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# Mapping 50 years of NIACRO – Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders

Brendan Fulton, Olwen Lyner, Shadd Maruna and Gillian McNaull\*

**Summary:** The year 2021 marks half a century of NIACRO's work, supporting people involved with criminal justice, and their families, as well as the wider community. Born in the first years of what became a 30-year violent conflict, and operating in the criminal justice voluntary/community sector, NIACRO has survived through 50 turbulent years as one of Northern Ireland's largest crime-reduction and community-building organisations. This paper examines the lessons to be learnt from the longevity of this organisation, illustrating how the four qualities of responsiveness, diversification, surety of mission and partnership working have been central to NIACRO's resilience within an often-treacherous terrain of fluctuating funding. First, NIACRO has perceptively engaged with the complex local and national political landscape, and the ensuing criminal justice and social issues that emerged. Second, through diversification of services in response to changing penal policy, NIACRO has developed its vision and capacity to engage effectively with both statutory criminal justice and the voluntary and community sector. Third, NIACRO had at its foundation a core value of centring the needs of those in contact with criminal justice, and did not drift from this mission. Finally, NIACRO was able to build organisational resilience over the decades through a network of partnerships, co-operation and co-production with community organisations and state agencies.

**Key Words:** Criminal justice voluntary and community sector (CJVCS), organisational resilience, partnership working.

## Introduction

As the non-profit, non-statutory segment of the criminal justice system, the criminal justice voluntary and community sector (CJVCS) forges the bridge between criminal and social justice (Cook, 2006; Tomczak and Buck, 2019).

\* Brendan Fulton is a former Senior Manager in PBNi and a previous Vice-Chair of NIACRO (email: brendanfulton@yahoo.co.uk). Olwen Lyner is the Chief Executive Officer of NIACRO (email: olwen.lyner@niacro.co.uk). Shadd Maruna is Professor of Criminology at Queen's University Belfast (email: s.maruna@qub.ac.uk). Gillian McNaull is Research Fellow at Queen's University Belfast and a member of NIACRO Executive Committee (email: gmcnaull01@qub.ac.uk).

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The sector encompasses agencies working with victims and with people who have offended and their families, providing services in the community, in prison, and through advocacy programmes (Tomczak, 2017). In Northern Ireland, the Charity Commission for NI records that 245 voluntary and community-sector organisations indicate that they work with those in contact with criminal justice, with up to 1,100 third-sector bodies involved in criminal justice service provision, including conflict, post-conflict and community-safety-related issues (CJINI, 2019).

These organisations are often very small, with fewer than a dozen staff-members, and the 'expected life span' is notoriously short. International research suggests that the vast majority of community-sector organisations will dissolve in less than a few years (Walker and McCarthy, 2010; Helmig *et al.*, 2014). Sometimes, this demise can be a positive thing, suggesting that a mission has been accomplished or that the issue the organisation was designed to address has been largely resolved (Fernandez, 2008). In most cases, short-lived community organisations simply fail to overcome the 'liability of newness' and cannot establish themselves in a field crowded with more established organisations (Hager, Galaskiewicz and Larson, 2004). As such, much can be learned from community-sector organisations that manage to survive and thrive for decades.

Among the longest standing of these organisations on the island of Ireland is NIACRO (originally, the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), a leader in the field since its formation in 1971. Established as a membership organisation, with an aim to support resettlement of those exiting prison, it was sponsored by national government, mirroring its sister organisation, NACRO (covering England and Wales), and some 10 years later SACRO (Scotland). Over the decades, the span of the organisation's work has expanded and it now includes early intervention, and support for families of those involved in criminal justice, alongside research-informed advocacy. Throughout the organisation's history, partnership working with both the statutory sector and other CJVCS organisations has been a key aspect of its approach. This paper will examine the longevity of this organisation under the four key themes of responsivity, diversification, surety of purpose, and partnership.

## **Responsivity to societal change**

### ***Beginnings***

Northern Ireland, initially established in 1921, is experiencing an anniversary of its own in 2021. In the early decades of its existence, Northern Ireland remained out of step with the more liberal criminal justice reforms being passed at Westminster (Dickson, 2011). However, the 1950 Probation Act (NI) and 1953 Prison Act (NI) brought a growing sense of progress with a new model probation order and fresh responsibilities relating to the aftercare of prisoners (Fulton and Parkhill, 2009). From 1967, the Probation Service was assigned responsibility for the through care of prisoners, manifested firstly through a Prison Welfare Unit at Belfast's Crumlin Road Prison, with services supported by the voluntary sector (Fulton and Parkhill, 2009). In the previous century, these services had been supplied by Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies, one serving the Catholic community and the other the various Protestant denominations (Fulton and Parkhill, 2009).

However, it was recognised that the Probation Service, as a single agency, was not sufficiently resourced to manage these tasks, and it welcomed appropriate support from the community and voluntary sector. It was into this criminal justice space that NIACRO sought to establish itself. The organisation was conceived to 'work for the welfare of the offender' (NIACRO, 2021), offering services and support on a cross-community basis. Supported by elements of business, academia, criminal justice practitioners and faith groups, the organisation opened its offices in 1971, with a three-year government grant (NIACRO, 2021) — a signal of readiness for more pluralism in this society and an openness to new approaches. The focus was on employment and accommodation needs, supporting individuals post custody.

The Probation Board (NI) Order 1982 established the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), which had the authority to fund voluntary and community-sector organisations (Fulton and Parkhill, 2009). The PBNI board was resourced with a community development budget, circa 15 per cent of its total, funding partner organisations including NIACRO, Extern, Save the Children Fund, Ulster Quaker Service, Committee NI Victims Support, and Belfast Rape Crisis, while several smaller grants were given to community-based organisations (PBNI, 1987). This focus on supporting community development mirrored the direction taken by other statutory bodies in Northern Ireland, supporting the empowerment and resourcing of communities to develop responses to issues relevant to them.

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## ***The Good Friday Agreement***

The Good Friday Agreement (1998) brought with it the early release of political prisoners, with ex-prisoners and their families playing a crucial role in peace building (McEvoy, 2001). The consequent reduction in prisoner numbers led to the closure of the Maze Prison/Long Kesh in 2000. During these early years of peace, NIACRO engaged with the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, established by the Irish Government, in developing cross-border relationships across the island on prisoner transfers, accommodation provision and access to education/employment. In addition, NIACRO built on earlier work to provide mechanisms for the release of prisoners detained at the 'Secretary of State's Pleasure' (SOSPs) — that is, those who were aged 17 or under when they committed an offence that as an adult would have attracted a life sentence (Knight, 1984). During this period, NIACRO obtained independent funding for three research projects: the release and reintegration of politically motivated prisoners (Gormally and McEvoy, 1995); the reintegration needs of politically motivated prisoners (a set of studies with key ex-prisoner groups); and the paramilitary-style beatings and attacks prevalent in the absence of consensual policing. This latter research contributed to the development of the community restorative justice organisations, NI Alternatives<sup>1</sup> and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)<sup>2</sup> that remain active today.

An outcome of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) was the decision to conduct the Criminal Justice Review (2000), which was published with recommendations rooted in human rights standards (Dickson, 2011). The Review included recommendations on sentencing, prisons and probation, while calling for 'a comprehensive review of correctional policy' (Criminal Justice Review Group, 2000, p. 281). Although recommending joint prison/Probation working and new roles and skills to enhance the skills of Prison Officers to work effectively with prisoners, a key conclusion of the Review was that prisons and Probation should remain separate (Criminal Justice Review Group, 2000). This decision was significant in providing for a separate voice to advocate and develop models for community sentencing, as well as sustaining links to a wide range of CJVCS supports, including NIACRO, for people in contact with criminal justice. It also opened up greater access to prisons for the CJVCS.

<sup>1</sup> Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) provides communities with access to government-accredited restorative justice processes (<https://alternativesrj.co.uk/>).

<sup>2</sup> Community Restorative Justice Ireland provides accessible, non-violent responses to conflict through its government-accredited restorative justice programmes (<https://www.crjireland.org>)

While NIACRO welcomed these developments, many elements of prison life remained stuck in a containment model during this period, with a freeze on new Prison Officer recruitment and a lack of investment in a much-needed change process. Evidence of fresh thinking emerged in response to young people around this time, with the establishment of the Youth Justice Agency in April 2003 (DOJNI, 2012), focusing on restorative practice through its Youth Conferencing Service, and opening the new Youth Justice Centre—Woodlands (2007) — a move away from large institutions.

In NIACRO's early days, media focus was predominately on NIACRO's policy standpoints. Following the Good Friday Agreement, the focus moved more to its services and those using them. The Base 2 service, which supports those under threat in the community, was routinely contacted and referenced by the media. The CJINI Inspection (2020, p. 5) confirmed that, 'Base 2 has saved lives and works in our communities to effectively validate threats from paramilitary groups to individuals and families', helping them 'to relocate and resettle'.

### ***The Hillsborough Agreement***

The next wave of seismic shifts in criminal justice policy in Northern Ireland was to occur just a few years later. The Hillsborough Agreement (2010) created conditions for the devolution of policing and justice powers from the British Government at Westminster to the Northern Ireland Executive. The Northern Ireland Act (2009) created the legislative framework for the changes, including the establishment of the Department of Justice Northern Ireland (DOJNI) and the appointment of a Minister for Justice (McAlinden and Dwyer, 2015).

Within ten days of establishment of the new DOJNI, the first Justice Minister, David Ford, announced a review of the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) to take place under the purview of a Prison Review Team (PRT) led by Dame Anne Owers (BBC News, 2010). In its review, the PRT recognised the wealth of community voluntary-sector stakeholders in Northern Ireland and invited their engagement throughout the consultation. NIACRO capitalised on this opportunity to call for an NI-specific version of 'justice reinvestment' (Tucker and Cadora, 2003), entailing:

... a reallocation of existing resources away from what is termed 'front end' criminal justice organisations such as prisons. These freed up resources should be used to fund diversion and resettlement programmes consistently and effectively (NIACRO, 2010a, p. 7).

The Justice Minister described the PRT report (2011) as ‘a watershed for the Northern Ireland Prison Service’ (DOJNI, 2011, p. 5). As the DOJNI implemented change to decrease the number of people sent to prison, the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act (2011) created alternatives to prosecution in the form of penalty notices and conditional cautions, with ongoing work towards a Supervised Activity Order to address the prevalence of those going to prison for fine default (Ford, 2011, p. 4).

NIACRO responded to the PRT report as a ‘critical friend’, concerned by a ‘lack of clarity’ over the responsibility for implementing the recommendations between the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS), Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), while also calling for other statutory bodies, including Social Security and Housing, to be engaged in service delivery for those leaving custody (NIACRO, 2012). As the reform programme was rolled out, NIACRO and colleagues — Quaker Service, Women’s Support Network, Prison Fellowship, and Opportunity Youth (now Start 360) — continued to provide civil society oversight, holding change agents to account.

### ***Coping in a challenging environment***

Across its 50-year history, the wider socio-political context of Northern Ireland meant that staff and volunteers were often working in difficult and challenging circumstances. Many knew a victim or a family with someone in prison, and NIACRO gave voice to issues of concern — not always well received by those in authority, but necessary in the absence of the many organisations that now provide such checks and balances. The organisation’s flexibility and responsiveness to this ever-changing social landscape is a key aspect of NIACRO’s longevity throughout the conflict and through two decades of peace. Part of this tractability was a result of NIACRO’s grounding in communities; notably, NIACRO was amongst the first to give voice to the concept of justice reinvestment or decentralising justice investments from state institutions to community-building initiatives.

### **Diversification**

Diversification in organisational terms is regarded as a strategy for growth and/or reduction of risk and volatility (Ansoff, 1957). In the case of the CJVCS, diversification is also about responding to unmet need. Beginning with only two staff, NIACRO built a secure foundation from which to deliver early

services, while surveying the system for gaps in provision for which it might be able to respond and to secure funding support.

Before organic growth could take place, it focused on its core business, especially services to discharged prisoners. From the Poor Law of 1838, it was clear that the route back into society from penal institutions in Ireland had many pitfalls. Government was slow to react, and Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies were slow to emerge, despite eligibility to receive funding to support the return of prisoners to family, accommodation, community, and employment. As discussed above, by 1971, the former responsibilities of the Discharged Prisoners Aid Societies had passed to the Probation and After Care Service. Key personnel from the Societies collaborated with others from business, education, service agencies and trade unions to found NIACRO and retain a CJVCS presence on the bridge between prison and community.

In the early 1970s, the needs of the rapidly increasing prison population became a priority. A 'Wives and Families Centre' for relatives visiting Belfast's Crumlin Road Prison was opened by NIACRO in January 1972, while an Ulster Quaker Service group set up a similar centre at the Long Kesh Camp, which had been hastily established for detainees after the introduction of Internment in August 1971. Dostoyevsky commented, 'you can measure the degree of civilisation in any society by entering into its prisons' (Dostoyevsky, 1862). Through these early visitor-centre initiatives, NIACRO, together with other community groups, made a positive contribution by creating a calm, caring, non-judgmental and neutral oasis for families experiencing the process of visiting in a high-security setting.

The Crumlin Road family centre had a precarious existence due to difficulty in finding suitable premises. While experience and feedback from families and visitors at Crumlin Road and Long Kesh (later, Maze Prison)<sup>3</sup> continued to show the need and the value of these services, funding was uncertain until 1982, when the jointly run NIACRO and Save the Children Fund 'SCF'<sup>4</sup> centre opened. It provided a canteen and a play area for children. In this pioneering stage, volunteers played a key role. The Northern Ireland Office (NIO) funnelled funding via NIACRO to SCF to organise a playgroup within the Ulster Quaker Service provision at the Maze. These early partnership projects paved the way for the Probation Board to provide funds

<sup>3</sup> HMP Belfast, also known as Crumlin Road Gaol/Prison, was used to house internees and political prisoners during the conflict, alongside HMP Maze, which had opened as 'Long Kesh Detention Centre' for internees in 1971.

<sup>4</sup> Save the Children is an international charity, focused on supporting children to learn and grow, and addressing the challenges they face (<https://www.savethechildren.org.uk>).



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for the joint NIACRO/SCF centre at HMP Belfast when their new financing powers came into effect in 1982.<sup>5</sup>

Further diversifications that followed were guided by positive changes in the wider political culture. First, there was growing recognition that deprivation of an individual's liberty, by the State, had ramifications for the family and dependents, for which the rest of society and the State bore responsibility. Second, the State began to acknowledge that some of these responsibilities could be carried out on behalf of the State by voluntary-sector organisations working within the criminal justice ambit. Third, there was increasing awareness that many of these responsibilities fell outside the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system, raising questions about how other arms of government could be persuaded to engage and respond to these issues. Finally, while these service provisions were hitherto discretionary, the idea of legally mandated provision was gaining traction.

Diversification was also led by service-users and their needs. While NIACRO's prison visitor centres originally provided respite, diligent listening to the concerns of visitors led to innovations to improve the visiting experience, including children's play areas, space for parents to share concerns and seek support, and opportunities for families to participate in sharing their stories, experiences and needs. Every prison eventually had its own centre, and increased focus on family relationships and children's needs brought in organisations such as Barnardo's.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Prison link and family links***

In 1987, PBNI partnered with NIACRO to set up Prison Link to help those in prison maintain family relationships (NIACRO, 2006). A small Probation team was established in courts and the community to develop this service and to evaluate its impact on outcomes for families, the person in prison and the community from which they originated. Having raised the profile and significance of family work, PBNI strengthened its partnership with NIACRO in the joint delivery of the initiative and reduced the number of Probation Officers involved.

Twenty years later, the Prison Link name was changed to Family Links, to reflect feedback and progress towards integration with mainstream family

<sup>5</sup> Sir Harold Black's *Report of the Children and Young Persons Review Group* (1979) had highlighted the need for preventive work with young persons, whilst signalling the necessity for a community-based approach in Northern Ireland — this resulted in funding becoming available for child-centred services.

<sup>6</sup> Barnardo's is the largest national children's charity in the UK (<https://www.barnardos.org.uk>).

services (NIACRO, 2006). However, despite the necessity for these support services, no statutory body had a duty of provision. This gap led to NIACRO's entry into advocacy for the rights of the children of prisoners. In the decades that followed, NIACRO has engaged with agencies and organisations across NI, the UK and Europe to highlight these needs, support children and exchange best practice. As NIACRO noted:

It's possible to see a clear development in our work with families and their issues over the years... It still springs from a humane desire to ease the pain of having a family member in prison, and it still offers very practical help. But it is more systematic, more likely be a partnership with statutory or other voluntary agencies, and more assertive in lobbying for improvements to services, policy, and legislation. (NIACRO, 2006, p. 2)

The knowledge gained in this area of work encouraged further diversification. It became clear from research that being the child of a parent convicted of an offence increased vulnerability and risk of criminalisation in later life (Farrington, Barnes and Lambert, 1996). This prompted responses to bolster the parent-child relationship and enhance the range of health, educational and community supports available to the family. NIACRO had started off at the tertiary prevention level (Brantingham and Faust, 1976), but engagement with families impacted by the imprisonment led to involvement in secondary-level prevention activity. Throughout these developments, the entry point for service-users and their needs has continued to be through the criminal justice system.

### ***NIACRO in the community***

Increasingly, however, the community became another entry point for NIACRO services for vulnerable groups. In its first decade, NIACRO had already become involved with communities who were concerned with anti-social behaviour by young people. A drop-in centre in Armagh, for young people who did not use conventional youth clubs, emerged from a public meeting in 1978. A community project shaped by the Black Report (1979) unfolded in outer West Belfast, evolving into ten after-school projects across NI in areas termed 'hot spots' by Criminal Justice agencies.

When established in 1982, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI) was empowered to run or fund crime-prevention schemes, and NIACRO benefited from this engagement in secondary-level prevention. One aspect of

this was engagement with Interact, an interagency initiative intended, among other aims, to address problems of paramilitary threats against young persons and adults. From this, emerged the Base2<sup>7</sup> service in 1990.

In 1995, NIACRO consolidated its work in communities into a Crime Prevention Unit. More explicit partnerships were formed with local communities across NI, including the 1997 partnership with the Rural Community Network (Williamson Consulting, 2005). The focus in this partnership included not only diversionary activities for young people, but also projects for vulnerable older persons within those communities. In time, the Family Support Hubs model, a health-and-social-care initiative systemically embedded across NI, evolved to provide a better reach and response to NIACRO's service-users.

In building programmes based on the concept of justice reinvestment (Tucker and Cadora, 2003), NIACRO developed 'earlier stage' secondary interventions, mindful of labelling or stigmatising young people at risk of anti-social behaviour. Diversion from criminalisation and respect were embedded as core values. NIACRO's experience in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust region enabled it to access resources for its children and parents programme – Child and Parents Service (CAPS). This was aimed at families whose 8–11-year-olds were 'at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour' (NIACRO 2006, p.5).

NIACRO developed and piloted this model of working, influenced by service-user needs and informed by research that emphasised the importance of diversionary activity, care and positive attention towards the child and family support (Earls and Carlson, 2001; Rutter, 1985). In 2015, NIACRO secured contacts under the Early Intervention Support Service (EISS) which were centred on Family Support Hubs, one of which NIACRO chaired. NIACRO achieved the Investing in Children Membership Award 2018, which recognised imaginative and inclusive practice for its work in this project.

### ***NIACRO and research***

NIACRO never lost its focus on employment. Its first piece of significant research found that post-release aftercare services were not accessible for many of the burgeoning prison population re-entering the community (Fairleigh, 1973). The rapid expansion of conflict-related incarceration left Probation under-resourced to meet an emergency of this scale — even with the suspension of the statutory post-release provisions laid out by the Prison

<sup>7</sup> Base2 provides services for those under threat in the community.

Act (NI) 1953 and Treatment of Offenders (NI) Act 1968. NIACRO's attempts to obtain funding to meet this need were unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, a core dimension of the organisation's role and approach was established. Information and research evidence of issues should be obtained and used to influence policy and funding priorities. This information and knowledge-based approach established NIACRO as a reliable source of evidence, raising awareness of unmet needs through focused research.

### ***Employment***

In 1978, the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) recognised the need to mirror English and Welsh legislation regarding criminal-record duration, and introduced the Rehabilitation of Offenders (NI) Order 1978. Local issues limited the range of eligible jobs and the number of beneficiaries of this order.

The NI economy has experienced high levels of unemployment, which has prevented young people from establishing a foothold in the world of work. NIACRO's (1981) research for the Department of Manpower Services reported that only 10 per cent of those who had offended had been in regular employment since leaving school. The Department initiated funding for NIACRO to provide work experience and training places. By 1985, NIACRO had developed 50 placements in a variety of locations — a crucial milestone in its diversification of service delivery. Significantly, a government department other than the NIO (now Department of Justice) had acknowledged the importance of supporting young people at risk, recognising their potential to enrich future workforces and benefit wider society.

### ***NIACRO, PBNI and Extern***

A further phase of development began with the partnership forged between NIACRO, PBNI and Extern in the late 1980s. As in the development of Family Links, PBNI established a specialist team with a seconded member of the Department of Employment to work alongside NIACRO and its CJVCS partners. This partnership was enhanced through engagement with the Confederation of British Industry, Business in the Community, trade unions, and the Department of Employment and Further Education colleges.

An external review by Deloitte & Touche (1995) identified a lack of skills and progression among service-users and introduced a focus on increasing the employability of individuals. NIACRO established a 'Coping with Convictions Unit' in 1995 to engage with employers and provide information,

advice and training on employing persons with convictions. It also offered people with criminal records information and advice on how to manage disclosure of convictions. NIACRO and Extern took over this employability service and helped service-users to improve their soft skills. Mainstream education, training, or work placements became the desired outcomes.

In 1998, the Action for Community Employment (ACE) programme closed, and its successor, Labour's New Deal, disrupted the referral pathway between Probation and its CJVCS partners. NIACRO and Extern then availed of EU funding to deliver interventions. In 2001, the EU's Equal Programme funded a new NIACRO employability project, Personal Progression System (PPS), focusing on prisoners' transition from prison, and it also funded the Reach Out initiative. These programmes helped participants to access the labour market, increased links with employers, and encouraged statutory services to mainstream successful practice. PPS was an outstanding example of effective partnership in the Equal Programme, whilst Jobtrack won a National Training Award (2003) for effective training with employers.

In 1994, NIACRO with Extern worked to develop an Educational Trust to help prisoners released under the Good Friday Agreement, who were experiencing difficulties in accessing post-prison education courses. The Trust adopted an all-island remit, with funding from successive European peace programmes and various public bodies. NIACRO engaged funders and former prisoner groups on the Board to support governance arrangements. This initiative built on previous engagement with political prisoner groups, to explore both mechanisms for early release and support for those released as part of the settlement. This ability to build upon past partnerships, to develop co-produced solutions, has been central to NIACRO's resilience.

NIACRO's ability to respond to the changing needs of the community has been central to its longevity. Its approach has never been focused on year-on-year growth. NIACRO has focused on listening to service-users, collecting evidence, and responding to community needs. It has designed interventions that have evolved with the external environment and ensured the development of staff skills and competencies. NIACRO sought to retain strong links and a collaborative approach across the CJVCS sector.

## **Surety of purpose**

NIACRO's longevity could also be attributed in part to its 'surety of purpose' and steadfast focus on its key mission. This resistance to 'mission drift' (Minkoff and Powell, 2006) was supported through the strong bond and

shared purpose throughout the 50 years between the Executive Committee, the management and the staff. Accountability and transparency have ensured good governance. NIACRO's person-centred focus to prevent further offending, harm and victimisation has been central in maintaining its probity and identity in times of turmoil and change.

From its small beginnings, NIACRO has provided an increasing range of services to young persons and families, extending beyond resettlement after prison. It has worked with many different people and been supported by many different funders. By the end of the 1980s, 50 per cent of NIACRO's income came from *outside* the Justice Sector.

In 2012, NIACRO decided on a name change in formal recognition of the many changes through its history. The original name was no longer representative of its diverse range of services. The acronym, NIACRO, which had become part of the Northern Ireland vernacular, was retained, while the original words ('care and resettlement of offenders') were dropped. In this rebranding, the trust and credibility built up over the previous 40 years could be retained, while better reflecting the diverse nature of the organisation.

NIACRO has taken public policy positions on controversial and high-profile issues, ranging from the release and reintegration of politically motivated prisoners to the formation of community restorative justice projects to address issues of punishment beatings. Despite pressure from the media and funders, NIACRO has maintained its clarity of purpose and focus, based on agreed values and principles, and seeking workable solutions respecting all interests.

NIACRO's individual members (circa 200) and cohort of volunteers (circa 250 at its peak) have provided valuable support and tangible social capital at critical points.

## **Partnership and co-production**

Central to NIACRO's value system has been its commitment to remain entwined with other community-sector and statutory organisations in Northern Ireland. This focus on partnership and co-production, with its strong cross-sectoral relationships, is a significant factor in NIACRO's resilience. The conversations with CJVCS organisations on co-production — including 'The Children of Prisoners Group', involving Prison Fellowship, Barnardo's, PBNI and NIACRO, among others — became the foundation of NIACRO's successful Children of Imprisoned Parents (CHIP) programme, which was mainstreamed by the NIPS (see RF Associates, 2019).

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## **Funding services**

NIACRO has worked with many diverse funding partners over the decades. With the need to see those in prison as 'citizens first' (Priestley and Vanstone, 2010), funding relationships began to develop with key agencies responsible for resettlement. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), a partner agency in early community safety work, provided funding to Base2. NIACRO secured 'Supporting People' funding for programmes addressing anti-social behaviours threatening tenancies — a significant contribution to the 'Safer Communities' agenda.

NIACRO had applied for and deployed European Social Fund (ESF) resources since 1987 to support youth work in local communities. When the New Deal failed to fund the PBNI/NIACRO delivery model for employability, NIACRO repurposed ESF resources to become Jobtrack, which ran until 2015.

When NIACRO received European funds, it embraced the European connections that flowed from it. In the EU Equal Programmes, NIACRO became involved in transnational learning and research networks, with objectives beyond employability. NIACRO participated in European projects focused on Children of Prisoners and Hate Crime, as well as on the use of criminal records. International connections have broadened perspectives and enhanced local developments.

NIACRO established the Accessing Services for Offenders group, ASFO — an informal gathering of CJVCS organisations working in the justice arena — and still chairs it.

CJVCS partnership work has been an important vehicle for resourcing social cohesion and stability initiatives throughout the conflict and in its immediate aftermath. By the late 1990s, the now Department for Communities (DoC) was assigned responsibility for the voluntary and community sector. Valuable co-produced thinking emerged, addressing the resilience of the sector, including its role in service delivery, the value of its asset base, and the requirement for a contingency reserve (see TFRVCS, 1996; 2004; 2005).

In 2004, NIACRO bought a site in Belfast and established an asset base which, alongside its contingency reserve, enabled it to weather prudently the loss of contracts it experienced in 2015, and which led to considerable reflection and review of its focus and purpose. Following the 2015 funding setback, NIACRO made a bid for and secured the PBNI nine-month contract to establish a programme addressing increasing numbers of recalled licensees

to prison. This programme, 'RESET' (Hamilton, 2016), introduced new, more formal working arrangements between Probation Officers, NIACRO staff, and service-users. The RESET paid mentoring scheme for prisoners leaving custody was introduced by PBNI in March 2015, and delivered by NIACRO.

Following on from this short-term initiative, PBNI partnered with NIACRO and restorative justice colleagues, NI Alternatives and CRJI, to deliver the Aspire project, working with young men at risk of becoming involved in criminality (Grant, 2019).

Now fully aware that funding in the competitive market required dedicated skills, NIACRO looked to augment its business-development expertise. Business development includes quality assurance to ensure delivery of contacts secured, with a tangible focus on retaining valued business. It also supports readiness to meet diverse quality standards required by 'Investors in People', 'Investors in Volunteers' and 'Investors in Children'. These standards enhance NIACRO's ability to meet the external scrutiny of funders. Data capture instruments validated by the DOJNI's (2015) Data Lab results have provided key information in evidencing resilience in NIACRO's Jobtrack employability programme.<sup>8</sup>

Over the years, NIACRO has welcomed and supported secondments from statutory partners PBNI and the Social Security Agency, alongside those to and from NIPS. These experiences have enriched NIACRO, enabling it to understand and engage more effectively with other organisations, and enhancing co-operation. In the mid-1990s, NIACRO embraced the establishment of the Justice and Care Assessment Centre, which offered all staff who have completed a year's service the opportunity to undertake appropriate assessment processes.

Post devolution, NIACRO responded to consultations and gave evidence to committees as it had been invited to do at Westminster previously. In preparation for the devolution of justice, NIACRO reviewed its capacity to make the necessary contributions. At the time, the Northern Ireland Development Programme (NIDP),<sup>9</sup> a privately funded initiative, was engaging with third-sector leaders in NI. A select group was invited to pitch for funds. NIACRO was awarded funding to support a dedicated public affairs post. The post was supported for four years and, in that time, NIACRO engaged with

<sup>8</sup> Data Lab compared a cohort of Jobtrack completers (2010–11) with a control group with similarly profiled offences who had not completed a similar programme. The one-year proven reoffending rate for Jobtrack completers was 20%, compared to the control group's 32%. The Data Lab concluded this was a 'statistically significant difference' (<https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/doj/northern-ireland-data-lab-bulletin-1-2015.pdf>).

<sup>9</sup> NIDP was a fund supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Henry Smith Charity, from 2008.



political parties and party policy advisors, and hosted a series of co-produced seminars at Stormont on a wide range of topics. This engagement raised NIACRO's profile and helped issues of concern to be better understood by decision-makers.

From its origins, NIACRO's drive has been to provide community links supporting de-institutionalisation and reducing reoffending. This has meant working in communities, networking across institutional silos, and attracting support and funding from diverse sources. These strong roots throughout the wider society have proven essential in maintaining the organisation's focus and strength.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been both to tell the story of NIACRO's past and, just as importantly, to track and reflect on important lessons to inform its future. NIACRO's story over the past half-century brings life and nuance to the growing literature on how community voluntary-sector organisations can survive and thrive (Helmig *et al.*, 2014; Tomczak and Buck, 2019).

NIACRO's resilience and longevity have seen it become a key delivery agent in employment progression and criminal records advice, family and prison visitor support, and early intervention and personal development programmes for people in the community on the edges of criminality and those already in the criminal justice system.

Resourcing has never been assured for NIACRO. Survival and development have required vision and planning, a grounding in the community, and an appreciation for research and evidence. NIACRO has linked with other bodies to co-operate and reduce organisational rivalries that give rise to dysfunction. It has sought to provide leadership in policy debates, and has engaged with policymakers and with the wider public. Established in a time of conflict, NIACRO's story is unique in many ways, but it also provides hope and lessons for a sector that is often under-appreciated and under-resourced.

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