

Offender Supervision in Europe

COST Action IS1106



Working Group 3: Practising Offender Supervision in Europe

Gwen Robinson, University of Sheffield, UK
Kerstin Svensson, Lund University, Sweden

Introduction

This briefing summarises the learning from the fourth year's activities in Working Group 3 of the COST Action on Offender Supervision in Europe (COST IS1106: www.offendersupervision.eu). This group is focusing on the practice dimension: who is doing offender supervision and how are they doing it? This year we have concluded the work we started in year 2: that is, developing innovative research methods that can be applied to the domain of practice, and which can also be used to compare practice across jurisdictions. In this last year of the Action we have focused on disseminating our work and thinking about its implications for further research.

This briefing presents reports on progress from each of our three sub-groups.

Sub-group 1: Visualising practice

This sub-group is led by Nicola Carr (UK) and Andrea Donker (the Netherlands). The other participants in the group are Aline Bauwens (Belgium), Jacqueline Bosker (the Netherlands), Ines Sučić (Croatia), Gwen Robinson and Anne Worrall (UK). This group aimed to test the utility of visual methods (photography) for representing and comparing probation practice in different jurisdictions.

This group collected almost 400 photographs, taken by 14 probation practitioners in 5 different countries. These included images of a whole range of things, including: the exteriors (and signage) of buildings where offender supervision takes place; waiting rooms and reception areas; rooms used to conduct interviews with offenders; staff rooms, offices and desks; and a range of other places and objects.

Due to the diverse range of images we collected, and the fact that we had not previously tried to analyse images, analysis was a challenge. We spent a lot of time discussing the possible meanings of the images (some of which were not

obvious to us at first sight) and the added value of the brief written descriptions we had asked the practitioners to supply alongside their images.

Some members of the group experimented with the method of ‘photo-elicitation’: that is, using some of the photographs from our collection as visual prompts to elicit discussion about offender supervision practice in different jurisdictions (Rose 2007). We discussed the findings of this exercise at our meeting in Zagreb in October 2015.

Sub-group 2: Observing practice

This sub-group is led by Johan Boxstaens (Belgium). The other participants in the group are Pascal Decarpés (France), Pana Octavian (Romania), Anita Rønning (Denmark), Kerstin Svensson (Sweden), Ester Blay Gil and Anna Melendez Pereto (Spain). This sub-group aims to answer the question: What kind of knowledge can be obtained about probation practice by using observations as a research method?

We started our work this last year by looking at the preliminary comparative results of our project. The base for this exercise was a presentation that was used at the last ESC conference in Porto in September 2015. At first, we discussed some methodological issues on the analyses of our observational data. We had by this time completed 36 observations of first meetings between POs and supervisees throughout 5 European jurisdictions. We had also created an SPSS-database, but because of the small sample, thorough quantitative analysis was not possible. Therefore, we discussed the possibility of using other analytical methods to deal with this problem.

Getting access to the field of probation practice took a lot of efforts and many different steps had to be undertaken in order to be able to observe practitioners in their first meetings with probationers. A very interesting issue that came out of the first preliminary findings, concerned the architecture and the stage that are set for supervision in the different jurisdiction. We discussed this in relation to the article by Jake Phillips (2014) on the ‘performance’ of supervision in the front- and backstage of probation offices (cf. Goffman). Among our future plans is a follow-up on the comparative results of our observational study.

Sub-group 3: Practice diaries

This sub-group is led by Tore Rokkan (Norway). The other participants are: Mariella Camilleri (Malta), Annie Kensey (France), Jake Phillips (UK), Martin Lulei (Slovakia), Sorina Poledna, Smaranda Witec and Cristina Faludi (Romania). The aim of the sub-group is to learn more about the use of diaries/narratives to describe the professional life of practitioners.

We made a structured format for the collection of data from participants, in connection with reflections of every day experiences included in the weekly diary and a follow-up interview. We then piloted it in each jurisdiction. The

data collection turned into a form of action research as the practitioners had to be actively involved in the process. During our discussions we found it difficult to define or identify the most appropriate terminology in the context of one jurisdiction at times and to do this across jurisdictions presented many problems. In the end, we decided to adopt a hybrid model for the tool in order to capture both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants were asked to identify the main activities they undertook in each hour of the day.

The diaries gathered stories about practical administrative tasks, as well as stories about emotions in the workplace. Different practitioners took different approaches to filling in the tool, which exposed some weaknesses in the tool, but still, taken together the understanding of practising offender supervision was enhanced through analysis of the diaries. The participating practitioners also saw their working day in a different perspective through the diary, which could be an argument for diaries as a good tool in action research for involving practitioners.

Outputs year 4

In December 2015 we published a special issue of the *European Journal of Probation* 7 (3) with the title 'Innovative Methods for Comparative Research on Offender Supervision Practice'. The issue contained an introduction by the working group leaders and an article from each of the three subgroups, each of which focused on the challenges and potential of the particular method they had piloted. The special issue also included one article from the working group on decision making. Taken together these articles make a contribution to collaborative comparative studies that is relevant both for studies of offender supervision and other practises.

Members of one of the sub-groups (Anne Worrall, Nicola Carr and Gwen Robinson) also prepared a chapter for the forthcoming *Handbook of Visual Criminology*, to be published by Routledge. The chapter has the title: 'Opening a window on probation cultures: a photographic imagination'.

During this fourth year two presentations from the working group were also given at conferences:

- Kerstin Svensson and Johan Boxtaens: 'Innovative research methods in comparative research on social work practice'. 5th European Conference for Social Work Research: *Re-visioning social work with individuals, collectives and communities: social work research*, Ljubljana, 22 - 23 - 24 April 2015
- Johan Boxstaens and Ester Blay: 'Observing European Probation Practice: Bridging the gap between a qualitative and quantitative approach for comparative purposes'. 15th annual conference of the ESC: *Criminology as unitas multiplex: Theoretical, epistemological and methodological developments* Porto, 2-5 September 2015.

Summary of our work, 2012-16

In the research review prepared by this working group at the beginning of the COST Action we found that research on offender supervision was scarce. The studies we found focused on local conditions, and very few comparative studies had been conducted. The main methods used were interviews and surveys, which had produced knowledge principally about what practitioners *say they do*, rather than on *what they actually are doing*. This working group has thereafter sought to extend that knowledge base by developing innovative methods for research on practice. We have found that by using *photographs*, *diaries* and *observations* a more thorough understanding of the practice can be given. We also found that interviews can be valuable, but more as a complement to the other methods than a standalone method. Our piloting has given us opportunities to test the methods, and also knowledge on both similarities and differences between the European practices.

We have formed a solid knowledge base through the literature review, but also on methods for studying practice. We have developed three methods for collaborative comparative research and thereby created a base for future comparative studies. We have learned that there is a great variation in practice, but also that the variation can be just as wide within a jurisdiction as between jurisdictions. Further, we have found a 'habitus' of offender supervision: a common approach that is recognisable in offender supervision in different jurisdictions and settings. This means that we now know more about what 'they' are doing when they are practising offender supervision and we have created a good frame for future studies. We also know that people are important, and that it is important to involve practitioners in the study of practice. They need to explain their perspectives of what we observe in observation, what they show in their pictures and how they choose what to mention in a diary. This means that collaboration with practitioners in research is of great value for the outcome. A problem we have found however concerns getting access to practice and for practitioners to find time to contribute to research.

Conclusions and recommendation

With the outcomes from this working group as a starting point a lot of studies could be initiated. For example wide questions for comparative research are suggested, such as *What constitutes the habitus of offender supervision in Europe?*, or for more local studies, *What constitutes the variation within a jurisdiction?*. An overarching question that arises from the work done is *What is 'community' in community sanctions and measures?* Our pilot studies also suggest several more detailed questions, the viability of each depending on the interest of the researcher and the degree of interest from practice.

Our mixed methods approach to research on offender supervision, the fact that we have a strong network of academics and colleagues connected to practice and the presence of leading academics in the field of probation

research in our working group provides a very good platform for the future. The challenge for further work is to find appropriate channels for funding.

Recommendations for practice: Open doors for collaboration with researchers. It makes it possible to understand your practice better and develop it consciously. When you understand similarities and differences within and between jurisdictions, you can also better understand which models and methods for practice it is possible (and wise) to transfer between jurisdictions.

For more information about the Action, check out our website:
www.offendersupervision.eu

Members of working group 3, 2012-16:

Listed below are those who in some part of the Action have been involved in Working Group 3: Practising Offender Supervision. In total it is 28 participants from 14 countries.

Aline Bauwens (Belgium)
Jacqueline Bosker (the Netherlands)
Johan Boxstaens (Belgium)
Ester Blay Gil (Spain)
Mariella Camilleri (Malta)
Nicola Carr (UK)
Pascal Decarpés (France)
Axel Desseker (Germany)
Andrea Donker (the Netherlands)
Cristina Faludi (Romania)
Berit Johnsen (Norway)
Annie Kensey (France)
Martin Lulei (Slovakia)
Pana Octavian (Romania)
Niamh Maguire (Ireland)
Anna Melendez Pereto (Spain)
Jake Phillips (UK)
Sorina Poledna (Romania)
Tore Rokkan (Norway)
Anita Rønning (Denmark)
Gwen Robinson (UK)
Kerstin Svensson (Sweden)
Ines Sučić (Croatia)
Renata Glavak Tkalić (Croatia)
Ivana Vrselja (Croatia)
Anja Wertag (Croatia)
Smaranda Witec (Romania)
Anne Worrall (UK)

