

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Effective community-based supervision of young offenders

Trotter, C. (2012). "Effective community-based supervision of young offenders." Trends & Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice (448): 1 - 7.

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Summary/Conclusions

In recent years there has been a wealth of research regarding evidence-based skills in supervision of adults but very limited research on evidence-based skill use with juveniles. This study directly observed and coded 117 criminal justice staff and juvenile interactions in Australia. During each session, staff were evaluated on 15 evidence-based skill areas. Researchers discovered there was a significant positive relationship between the use of skills and decreased recidivism. Staff who received a global skill rating of 6 or more had clients with lower rates of recidivism than those who had a lower global skill rating.

Limitations of Information

The skills of criminal justice professionals in New Wales, Australia were evaluated. It is unclear how criminal justice professionals in the United States would have performed in the study. The sample study group consisted of volunteers and may not be representative of all staff. The quality and quantity of training in the Australian criminal justice system and how different training impacts staffs' skills is unknown.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Skill Use Decreases Recidivism

Building upon prior research, evaluators studied the effects of evidence-based skills on juvenile populations in New Wales, Australia. Previous studies evaluating skill usage have focused on adult clients. Researchers were also interested in whether or not certain skills or differences in staff characteristics (e.g. enforcement versus therapeutic) contributed to any reductions in recidivism.

Over 4 years, researchers observed 117 interviews conducted by Juvenile Justice Counselors and Juvenile Justice Officers. Collaborating with researchers from other projects, a coding manual was developed that evaluates 15 different evidence-based skills (e.g. structure of the interview, role clarification, problem solving, and pro-social modeling). Staff was evaluated through direct observation or audio tape. The interactions were between 5 minutes and 102 minutes. The study participants received a global skill score between 1 (low skill use) and 10 (high skill use). Researchers later analyzed police records for recidivism. The study defined recidivism as a conviction of a new offense within two years.

Staff who received a score of skill score of 6 or more only had lower rates of recidivism (62.5%) compared to staff that scored 4 or less (81%). Two skills that appeared to be correlated with reduced recidivism were incentives and a non-blaming attitude. Proper use of incentives was the only skill found to be statistically significant in reducing recidi-

vism. Lastly, the study discovered those who had counseling backgrounds were more likely to use evidence-based skills despite managing higher risk cases than enforcement-oriented peers. The staffs' increased skill usage resulted in lower recidivism.

Practical Applications

- √ Identify and incentivize pro-social behavior.
- √ Try to avoid blaming when working with probationers. Seek understanding about factors that may have contributed to the situation or behavior instead of focusing on the result.
- √ Consider asking what problems the probationer would like to work on. This tactic can avoid blaming and begin a case planning process.
- √ Ask your supervisor to schedule a direct observation. Direct observations provide a great opportunity to practice skills, receive feedback, and set performance goals.
- √ Develop and utilize evidence-based skills.
- √ Consider hiring candidates with sociology, psychology, or counseling backgrounds. The study found therapeutic oriented individuals were more likely to use evidence-based skills.

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