

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *A User Group's Perceptions of the Quality and Effectiveness of PSI Reports*

Norman, M., & Wadman, R. (2000). Utah Presentence Investigation Reports: User Group Perceptions of Quality and Effectiveness. *Federal Probation*, 64(1), 7-12.

**Key Words:** pre-sentence reports, probation investigations, sentencing, PSIR

### Summary/Conclusions

The study explored the attitudes of judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and supervising probation and parole officers in regard to the quality and effectiveness of pre-sentence investigation (PSI) reports in the state of Utah. Using a survey method, the "objective of the study was to provide specific recommendations to the Utah State Department of Corrections for improving the quality and usability of the PSI." Results identified strengths and weaknesses, "quantified the relative importance of the various content areas in the document," and revealed other interesting issues.

### Limitations of Information

The responses to the survey are limited by their scope. Although public defenders were invited to participate, a small portion of potential respondents returned the survey, so this user group comprised just 4% of the sample. It should also be noted that Utah's Department of Corrections was just moving away from a law enforcement philosophy when this study was completed; therefore, survey responses reflect a less rehabilitative philosophy than Colorado's current approach.

**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.

### Increasing the Effectiveness of PSI's

Researchers in Utah sent surveys to 378 presentence investigation report (PSIR) users in four areas of criminal justice: prosecution, defense, judicial, and probation/parole. The surveys included 34 closed-ended questions, one multiple choice question, and two open-ended questions.

The findings were based on 227 returned questionnaires. The first noteworthy finding was that only 55% of all users indicated they read the whole report. Among the user groups, 90% of judicial users read the whole report but only 40% of probation/parole officers (PO) read the entire document. Respondents most often identified the greatest weakness of the PSIR as the inaccurate information in the criminal history section and the unverified information supplied by the defendant. The respondents did not have much agreement on the greatest strengths of the reports; however, the strengths most frequently identified included: the broad background of the offender and the report's usefulness to supervising officers.

The results of asking for the respondents to rate the sections of highest and lowest importance reflected "a pattern reflecting a lower level of interest in those sections of the PSI containing information about the defendant's personal life"; "de-emphasizing the rehabilitation of offenders."

Additional analyses concluded that "the most important purpose of the PSI is to assist the court in reaching a fair sentencing decision." Almost all respondents agreed that the reports provided

fair and objective information about the offense and the offender's background, with little indication that reports were biased intentionally by PO's.

### Practical Applications

- ✓ Consider having discussions with user groups to determine what is most important for your district's stakeholders and put emphasis on those parts of the PSIR.
- ✓ Use as many sources as possible to verify criminal history (CCIC/NCIC, DA files, internet searches, personal contact with courts, old files).
- ✓ Ensure that unverified information in the PSIR is clearly noted as such.
- ✓ Negotiate with your district's bench for timeframes that allow for appropriate collection and verification of PSIR content.
- ✓ Prepare PSIR writers with the requisite trainings, such as Report Writing, Law and Liability, Adult and Juvenile Assessments.
- ✓ Make certain that assessments are completed with a high degree of fidelity, so that the criminogenic needs identified are accurate.
- ✓ Recommendations for sentencing should focus on offender activities which diminish the criminogenic needs and build pro-social skills and networks.
- ✓ Conduct frequent audits of PSIR's to ensure the veracity of information and fidelity to assessments.
- ✓ Develop or enhance a culture, within the probation department, that values PSIR's and uses the document to assist in case planning and surveillance activities.

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