



Her Majesty's
Inspectorate of
Probation

Innovation in probation: The Eurobarometer on Experiencing Supervision

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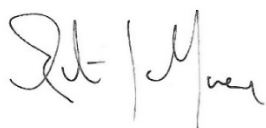
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Foreword

HMI Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Professor Ioan Durnescu, who has conducted research across European probation services for many years. The report highlights the links between subjective experiences of supervision and probation outcomes, and how this has led to the development of a new tool for use with service users – the Eurobarometer on Experiencing Supervision. The tool has been tested in a number of European jurisdictions and can be used for multiple purposes. Ultimately, it has the potential to help engage service users, improve delivery, and add to the evidence base at the local, national and international levels. It also fits well with the desire within HMI Probation to obtain service user views within each of our inspections of probation services.



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Dr. Ioan Durnescu is Professor in the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Bucharest, Romania. He teaches and conducts research in relation to probation, prisons and resettlement. His special interest is comparative probation. He is one of the editors of *Probation in Europe* (WOLF, 2008), *Understanding penal practice* (Routledge, 2013) and *Probation: 12 Essential Questions* (Palgrave, 2016). He is also co-editor of the European Journal of Probation, a journal published by the University of Bucharest in partnership with SAGE Publishing. He is a member of a number of prestigious organisations such as the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) and the European Society of Criminology.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HMI Probation.

1. Introduction

Community supervision started as a bare alternative to prison. As it was defined back then, probation or suspended sentences were considered as 'judicial favour' rather than as punishment (Dianu, 1997). And rightly so, because for a very long time, probation or suspended sentences were not accompanied by conditions or obligations that the person should submit to.

This reality changed in the 1960s when the penal legislation in many European countries introduced obligations and conditions that probationers needed to fulfil during the probation period. This is how different behavioural conditions (e.g. to attend school, to attend programmes, undertake treatment etc.) or restrictions (e.g. not to meet certain people) have appeared in the penal arena.

Once these transformations took place, the nature and the character of supervision took a more punitive turn and increasingly practitioners and scholars recognised that community supervision is not just an alternative to custody but a real punishment that is served in the community. Some even went so far as to call probation a 'virtual prison' (Roberts, 2004).

Alongside these changes in the configuration of offender supervision, scholars started to explore the differing dimensions of this supervision, e.g. the impact on reoffending, perceptions of staff, risk assessment etc. One of the most important conclusions of these studies was that the way offenders experience supervision influences the outcome of probation. In other words, those who perceive their probation officer as reasonable, knowledgeable and empathic (Rex, 1999) are more inclined to attribute positive change in behaviour to probation supervision. Moreover, supervision was considered to be positive when the probation officer had a good relationship with the offender (Ditton and Ford, 1994) or when supervision was described as helpful in solving problems or when client's welfare was taken into account (Davies, 1979; Farrall, 2002; McCulloch, 2005).

Building upon these research findings, this *Academic Insights* paper highlights the development of a new tool – the Eurobarometer on Experiencing Supervision (EES) – to capture the subjective experience of supervision and help measure the success of probation.

2. The Eurobarometer on Experiencing Supervision

As the subjective experience of supervision proved to be an important determinant of probation outcomes, many probation services started to develop and use feedback questionnaires.¹ In most cases, the questionnaires assess only the satisfaction of the probationers and not the other dimensions of the experience of supervision. Furthermore, this form of evaluation can be misleading at times as research and common sense tell us that even negative experiences (such as attending an intensive cognitive programme) can be beneficial for the individual in the long run.

2.1 Development of the EES

Starting from these observations and taking into account the existing literature on what matters in supervision in terms of recidivism and also from the offender's perspective, a group of academics involved in *COST Action – Offender Supervision in Europe*² started to develop a comprehensive tool to capture the subjective experience of supervision and measure the success of probation. This EES tool now includes the following questions:

- six questions are used to assess supervision as a general experience (e.g. the meaning of supervision, primary and secondary stigmatisation)
- six questions deal with the service user's perception of the supervisor (e.g. the understanding of the supervisor's role, the number of supervisors in the last 12 months)
- the quality of the relationship is evaluated in one question with 14 items (e.g. positive, tense, distant)
- practical help is assessed in one question with 13 items (e.g. my supervisor helped me find a place to live)
- compliance is evaluated through three questions (e.g. motivation, likeliness)
- breach is measured through four questions (e.g. number of times the probationer failed to turn up, the possible reaction of the supervisor to one vignette)
- rehabilitation is covered in three questions with multiple response options (e.g. the severity of supervision, the meaning of supervision in relation to moving away from crime)
- co-production and involvement of the service user is dealt with in four questions (e.g. my supervisor works with me when drafting the sentence plan)

Each question or item is assessed from 1 to 5 where 1 is 'totally disagree' and 5 is 'totally agree'.

The questionnaire was translated, adapted and piloted in eight different European jurisdictions on opportunity samples. Although not representative, the results were indicative of how offender supervision is experienced by the recipients. Furthermore, the psychometric

¹ An offender survey is administered across probation providers in England and Wales, with the headline findings – percentage of those reporting an overall positive experience of engagement – used in specific performance measures.

² For more info, please visit the project website: <https://www.offendersupervision.eu>

properties of the scale proved to be acceptable – Cronbach alpha scores above .60 for most items.³

2.2 The potential uses of the EES

The EES can be used for many purposes. The first and the most obvious use is to measure the perception of individuals under supervision at one point in time. By doing so, practitioners and managers can understand whether the perceptions of the service users are in line with the intended policy. For instance, if a probation agency aims at promoting positive relationships with service users (as highlighted in the desistance literature and in the Council of Europe European Probation Rules⁴), this is captured within the tool in 14 different items. If perceptions are not as expected, the managers together with the practitioners can think of ways to enhance relationships and bring them in line with the intentions (e.g. more training, other intake procedures that stress role clarification etc.).

The tool can also be re-administered and measure, using the example above, whether there are any changes in the individual’s perceptions regarding the quality of relationships. In this way, practitioners and managers will have direct feedback on the impact of any new initiatives.

Another important use of the tool is in comparing two or more separate probation offices or even probation services. Examples are set out below (from Durnescu *et al*, 2018) comparing different probation systems from eight jurisdictions:

Table 1. Feeling about yourself since being under the supervision (%).*

Country	Feeling about yourself since being under the supervision (%)		
	Better	The same	Worse
Ireland	83.3	16.7	0.0
Serbia	70.0	30.0	0.0
Croatia	66.7	22.2	11.1
Norway	50.0	25.0	25.0
Lithuania	44.4	33.3	22.2
England	40.0	60.0	0.0

*Data from Romania and Spain are missing.

Table 2. Self-observed influence of supervision on different aspects of life.*

Country	Aspects of life						
	health	future prospects	family life	quality of life	social life	job or education	finances
Ireland	4.33	4.17	4.50	4.17	3.67	4.00	3.67
Croatia	3.67	3.67	3.67	3.33	3.56	3.43	3.00
Serbia	3.18	3.22	2.92	2.67	2.67	2.45	1.73
Norway	3.00	3.57	2.88	2.78	2.71	2.50	1.89
England	3.20	3.14	3.33	2.71	3.00	3.00	2.43
Spain	3.00	2.89	2.22	2.56	2.22	1.89	2.22
Romania	3.00	2.17	3.00	2.57	2.86	2.25	2.80
Lithuania	2.50	2.56	2.75	2.29	2.29	2.11	2.57

*Scale range: 1 (much more negatively) to 5 (much more positively).

³ Cronbach’s alpha scores measure how well individual items correlate with the sum of the other items, indicating how well the items measure discrete characteristics or factors.

⁴ The European Probation Rules are summarised by Rob Canton in HMI Probation *Academic Insights 2019/02*.

As mentioned above, this pilot took place on convenience samples and therefore the conclusions are to be taken with great caution. However, applied on representative samples, the tool can provide reliable and accurate descriptions of the way people under supervision understand and feel this experience.

3. Conclusion

Being based on multiple sources of knowledge, we think EES is an innovative tool that can help probation staff learn more about service users' perceptions. Although the tool was piloted only on convenience samples, EES has proved its potential.

The short-term plan is to use the tool in real life situations, in one or more probation services across Europe. There are advanced discussions with one service to use it as a feedback mechanism to improve the quality of supervision.

In the medium-term, we intend to adjust and up-date the tool in line with the ongoing production of knowledge.

Our aspiration is for use of the tool to be seen as normal routine in most probation services. Through such use, we believe the tool can contribute to responsible, ethical and evidence-based practice.

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