

# **Evaluation in Practice in the Catalan Probation Service**

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This paper describes a practical example of evaluation carried out in Catalonia. The aim of the project was to develop a practice tool that would assist probation officers in the early identification of problem alcohol and drug use.

Probation officers were involved in the selection of this topic and the evaluation through the Community of Practice of Catalan probation staff. This is a virtual platform that connects all probation employees in Catalonia, where they share articles of interest and working groups are created to discuss issues that affect our work. Participation is voluntary. The opinion of workers is taken into account in the choice of subjects to work on and one of the main objectives is to maximize community participation, promoting the exchange of knowledge and increasing the cohesion of professionals in this area. This process identified the initial interview as the preferred place to include an assessment tool.

The choice of the initial interview review arose from the problems experienced in the execution of sentences imposed by the courts where there is substance use, particularly alcoholic drink which is the most frequently consumed drug. The main objective of this review was to create a tool to help us detect, in the first interview, people who have a problem of toxic abuse, particularly alcohol which is prevalent; to design a work plan that takes account of this circumstance and avoids, as far as possible, the impact on serving the sentence that undetected alcohol and drug abuse can cause.

The model of initial interview that was in use in the Probation Service at that time was felt to be too general about the health of offenders and gave poor technical information to the officer about substance abuse. The Probation Service has used various tools that were imported from the health sector to assess substance consumption and detect addictions (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification AUDIT- Test-, CAGE Alcoholism- Chronic General Evaluation-, ISCA- Systematic Interrogation of Alcoholic Consumption-). These had very closed and concrete questions which aroused suspicion among offenders and led to lack of reliability of their answers. The willingness of the people who come to the Administration of Justice tend to be much lower as they arrive under a legal obligation, unlike those arriving at different points of the health care network (Primary Care Centres, Centres in drug dependency care and monitoring, mental health centres, etc.) who start from a recognition or awareness of their problem. Moreover, people who arrive with a judicial obligation are frightened and suspicious of the use that can be made of the results obtained from self-reports.

In conclusion, the first interview model used until then did not meet the needs of the Probation Service and had to be updated. Thus, in early 2013, the Community of Practice accepted the challenge and created a commission to address this issue and started to work with the aim of creating a tool for detecting alcohol abuse that would be integrated in the first interview with each offender. The process of review, updating and validation of the initial semi-structured interviews to be carried out with every sentenced person, with an alternative to prison sanction in Catalonia began in early 2013, and today still continues to develop.

The commission provided the community of probation staff with up to date research material and various documents and links that were used in other areas that work in the prevention and treatment of alcohol and other substance addiction. Moreover, they made a thorough analysis of the scientific literature on what tools were currently available to detect alcohol consumption, and which of those tools were the most sensitive, specific and reliable. This first review assessed that the most appropriate to the judicial context had to be a screening tool to detect alcohol consumption, integrated in the context of a professional interview. This tool should detect which persons probably have hazardous use or are dependent on alcohol, so that appropriate referral and intervention could be made.

Common guidelines for intervention that could help professionals detect drug abuse or alcohol addiction in the context of the first interview, were jointly agreed from several individual technical opinions and from the probation officers and expressed through contributions to online open forum. It was very important and necessary to the work of the commission, who promoted participation, that they investigated the proposals and organised the various opinions and criteria to return the information to the community in a clearer and more fundamental form that would stimulate the platform and its participants.

The result of this work was a draft script for a semi-structured interview designed for use in all the initial probation interviews. A process of evaluation and validation of the first interview script was initiated to determine whether it met the following objectives:

- Detection of problematic alcohol use in offenders.
- The interview should be useful for the entire range of Alternative Penal Measures (unpaid work, mental health treatment, different training programs, domestic violence).
- Provide comprehensive knowledge about interviewee (personal, family, work, health, judicial and education).

## **EVALUATION METHODOLOGY**

The first phase of the evaluation was a pilot test with officers from all of the teams in Catalonia to help validate the tool and to identify aspects of it that could be improved. Two probation officers from each team volunteered to use the new scripts in ten interviews each and to make an assessment of each interview, as well as a general evaluation of the tool. The probation officers who participated in this pilot exercise volunteered to collaborate in designing an optimal initial interview.

To evaluate the interview script a structured protocol was agreed which collected the data in a qualitative, practical and flexible form, suitable for a wider analysis. The commission designed a questionnaire that every probation officer had to answer in relation to each sample interview in order to collect general data and basic aspects that were considered useful for an assessment of the tool:

- Basic data about the offender.
- Duration of the interview.
- Discomfort/co-operation of the offender.
- Usefulness in detecting alcohol consumption.
- Offender's attitude.
- Lack of items or areas of knowledge.
- General assessment of the tool by the officer.

The objective of the evaluation was to find out:

- If the duration of the interview was correct.
- If the interview was well structured.
- If the interview was comfortable or uncomfortable for the user.
- If the tool had proved to be useful to detect alcohol consumption.

To obtain the data from a range of different probation officers it was agreed to collect it as follows:

- Involvement of a minimum two probation officers from each judicial office team.
- Approximately ten interviews for each volunteer probation officer.
- Answering one questionnaire to each interview with the tool, that is to say, an assessment questionnaire for every user.
- Data collection period January and February 2014.
- Analysis of the data collected, qualitatively and quantitatively, during March 2014.

The final sample analysed by the assessment tool was a total of 117 initial interviews conducted in all teams and territories with offenders sentenced to different alternative to prison sanctions and with different personal situations (eg different ages, nationalities and types of crime). The interviews were conducted during the months of February and March 2014.

In general, the data collected in this evaluation could not determine whether the tool works or not for the detection of alcohol consumption. Although it facilitated the collection of information in general, and specifically when the prisoner openly acknowledged alcoholic abuse, it was necessary to determine its effectiveness in the detection of drug abuse. Given this conclusion it raised the need for a second phase of evaluation.

This second phase focused on cases where problem alcohol consumption had not been detected in the first interview. These cases were monitored during the execution of the sentence to identify whether possible problematic alcoholic consumption had subsequently been detected in one of the following ways:

- The organisation where the sentence is delivered (unpaid work, training skills, etc) has informed us that the prisoner has attended under the influence of alcohol.
- The offender admits problematic alcohol consumption in later interviews.
- The family of the offender later informs us about a drug abuse problem.

This monitoring was based on coordination with the different relevant organisations, follow-up interviews with users and the hypothetical interventions with offenders' families in monitoring the execution of the imposed sentence.

The objective of this phase was to examine whether the tool is effective in detecting alcohol consumption conclusively: if a high percentage of the respondents who had initially denied problematic consumption were subsequently found to have this problem, that would show that the effectiveness of the tool is not very high. Based on the results of monitoring the execution of the sentences, we can determine that the tool effectively discriminates people who do not consume alcohol or other substances in a problematic way from those that do.

This semi-structured interview is a tool that, along with the social skills of the interviewer, expertise and mastery in nonverbal communication, and jointly with a good script for interview, will generate the most reliable information for the benefit of the offender and the execution of the imposed sentence. For upcoming revisions, it is recommended to also use objective validated tools that will allow studying the convergent validity between the two tools and compare effectiveness in detecting whether people have a problem with alcohol. Conducting a more comprehensive study is not excluded in the future, but it was not the main aim at this time.

## **STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THIS EVALUATION**

In relation to this evaluation experience in the Catalan Probation Service there are several points to note.

First of all, it is important to highlight positively the participation and involvement of all professionals in the definition of the problem and the need to work on this field of the intervention. It might seem that the voluntary participation of all the probation professionals could complicate decision making or extend deadlines but this was not so. A resilient, horizontal, participatory and inclusive process has been achieved by the placing and structuring of the discussions via the internet forum and through the blog in the virtual platform that unites all professionals, combined with establishing working responsibilities of each commission with a structure and deadlines for the goals of the project. At the same time the process has been conducted in an orderly manner and has produced results which, although still in the process of implementation, are of great value to the intervention. Having probation staff participation has a value itself, not only for the product quality and its evaluation, but also that taking into account the opinion of professionals and encouraging expression of their doubts promotes their wellbeing and resilience.

There have been complications such as a lack of meeting space for professionals, means of transport for staff travel, and lack of time to devote to these complementary and unpaid tasks. These are examples that have hampered the process of participation of probation staff. But all of these difficulties have been overcome thanks to the motivation of the staff who have reorganised their agendas to be involved in the process, even in their personal time.

It has also been possible thanks to the measures taken to facilitate the process by all institutions that have been involved: Catalan Department of Justice and the three Foundations awarded with the Service of Alternative Penal Measures in Catalonia: APIP-ACAM Foundation, INTRESS Foundation and IRES Foundation. The cooperation of every institution involved has facilitated the whole process and has generated solutions when problems have occurred. Without this overall agreement, success would not have been possible. It is an illustration of the commitment of Catalan's Justice Department to the probation service, making available for all the staff a virtual platform where all professionals can communicate online from any place in the whole world. This technology has saved time and travel expenses and helped to structure the information. The commitment to the project has been demonstrated also by the three foundations that deliver probation in Catalonia, facilitating the travel expenses for probation officers' technical meetings, spaces and all material needed when the necessity has arisen. These have also been essential elements for the good result of the project.

Regarding the evaluation, there are a number of positive aspects and some limitations that affect the validity of the results and its use in a scientific context. First of all, the method for selecting the sample is a positive factor for the objectivity of the results, the randomness in the selection of individual offenders and their lack of knowledge of being involved in a pilot test. On the other hand, the size of the final sample (117 people) is small in terms of a scientific assessment tool. This was due to two main factors. Firstly, there were misunderstandings in some teams in relation the collection of information about the interviews which made invalid the results of three of the twelve probation teams. Secondly, limiting the assessment of the interview to two months (February and March 2014) restricted the sample to offenders who attended scheduled interviews with the volunteer officers in this period.

However, the design of the evaluation was not intended to make a scientific validation but was an assessment of the practicality and effectiveness of the new tool and the selected sample did achieve this objective. With the applied design it has been reported that the new tool effectively discriminates people who have problematic alcohol consumption from those that do not. It has also been found that the administration time is not excessively higher than the time invested with the previous model. Thanks to the evaluation there were aspects found to be included to make it more complete in terms of structure. It has been demonstrated also that offenders did not appear to find the questions uncomfortable and that they have been mostly cooperative with the probation officers.

On the other hand a limitation of this evaluation in a scientific context is the lack of an analysis with a control group that had used the former interview model. The assessment that has been carried out limited the attribution of good results only to the use of this new tool developed to detect consumption of alcohol. Comparison with a control group could have identified whether the result was due to the use of the new tool or to other factors. It would also have allowed differences to the former interview model to be assessed.

The lack of independent and external evaluators to the process can create a confirmatory bias that cannot be measured objectively and limits validity to assessments made by officers. It is reasonable to think that one tends to favour information that confirms our beliefs or expectations and an evaluator who was not involved in the construction of the evaluated tool would have improved the objectivity of the evaluation results. However, it should be noted that the evaluators of the tool were particularly interested in finding areas for improvement of

the new semi-structured interview, since it would finally be themselves, as probation officers, who would use it in all their cases.

With respect to the questionnaire model used to evaluate the interview, open questions collected lots of information but had the added difficulty of misunderstandings and different understandings between participants. This caused some difficulties with their treatment in the context of statistical analysis. At the same time the questionnaire instructions were not delivered clearly enough and there were some teams that had not understood they had to fill out a single questionnaire for each conducted interview, invalidating all of their assessments and thus reducing significantly size of the sample. The variability of answers to open questions also increased the difficulty analysing the results. The use of closed questions, to which all would respond in the same way (as grading one to ten for example) with clear instructions would have eased this work but it would not have captured the nuances that open questions allowed.

This assessment has a direct impact on the practice of probation officers. The results are being used to shape the optimal structure and the essential contents of the initial interview with offenders. The tool is currently again under construction since one of the shortcomings found is that it is not adapted to the peculiarities of each different sanction. It is now being developed in relation to each type of sanction: unpaid work, treatment, training, etc.

The overall assessment of this evaluation process is very positive. The implementation of the new tool has not yet been completed because of the necessity to add new annexes to the interview model to suit any type of sanction or measure imposed. Once the new tool is finally built, it will definitely be recommended to start a new evaluation process to determine its usefulness and effectiveness. It will be at that time, before final implementation, when a complete and rigorous evaluation to correct the limitations of this evaluation will be needed.

In Catalonia, a more or less structured evaluation of any protocol or tool is a prerequisite to its implementation. The high presence of different kinds of evaluation in our daily practice, leads to streamlined and improved processes. The evaluation process is embedded to our non-conformist nature and will definitely lead us to achieve more knowledge.