

# Offender Supervision in Europe

COST Action IS1106



## Decision-Making and Offender Supervision in Europe

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### Introduction

This year, we were very happy to welcome new members from Greece and Ireland to our working group. Since the working group is very active and the sitting chairs were not able to attend all the meetings, we invited a third co-chair and are very happy that Niamh Maguire of Waterford Institute of Technology (Ireland) agreed to share this job with us.

### From Year 1 to Year 2

After the conference in Liverpool last year, the working group on finished the chapter (Boone and Herzog-Evans, 2013) that is published in the Actions first book on Offender Supervision in Europe (McNeill and Beyens 2013). Our main results were that empirical studies of decision-making linked to supervision were scarce, in particular in relation to decision-making in the pre-trial and release phases. As for the research that has been conducted, it concentrates on factors that influence decision-making and not on decision-making *processes*. Our review of the existing literature also made clear that research was concentrated in only a few countries (in particular England & Wales, Scotland, Belgium, the Netherlands and increasingly Spain and France) and that breaching of offender supervision measures is an almost totally neglected topic.

### Studying decision making *processes*

In Bratislava in October 2013, we took our first steps towards developing a comparative research methodology for studying decision-making in offender supervision. Cyrus Tata (of the University of Strathclyde, Scotland) presented a very inspiring plenary paper on studying decision-making *processes*. In the working group sessions, Gill McIvor (Scotland) and José Cid (Spain) presented papers on a range of strategies for studying decision-making and

focused on highlighting which strategies they found successful as well as those that they found to be less successful. Kristel Beyens (Belgium) and Niamh Maguire (Ireland) presented their experiences with vignettes as a research method for doing national and comparative research and the members of the working group discussed extensively the advantages and drawbacks of using vignettes and other research methods for doing comparative research.

## **Questions of data, methods and comparison**

In preparation for our Malta meeting in March 2014, we worked on identifying the types of research data that could be collected in different jurisdictions, as this would influence our choice of research methodologies. For example, in some countries access to court reports might not be problematic whereas access to the judiciary might be impossible. Representatives from each jurisdiction filled in a matrix designed to capture the possibilities in terms of research data and methods. We began our meeting in Malta with an overview of this matrix by Dr Trevor Calafato (Malta) and it emerged that the most popular methods were interviews, focus groups and vignettes and that while access to the judiciary was possible in many countries it certainly was not easy.

In Malta we decided to choose vignettes as a method to explore the topic of breach comparatively. From our discussions in Bratislava we learned that the method of vignettes seemed to offer great potential in terms of doing comparative research, despite its drawbacks. We chose the issue of breach to focus on as our review of the literature showed that there was a dearth of research in Europe on this important issue in all decision-making three phases (Boone and Herzog-Evans 2013: 85-86).

The aim of our meeting in Malta was to develop a number of vignettes that could be used to examine the issue of breach in comparative contexts. We managed to leave Malta with an outline of two comparative vignettes that we developed further in the next months. In the coming months these vignettes will be piloted in a number of jurisdictions to test how useful vignette methodology could be for exploring the issue of breach in offender supervision comparatively.

## **Electronic monitoring project**

Some members of our group (Kristel Beyens (Belgium), Anthea Hucklesby (England & Wales), Frieder Dünkel (Germany), Miranda Boone (the Netherlands) & Gill McIvor (Scotland) prepared a proposal on Electronic Monitoring for the European Commission-Directorate of General Justice Action Grants that was granted in December 2013. The overall aim of this study is to compare the operation of EM for adults in four member states (five jurisdictions) in order to examine its use at all stages of the criminal justice

process and its effectiveness in terms of providing an effective and humane alternative to custody and reducing prison populations.

The research has already started (in May 2014) and is coordinated by the University of Leeds. This project can be regarded as the first successful research grant deriving from the COST-project and we hope many more will follow.

## **Community Punishment in Europe**

Several members from our working group also attended an Action workshop meeting in Ross Priory, Scotland in February to begin preparation of a book on Community Punishment in Europe that will be edited by Fergus McNeill and Gwen Robinson and will be published by Routledge next year.

## **Conclusion**

We have had a busy year and have faced many challenges – both practical and conceptual – about how to develop comparative research on decision-making processes. But we have made real progress and are now close to being in a position to pilot test the use of vignettes in a comparative study. We hope that by this time next year we will have some provisional results to share – and look forward to discussing both these results and what we learn from the piloting process with our colleagues in the Action in next year’s meetings. We are also pleased that the open conference of the Action (in Athens, probably on 16-17<sup>th</sup> April, 2015) will be on compliance, breach and enforcement – topics that we consider extremely important and, until now, neglected.

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

## **References**

Boone, M. and Herzog-Evans, M. (2013) ‘Decision-Making and Offender Supervision’, in F. McNeill & K. Beyens (eds.) *Offender Supervision in Europe*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

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