

# Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in French Probation: An Analysis of the RPO1 Implementation

## *Research Summary*

*Anais Tschanz*

PhD in Criminology - Researcher, CIRAP  
French Correctional Administration Academy

**LE CIRAP**

Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherche  
Appliquée au champ Pénitentiaire

*Interdisciplinary Centre for Applied  
Research in the Penitentiary Field*



## *Introduction*

French probation has been marked by continuous transformations resulting from the ongoing evolution of penal policies and the structuring dynamics that have progressively redefined its missions and reshaped professional practices. These transformations have been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, documenting changes in the role of probation officers, the identity-related issues they raise, the professionalization of practices and specialization of tasks they entail, as well as the competing rationalities that emerge from them.

It is within this context that the RPO1 (Operational Practices Framework) was developed. Designed as a comprehensive intervention methodology guide for the French Probation Services (Services Pénitentiaires d'Insertion et de Probation – SPIP) across the national territory, it was developed following the Consensus Conference on Recidivism Prevention held in France in February 2013 and was inspired by the European Probation Rules. The framework is built around criminological principles – primarily the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model – and Evidence-Based Practices (EBP). It embodies both a strong interest in criminology and a desire to professionalize probation officers and harmonize their practices throughout France. By examining the development of RPO1 alongside the evolution of the probation officer profession, our research identifies three underlying logics:

- A scientific logic, whereby criminology, its theories, and its concepts constitute a form of toolkit from which particular instruments are selected according to the missions and objectives pursued. This logic also reflects a commitment to evidence-based practices validated through scientific research. Beyond informing and justifying certain choices, it contributes to reassuring practitioners and legitimizing their practices.
- A political logic, insofar as RPO1 institutionalizes a criminological orientation of probation practices. This orientation forms part of a broader movement promoted by successive governments in pursuit of recidivism reduction, one of whose major turning points was the Consensus Conference, which played an important role in validating and facilitating the appropriation of scientific discourses.
- A professional logic, emerging from field organizations and reflecting both a desire and a need to harmonize practices and further professionalize probation work through the establishment of a common framework. It also responds to a need for legitimacy within the probation field, the justice system and, more broadly, civil society.

## *Theoretical Framework and Research Question*

Given the constitutive logics outlined above, this study proposes to analyze RPO1 as a public policy instrument that is not neutral, but rather carries values, rationalities, and power relations. To do so, it draws on a hybrid analytical framework combining implementation science and the sociology of public action.

### **Implementation Science**

A rapidly expanding field within probation research and practice, implementation science seeks to understand how interventions deemed effective – such as Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) – can be transferred into and adopted within routine practice (Cabassa, 2016). Rather than focusing primarily on the effects of an innovation, it examines the concrete processes through which that innovation is translated into everyday professional practices.

From this perspective, implementation is conceived as a multi-stage process aimed at translating scientific knowledge into organizations with the ultimate goal of producing meaningful and sustainable change. The purpose of implementation science is therefore to identify the facilitators, barriers, and conditions associated with successful implementation (Taxman & Belenko, 2025). To achieve this, it relies on a rigorous methodology that does not primarily seek to assess whether an innovation is effective, but rather to understand what occurs between the design of an innovation and the evaluation of its outcomes.

Implementation science thus provides a valuable framework for examining the dissemination of EBP within probation services. It encourages moving beyond a top-down logic of normative prescription by investigating the concrete conditions under which tools are received, translated, and adapted in practice. It also promotes the search for an appropriate balance between fidelity and adaptation, ensuring that the theoretical foundations of a model are preserved without rigidly prescribing its modes of application.

## Sociology of Public Action

Implementation science highlights the central role that the characteristics of an innovation play in shaping its implementation process. In light of the various logics underpinning the development of RPO1, we propose to analyze it as a public policy instrument that “constitutes both a technical and a social device that organizes specific social relations between public authorities and their target populations according to the representations and meanings it carries” (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004, p. 12).

This perspective enables us to approach RPO1 as a complex and non-neutral object, simultaneously conveying values, technical discourses, and political intentions that produce effects on individuals, professional practices, and the organizational contexts in which it is implemented.

Drawing upon this theoretical framework combining implementation science and the sociology of public action, the present study seeks to understand how RPO1 was implemented within French probation services (SPIP) – by whom and through which mechanisms – and to examine the effects of this implementation on practice settings. More specifically, adopting a three-level analytical perspective (micro, meso, and macro), the research explores issues of receptivity, representations, appropriation processes, service dynamics, and professional identity.

## Methodology

To analyze the implementation process of RPO1 across France, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis was employed.

In the first phase of the study, a questionnaire consisting of 135 questions was developed to explore perceptions of RPO1, its implementation modalities, its level of implementation, and the monitoring activities put in place to support its deployment. The questionnaire was distributed in March 2023 to probation managers throughout France, including Functional Directors of Probation Services (*Directeurs Fonctionnels des Services Pénitentiaires d'Insertion et de Probation – DFSPIP*) and Prison Directors for Reintegration and Probation (*Directeurs Pénitentiaires d'Insertion et de Probation – DPIP*), as well as heads and deputy heads of the Departments of Reintegration, Probation, and Recidivism Prevention Policies (*Départements des Politiques d'Insertion, de Probation et de Prévention de la Récidive – DPIPPR*) and Methodology and Support Units (*Unités Méthodologie et Accompagnement – UMA*) attached to the Interregional divisions of Correctional Services (*Directions Interrégionales des Services Pénitentiaires – DISP*). A total of 181 responses were collected.

In the second phase, 42 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2024 in order to further explore and contextualize the information gathered through the questionnaire. Adopting a more micro-level perspective, these interviews sought to understand how the implementation of RPO1 was received, perceived, and experienced within probation services, as well as to identify and explain its effects on SPIP organizations, professional practices, and, more broadly, on French probation.

The interviews were conducted across three DISP jurisdictions and seven SPIP offices. Participants were primarily probation officers (*Conseillers Pénitentiaires d'Insertion et de Probation – CPIP*), but also included DPIP managers and service psychologists. Approximately one DPIP manager and five to six probation officers were interviewed within each SPIP.

The methodological design was intended to capture the implementation of RPO1 across multiple levels of analysis. The questionnaire provided a national-level overview of implementation strategies, perceptions, and organizational practices, while the interviews offered a more in-depth understanding of the meanings attributed to RPO1 by practitioners and managers, the ways in which it was appropriated in everyday work, and the effects it produced within professional and organizational contexts.

Combining quantitative and qualitative data made it possible to examine both the breadth and depth of the implementation process, while also linking macro-level institutional dynamics to the experiences and practices of frontline professionals.

## Findings

To understand how the implementation process of RPO1 was perceived, interpreted, and incorporated into everyday professional practice beyond its original intentions, this study examines two major dimensions of implementation: support for change and receptivity to change.

### A Nationally Designed but Locally Uneven Implementation

A policy notice issued by the Prison Administration (*Direction de l'Administration Pénitentiaire – DAP*) on June 13, 2018, established a structured implementation plan. However, the data reveal:

- Significant variation in local implementation strategies (mandatory training sessions, working groups, informational meetings, or simply distributing the RPO1 to staff);
- Considerable differences in managerial leadership by DPIP due to both structural factors (staffing shortages, frequent turnover) and individual factors (knowledge of the framework, perceptions of the tool, professional background, etc.).

As a result, the implementation of RPO1 was fragmented and highly dependent on local dynamics and individual actors, calling into question the overall reach of the national strategy. The lack of change support perceived by many probation officers generated feelings of frustration and isolation and, in some cases, contributed to forms of resistance.

Our findings highlight shortcomings in strategic governance and institutional fragmentation in the support provided for innovation implementation. From an implementation science perspective, implementation requires a series of activities carried out over the long term. It is an “active process” (Pope, 2025) involving deliberate and sustained efforts to ensure the long-term sustainability of an innovation within practice settings. Implementation should therefore be understood as a continuous process rather than a one-time event.

### The Role of Managers

This study explores the role of DPIP in supporting organizational change. Our findings underscore the central role played by these probation managers as implementation leaders, positioned at the intersection of central administration, interregional prison divisions, and local probation services.

However, the data also reveal uncertainty regarding the role of the DPIP. Should they act as technical experts supporting frontline staff, or should they primarily fulfill managerial and change leadership functions? This ambiguity is reflected in participants' accounts and varies according to professional position. Probation officers frequently argued that managers should possess a thorough understanding of the tools whose use they subsequently evaluate. By contrast, members of the management corps tended to emphasize a strategic role focused on steering change and implementing public policy.

This discrepancy contributes to uncertainty regarding the role of DPIP in the implementation of new practices, fuels tensions, and weakens support for change. Clarifying managerial responsibilities therefore appears essential to strengthening implementation efforts. Whether DPIP are positioned as technical supervisors or as organizational leaders has important implications for their training and their role in practice. As discussed in the recommendations section of this report, our findings support strengthening the managerial and leadership functions of DPIP. In this perspective, they serve as the link between central administration and practice settings, ensuring the implementation of service policies while selecting implementation strategies that are appropriate for their local context and sustainable over time.

## Collective Dynamics and Multidisciplinarity in Support of Change

Research in implementation science (Taxman et al., 2014) demonstrates that technical knowledge, although essential, is insufficient on its own to ensure the long-term integration of new practices. Peer support and the development of internal social dynamics play a crucial role in fostering commitment to change and creating a favorable implementation climate through the circulation of knowledge, experiences, and practices. In other words, support for change cannot be reduced to a top-down transmission of information. It requires the creation of an organizational environment in which the collective itself becomes an implementation driver.

RPO1, as originally designed, explicitly incorporates this dimension. It is presented as a framework for intervention within probation services as a whole rather than as a tool intended exclusively for probation officers.

The data highlight two key findings:

- The central importance of collective dynamics: working groups, case discussion meetings, informal exchanges, and peer support are critical for ensuring that RPO1 genuinely becomes embedded in practice;
- The importance of a cross-disciplinary understanding of RPO1 as a framework for the entire SPIP, as opposed to a narrowly technical interpretation restricting it to probation officers, which tends to fragment teams and exclude other professional groups from the implementation process.

Our interviews show that teamwork and collective thinking constitute essential mechanisms for both implementation and appropriation. When RPO1 is approached as a tool for collective mobilization, it becomes a source of cohesion and organizational structuring. It allows probation services to be understood in their full complexity and promotes the complementary contributions of different professional groups.

In particular, service psychologists represent a crucial resource in supporting the implementation of tools derived from cognitive-behavioral approaches by facilitating their understanding and appropriation. Despite these strengths, our findings also reveal:

- A strong demand for opportunities to exchange experiences and reflect on practice, which remain limited or, in some cases, entirely absent;
- An implementation process that varies depending on whether RPO1 is perceived as a shared service-wide framework or as a tool intended solely for probation officers;
- The inconsistent presence of service psychologists across probation services.

## Training as a Major Lever for Implementation

At the French Correctional Administration Academy (*École Nationale d'Administration Pénitentiaire – ENAP*), the initial training curriculum for probation officers is now largely aligned with RPO1, giving the institution a central role in the implementation process. Nearly half of the total training curriculum is devoted to criminology-related subjects.

This early implementation strategy – introduced during professional training – is consistent with a long-term structural transformation approach. Future practitioners are socialized into RPO1 as a natural professional framework rather than as a reform requiring later adoption, thereby strengthening its legitimacy. Consequently, trainees and newly qualified probation officers enter practice settings with the knowledge acquired during their initial training, which then operates indirectly as a form of continuing education within probation services.

The interaction between newly trained officers and more experienced staff who have received limited training in these approaches produces several effects.

- First, it creates a reversal of traditional roles: less experienced practitioners become the holders of technical expertise and may find themselves teaching new practices to experienced probation officers, who are in turn placed in the position of learners.
- Second, newly trained professionals often compensate for the lack of structured implementation support by acting as informal implementation agents. In doing so, they partially substitute for collective implementation mechanisms. This dynamic reinforces the idea that implementation relies more heavily on individuals than on organizational structures.

With regard to frontline practitioners, our research distinguishes three forms of training: mandatory training delivered before the introduction of RPO1, continuing professional development, and training provided to contract staff.

The findings suggest that these fragmented training opportunities are limited both in duration and accessibility. In the absence of sustained and cross-cutting support, practitioners develop their own ways of using the framework, thereby reinforcing variation in practice and internal fragmentation within teams. Our findings therefore highlight the need for broader and more structured educational and training support if a framework such as RPO1 is to foster the development of a genuinely shared intervention culture.

More broadly, this research demonstrates that training is a key implementation driver, consistent with findings from implementation science. Beyond this role, training also sheds light on the underlying logics shaping correctional public policy and innovation governance. It reveals an approach characterized more by injunction than by support and by the delegation of responsibility to practitioners in the absence of a fully developed implementation strategy.

### Receptivity and Appropriation

The data indicate generally positive attitudes toward RPO1, supported by the scientific discourse associated with EBP, which lends legitimacy and credibility to the new practices being introduced. At the same time, this scientific framing may conflict with the professional intuition of experienced practitioners, generating tensions, dissonance, and conflicts related to both professional identity and interprofessional relationships.

With regard to appropriation, our findings suggest that it is shaped by both collective and individual dynamics, varies considerably across practitioners, and may lead to diverse forms of use. These findings lead to several observations.

**First**, receptivity to change is multidimensional. It is shaped by representations, implementation contexts and conditions, and the individual and professional characteristics of practitioners. Receptivity is therefore not a fixed attribute dependent solely on personal willingness or years of professional experience. Rather, it is a dynamic construct influenced by perceptions of feasibility, coherence, and compatibility between existing practices and newly introduced approaches. For this reason, receptivity requires particular attention throughout the implementation process.

**Second**, appropriation is gradual, non-linear, and heterogeneous. RPO1 circulates, spreads, and is tested within probation services through a variety of mechanisms and formats: individual or collective appropriation, experimentation, working groups, selective use, or comprehensive adoption. These multiple ways of engaging with RPO1 reveal the plasticity of public action. The framework is translated, adapted, interpreted, experienced, and at times redefined or circumvented. This diversity should not be understood as a failure of implementation; rather, it reflects the real work of integration and adaptation that implementation science recognizes as both inevitable and necessary.

**Third**, RPO1 is not a neutral instrument. It generates tensions between professional knowledge grounded in experience and technical knowledge derived from the criminological models upon which it is based. Some probation officers view RPO1 as a vehicle for the progressive development of their professional practices, contributing to increased expertise and a stronger sense of professional recognition through the use of more structured tools. Others express distance from, or even distrust toward, what they perceive as an excessive technicalization of their profession and a loss of meaning in work historically grounded in relational practice.

In this sense, RPO1 serves as a vehicle for a broader paradigmatic transformation in correctional public policy and plays a significant role in reshaping the professional field of probation practice.

### Resistance to Change

Resistance to the introduction of RPO1 emerged as one of the principal obstacles to implementation in both the survey and interview data. Participants expressed three main forms of resistance:

- Ideological resistance, rooted in disagreement with the underlying principles of the model;
- Practice-based resistance, reflecting attachment to established professional routines and ways of working;
- Political resistance, directed toward the top-down nature of the reform and its implementation process.

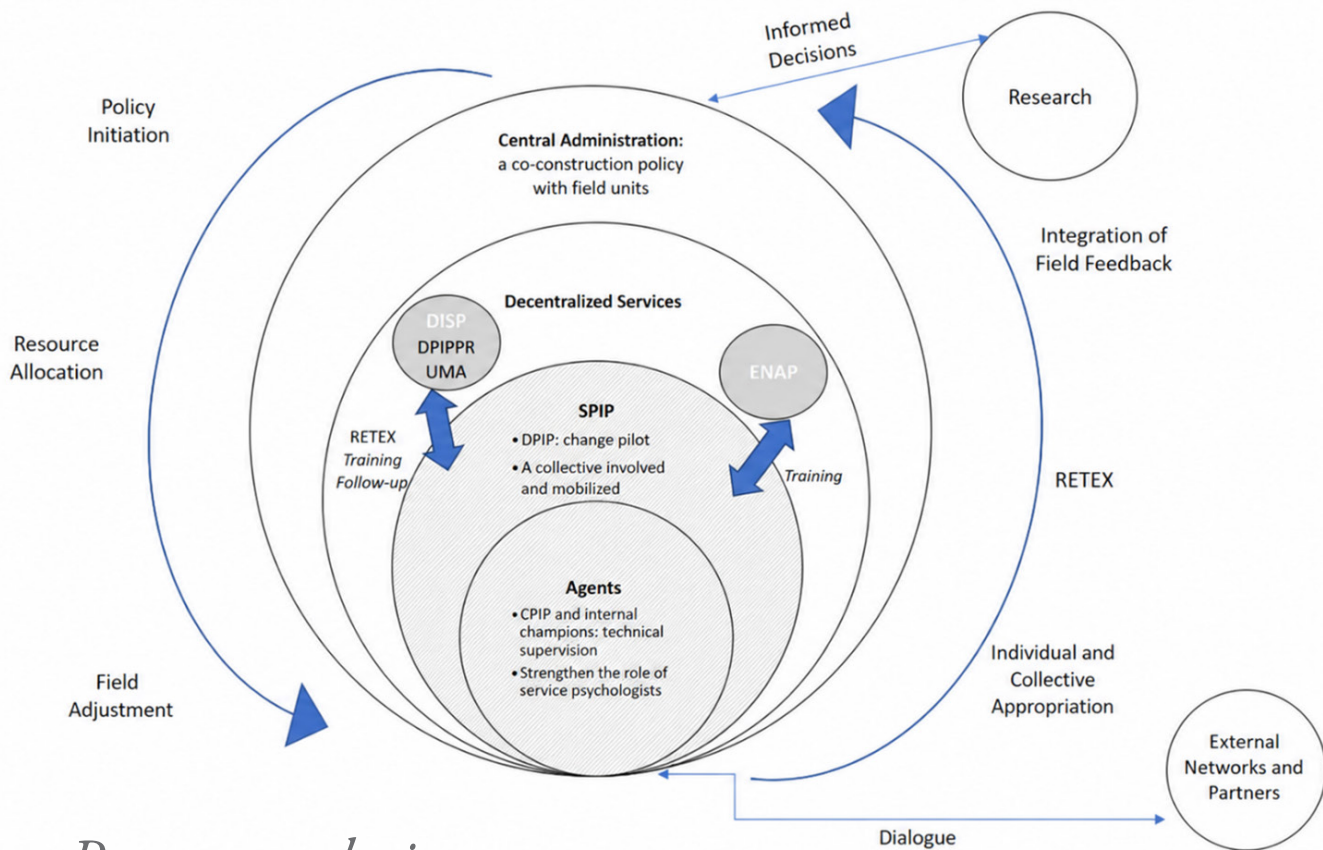
These categories become meaningful only when examined in relation to the complex dynamics that underlie them.



This model highlights gaps between intentions and outcomes. Several discrepancies are observed across different levels:

- Between ambition and implementation: the design and diffusion of the RPO1 reflect a strong intention to transform practices, harmonize them, and structure them through criminology and EBP. However, this ambition is only partially realized, as effective implementation requires sufficient resources and means. Our findings indicate a surface-level organizational commitment: while the intent is clear, field-level implementation was not sufficiently supported, and services were only marginally prepared for change. This gap produces a central effect: it implicitly shifts the burden of operationalizing the reform onto frontline actors. Professionals thus become both passive recipients of an imposed framework and active agents required to create the conditions for its implementation.
- The lack of resources allocated to policy implementation creates a disconnect between political intentions and structural realities on the ground. This is reinforced by a top-down imposition and a change process that is weakly supported, if at all. This gap can be interpreted as reflecting limited knowledge of frontline services and of the difficulties practitioners face in carrying out their missions. It generates a succession of disjunctions across macro, meso, and micro levels and becomes a source of rejection and resistance:
  - > At the macro level, the RPO1 is presented as an evidence-based intervention guide intended to harmonize, structure, and legitimize CPIP practices.
  - > At the meso level, SPIP lack the temporal, material and managerial resources, needed to integrate the innovation into routine practice.
  - > At the micro level, practitioners must reconcile experiential professional knowledge, the introduction of new practices, and the constraints of their working conditions. In this context, the RPO1 may become secondary or may even crystallize and amplify pre-existing tensions and divides.
- Entre les professionnels d'un même service, avec l'émergence d'incompréhension, de défiance et de sentiment d'illégitimités en fonction des dynamiques produites par l'arrivée d'un tel dispositif. En effet, la diffusion du RPO1 sur les terrains n'est pas neutre et peut produire deux effets opposés :
- Un effet de cohésion lorsqu'il crée un langage commun et qu'il est support d'une dynamique d'équipe. Il peut alors rapprocher des professionnels qui se retrouvent dans les pratiques que le dispositif porte ou le sens qu'il donne à leurs fonctions.
- Within teams and services, the implementation of the RPO1 may generate misunderstanding, mistrust, and perceived illegitimacy depending on the dynamics produced by its introduction. Indeed, the implementation process is not neutral and can produce two opposing effects:
  - > A cohesion effect, when it creates a shared language and supports team dynamics. It may bring professionals closer together through shared practices or through the meaning they attribute to their work.
  - > A polarization effect, when it reinforces divides between professionals whose identities have developed along different trajectories, between those who adhere and those who do not, between "those who know" and "those who do not practice".

This model of current implementation reveals a misalignment between political ambition, organizational conditions, and professional cultures. It also makes it possible to identify potential levers for action at each level (micro, meso, macro), leading us to propose a renewed model for implementing EBP within the French correctional system. This alternative model departs from a traditional vertical structure and is instead based on exchange, dialogue, reciprocity, and mutual understanding.



## Recommendations

To move toward this more circular rather than pyramidal and vertical implementation model, we propose:

- Strategic recommendations aimed at central administration and DISP, focused on establishing a genuine implementation policy that takes field realities into account, informed by implementation science and promoting shared governance.
- Organizational recommendations aimed at increasing receptivity to change in local settings by providing the necessary resources to integrate new practices and strengthening collective dynamics.
- Professional recommendations involving clarification of SPIPs' roles and recognition of the diversity of professional identities.

These recommendations are as follows:

- Rethink EBP implementation policies so that they are structured and evenly disseminated across French territory, with clear definition of each actor's role. A rigorous implementation methodology, with clearly defined and standardized stages applicable across all SPIP and DISP – as recommended by implementation science – would also help mitigate the impact of contextual disruptions affecting implementation processes (such as the COVID-19 crisis, but also governmental priority shifts or internal organizational changes within SPIP). This suggests the creation of a dedicated working group tasked with adapting implementation science recommendations to the French context.
- Reduce gaps between policy intentions and the realities of practice by ensuring that ambitions are matched with adequate means. This requires ensuring that environments in which innovation is implemented are actually able to operationalize it. This includes allocating sufficient resources to both initial and ongoing training, as well as to human resources, so that SPIP staff workload allows for the integration and use of new practices.
- Promote shared governance: integrating practitioners into implementation processes, co-developing tools, and recognizing local specificities are key conditions to prevent rejection often associated with perceptions of top-down imposition or loss of professional bearings. This would require collaborative methods based on reciprocity and adapted to field realities. Implementation science refers to this as a "bottom-up" approach, in contrast to a "top-down" approach. It involves treating frontline professionals as full participants in the implementation process, both in deployment and in the design, adaptation, and evolution of

interventions.

- Clarify the roles of SPIP actors, which appear as key levers for facilitating knowledge circulation and practice transformation. This first requires clarifying the role of DPIP in supporting change, strengthening their managerial and steering functions as guarantors of service policy coherence and implementation consistency. Technical supervision would be entrusted to SPIP psychologists, whose functions – particularly as defined in RPO2 – place them in a key supporting role for EBP implementation, as well as to “internal champions”, namely CPIP staff specialized in specific RPO1 components or prioritarily trained in new practices. These professionals would play a central role in the horizontal, day-to-day, and sustained dissemination of innovation.
- Revise initial training so that it aligns with the competencies practitioners are expected to mobilize and does not contribute to role confusion, particularly for correctional integration and probation managers. Develop continuing training to support the long-term sustainability of innovation implementation in practice settings.
- Strengthen the role of collective dynamics in implementation: institutionalizing spaces for discussion, feedback, and practice analysis helps build cohesion and collective ownership around a shared object. It is essential to involve all SPIP professionals, not only CPIP staff, in order to make the RPO1 a unifying tool rather than a factor of fragmentation.
- Take into account practitioner receptivity: rather than attempting to counter “resistance,” it should be understood as a symptom of underlying difficulties that must be identified and integrated into the implementation process. Reframing this issue also allows a shift away from an individual-level interpretation of implementation failure toward an organizational and systemic analysis. In other words, the obstacles encountered in implementing the RPO1 are not solely the result of individual resistance, lack of adherence, or misunderstanding of the framework, but reflect deficits in support, governance, and adaptation to local contexts.
- Consider the characteristics of probation and reintegration professionals in terms of experience, professional evolution, and changes in practice. One of the key contributions of this research is precisely the identification of the effects of the RPO1 on the professional identities of all SPIP staff.
- Develop implementation science in France in connection with research and training institutions as well as field practitioners, in order to establish a rigorous yet flexible methodology capable of systematically supporting the implementation of new practices – not “on” practice settings, but “with” them, in a logic of co-construction and transition support.

These analyses outline a pathway for the evolution of French probation practice supported by implementation science. More broadly, this research also contributes to implementation science through a French-speaking qualitative approach, in a field that has been largely dominated by quantitative and anglophone research. By analyzing practitioners' representations, practices, and appropriation processes through their own discourse, it does not focus primarily on whether implementation is successful or not, but rather on what it does to actors. This perspective remains relatively underdeveloped in implementation science, which has mainly focused on indicators and determinants of success. Implementation is therefore not only a process of diffusion structured around key stages aimed at producing change, as initially defined in this study. It is also a social, identity-based, and organizational process that reveals tensions between scientific norms, public policy governance, and professional realities.

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Anaïs Tschanz

PhD in Criminology - Researcher, CIRAP  
French Correctional Administration Academy

ÉNAP - 440, avenue Michel Serres  
CS 10028  
47916 AGEN cedex 9

[www.enap.justice.fr](http://www.enap.justice.fr)



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