

# Probation officer training

Improving probation officers' skills to better supervise offenders in the community.

First published

29 June 2017

| Effect scale  | Quality of evidence  |   |                          |   |                             |
|---|--|---|--------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
|   | Effect Impact on crime   | Mechanism How it works  | Moderator Where it works | Implementation How to do it   | Economic cost What it costs |
|  Overall reduction |  Strong |  Low | No information           |  Low | No information              |

## Focus of the intervention

Probation officers – known as community supervisory officers in the USA – are employed to supervise offenders during probation or parole. Providing formal training in core correctional practices (CCPs) is intended to improve their supervisory skills, reducing the likelihood of reoffending.

This narrative is based on one meta-analytic review covering 10 studies that evaluated the effect of officer training in CCPs on offender outcomes, specifically reoffending.

The primary studies were based on evidence from the USA, UK, Australia and Canada.

## Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that officer training in CCPs has reduced reoffending.

The results of the meta-analysis indicated that when probationers and parolees were supervised by officers who received training in CCPs, they were less likely to reoffend than offenders who were not supervised by officers trained in CCPs.

The average reoffending rate for offenders supervised by officers trained in CCPs was 36.2%, compared to an average reoffending rate of 49.9% for offenders supervised by officers lacking the CCP training.

## How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

This evidence is taken from a meta-analytic review covering 10 studies. The review demonstrated a high-quality design in terms of having a transparent and well-designed search strategy, and featured valid statistical analysis and a sufficient assessment of the risk of bias.

Various methods were used across the 10 studies that could have affected the results.

Unfortunately the review authors did not conduct any moderator analysis or rate the quality of the studies to assign more weight to studies that used more rigorous methods.

The review authors did not explore or test the effect of different outcomes of reoffending (rearrest, new convictions, or generally a new offence), nor did the review state how the authors dealt with missing data or whether issues arising from publication bias and dependency were considered. Therefore not all sources of bias have been ruled out.

## Mechanism – how does it work?

The review does not explain or test the mechanisms through which the supervision of offenders by officers who received training in CCPs might reduce crime.

There is emphasis on a series of skills that are expected to increase the effectiveness of community supervision and other correctional interventions designed to rehabilitate offenders. These are presented as five dimensions of effective correctional practice which form the CCPs framework:

- effective use of authority
- pro-social modelling

- effective problem-solving strategies
- the use of community resources
- interpersonal relationship factors

## Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review did not examine under what conditions or for what types of offenders (for example, adults, juveniles, different genders or risk level) the intervention might work best.

Seven of the 10 studies included in the review examined the effect of officer training across both parolees and probationers.

The remaining three studies included only offenders who were on probation.

## Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

Five of the 10 studies included in the review provided information on the length of the initial training in core correctional practices.

On average, training lasted approximately four days (34 hours) and ranged from 24 to 54 hours. Booster sessions were provided to those officers who underwent the initial training.

The size of the groups of officers receiving the training varied across the studies, ranging from eight to 48 (with an average of 23.5).

The review authors highlighted the importance of continued support (for example, refresher courses or individualised feedback) for officers following the training and this was believed critical to effective implementation.

The authors noted a number of factors which may have been important to the successful implementation of officer training in CCPs, which were also supported by authors of other similar studies.

- The importance of using a validated risk assessment to identify an offender's current level of risk.

- That officers are trained on role clarification. That is, officers discuss the conditions of the supervision and the offender's responsibilities with them, and the offender demonstrates an understanding of the supervision process, including outlining their expected behaviour.
- The explicit inclusion of skills that develop a professional and supportive relationship between supervisor and supervisee. These include relationship-building skills and cognitive-behavioural intervention techniques to address anti-social attitudes.

These factors were not, however, tested in the review.

## **Economic considerations – how much might it cost?**

No formal economic analysis is provided.

However, the review authors cite sources regarding the cost effectiveness of enrolling offenders in community supervision (average US \$3,433 annually) compared to the annual cost of a custodial sentence in a medium security prison (US \$26,247).

The review authors use these figures to suggest that the outlay in time and money to implement a training program in CCPs is likely to be cost-effective as more offenders are able to be better managed in the community.

## **Summary**

There is evidence that offender supervision by probation officers who have received training in CCPs reduces crime.

Training in CCPs is believed to improve officer skills in offender supervision, leading to more effective community supervision and a reduction in reoffending.

However, the quality of the primary studies varied considerably, meaning it was not possible to assess whether different contexts alter the results.

Additional information is needed regarding the influence of different officer and offender characteristics, such as offender risk level on the effectiveness of the intervention.

Further studies are needed to examine the implementation issues surrounding officer training in CCPs and provide economic analysis of the intervention.

## Reviews

### Review one

#### Reference

- Chadwick, Nick., DeWolf, Angela. and Serin, Ralph. (2015) 'Effectively Training Community Supervision Officers: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Impact on Offender Outcome', *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42:10, 977 – 990

## Summary prepared by

This narrative was prepared by UCL Jill Dando Institute and was co-funded by the College of Policing and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESRC grant title: 'University Consortium for Evidence-Based Crime Reduction'. Grant reference: ES/L007223/1

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