Confederation of European Probation
Research and Development Project
Summary Report

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Background and methods

- During 2024-25, we undertook a **Research and Development Project (RDP)** on behalf of the Confederation of European Probation (CEP). The RDP project's central aim has been **'to enable CEP to improve the scale, effectiveness and the quality of its engagements with research and knowledge exchange activities, in pursuit of CEP's mission, particularly in relation to the professionalization and promotion of probation'.**

- To achieve that aim we undertook a *year-long process of dialogue with the CEP Board and members; with its partners and stakeholders; with probation researchers, and with managers and frontline practitioners.* This summary report reviews what we learned in this process.

Reviewing probation research and developing a typology

- To help us develop a typology of probation research that we could use in an online survey of probation professionals, we reviewed the titles and abstracts of all 663 articles published in 4 prominent English-language probation journals between 2013 and 2023 (the European Journal of Probation, Federal Probation, Irish Probation Journal and Probation Journal). A process of coding each article and clustering codes into themes allowed us both to develop a useful typology of probation research and to note the topics most frequently discussed in the 4 journals. The three most discussed themes were: evidence-based policy and practice; probation as an institution (that is, research about probation itself); and desistance and social integration.

- We presented these results and our emerging typology both at both academic and professional conferences in late 2023. Discussions with participants assured us of the utility of the review and of the typology; but also led us to recognise that, by its nature, a retrospective review of this sort could not reveal current priorities and concerns, especially in relation to issues that may have emerged (or come to prominence) very recently. As a result, and taking account of suggestions raised in these discussions, we added some items to the typology (on new technologies and on violent extremism, radicalisation and de-radicalisation) so that its final version included 18 items in total.

Survey results

- Our online survey drew on similar previous projects and on our review of articles. It was disseminated amongst CEP member organisations between November 2023 and January 2024. We invited probation professionals at all levels (from senior leaders to frontline practitioners) to contribute views about their experiences and uses of research in the development of probation services and practices. While the survey was prepared in English, we also offered translated versions which were checked and improved by country 'champions'.

- The survey attracted **926 responses from 29 jurisdictions.** Of the 926 participants, 647 (69.9%) were frontline practitioners, 167 were frontline managers (18.0%), 81 were senior managers (8.7%) and 31 were working at the policy level (3.3%). Almost 7 in 10 of the respondents had been working in their organisations for more than 5 years, and about half had more than 10 years of experience. Though we were very pleased with the number of responses, uneven levels of participation mean that the survey can be considered statistically representative of the views of the probation workforce in Europe.

- While more than one third of respondents engaged frequently with research (at least once a month), 42.7% reported relatively rare engagement (no more than a few times per year). Surprisingly perhaps, given that respondents opted into participation in a survey about research, 16% report never engaging with it at all. The most common means of accessing research included seminars, conferences and training events organised by respondents' employers. For our respondents, social media, podcasts and blogs appear to be used quite rarely to access research, perhaps because they would be unlikely to be accessible during working hours. In relation to the challenges faced in attempting to access research lack of time emerges as the key issue (for 34.2% of respondents), although resource limitations are also an issue for a significant number.

- When we asked respondents about *how they make most use of research* in their current roles, their responses suggested that research is used most frequently to assist with assessment, intervention design and client evaluation. That said, there were differences related to different roles; more senior staff naturally were somewhat more likely to use research in staff training and in developing policies and procedures. We also asked respondents *which kinds of research* they used most in their role (using the same topic list mentioned above). The answers suggest that research on evidence-based practices, on desistance and on risk is often used, but it is notable that research on probation organisations and their staff also seems important; indeed, this rated second-most highly.

- Perhaps the most important question we asked sought the respondents' views on which were the most important areas of research for probation's future. **They were invited to select five from the list of 18 topics already mentioned above.** The top five topics (in order of priority) were research on desistance and social integration, on the health and mental health of probationers, on probationers' needs, on assessing and managing risks, and on understanding and responding to different types of offending. It was notable that health and mental health issues amongst probationers feature so prominently in this regard.

Focus group discussions

- During March and April 2024, we gained further insights by discussing these results (and the broader issues) in a series of focus groups with senior leaders in probation (n=8), CEP stakeholders and partners (n=8), and three meetings with practitioners (n=21). The practitioners who participated came from England, France, Germany, Ireland, Jersey, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Slovenia and Turkey.

- The practitioners shared our view that those who completed the survey, like those who we met in focus groups themselves, were more likely to be more enthusiastic about probation research than many of their colleagues. They also noted that high workloads and limited time meant that only those with an interest in research might have been prepared to commit the time to complete the survey. In discussing the results related to how often people access research, even interpreting 'access' and 'engagement' broadly (to include training events and conferences, blogs and articles), practitioners stressed that accessing research is not easy for very busy practitioners. Some commented about language saying that not enough research is available in translation. The same point that was reinforced in the focus group with senior leaders: *'we have a language barrier'.*

- In discussing barriers to accessing and using research, high caseloads were a recurring theme, not just in the discussions with practitioners, but also in the meeting with senior leaders. Either way, time constraints and workload pressures were the main themes, alongside the pressure to focus on assessing and managing risks.

- Indeed, some were surprised that such a high proportion of survey respondents reported engaging with research quite regularly. Practitioners reported that engagement with research is much more commonly facilitated during working hours, through in-house training events, and via (research-based) manuals. Practitioners did recognise the importance of keeping up-to-date with new research, partly because of the pace of social change.

- In the practitioner focus groups, several participants noted that probation leaders and managers may be more interested in the implementation by practitioners of something that *they* [the leaders] have deemed to be research-informed, rather than encouraging reflective, research-informed practice at the frontline. This more managerial approach would then make leaders and managers the main conduits of relevant research, evidence and theory, with practitioners left as secondary or vicarious research users. Relatedly, some practitioners felt that younger practitioners who had been more recently recruited (within a more managerialised and risk-focused era) had less interest in research.

- In making sense of when research is and is not used in practice, it came as no surprise to the practitioners that the survey results suggested that use of research evidence was frontloaded in the practice process. At the beginning of the process, the focus is primarily on completing risk assessments and writing reports; thereafter, 'prescribed instructions' from employers about the 'next steps' in interventions tended to guide implementation more than research.

- Yet for some respondents, this was partly why research had become slightly divorced from practice; once intervention is in train, practitioners tend to work by habit, by instinct and/or by following procedures. It was noted that practitioners can feel 'de-professionalised' to some degree, particularly where leaders and

managers are telling practitioners what to do (i.e., what tools, programmes and approaches to use) rather than encouraging reflective and critical research-informed practice. Many practitioners, from different parts of Europe, agreed that research is often implemented 'top-down'. But it was also noted that those different professional backgrounds (e.g., law, social work, social sciences) might lead people to practice differently and to use research differently; some might prefer a more proceduralised approach.

- Discussing the survey findings related to future research priorities, the stakeholder focus group also stressed the importance of research on other justice professionals' and politicians' understanding of probation. This was linked to the need to '*improve the visibility and promotion of probation among judges and prison services and you know politics and community services'.* The broader problem of lack of wider public understanding of (and support for) probation was also raised.

- Reviewing the ranking of research priorities, one of the senior leaders noted that: *'[p]robation is about helping, supporting… so I am not all that surprised that desistance, social integration is very high, but also the needs [of service users]'.*

- The practitioners had many comments and ideas on research priorities. All agreed with the survey respondents that health and mental health were increasingly important areas, which required practitioners to be aware of new and emerging research. As one of the senior leaders noted, practitioners are confronted with these issues on a daily basis.

- The relatively low priority accorded in the survey to 'research on how people experience probation supervision' provoked significant discussion. For one participant, this survey finding made sense as a product of the emphasis on targets. Another suggested that there might be a fear among some practitioners related to not knowing what to do with negative feedback, or how to respond to unmet need (in the absence of resources).

Recommendations

Our research strategy employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative insights. We will utilize:

- Desistance and integration
- Probation institutions, cultures and practices
- Probationer experiences of supervision
- Probationer health and mental health
- Professional and public understandings, and media representations
- The role of new technologies in probation

Desistance and integration: These topics were highly prioritised because they speak directly to the core functions of probation. While a great deal is now widely known about desistance *in general*, there is much more to be learned about supporting *diverse pathways* to desistance and integration *from* different types of offending, *for* different types of people and *in* different cultural and systemic contexts.

Probation institutions, cultures and practices: Although the survey results and focus groups did not prioritise research on probation itself as a key priority, the CEP Expert Group on Research (in reviewing our report) argued that CEP needs to encourage and enable more research on different constructions of probation in social, cultural, legal and organisational terms (including comparative research).

Probationer health and mental health: Awareness of and evidence about the extent and nature of health and mental health needs of people on probation has been growing in recent years, but since levels of need appear to be increasing in these areas, more knowledge (and more access to knowledge) is urgently required.

Professional and public understandings, and media representations: These topics emerged more strongly in the stakeholder and senior leader focus groups, with particular reference to discussion around how probation leaders can most effectively manage their engagement with policy and politics and other justice professions, and how they can better educate and inform these different publics about probation.

The role of new technologies in probation: This theme emerged strongly across all focus groups, in which there was discussion both of the potential and of the pitfalls of new technologies. Clearly, the evidence base in this area is also in need of development.