

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *The impact of skills in probation work: A reconviction study*

Raynor, P., Ugwuodike, P., et al. (2014). "The impact of skills in probation work: A reconviction study." *Criminology & Criminal Justice* 14 (2): 235 - 249.

**Key Words:** Core correctional practices, effectiveness of probation, practitioner skills

### Summary/Conclusions

In the present study, researchers analyzed videotaped interviews between probation officers and probationers. Using a checklist, researchers assessed officers on their interview skill use. Interview skills consisted of relationship skills and structuring skills. Then compared reconviction rates of the interviewed probationers. The study uncovered that probationers who were exposed to higher skill use were 22% less likely to be reconvicted. When officers used more skills, there was a 34% reduction in reconviction.

### Limitations of Information

The study was conducted in England. The probationers and probation officers may not be representative of those in Colorado. It is unknown how long the interviewees were on probation prior to the videotaped interviews. The study was not conducted in a controlled environment as other factors might impact reconviction rates. The study had a small sample size. It is unknown how a larger sample size might influence the results. The study did not examine how skills might impact other forms of success.

**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.

### Using Skills Strategically

The current study is the Jersey Supervision Skills Study from the British Channel Island of Jersey. The study utilized 75 videotaped probation interviews from probation officers. Researchers coded the videotapes using a checklist of 63 different items that were determined to be important in officer and probationer interactions. The checklist aligns with prior work done with "Core Correctional Practices".

Each officer needed to submit at least 5 videotaped interviews with different probationers. The interaction skills in each interview were coded and quantified. The skills evaluated were: relationship skills such as set up of interview, non-verbal communication, verbal communication, effective/legitimate use of authority and structuring skills including motivational interviewing, pro-social modeling, problem solving, and cognitive restructuring. Researchers immediately discovered officers utilized relationship skills more than structuring skills overall and some used a larger variety of skills than other officers.

When researchers looked at how skills impacted reconviction rates, the found probationers supervised by officers who used above average skills had reconviction rates of 31% compared to 53% for those supervised by officers who used below average skills. Additionally, probationers had larger reductions in LSI-R scores when supervised by officers using more skills (-3.4) as opposed to officers using fewer skills (-1.7). Finally, researchers were interested how skills

impacted reconviction rates at one and two years. Pro-social modeling, problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and total skill use were all found to be significant predictors of non-reconviction at one year. Non-verbal communication, verbal communication, motivational interviewing, problem solving, and total skill use were all found to be significant predictors of non-reconviction at two years.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Acquire new probation interviewing skills by attending training.
- ✓ To enhance structuring skills, take a few minutes before an appointment to strategically plan which you will use (e.g. MI, cognitive restructuring, problem solving) in the appointment.
- ✓ The more skills you can use during your appointments, the better. Use different skills to build rapport and provide structure.
- ✓ Both relationship and structuring interview skills have an impact on the success of probationers.
- ✓ Pay attention to both your verbal and non-verbal communication in probation appointments.
- ✓ Try practicing skills in a safe setting like communities of practice and in training.
- ✓ Set goals on how you can improve your skill use in probation appointments.
- ✓ Consider asking your supervisor for coaching on specific skills.
- ✓ Ask for feedback from probationers, supervisors, and colleagues.

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