

# Offender Supervision in Europe

COST Action IS1106



## Practising Offender Supervision in Europe

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### Focus

This briefing summarises the learning from the second 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? This year we have focused on research methods for acquiring knowledge about practice.

The work we have done during this second year of the action has taken as its starting point the conclusion drawn after the review of research on offender supervision practice that we did in year 1 (see Robinson & Svensson 2013). We found that this is a field with a low level of innovative methods and that the methods typically used to research practice provide us with knowledge about what workers say they do, but much less about what they actually do. To know what practice is, and to begin to make comparisons between jurisdictions, there is thus a need to move beyond 'stories' about practice (mostly derived from interviews) and to attempt to do studies of what practitioners are actually doing.

### Three principles and three subgroups

The group defined some priority areas for further development of the action. In our search we adopted three principles:

1. The focus of our work should be on innovative research methodologies and the question whether or not it is appropriate to use these in research on practicing supervision.
2. The proposals we make as a working group have to fit in a comparative perspective. This doesn't mean that every jurisdiction that is represented in the Working Group has to participate in every proposal, but the goal remains to compare probation practice in a number of (minimum two) European jurisdictions.
3. Feasibility is an important issue: the proposals we make need to be small-scale and can possibly be used as 'pilots' for larger projects in the future.

Brain storms among members of our group led to an agreement to pursue 'pilot research' in three methodological domains and thereafter we divided into three sub-groups: Visualizing, Observations and Diaries. Each member decided which sub-group to join for the "pilots".

### **Visualising**

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 aims to test the utility of visual methods (photography) for representing and comparing probation practice in different jurisdictions.

The sub-group's work began with a brief review of some of the literature on visual research methods, and it was decided that we would each identify at least one practitioner in our own jurisdiction and ask them to take part in a pilot of the method. Our initial discussions centred on issues around ethics, access and structured vs structured approaches. Some of the questions we debated were: should we simply ask practitioners to take pictures entirely of their own choosing, or should we offer some direction as to what they should try to include/capture in their photographs? Should we direct participants to include, or avoid, taking pictures including colleagues and? Clients?

Having agreed on a way forward, we secured ethical approval to pilot the method from one of the Universities from which our members are drawn, and developed a consent form and information sheet. We decided to make it a 'semi-structured' activity and therefore included on the information sheet topics we asked participants to try to capture, including the following: the environment in which supervision take place (e.g. building, area in which the building is located, office, reception area, waiting room etc.); the environment that you consider the place that you do your most important work; anything representing an obstacle to your work; any other images that you think are relevant. We asked participants not to include any images of clients, and to seek specific consent from any colleagues they wished to include in their photographs. We asked participants to provide, in a separate document or by email, a brief explanation of each image. After they had completed the activity, we tried to conduct a brief interview with participants to find out what it was like for them to take part in the pilot study, and whether they had found the exercise interesting and straightforward to do.

When members of the group met to compare the initial images that had been created by 8 participants, we found much that was similar as well as some interesting variations between the sets of pictures. And whilst some participants chose to take lots of pictures, others took only a small number. The group decided to continue with the pilot in order to collect more images from a wider range of jurisdictions, and then to spend some time, first separately and then together, thinking about how it might be possible to analyse the images collected. We agreed that what we had done to date is an example of the 'photo-documentation' method, but that we might also think about how the images might be used in 'photo-elicitation' research: that is, as

visual prompts to elicit discussion about offender supervision practice in different jurisdictions (Rose 2007).

### **Observations**

This sub-group is led by Johan Boxstaens (Belgium). The other participants in the group are Pascal Decarpés (France), Pana Octavian (Romania), Anita Rønneling (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?

The sub-group's work started with a rudimentary proposal for small-scale pilot research on the use of observations as a methodological framework in research on probation practice. To narrow the scope of the pilot research, we aimed to look at first meetings between probation workers and clients. In these first meetings, we expected probation practitioners to explain what probation is, describe their professional role and express their expectations towards the client. We thought that by focusing on first meetings we would get rich qualitative data on how probation workers present themselves and their work to clients and how they "set the scene" for offender supervision. We decided to limit the number of observations in our pilot and decided to add a semi-structured interview with the probation worker to our research design. Before the observations a frame was set for what to observe as well as for the interviews.

A small-scale pilot was done in four jurisdictions: Romania, Denmark, Sweden & Belgium. Ten observations were done: 1 in Sweden, 1 in Denmark, 3 in Romania and 5 in Belgium. Transcripts in English from the observations were distributed and read by the members of the sub-group. From that reading we noticed that the transcripts were very different, even though we had had a common frame. The transcripts of the first observations that were done in 4 European jurisdictions were different in style and contents, which made a good comparison very difficult. This led us to the understanding that we may need some methodological support in the next phase. We had some difficulties in defining what exactly it was that we saw during the observation. We also noticed that sometimes we used different terminology to describe similar situations and vice versa. That meant that on different occasions we used the same words but actually were trying to describe something different.

From this we agreed to take some more time to properly analyze the empirical data and try to make a list of all the points where a comparison may be possible. We plan to make a better framework for our observations; a more clearly defined observation scheme that in the future would make it easier to compare data.

### **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.

The work of the group started with a discussion on whether a structured or an open approach should be used, or maybe a combined approach. From that we started looking at more concrete examples of diaries and shared experiences from working with this format. We chose to downsize the project to a single trial with 1-2 participants each. The reason for this was both to gain experience from collecting this type of data; and to ascertain the scope and amount of information we would get from it. We chose to make a structured form for collecting daily activities over a period of one week, to document the following: day in the week, time of day, type of activity, reason for activity, where and with who the activity was conducted. Type of activity could be visits, meetings, telephone calls, court hearings etc. 'Where' would refer to the place of the activity, like at the office, at the worker's home, offender's home, relative's home, etc. The 'who' question could imply the offender, offender's family, and colleague(s) or partner from another agency. We also wanted to get some reflection from the probation worker about the whole week, to ascertain whether this was a typical week etc. The schedule for piloting the diary starts with further work to prepare the diary in a simple excel-format and translate it separately for the test in the different countries. We will also be developing a consent form to be used in the different jurisdictions.

## Next steps

Piloting and analysis of data will continue throughout the summer and autumn on 2014. Each sub-group is currently preparing a paper to be presented at the annual conference of the European Society of Criminology in Prague (September 2014) and a full report of each pilot study will be written up for publication. These papers will describe the genesis of each project; the issues encountered in the development of pilot work; the experience of piloting each method; and discuss the utility of each of these 'innovative' methods for future research on offender supervision practice. It is hoped that, by these means, we will make a contribution to one of the aims of the Action, which is to find new ways of making the normally hidden domain of offender supervision more 'visible', and ultimately aid public understanding of what it involves.

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

## References

Robinson, G. & Svensson, K. (2013) 'Practising Offender Supervision', in F. McNeill & K. Beyens (eds) *Offender Supervision in Europe*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rose, G. (2007) *Visual Methodologies: An introduction to the interpretation of visual materials*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). London: Sage.