



Experience Insights | Issue 01 | May 2026

Bringing together highlights in experience-informed knowledge across criminal justice, prisons, probation, and community practice





Welcome to the first edition of **Experience Insights**.

This is a new space, created to share some of the latest and most thought-provoking contributions grounded in **insights from experience**. The aim is simple: to bring together good work that is often scattered across different spaces and present it in a way that is accessible, digestible, and easy to engage with.

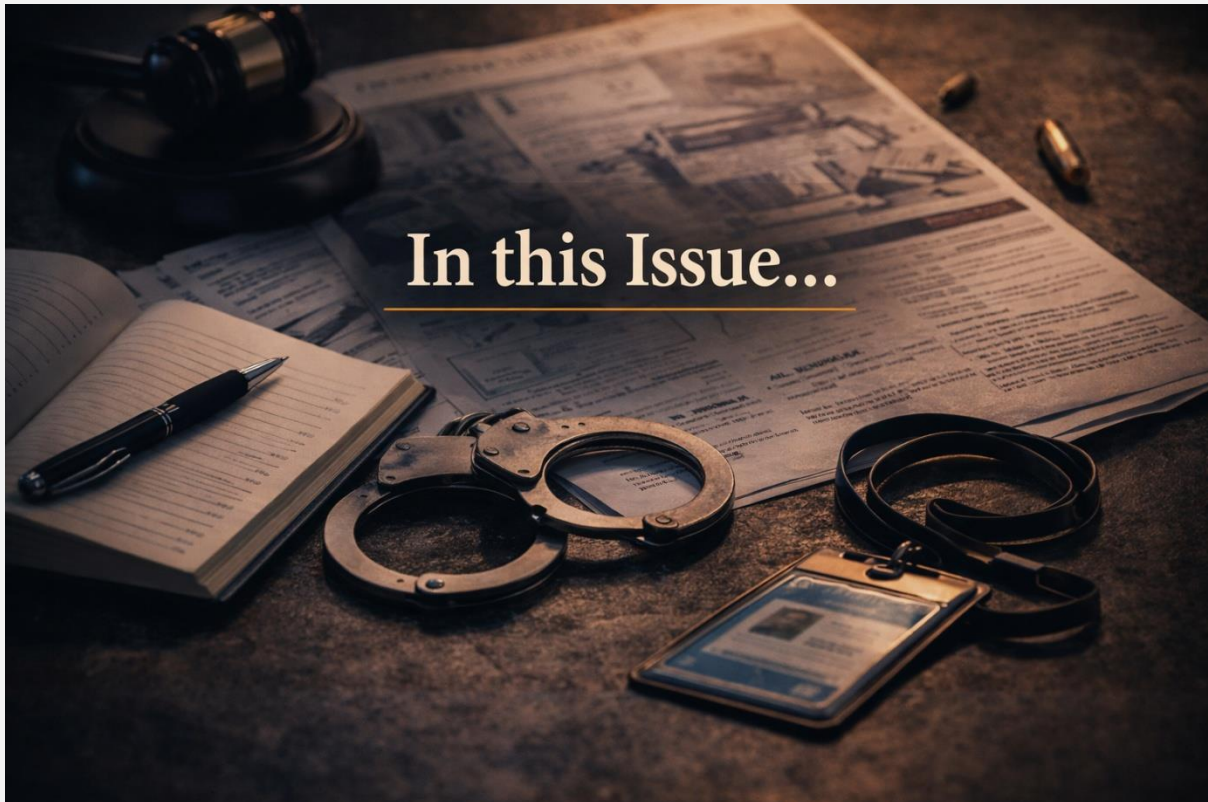
By “experience”, I mean this broadly. That includes knowledge rooted in **lived experience, practitioner experience, and co-produced work**, as well as writing and discussion that stays close to the realities of practice, harm, punishment, recovery, support, and change. It also means drawing from a wide range of sources: **academic articles, research, books, reports, blogs, podcasts, and events**.

This is not intended to be an inherently political project, nor is it being created to push a fixed line or agenda. One of the strengths of experiential knowledge is that it is a broad church. It can be practical, reflective, critical, hopeful, uncomfortable, generous, or unresolved, and I want **Experience Insights** to leave room for that breadth rather than narrowing it too quickly.

I hope it becomes a space that helps more people find, read, and engage with the work already being done.


Max Dennehy.





1. **Lived experience, trust, and legitimacy in criminal justice practice**
How trust is built and why lived experience roles can carry both authority and strain.
 2. **When prison power works through withdrawal**
What happens when prisons remain controlling, but support, guidance, and human contact recede.
 3. **Street culture, digital life, and probation practice**
Why probation needs to understand the hybrid online and offline worlds many younger clients move through.
 4. **Why research on hope needs lived experience**
A challenge to neat ideas of hope, showing how fragile and short-term it can be after prison.
 5. **How could AI support probation without replacing professional judgement?**
A grounded look at where AI may help probation, and where caution still matters.
 6. **Why proximity matters more than labels in harm reduction**
An argument that closeness to everyday reality matters more than the language services use about experience.
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Lived Experience, Trust, and Legitimacy in Criminal Justice Practice

Andi Brierley

Meet the Author:

Andi Brierley is a criminologist and Senior Lecturer at Leeds Trinity University. He previously worked in youth justice for around 15 years and is known for work on lived experience, youth justice, prisons, and penal practice. His research and publications combine academic work with practice experience and lived experience of care, school exclusion, addiction, and youth incarceration

In short...

This article examines how credibility, trust, and legitimacy are negotiated in lived experience practice across prison, probation, youth justice, and community settings.

Drawing on Brierley's study, it argues that the authority associated with these roles is shaped by relational position, embodied skill, and organisational context, rather than by lived experience alone.

Brierley's contribution is useful because it offers a more developed account of how lived experience roles actually work in practice.

Rather than assuming that trust and legitimacy naturally follow from shared background, the article shows how they are built, recognised, and constrained within criminal justice and its partner organisations. It also makes clear why these roles can be both effective and precarious.



Liminal legitimacy

One of the article's core arguments is that legitimacy in lived experience practice develops against a persistent "them and us" divide within criminal justice.

Participants described many professionals without lived experience as distant or culturally removed, while lived experience professionals were more often seen as recognisable, understandable, and easier to trust. Brierley argues that this is structural rather than interpersonal. It is tied to the way penal systems separate those who exercise authority from those subjected to it.

The concept of **liminal legitimacy** helps explain this in-between authority. Participants repeatedly described lived experience professionals as occupying a "sweet spot" between conventional professionalism and service-user status. That position **allows them to translate between two worlds**. Trust, in this context, is shaped by body language, style, language, familiarity, and cultural fluency, rather than by job title alone.

At the same time, the article shows that this position can be unstable. The same conditions that make lived experience work valuable can also leave workers exposed to scrutiny, tokenism, emotional strain, and uneven recognition.

Desistance habitus

Brierley develops the idea of **desistance habitus** to show that **lived experience professionals bring more than shared biography**. They bring embodied skills and dispositions formed across criminalised, carceral, and professional worlds: reading situations, understanding status, navigating boundaries, and adapting communication across different settings.

These capacities can become forms of symbolic and moral capital in practice. At the same time, the article is careful not to turn lived experience into a universal resource.

Participants described biography, prior status, matching, and context as all shaping whether credibility is actually granted. The article also notes that organisations can over-rely on these workers precisely because of their lived experience, turning relational skill into a source of pressure and exposure.

The contested label "peer"

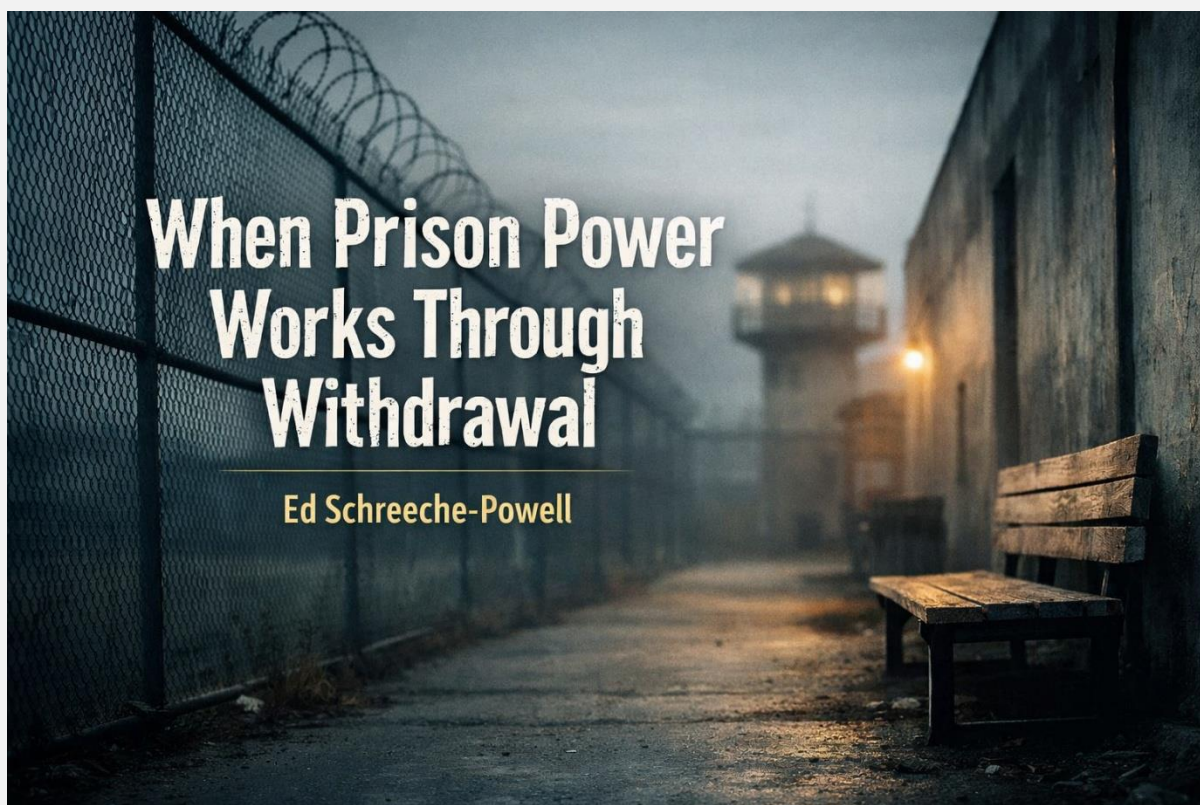
While the term "peer" remains common in UK criminal justice practice, many participants in Brierley's study experienced it as stigmatising, reductive, or professionally limiting. For some, it remained meaningful in custodial settings where shared experience was immediate. In community and statutory contexts, however, it was more often felt as something that tethered people to a criminalised past and undermined their professional legitimacy.

The article closes by reframing lived experience work as **stratified legitimacy work**. Authority is not automatically produced by biography. It is shaped by structural position, symbolic capital, status, organisational context, and relational recognition.

Reference

Brierley, A. (2026) 'I sit somewhere in that sort of sweet spot': Liminal legitimacy in criminal justice practice. *Punishment & Society*. DOI: 10.1177/14624745261436432.





When Prison Power Works Through Withdrawal

Ed Schreeche-Powell

Meet the Author:

Edwin Schreeche-Powell is a criminologist at the University of Greenwich whose work focuses on prisons, penal power, peer support, and late-modern imprisonment. Writing from a position informed by lived experience as a former long-term prisoner, his research pays particular attention to open prisons, institutional withdrawal, and the realities of support, wellbeing, and power in custody.

In short...

This article argues that a distinctive form of penal power operates not through tighter control or more visible intervention, but through the withdrawal of support.

Drawing on research into peer-led induction in open prisons in England and Wales, Schreeche-Powell develops the concept of **institutional withdrawal** to explain how responsibility is pushed onto prisoners while relational and procedural support recedes.

This is a useful article for anyone interested in imprisonment, open conditions, peer support, responsabilisation, or penal power. It offers a clear conceptual argument, grounded in detailed accounts of what the move into open prison actually felt like. Its value lies in asking a slightly different question from much of the existing literature: what happens when support structures thin out, but accountability, surveillance, and sanction remain firmly in place?



Institutional Withdrawal

In this contribution, Schreeche-Powell argues that power in open prisons does not only work through obvious control, surveillance, or strict rules. It can also work through **withdrawal**. People in open conditions are expected to be more independent, but participants described that independence as thin and unsupported. Rather than feeling helped through a transition, many felt they were left to work things out for themselves, with unclear expectations and limited guidance.

Problematising Peer-led Induction

Schreeche-Powell makes the case that, in theory, **peer-led induction** is meant to help people settle into open prison.

In practice, **participants often felt that peer support was replacing staff support rather than adding to it**. Staff were described as distant and focused on process, while peer support could be brief or inconsistent. This mattered because the early move into open conditions is precisely when people most need reassurance, clarity, and reliable support.

Responsibilization by Default?

To make sense of this, the article uses two ideas.

1. **Responsibilization withdrawal** refers to people being told to take responsibility for themselves without being given the support or information needed to do that well.
2. **Bureaucratic withdrawal** refers to a setting where paperwork and procedure substitute for actual human help. The prison still holds people accountable, but the support that should sit alongside that accountability has been thinned out.


Schreeche-Powell find that, what may often *look* like disengagement is often a response to these conditions. Some participants described keeping their heads down, stepping back from formal processes, or relying on informal networks instead. Rather than treating this simply as non-compliance or lack of motivation, the article suggests it can be understood as an **adaptation to uncertainty, risk, and weak institutional support**.

Schreeche-Powell finished by suggesting that **institutional withdrawal** may be a useful way of thinking about other parts of the criminal justice system where support fades but accountability remains.

Reference

Schreeche-Powell, E. (2026) 'Institutional withdrawal: Power through omission in late modern imprisonment'. *The British Journal of Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azag016>.





Street culture, digital life, and probation practice

Jeffery Jhanjan

Meet the Author:

Jeffrey Jhanjan is a Probation policy advisor and a dual PhD candidate at Leiden University. With a background in probation practice, his work explores street culture, delinquent behaviour, and hybrid online-offline realities in probation and forensic social work.

In short...

This short piece by Jeffrey Jhanjan argues that probation practice needs to take street culture seriously, including its online and hybrid forms.

Drawing together research, professional experience, and frontline observation, Jhanjan calls for greater sensitivity to the cultural worlds many younger clients inhabit, and for probation officers to pay closer attention to the interplay between online and offline life.

To say we live in an increasingly digitised world barely scratches the surface. Jhanjan's contribution matters because it asks probation to think more seriously about the online worlds people inhabit, and about how identity, conflict, risk, and self-presentation now move across both digital and street-based settings. For practitioners, this is not a marginal issue. It is increasingly part of the everyday landscape of supervision.

The street as cultural context

A key part of the piece is its argument that “the street” remains an important cultural context for many forensic and probation clients, particularly younger ones.



Jhanjan explains that, across his years in probation practice, he repeatedly heard clients describe themselves through street life and street-based socialisation. This becomes the starting point for a wider practice argument: if probation officers focus only on offending behaviour in a narrow sense, they risk missing the cultural world in which that behaviour is given meaning.

Hybrid street culture: online and offline

Jhanjan introduces the idea of a **hybrid street culture**; that street culture now operates across both physical and digital spaces, producing what he describes, via existing scholarship, as a reciprocal on- and offline reality.

This matters because **clients may perform, communicate, threaten, affiliate, or signal criminal involvement online in ways that are highly relevant to practice**, yet not always visible in face-to-face supervision. Jhanjan gives the example of a client who presented a pro-social image in the counselling room while projecting a strongly pro-criminal identity in online rap content.

The point is not simply that online life matters. It is that probation officers may misread clients if they do not understand the hybrid environments in which identity and risk are being negotiated.

Street sensitivity in the digital era

The piece then makes a more direct practice claim: probation should work with a form of **street sensitivity in the digital era**.

Jhanjan argues, with van den Broek, that hybrid working now needs an additional meaning. It is no longer only about balancing care and control. It also involves **proportionate attention to both online and offline domains**. This is presented as relevant to communication, trust, responsiveness, working alliance, and intervention effectiveness.

A more nuanced understanding of street culture

Jhanjan also suggests that probation should resist seeing street culture only through a deficit or risk lens. He acknowledges that many young people involved in probation have experienced vulnerability, brokenness, and difficult social conditions, and that **street culture may also provide identity, creativity, expression, and belonging**.

The closing argument is therefore not simply about digital vigilance or risk monitoring. It is also about recognition, care, and understanding young people more fully.

Reference

Jhanjan, J. (2026) 'Warm Hearts in Cold Streets, Growing Roses Through Concrete'. *Probation Quarterly*, Issue 39, pp. 30–34. <https://doi.org/10.54006/MWDU9762>.



Why Research on Hope needs Lived Experience

David Adlington-Rivers

Meet the Author:

David Adlington-Rivers is a Doctoral Researcher in Forensic Psychology at Durham University and an Associate Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at Buckinghamshire New University. His work focuses on hope in prison and post-release contexts; particularly how lived experience can improve research and practice in probation and community justice. He is also the author of Freedom is in the Mind, a self-help book for people in prison.

In short...

Research on hope in probation practice often begins from the wrong assumptions.

Drawing on a small pilot study with people living in the community after prison, Adlington-Rivers suggests that hope is often more fragile, cautious, and short-term than research and training frameworks assume, and that lived experience co-design improves the quality of that research from the outset.

This piece is worth reading because it challenges a familiar but often simplified idea in probation practice: that hope is mainly about confidence, optimism, or future planning. It is especially useful for practitioners and researchers because it shows how hope may look very different in post-release life, and why research design needs to reflect that reality more carefully if it is going to be useful in practice.

Managing hope carefully in risky terrain

A central argument in the piece is that hope in probation contexts is often misdescribed when it is treated as optimism, confidence, or a straightforward belief in future change. That way of thinking may make sense in abstract models of hope, but it fits poorly with the realities of post-release life.



Participants in the pilot study were living with uncertainty, restriction, and the knowledge that one mistake could have serious consequences. In that context, hope was often described as something that had to be judged carefully, adjusted to circumstance, and sometimes deliberately limited.

Hope as fluid

The pilot study is also used to show how research assumptions can drift away from lived experience. An early working idea in the study was that hope might move along a recognisable path from surviving to thriving. That assumption did not hold. **Hope appeared fragile and uneven, expanding and contracting depending on housing, health, relationships, and criminal justice contact.**

Some research questions that looked reasonable on paper felt premature or uncomfortable in practice. The article treats this as evidence that the research design itself needed improving.

Cautious hope

A further insight concerns how hope may appear in practice. Adlington-Rivers argues that hope is often visible not in positive language about the future, but in cautious, risk-aware forms of self-regulation.

Participants described avoiding certain people, changing routines, staying away from particular places, and engaging with support even when it felt difficult. These were not framed as optimism, but as **necessary acts of self-control**. For probation practice, that matters because a narrowing of focus to immediate survival or stability should not automatically be read as disengagement.

Listening to experience

The final argument is methodological.

The pilot study led directly to the introduction of a lived experience co-design panel for the substantive phase of the author's wider doctoral research.

The panel is intended to strengthen the research where it is most vulnerable: in the assumptions built into concepts, questions, and language. The article argues that **co-design helps challenge linear ideas of progress, identify when hope language becomes unrealistic or pressurising**, and ensure that research reflects how people actually think and talk about staying out of trouble.

Reference

Adlington-Rivers, D. (2026) 'Why Research on Hope Needs Lived Experience'. *Probation Quarterly*, Issue 39, pp. 77–79. <https://doi.org/10.54006/HNGN6524>.



How could AI support Probation without replacing professional judgement?

Lee Whitmore

Meet the author:

Lee Whitmore is a senior probation leader in Kent, Surrey & Sussex, with over 25 years' experience across public, private, and voluntary-sector services. His background includes senior probation leadership roles in Sussex and the wider South East

In short...

This short piece explores how AI might support probation practice if it is introduced carefully, securely, and with professional judgement left firmly in human hands.

Drawing on a regional pilot using an approved transcription and summarising tool, and informed through experience as a senior probation leader, Whitmore argues that AI could reduce administrative burden, improve accessibility, and free up more time for relational work, while also raising ethical and practical risks that probation cannot ignore.

AI is one of the defining questions of the coming decade.

This piece is worth reading because it gives a grounded, practice-facing account of AI in probation without presenting it as either a miracle fix or something to reject outright. Instead, it asks a more useful question: where might AI genuinely help, and what safeguards are needed if it is going to be used responsibly in a high-stakes field shaped by risk, ethics, and public protection?



Not if, but how

Whitmore's central argument in the article is that **probation cannot afford to ignore AI, but nor can it adopt it naively**. Whitmore presents AI as something that can feel both promising and threatening in a pressured service environment.

The cautionary example used in the piece is a consultancy case in which generative AI allegedly produced generic and sometimes biased material when used as a substitute for human analysis. The broader point is that **AI can amplify bias, flatten nuance, and create risk when it is used as a shortcut** around professional expertise. In probation, where decisions can have major consequences, that is an ethical as well as technical issue.

AI as co-pilot, not autopilot

The practical core of the article is a pilot using an approved and secure AI transcription and summarising tool. The problem being addressed is familiar: staff often have to divide their attention between listening carefully in meetings and producing records at speed. In the pilot, meetings were recorded with consent, transcribed, and turned into structured summaries, including summaries shaped by templates such as CRISSA [A standardised method for structuring and recording an interview: Check-in, Review, Implement, Summarise, Set tasks, set next Appointment (HMIP glossary, 2025)].

The article reports substantial time savings, because the AI-generated summaries could then be checked, edited, and finalised rather than written from scratch.

AI facilitating increased human potential

Whitmore also suggests that the value of the tool goes beyond speed. AI-generated summaries may improve the quality of records, support clearer accountability, and allow managers and practitioners to give fuller attention to the person in front of them. This is linked to coaching-style supervision, where listening and reflective conversation are often hindered by note-taking.

Whitmore also highlights accessibility benefits, especially for neurodiverse staff or colleagues with dyslexia or processing difficulties, arguing that these tools may reduce barriers created by rapid, high-pressure recording tasks.

AI and consistency

The final section looks beyond the pilot and sketches a wider future for AI in probation.


Whitmore suggests that integrated tools might help structure risk assessment notes, prompt practitioners to complete related tasks, help newer staff identify suitable interventions, analyse service-wide trends, and improve the clarity of reports, letters, and sentence plans.

These are presented as possibilities rather than proven outcomes. The article is clear that AI should not replace practitioner judgement, predict individual behaviour, or bypass security and data-protection requirements. The recurring message is that AI should support practice, not override it.

Reference

Whitmore, L. (2025) 'Unlocking Potential: How can AI Support Probation'. *Probation Quarterly*, Issue 38, pp. 41–44. <https://doi.org/10.54006/BTLB3965>.





Why Proximity Matters in Harm Reduction

Mark Gilman

Meet the author:

Mark Gilman is a harm reduction writer and independent specialist with more than 30 years' experience in addictions research, policy, and practice. Writing from a position shaped by both professional and personal experience, he focuses on drug treatment, recovery, and the need for services to remain close to the street-level realities of dependent drug use.

In short...

In this contribution, Mark Gilman argues that the central issue in harm reduction is not the semantics of lived versus living experience, but **how close services are to the daily realities of dependent drug use.**

Drawing on lived experience, ethnographic sensibility, and repeated observation of street-based drug use, outreach, treatment systems, and organisational practice, he argues that when organisations drift away from street-level contexts through policy, compliance, and institutional distance, harm reduction becomes less credible, less responsive, and less able to prevent harm.

Gilman's article is provocative in a productive way. He asks a question that is uncomfortable but important: how close is an intervention, worker, or organisation to the everyday realities it claims to respond to? That question travels well beyond drug services. It has relevance for anyone working in outreach, treatment, community justice, or experience-led roles.



Proximity beyond identity

A central move in the article is to challenge the assumption that lived or living experience automatically guarantees closeness to the phenomenon. Gilman argues that someone may have real past experience of drug use and recovery while no longer having meaningful daily cultural contact with active use. Equally, someone may still use drugs but not be in the kind of unfiltered settings that create high proximity to others in acute need.

At the same time, he points to actors who may not fit expected identity categories but who nevertheless have high proximity because their role places them physically and relationally close to people who are using drugs, including some faith-based volunteers and detached outreach workers. The point is not to dismiss experience, but to argue that identity labels alone do not settle the question of who is genuinely close to the realities harm reduction must address.

Organisational Distance

In what Gilman calls “the organisational distance problem”, he argues that many larger providers now operate within systems shaped by contracts, staff protection, reputational management, data requirements, and risk procedures. None of these are trivial concerns.

The claim is that, taken together, they can gradually pull services away from the street-level environments where dependent drug use actually unfolds. Workers spend more time documenting than being present, access narrows, and service rhythms become organised around office hours rather than around the tempo of survival. The emphasis here is architectural rather than moral. The issue is not simply whether individual workers care, but whether service design creates or reduces proximity.

What closeness reveals

A further insight comes from Gilman’s description of what high proximity reveals. Close involvement does not only show dysfunction, desperation, or pathology. It also reveals **loyalty, informal care, practical intelligence, survival skills, and local knowledge**. Gilman draws on **Asset Based Community Development** thinking arguing that distance tends to see only damage, whereas proximity shows capability alongside chaos. That matters because it shapes how people are understood and how services are designed.

The proximity gradient

Gilman creates a model to measure this in what he calls the “**proximity gradient**”; placing commissioners, strategy authors, and senior managers at the low-proximity end; service managers, clinicians, and peer mentors in structured roles somewhere in the middle; and detached outreach workers, embedded faith volunteers, informal community actors, people currently using drugs in daily networks, and researchers willing to remain in unfiltered spaces at the high-proximity end.

Harm reduction, Gilman argues, works better when **proximity is built into service architecture rather than left to a few committed individuals**.

Reference

Gilman, M. (2026) *Proximity Is the Point: Why Harm Reduction Fails When It Drifts Too Far Away*. LinkedIn article published 2 March 2026.

