

# Offender Supervision in Europe

COST Action IS1106



## Practising Supervision

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

### Focus

The briefing summarises the learning from the first year's activities in Working Group 3 of the COST Action about Offender Supervision in Europe (COST IS1106: [www.offendersupervision.eu](http://www.offendersupervision.eu)). This group is focusing on the practice dimension: who is doing offender supervision and how are they doing it? More specifically we have focused on what research has been done about practice, and what lessons can be learnt from that.

Having said that our focus is on research about practice, it has to be added that we do not put emphasis on research on the effects of practice. There have been studies of the effects of different interventions and many interventions are built on knowledge from research findings. But what do we know about how the work is actually done? That is the field in our interest.

### Contributions

All members of the working group have been involved in finding studies and publications from their jurisdiction. That means that we have had contributions about research in Belgium (by Aline Bauwens and Johan Boxtaens), Croatia (by Renata Glavak Tkalić, Ines Sučić, Ivana Vrselja and Anja Wertag), Denmark (by Anita Rønneberg), France (by Pascal Descarpes), Germany (by Axel Desseker), Ireland (by Niamh Maguire), Malta (by Mariella Camilleri), the Netherlands (by Jacqueline Boster and Andrea Donker), Norway (by Berit Johnsen and Tore Rokkan), Romania (by Cristina Faludi and Sorina Poledna), Slovakia (by Martin Lulei), Sweden (by Kerstin Svensson) and the UK (by Nicola Carr and Gwen Robinson).

### Country reports

Authors of the reports from the different countries were asked to review the existing empirical research on the practice(s) of offender supervision. The definition of offender supervision was said to include work carried out by professional and/or other workers as well as public, private and third sector agencies. Contributors were asked to focus on what is known about workers, their interactions, and practices, rather than the outcomes of supervision. We

also wanted the reports to say something about the methods used by researchers, so that we could know how we know what we know. Contributors were asked to review the research done in the following five areas:

1. Roles, characteristics, recruitment and training of practitioners
2. Interactions and relationships between practitioners and other professionals
3. The delivery, practice, performance of offender supervision
4. The role of tools and technologies in the delivery of offender supervision
5. The management, supervision and regulation of practitioners/practice

The reports showed that there is still a lot that is unknown in this field. The research on how offender supervision is practised is relatively scarce. Of the five areas above, two have very few studies: number 2 and 5, which means that our knowledge on interactions, relationships, management etc. does lack specific scientific support. In the other three areas more studies have been conducted and in the following we will say something about where the studies have been carried out, how research is generally funded, and the methods and themes that are common and rare. We will end by posing some questions about how the lack of interest in this field might be understood.

### **Where and by whom are studies conducted and funded?**

Some studies were found in every country, but the quantity of studies varied: the UK (especially England & Wales) dominates, while small countries (such as Malta) and countries with new probation systems (such as Croatia) have very few studies to report. England & Wales is the jurisdiction with the highest number of workers in offender supervision (over 10,000). It is also among the jurisdictions with the longest history of offender supervision; although a long history of probation systems is no guarantee of a large amount of research. For example, few recent studies were found in the Scandinavian countries. Romania and the Netherlands seem to be countries where there is quite a lot of ongoing research which has yet to be completed/published. There are different preconditions for these two countries to be developing research now. In Romania, offender supervision is rather new, but there are highly engaged researchers in the field. In the Netherlands a new injection of funding of research in this field has played an essential role. We will come back to that, but first something about who the researchers are.

In almost every jurisdiction there are examples of research done by people who have some experience of offender supervision, mainly by working as a supervisor or probation officer. We can also see that there are some masters' and PhD theses, but nevertheless, the interest in offender supervision tends to be limited. It could be seen as an "internal affair", where those with prior involvement in practice have gone on to do studies of practice.

Funding of research on the practice of offender supervision has mainly come through governmental bodies. Some studies are funded by research grants, but more are funded through the ministries and other authorities that manage

the probation service (or equivalent body). In the Netherlands the three different organizations for supervision of offenders have funded professorships at universities for research in this area, an innovative approach that seems to be producing results as many studies are now going on. Some studies are conducted by academics with funding from universities, but most academic studies have been small scale projects completed by masters or PhD students. Also within academia, as we have already noted, researchers tend to have prior experience of working in probation. The conclusion therefore has to be that interest in research on practising offender supervision is quite scarce, from the perspectives of both funders and researchers.

Our review also revealed that the results of research into practice are not always widely disseminated. But it is also shown that if the research is carried out in close cooperation with practice, the results are more likely to get attention. Since most publications are written in the national language, most often there are low possibilities to transfer knowledge between different countries. Therefore, research from the UK gets the most attention as it is published in a language that can be understood by many.

## **Methods**

The methods used for research into practice have not been very innovative, and most studies have been small scale. But we do see some examples of innovative methods and we do see some studies on a larger scale.

Interviews and surveys have been the dominant methods for data collection, but also quite a lot of studies work with artifacts from practice, which could be documents (e.g. pre-sentence reports) produced in practice that thereby are said to reveal how practice is carried out. A rarer but occasionally used method is ethnography, involving the observation of practice. Very few studies make comparisons, but there are examples seen from comparisons between practice in Belgium and England & Wales, as well as between larger cities, small towns and rural areas in Germany.

Some single studies have used innovative approaches that generate new kinds of knowledge about aspects of practice. For examples, a study from England and Wales used a method called “Appreciative Inquiry”, whereby interviews with practitioners focused on eliciting ideas about ‘best practice’ and how workers want to work. In Sweden diaries from probation officers were used in one study in order to better understand their everyday practice.

Since many of the studies are of small scale, there is mostly only one method and one kind of material in most of the studies. We seldom see any replication of research designs between or within jurisdictions. This has meant that knowledge about practising offender supervision has not developed in a way whereby it would be possible to accumulate results and do comparisons.

The growing amount of research in the Netherlands might be able to provide new kinds of knowledge and also knowledge about some key issues in practice. Even though the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee is often said to be essential, very few studies about the ‘working alliance’ have

actually been conducted. But now there is an ongoing study in this area in the Netherlands.

The conclusion that could be drawn after a review of the methods used is on the one hand that this is a field with a low level of innovative methods and on the other hand that the methods used gives us knowledge about what workers say they do, but much less about what they actually do. To know what practice is, there is a need to move beyond ‘stories’ about practice (mostly derived from interviews) and to do studies of what practitioners are actually doing.

## **Themes**

The studies are often descriptive and tell us something about single role(s) in single jurisdictions (e.g. community service workers in Ireland, or the values, attitudes and motivations of probation officers in England & Wales); or they have tended to focus on certain tasks, such as assessment, report writing or electronic monitoring. Research has sometimes been prompted by that the introduction of a new tool or measure, which partly explains why we see more ‘snapshot’ studies of the situation when new techniques are introduced than of everyday practice when it is ‘business as usual’. Finally, a common and recurring theme is to study the impact of changed policies, and in this area we see attention to issues such as the balance of care and control; or between rehabilitation and risk management; or the scope for discretion in practice.

There is much more that has been not been studied. Just to mention some of the “forgotten” areas we could point to the lack of knowledge in the recruitment and training of persons who do offender supervision. This is an area that has attracted some research in jurisdictions with new probation systems, as in Romania or Croatia, but seldom is studied in the “old” jurisdictions. Para-professional and non-professional staff (who outnumber professionals in some jurisdictions, such as England & Wales and Sweden), are groups about whom we know relatively little. Neither have we seen many studies of interactions between managers and practitioners, or between staff working in different organizations. We also know very little about the impact of diversity among offender supervisors, offenders or in the interaction between the parties.

We see a growing interest in everyday practice, which we think is important. In the UK for example studies of the histories of practice have been conducted through ‘oral history’ research, and observations of live or filmed interactions between offenders and supervisors (i.e. contemporary practice) are being done and analysed currently in England & Wales and Romania.

## **How can we understand the lack of interest?**

Our conclusion after this review is that the interest in research on the practice of offender supervision has been weak, but in some areas of knowledge and in some countries we can see a growing interest. Nevertheless, the relative lack of interest needs to be understood. Even though the numbers of persons under supervision in the community far exceed the persons in prisons in most of the countries, prison research still seems to be more popular (though even this is

not a strong field of research). One issue may be that 'offender supervision' is a practice few know about. Others could be that offender supervision is new in some jurisdictions, and there are problems in getting funding as well as access to practice (as reported from many of the countries). And, finally, given the relative invisibility of offender supervision, it may be difficult to attract new researchers or funders, even in the disciplines of social work and criminology where the most academic research is conducted.

Here we see the challenge for the continued work for the group: to attract more researchers and to do new research that will be of use and interest to practice.

A more detailed account of the findings of this and the other Working Groups will be provided in our forthcoming book: **Offender Supervision in Europe**, edited by Fergus McNeill and Kristel Beyens, which is due to be published by Palgrave in December 2013.

For more information about the Action, check out our website:  
[www.offendersupervision.eu](http://www.offendersupervision.eu)

If you are interested in joining or working with the Working Group on Practising Supervision contact: [G.J.Robinson@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:G.J.Robinson@sheffield.ac.uk) or [kerstin.svensson@soch.lu.se](mailto:kerstin.svensson@soch.lu.se)