

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Agreement About Intervention Plans by Probation Officers

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Key Words: Agreement, risk management, intervention plan, structured risk assessment

Summary/Conclusions

The present study examined agreement of probation officers' (PO) intervention plans and if PO experience has an effect on agreement. Dutch PO's were provided four different vignettes containing a short narrative and assessment information. PO's determined intervention plans for the different cases. After analyzing the plans, researchers determined that PO's were in good agreement about sanctions, fair agreement regarding conditions, criminogenic needs, and programs. However, agreement regarding instructions, controls, and goals were discovered to be poor. Experience only had a substantial effect on identification of criminogenic needs.

Limitations of Information

The Netherlands does not use the Level of Supervision Inventory (LSI) for assessments. It is not clear if a different assessment would change the results of the study. Probation officers were required to base decisions purely from a paper case. Impressions after meeting a probationer may or may not influence agreement. The four different case types may not be large enough to gauge agreement between PO's.

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.

Ensuring Consistency Across Probation Officers

Utilizing assessment information for sentence recommendations, program placement, treatment referrals, determining risk, and case planning is a complex process. The present study seeks to examine intervention plan agreement between Dutch PO's. The study also sought to examine if officer experience had any impact on agreement.

Forty-four randomly selected Dutch PO's agreed to participate in the study. Thirty of the officers were experienced (more than two years experience) and fourteen were inexperienced (less than two years). Officers reviewed four unique vignettes that included an assessment and a short narrative. After reviewing the vignette, PO's would document their intervention plan. Intervention plans included sections for PO's to recommend sanctions, conditions, instructions, control, supervision level, goals, criminogenic needs, and program referral. Officers completed plans in a monitored environment where they could not discuss the cases. To examine consistency, completed plans were categorized and coded.

Agreement about the different elements for intervention plans varied greatly. The average agreement of sanction recommendations was good. Sanctions in the study probation resemble Pre-Sentence Investigation recommendations. The average agreement for conditions, criminogenic needs, and program referral was characterized as fair. Instructions to probationer, control (e.g. drug tests,

treatment dosage), intensity of supervision (e.g. frequency of office visits), and goals (e.g. goal about personality) were all rated with poor agreement. The only area that indicated an increase in agreement for experienced officers was identification of criminogenic needs.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Consider attempting to link case plan goals to specific criminogenic needs of the probationer. This may help consistency of goals across probation officers.
- ✓ Use assessment information to guide sentencing recommendations to the Court in Pre-Sentence Investigation Reports, Sentencing Memorandums, and Updates to Pre-Sentence Investigations.
- ✓ Attend assessment booster trainings (e.g. LSI, CJRA, SOTIPS/VASOR, JSOAP). These boosters will help with maintaining consistency in scoring the assessments.
- ✓ Staff difficult cases with other officers in your department, as this may help maintain consistency across like cases.
- ✓ When trained, utilize the Strategies for Behavior Change program and other guided decision making tools (e.g. the new Case Plan format). Such programs will likely increase consistency when working with probationers.
- ✓ Ask probationers for feedback about their probation experience. This may help address any perceived inconsistencies.

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