money and cost
- Hope, growth and nature

The photographs, captions and extracts from the discussions demonstrate the effectiveness and powerful nature of this method to reveal how people experience supervision in the community. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

### Rubbish



**Rebecca** *I was trying to get the rubbish of my life, like the bag, here... Everything else is clean and I'm the rubbish and I was trying to get that in this one [...]*

*There's clean and there's that rubbish, and I'm that...*

**Sally** *You feel like that, yeah?*

**Rebecca** *Before probation, yeah, really did!*

**Sally** *But do you feel that probation has helped you move past that?*

**Rebecca** *From that course the Thinking Ahead for Women, I did that and I did another group called The Steps Programme for people with borderline personality disorder, yeah, amazing... because when you've been told you're rubbish ... when you've been affirmed that you're not*



*good enough ...which brings you to do the negative things we've done in our lives because we are screaming out for somebody to say...*

**Sally** *Actually you are good enough, you are...*



**Rachel** *...how everything has turned to rubbish, how I ended up living in bags ... I am still trying to sort the mess of what my life had become and has become... It doesn't matter where I am or what I'm doing, I'm still carrying this shit around with me because this is my life but it's still a load of rubbish in so much as I'm not working at the moment, I'm not doing real things, going to probation and talking about the way you ought to react as a woman isn't real life. You'd like it to be and at some point hopefully subconsciously it will be but realistically you don't walk down the street and go oh I mustn't react in this way or...*

## Health



**Ella** *...[this] hospital, my brother's worked there 26 years and that's where I often end up because of my depression and my drink ... suicide attempts, been there quite a few times*

## Judgement and representations



**Maggie** *So the mask, by being on probation...*

**Sally** *You are being someone you are not...*



**Mary** *...about the whole judgement, you shouldn't, you don't know a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes*

## Help and support



**Ella** *the fact that we all need help and we are all crying out and that box is saying 'will you help'?*



## Time



### Borrowed time

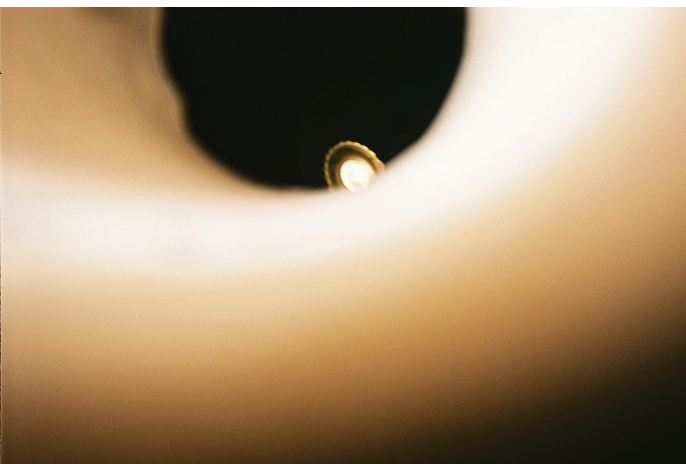
**Gillian** *I definitely think subconsciously I'm always fighting that chaotic [lifestyle]. [Supervision is] regimented and I've got to be there at 11 o'clock and I've got to stay there till 1 o'clock and it's every week and in the meantime I've got to do X, Y and Z on Tuesday and Friday and whatever else but there is definitely a whirlwind in amongst all of that [life].'*

## Money and cost



**Ella:** Money down the drain

## Hope, growth and nature



**Sally:** light at the end of the tunnel

**Suzy** *It's not so bad, it's not so bad because it will come good. Yes, I have committed an offence, it's not so bad because I'm here and not in prison and the fact that it will come good, it will be alright in the end. Cause it did really, it really did bother me when I was stood in court, it really did, to think that I was going to prison was a very, very dark time. But then, because I'm not, that's where my picture is, I'm not there, I'm here.*



**Sally:** Having the tools to enable yourself to do the right thing moving forward



**Rebecca** *...mushrooms are very temporary, they are not here forever*

## Conclusion

The pilot study showed that photovoice allows interaction between co-researchers that proved to be meaningful and insightful for those involved. The methodology has an aspirational dimension in that it enables service users to tap into their latent creativity and recognise the potential for change. It can facilitate empowerment and greater confidence whilst supporting desistance and generating social capital. Not only do the photographs speak volumes in themselves but some of the comments and discussions they elicit allow for potent appreciation of the participants' experiences.



The photographs and the accompanying discussions provided a strong sense of the pains of community punishment, covering both moments of active supervision and also the pervasive nature of the all-seeing eye of punishment in the community. Those experiencing supervision and support in the community have their lives laid bare and exposed to others who have power over them. To some extent, their lives are halted – their real life suspended or on hold during and sometimes after supervision. Photovoice is potentially an effective and visceral means of enlightening the public and practitioners as to this lived experience of supervision. It could be used to help develop policy initiatives, or as a tool to develop communication between community workers and those seeking support and supervision, whether or not it forms part of a court order. Photovoice is an engaging, energising and innovative methodology. There is definite potential for using this method and it deserves more attention through further research.

Cover photograph: 'Sobriety, clarity' but could also be watchful eye.

## References

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## About the authors

Wendy Fitzgibbon is Professor of Criminology, London Metropolitan University; Carolyne Kardia is a visual artist (<http://www.carolynekardia.co.uk/>); Laura McDavitt is a research assistant at the Law Commission.

## About the Howard League for Penal Reform

The Howard League is a national charity working for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

We campaign, research and take legal action on a wide range of issues. We work with parliament, the media, criminal justice professionals, students and members of the public, influencing debate and forcing through meaningful change.

## the Howard League for Penal Reform

1 Ardleigh Road  
London  
N1 4HS

t  
e  
w

020 7249 7373  
[info@howardleague.org](mailto:info@howardleague.org)  
[www.howardleague.org](http://www.howardleague.org)

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