

# Psychologists study what helps prisoners to change

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A crime laboratory research team at the School of Psychology in Albany aims to understand what motivates prisoners to turn over a new leaf and become responsible citizens once they leave jail.

The team of five post-graduate students is evaluating aspects of a motivational interviewing programme run by the Department of Corrections throughout New Zealand prisons.

Collectively they hope to identify which elements of the programme are successful in rehabilitating [prisoners](#), so they can make recommendations that will ultimately curb re-offending and reduce the number of people in prisons.

The students in the clinical psychology team are studying the outcomes of the programme, the measures used, and the skills of the trained programme facilitators, as well as how a [violence prevention](#) programme can change [offenders'](#) behaviour.

The students are supervised by team leader, Dr Mei Williams, senior lecturer and psychologist specialising in criminal psychology, with the assistance of senior lecturer in psychology Dr Dave Clarke.

Dr Williams says that generally offenders are not highly motivated to change their behaviour. The purpose of the one-on-one programme is to increase motivation to address their offending and engage in treatment. Hundreds of male and female offenders have been through the

programme in the past four years.

"Overseas studies show that the programme can help offenders to move beyond criminal behaviour and find more positive ways to live their lives. Our team aims to find out whether it can work with offenders in New Zealand and specifically which ingredients are most effective in inducing these motivational changes, and what improvements can be made where necessary," she says. "The ultimate goal is to reduce re-offending."

Motivational interviewing was developed about 30 years' ago by [psychology](#) professors William Miller (United States) and Stephen Rollnick (South Africa). It focuses on developing the client's intrinsic awareness of the benefits of changing their behaviour, and has been successfully adapted across a range of behavioural issues including substance abuse and mental health.

Gordon Sinclair, National Manager from the Department of Corrections' Community Probation and Psychological Services, says research into its programmes for offenders is encouraged. "We are pleased that Dr Williams and her team have come forward with research projects geared towards prisoner rehabilitation based on rigorous, sound social science," Mr Sinclair says.

Provided by Massey University

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