

**STSM SCIENTIFIC REPORT**  
**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: OFFENDER SUPERVISION IN IRELAND**

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**STSM Applicants:** Dr. Louise Kennefick, National University of Ireland Maynooth and Dr. Deirdre Healy, University College Dublin

**COST Action:** IS1106: Offender Supervision in Europe

**Host:** Professor Fergus McNeill, University of Glasgow

**Reference Number:** COST-STSM-IS1106-14670

**Period:** 12/8/13 – 16/8/13

### **1. Purpose of the STSM**

The purpose of the STSM was to enable Dr. Louise Kennefick and Dr. Deirdre Healy to visit Professor Fergus McNeill at the University of Glasgow in order to discuss his experience of conducting an oral history project on the subject of probation, as we intend to replicate his methodology in an Irish context.

In particular, our visit has: developed our skills as early-stage researchers through receiving immediate, face-to-face feedback on our project plan; expanded our network by introducing us to experts at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research as well as experts in the field of oral history research, and; broadened our understanding of offender supervision across the Irish and Scottish jurisdictions.

### **2. Description of the work carried out during the STSM**

During our STSM we spent 5 days at the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, University of Glasgow. We availed of the expertise and facilities at the Centre in order to complete a first draft of our project plan which will form the basis of our NUIM and UCD ethics applications, Irish Research Council funding application 2014, and Probation Service Research Permission Form.

While drafting our project plan, we obtained ongoing feedback and advice from Professor McNeill at face-to-face meetings. Having the opportunity to test our methodology and proposed procedures with Professor McNeill was extremely valuable in terms of reconsidering the scope of our project and planning for unanticipated issues. We also had the benefit of immediate feedback from members of the Centre when we discussed our project plan at a lunchtime seminar organised by Professor McNeill mid-way through our visit. Furthermore, we gained important contacts within the field of oral history research, Dr. Susan Bachelor (University of Glasgow) and Dr. Angela Bartie (University of Strathclyde), whose expertise we have been invited to draw upon as our project develops.

### **3. Description of the main results obtained**

Brief overview of project plan:

- Research design: Oral history interviews will be conducted with 30 Probation Officers who worked in the Service between the 1960s and the present day, in addition to 30 Probation Clients who received a probation order during the same

period. Each sample will then be categorised into 3 cohorts, namely, the 1960s/70s, 1980/90s and 2000s. Each cohort of Probation Officers and Probation Clients will comprise 10 interviewees. The experiences of each cohort will be compared and contrasted to explore changes in values, practices and contexts in probation supervision over time. Archival documents produced by the Probation Service during the same time periods will also be collected and analysed.

- Measures: Our research measures consist of qualitative interviews and documentary analysis. Firstly, qualitative interviews will be conducted with Probation Officers and Probation Clients in the form of oral history interviews. Traditionally, oral history interviews consist of topic guides rather than a structured interview schedule. Accordingly, we have developed topic guides to contour the narratives in respect of each cohort in the context of their respective experiences of probation and the Probation Service in Ireland. Vignettes and questionnaires appropriate to each cohort were also considered. Secondly, plans were made for the procurement and analysis of Probation Service documents from various sources during the relevant time periods.
- Sample characteristics: We explored the most appropriate means of conducting the oral history interviews. Based on the experience of other oral history researchers, we are aware that significant time and resources are required to achieve large samples. This is particularly true when the research spans a lengthy time frame and the sample includes populations that are elderly, potentially suffering from ill health, or difficult to access. Accordingly, we decided that a sample size of 60 will be sufficient to generate meaningful, varied and useful data and compares well to the sample sizes achieved by other researchers in this field. In addition, we believe it is achievable within the time and resources available for this project.
- Procedures: We drafted our initial procedure plan with a view to ensuring optimum recruitment of individuals employed by the Service and on probation during the relevant time periods. In particular, we considered the issues surrounding internal recruitment methods via a senior contact within the Probation Service, snowballing strategies, the use of associations and unions linked to the Probation Service, and media campaigns.
- Data analysis: Qualitative interviews will be transcribed and data will be entered into N6, a computer software package designed to code and analyse qualitative data. Quantitative data will be analysed using SPSS.
- Ethical approval: As the project involves interaction with humans, we will seek approval from the Research Ethics Committee of our respective universities prior to its commencement. To this end, we explored such issues as anonymity of participants, confidentiality of data, informed consent, and potential risks to research participants.

The STSM also provided us with the opportunity to fine tune our research aims and objectives, commence a literature review of oral history methodology, and finalise our research timetable and intended output plans.

#### **4. Future collaboration with host institution**

We estimate that the project will take approximately 2 years to complete. Towards the end of that period, we hope to return to the Centre in order to share our findings with Professor McNeill and other interested parties. Since our methodology will be based on that used by

Professor Fergus McNeill, there is also scope for a comparative study of the findings across the Irish and Scottish jurisdictions which we would like to pursue in the future, if appropriate.

**5. Foreseen publications/articles resulting or to result from the STSM**

Our project is at an early phase. The purpose of the STSM was to test the feasibility of its scope and to finalise our methodological and procedural plans. As a result, the work we have produced during the STSM is not intended for publication at this stage. Once our project is complete, however, we intend to disseminate our findings in order to advance public awareness of and research on offender supervision. To achieve this, we will write a newspaper article in a leading national newspaper, and post an overview of our results on the COST Offender Supervision in Europe website. We also intend to publish our findings in an international, peer-reviewed journal, and to hold a seminar for key staff at the Probation Service which will provide a forum for discussion of our study.

**6. Confirmation by host institution of the successful execution of the STSM**

(Please see attached).

**7. Other comments**

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the COST Offender Supervision in Europe Management Committee for facilitating this valuable opportunity to expand our knowledge-base, skills and research network. We would also like to thank and all the members of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research that we met with for helpful input and a warm welcome. Finally, we are especially grateful to our host, Professor McNeill, for his generosity of time and intellect in listening to and critiquing our ideas, and for sharing his vast experience and insights on oral history research in the context of offender supervision.