



Recent Developments in Photovoice in Europe: Service Users and Practitioners

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The following is a response to the recent article in Probation Quarterly Issue 34 (2024) entitled *A whole new way to look at American Probation*.

It was interesting and insightful to read how probation in New York is embracing participatory action research and photography. The article mentioned the use of photovoice in connection with the European COST Offender Supervision Project, which ran from 2012-2016. This article summarises the work undertaken in England, Scotland and Germany by me (Wendy Fitzgibbon) Fergus McNeill and Christine Graebisch (Fitzgibbon et al. 2017). PQ has also previously detailed another photovoice project run in England with mentally disordered people on probation (Fitzgibbon and Strapkova 2019). After briefly defining photovoice and describing some of the COST projects, this article compares our approach to that taken by ...Seeing Ourselves" in New York. We conclude by mentioning more recent projects which show how photovoice has continued to develop.

Photovoice seeks to deploy photography and visual images to give voice to the poor and marginalised who are often mis-represented or ignored by political and public institutions. Photovoice has two main roles. First, to enable isolated and disempowered groups such as probation clients, to voice their experiences and feelings through visual images. Second, visual images may function as a resource in campaigns for political change. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive and may indeed function sequentially.



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In England and other European countries, photovoice has helped practitioners during both training and subsequent practice to understand client experiences and to bring practice closer to clients' needs. A major emphasis in this approach is the equalisation of power between the researchers and the researched. The latter - those who actually take the photographs - become key experts who need to be involved in all stages from initial planning of the project, composition and taking of the photographs, choosing which photographs to use and which to discard, dissemination methods and the planning and curation of the exhibitions. Our approach recognised the importance of the clients deciding what was important and what to prioritise in the images and exhibitions.

The American project is oriented to the need to challenge and change media perceptions of probation. This is a worthy aim, but it is significantly different from the European photovoice approach. The European projects aimed to foreground the client's experience of probation supervision by enabling them alone to determine how their pictures told their own personal stories and voiced their feelings and experiences. If this led to improved probation policy and practice, all to the good, but as a side effect of the focus on the client's transformation in terms of individual expression, self-awareness and confidence building.

Many of these projects have received very positive feedback from participants, from practitioners and policymakers. Besides England, Scotland and Germany, such projects have been undertaken in Ireland, Greece, Switzerland and Norway. These are described in detail in my recent book *Applied Photovoice in Criminal Justice* (Fitzgibbon 2022).

Some of the key differences between these European projects and the approach of *Seeing Ourselves* concern the focus of the latter on visual storytelling or photo-journalism. Obviously, this felt empowering and captured the interest of the participants. However the fact the projects were based within an educational setting, and therefore had a more top-down college approach, coupled with their aim of setting out to portray more positive images of those on probation to counter the popular media's negative stereotypes regarding those under supervision, although worthy and successful, differ from the approach taken in Europe and by COST.

The European photovoice method differs in key respects.

First, the identity of participants is protected so they are free to explore both negative and positive feelings about probation. Ethical considerations are important, likewise the

ownership of photographs. The American project contained many images of people, including children. The European projects avoided pictures of identifiable people and places in order to minimise risk to the participants, who then felt free to communicate ideas like friendship, support, fear, belonging, transitions etc. through more abstract and imaginative images.

Second, these images, through interpretation and discussion, led participants to new insights into their lived experiences. This can be difficult and challenging, a process less evident with the overwhelmingly positive images in *Seeing Ourselves*. By contrast, the European projects revealed surprising and disturbing aspects of probation: its oppressive, pervasive nature and infantilisation of clients. But such revelations can be used positively to enable clients, participants and audiences to evolve and become more aware of the need for policy change and find the voice to articulate it (Fitzgibbon 2022).

Photovoice as part of a process enabling change is illustrated in one of the European projects led by Hannah Piggott and Jayne Henry (Piggott 2025), in a specialist secure hospital for violent offenders with intellectual disability. Photovoice enabled this group to capture images articulating their experience of secure incarceration and to reflect both on their treatment and the custodial regime more generally, including the importance of respectful relationships within the institution and the enormous significance of family relationships and visits.

Challenges within this particular group of participants related to learning and thinking difficulties and included susceptibility to suggestion and to copying each other's images. Nevertheless, the photographs powerfully demonstrated their views and their ideas, and these constructive comments on the institution will be used to revise current policies. The project also made them feel valued and listened to, perhaps for the first time in their lives (Piggott 2025).

*"It's one of the most important things
in the world, except for my photos
of my family"*

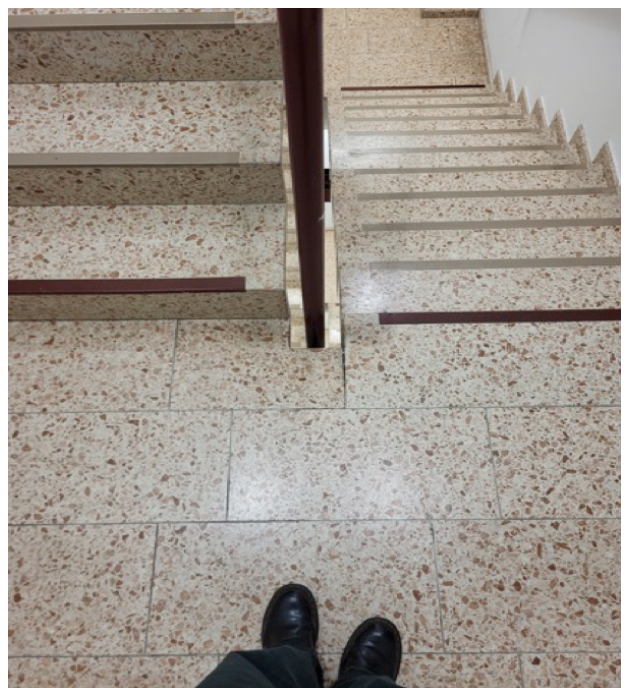


The most recent project (January 2025) I have undertaken was at Dortmund University (Germany) with my colleague Christine Graebisch. We joined practitioners and students of social work with people on probation. Students used photovoice to reflect on their criminal justice agency placements and the human rights of those clients they were trying to support and rehabilitate.

"Makes you want to run"



Some of the photographs from this project reflect the sense of chaos and lack of knowledge that social work students can feel. But they also indicate that the practitioners and students were able to reflect, communicate effectively and gain insight both into the powerlessness of the person on probation's experience and their need for support, as well as the more positive aspects, such as a sense of direction and hope.





There are some further aspects to the contrast between photovoice approaches in Europe and the *Seeing Ourselves* projects in New York. The setting of the latter was a college environment, where probation clients were taught to use digital cameras to take their story in a positive frame (literally!). The aim was to encourage an aspirational dimension, which is, of course, valuable in empowering those subject to the effects of the Criminal Justice System.

However, photovoice in its purest form enables marginalised people to come together in natural settings, be it their probation centre, a community or women's centre or a similar space. The aim is to explore and experiment in a non-directive context to capture their perceptions and ideas regarding the Criminal Justice System.

These resulting insights enable communication to those on the 'outside' who lack awareness of the complexities and struggles inherent in probation supervision. The popular media photographs in New York prejudiced the audience negatively towards probation clients. The *Seeing Ourselves* project aimed to portray clients in a more positive light, similarly to photovoice, but did so via an educational setting and therefore introduced the project in a non-natural environment. By contrast, our aim was to empower clients to share their ideas on how helpful, effective and challenging probation really is for those who are supervised. Many studies have ignored or, at worst, spoken for clients in the past. Photovoice avoids directing the participants but rather supplies the tools, the space and the environment of safety and respect without pre-judging what will be

revealed until the participants themselves have decided.

One similarity with the New York project is the importance, not just of the discussions of the photographs, but the arrangement and curation of how the photographs are displayed in the exhibitions. This is crucial in terms of the effects of the project on practitioners, the public and policy makers viewing the exhibition. The latter becomes a proud moment of achievement. (The screening of the film in the *Seeing Ourselves* project did approach this dimension). Participants share their personal insights with people viewing the exhibitions. These insights may not always be comfortable, but should challenge and provoke thoughtful discussions and change in practice as well as counter stereotypical perceptions of those on probation.

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