

Probation Workload

From How Many to How Carried



A briefing for the CEP Workshop on Caseload and Workload

Ioan Durnescu · University of Bucharest · Bucharest, 27–28 May 2026



The argument, in one slide

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Most of the workload conversation has been about

HOW MANY cases.

The more actionable question may be

HOW THEY ARE CARRIED.

Two officers, the same fifty cases, radically different working lives.

The European scale

SPACE II — 2024 (Aebi et al, 2025)

1.43 M

people under probation
across 37 European services

188

median probationers
per 100,000 inhabitants

67×

gap between highest
and lowest national rates

Variation across Europe (rates per 100,000)

Poland 636 · Türkiye 434 · Moldova 320 · Latvia 290 · England & Wales 284 · France 283 ... **Greece 17** · **North Macedonia 9.7**

Read these figures cautiously — they reflect penal cultures, not officer-level pressure.

Caseload is not workload

CASELOAD

a simple count

how many people sit on the officer's list at any given moment

WORKLOAD

the weighted demand

how complex, risky, time-intensive, and emotionally taxing those cases actually are

26% of probation officer time involves face-to-face contact with probationers

DeMichele & Payne, 2018 — time-study, US probation agencies

How much is too much?

Different sources give very different answers — and that's the finding.

25

what experienced
sentencers think reasonable

UK sentencer consensus

50–60

upper limit for manageable
quality work

HMIP, 2021

**1:20 / 1:50 /
1:200**

intensive / moderate-high /
low risk ratios

APPA standards

126%

current operating capacity
in London / East England

NAO, 2025

~50% of probation staff in England and Wales still describe their workloads as unmanageable (HMIP, 2025).

The paradox

Smaller caseloads, on their own, do not necessarily improve outcomes.

Without EBP

Fewer cases →

more time to detect violations → more technical revocations, no recidivism gain

With EBP

Fewer cases →

30% reduction in recidivism, when target caseload (~54) is paired with EBP-trained officers

Petersilia & Turner (1991, 1993); Jalbert, Rhodes et al. (2010, 2012)

The toll on the workforce

International evidence is now extensive and remarkably consistent

13–15.5

average sickness days/year
per probation officer (HMIP,
2025)

8%

annual attrition rate
among probation officers

25%

shortfall in qualified
probation officers (E&W)

72%

of inspected cases with
insufficient management
oversight



Many practitioners in the CEP audit described feeling like

“lone crusaders”

trying to hold complex cases together with insufficient time and oversight.

The pivot

Two officers, the same fifty cases.

One feels in control. One is close to breaking.

What differentiates them is rarely the cases themselves —

it is the organisation around them.

From here on, the conversation is about the second track: how the same workload is experienced.

Organisational justice: three dimensions

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How fair the organisation feels to those who work in it



DISTRIBUTIVE

Fair outcomes

Are caseloads, promotions, pay, and recognition fairly distributed?



PROCEDURAL

Fair processes

Are decision-making processes transparent, consistent, and open to staff voice?



INTERACTIONAL

Fair treatment

Are staff treated with dignity, informed honestly, and listened to?

Across correctional and probation studies, procedural justice shows the strongest, most consistent effects.

The key finding

22%

of the variance in job stress

explained by organisational justice perceptions alone

Lambert et al., 2019 · n=322 correctional staff

The policy implication is unusual but, it seems, well-grounded:

The same caseload, in a procedurally just agency,

is genuinely a different caseload.

Taxman & Gordon (2009), n=1,200 officers: procedurally just environments produced lower fear of victimisation, stronger commitment, and greater openness to reform — without any change in objective conditions.

Case allocation: black box vs glass box

BLACK BOX

- Manager decides
- Allocation arrives
- Rationale is opaque
- Pushback is read as complaining

Even mechanically fair allocation produces the stress response when perceived as unfair.

GLASS BOX

- Visible weighted workload models
- Published allocation criteria
- Staff input into allocation rules
- Team-level reviews of distribution
- Individual conversations about why

“I could carry these cases if I understood why they came to me.”

Beyond allocation: organisational levers

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Mechanisms with reasonable evidence behind them — none reduce caseload; all shift how it is carried.



Meaningful supervisor support

Regular, attentive, protected from being colonised by performance monitoring (JD-R: most reliable buffer against burnout)



Reflective supervision

Structured space — drawn from clinical and social-work traditions — to process the emotional content of complex cases



Voice in workload review

Practitioner participation in setting team-level thresholds, not merely receiving them



Visible recognition

Of complex case work, especially cases that demand emotional labour without producing clear outcome wins



Protected time for purposeful supervision

As distinct from crisis management — keeps the work close to its rehabilitative purpose

Toward an organisational care framework

F R O M

Practitioner wellbeing as a residual concern

Treated as a soft theme, after the operational essentials, when there is time left over



T O

Practitioner wellbeing as a measurable performance variable

Treated as a measurable, monitored, organisationally-owned dimension of service quality

Some recent European work has begun calling this organisational care.

What we still do not know well

The honest limitations of the evidence base



Anglophone bias

Most rigorous studies are American, English, Canadian; European comparative evidence remains thin



Gender almost never disaggregated

Yet practitioners widely believe female caseloads carry higher per-case complexity



Digital and hybrid supervision

Pandemic-era experiments with workload measurement largely remain unevaluated



Implementation gap

We know more about the correlates of organisational justice than about what shifts a system from black-box to glass-box



Net-widening

The question sits uncomfortably under most national workload conversations

Four observations to take forward

1

Workload is a systems problem

Sentencing policy, prison capacity, and probation resourcing have to be discussed together

2

Reduced caseloads need EBP alongside

The evidence will not support more staff without parallel investment in supervision quality

3

Organisational behaviour is the measurable lever

Procedural justice, transparent allocation, voice, supervisor support, reflective supervision, recognition, protected time

4

The re-framing matters

From “we cannot control caseload” to “we can shape how caseload is carried” — the most useful move the working group can offer

Thank you. Questions and discussion.