

Reducing Recidivism Through Probation Supervision: What We Know and Don't Know From Four Decades of Research

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THIS ARTICLE IS about the relationship between recidivism rates and supervision skills used by probation officers (or others who supervise offenders on community-based orders or parole). It focuses on routine day-to-day supervision rather than on intensive supervision programs or other specialized programs or interventions.

The general issue of what works and what doesn't work with offenders has received a lot of attention since the Martinson report (1974) suggesting that nothing works. Many meta-analyses have been undertaken, covering many hundreds of studies. These meta-analyses have attempted to identify the characteristics of effective practices and in many cases have attempted to quantify the impact of different types of intervention (e.g., Andrews & Dowden, 2006; Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Andrews and Dowden (2006), for example, argue based on their meta-analysis that effective practice can be conceptualized as focusing on the principles of risk, needs, and responsivity. They suggest that effective practice concentrates on medium- to high-risk offenders, criminogenic needs, and the delivery of programs or interventions that take account of individual needs and make use of structured cognitive behavioral techniques or interventions.

The meta-analyses undertaken to date have primarily concerned community-based interventions, including group programs and specialized programs such as drug treatment and clinical interventions. A meta-analysis covering studies up to 1998 undertaken by Dowden and Andrews (2004) attempted to identify core staff skills—in other words, the specific practices that human service workers

use in criminal justice interventions and how they relate to recidivism. They found the following core practices to be significantly related to reduced recidivism: relationship factors, skill factors, effective reinforcement, effective disapproval, problem solving, structured learning, effective modelling, and effective use of authority. The meta-analysis, however, is not clear about the extent to which the studies included in the meta-analysis focused on routine community-based supervision of offenders rather than on more specialist or group interventions.

There is some debate about the conclusions reached in some of the meta-analyses regarding the impact of different staff skills and also on the emphasis placed by researchers on various aspects of the skills. Fortune, Ward, and Willis (2012), for example, argue that a focus on collaboration, offender goals, offender strengths, and a sense of meaning are more important than the focus on risk and risk reduction that is supported by Andrews and Bonta (2008). Fortune, Ward, and Willis (2012) maintain that offenders are likely to desist from crime through a process of changing identity, a process that involves movement towards personal goals and community and social support. It seems clear that there is no universal agreement about what works in offender programs or offender supervision (see McNeill, Raynor, & Trotter, 2010, for more detailed discussion of this issue).

There is also no universal agreement regarding what works in routine offender supervision. While a number of studies, particularly in recent years, have examined the relationship between staff practices and

recidivism in community-based supervision, few if any meta-analyses or other literature reviews have focused on this issue. This review is an attempt to fill this gap.

This article takes the form of a literature review rather than a meta-analysis. While meta-analysis has done much to further knowledge about effective practice in criminal justice, it has also drawn some criticism. Berk (2007), for example, argues that because meta-analysis uses data that has not been generated through random sampling, the statistical conclusions are not valid. He recommends the use of conventional methods of research reviews. Others have criticized meta-analysis for bias in selection of studies towards those that have significant results, for including studies with poor methodology, and for combining different ways of measuring recidivism (see Pratt, 2012, for a summary and rebuttal of criticisms).

Literature reviews may therefore also have a place in developing knowledge about what works and what doesn't in criminal justice settings. Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey have argued that systematic literature reviews provide a more rigorous approach to synthesizing the literature on a particular topic compared to the more open style of conventional reviews (2011). According to Jesson and colleagues (2011), systematic reviews are clear about their aims, what databases have been searched, and what studies have been included and excluded and why; in addition, systematic reviews have a narrow focus and report on the quality of studies that have been examined. The review presented in this article is more akin to a systematic review than to a conventional literature review (Jesson et al., 2011).

Research Question

The research question that I examine here is: What is the impact on offender recidivism of different worker skills and practices used by supervisors in the one-to-one supervision of offenders on probation or other community-based orders?

Offender recidivism is defined in terms of the measures used in the various studies, including rearrest, re-conviction, further offense, or failure to comply with conditions of the court order. Most of the studies have used a two-year follow-up period for recidivism.

Literature Search

I searched criminal justice abstracts and ProQuest Criminal Justice (a comprehensive database of U.S. and international criminal justice journals) using the terms probation, effectiveness, recidivism, community, skills, and supervision. The search also used other methods recommended by Jesson et al. (2011), including scanning reference lists of articles consulted, consulting with colleagues with expertise in the topic, and manual searching of relevant journals.

The search focused on studies that examined routine supervision on probation or other court orders rather than specialist interventions. It excluded group work with offenders or studies that examined only particular groups of offenders, such as drug users or sex offenders. It included studies focusing on adults and young people, although care is taken to distinguish between the two. It should be noted, however, that in some studies young people may be classified as under 16 while in other studies young people include those up to 25.

The studies were then analyzed in terms of their methodology, particularly in terms of sample size, use of statistical tests of significance, and use of regression analyses to isolate the impact of various skills and allow for offender risk levels. The search gave preference to published articles in peer-reviewed journals, on the understanding that the peer-review process ensures at least some degree of methodological rigor. The studies were then analyzed according to the different skills used by the workers in the study, the nature of those skills, and the relationship of the skills to recidivism.

One of the difficulties encountered in doing the review was that in most cases a group of skills is described, usually in terms of evidence-based practice, and those skills as a group are related to recidivism. I located

only five studies that examined individual skills (e.g., relationship skills, problem-solving skills) for their relationship to recidivism. In some cases only one or two skills or practices were highlighted: for example the use of single-case study (Vered Slonim-Nevo, 1999), working with offenders on family issues (Denning & Homel, 2008), or socialization levels of workers (Trotter, 1990). These studies have not been included in this review.

Several studies have examined the impact of training on the performance of community corrections officers and the subsequent impact on recidivism. While this review is concerned with the impact of skills on recidivism rather than with the impact of training, I have included these studies where they have shown that the training has influenced the performance of the probation officers and the study has considered the recidivism of clients supervised by the trained officers.

The Studies

Eight studies have been identified and included in this review consistent with the criteria referred to above. Each of the studies examined the relationship between the use of evidence-based practices in probation and recidivism or the relationship between training, use of practices, and recidivism. Five of the studies examined the relationship between a range of individual skills used by probation officers and recidivism. The others considered the impact of a general set of skills but did not examine individual skills for their impact on recidivism. The studies are summarized here in the order in which they were published. Several of the studies have built on knowledge from earlier studies.

The earliest study located, conducted by Andrews et al. (1979), was published as a report by the Canadian government rather than in a refereed journal; however, it is included in this review because it was the first study on the relationship between workers' skills and offender recidivism reported in the databases and it was the precursor to a number of subsequent studies. The study analyzed more than 200 audiotapes of worker/client interviews (workers could be professional probation officers or volunteers) in probation in Canada and used regression analysis to examine the relationship between workers' practices and recidivism. The authors found the following practices of probation officers to be significantly related to reduced recidivism: appropriate use of authority, problem solving, prosocial modelling, and reinforcement. The

practice of reflective listening was also related to recidivism when accompanied by appropriate use of authority.

Trotter (1996) did a study based on principles similar to those used in the Andrews et al. (1979) study. File notes were examined in more than 300 adult probation and parole client files (of more than 50 officers). Using a regression analysis, the author found that recidivism rates were significantly lower than those of a control group when workers showed evidence in file notes of use of prosocial modeling and problem solving, although problem solving only related to failure to comply with conditions. The study also examined role clarification and empathy, neither of which significantly related to low recidivism, although role clarification was used more often with high-risk offenders.

Taxman (2007, 2008) examined a project that implemented (through training, supervision, and management) an evidence-based approach to supervision. A total of 274 adult probation clients supervised by officers in the Practice Community Supervision model were then compared to 274 matched probationers receiving routine probation supervision. The Practice Community Supervision model included use of the Level of Supervision Inventory Revisited to assess risk and need factors, case plan, referral, learning about triggers to offending, incentives, and sanctions and review. Use of the model as a whole was related to recidivism, although relationships between individual skills and recidivism were not reported.

Pearson et al. (2011) examined a program in the United Kingdom known as citizenship. This was a structured probation supervision program, based on "what works" principles, that aimed to engage offenders in targeted interventions complying with the risk principle and included training in motivational interviewing and prosocial modeling; the offender also worked through problem-solving modules depending on the offender's particular risk and needs. An experimental and control group was made up of about 7000 offenders. Through use of regression analysis and other statistical techniques, authors concluded that the program had an impact on recidivism. Some associations between skills and recidivism were reported. Pearson et al. (2010) found that the skill of promoting contact with other agencies was related to recidivism and that low- to medium- and medium- to high-risk offenders gained most benefit from the citizenship program.

This program is somewhat different from the others referred to in this review, as it involved worksheets, community contact, and specific modules rather than examining routine supervision. It is included nevertheless because it does report on the implementation of evidence-based practices across a large probation sample.

Bonta et al. (2011) examined audiotapes of interviews between 80 officers and 143 of their adult clients and examined structuring skills, relationship-building skills, behavioral techniques, and cognitive techniques and how these relate to recidivism. The authors used a random design and regression analysis to control for extraneous variables and found that the use of skills was related to low recidivism. Bonta et al. found that cognitive techniques had the strongest impact on recidivism.

Robinson, VanBenschoten, Alexander, and Lowenkamp (2011) examined tapes of more than 700 interviews between adult probation officers and their clients. They examined the use of active listening, role clarification, use of authority, effective disapproval, effective reinforcement and punishment, problem solving, and use of the cognitive model. Using a multivariate analysis of the data, they showed that the clients of those using the model had significantly lower recidivism. They did not report on the relationship between individual skills and recidivism.

Trotter (2012) directly observed interviews in a juvenile justice setting in Australia. The interviews were also audiotaped. This was one of the few studies undertaken with young people (up to the age of 20 years). One hundred and seventeen interviews were observed and then coded for use of various skills, such as relationship, role clarification, prosocial modeling, problem solving, and use of CBT techniques. The researchers used a global score as a measure of overall use of the skills as well as scoring individual skills. The global score was significantly related to client recidivism, after taking account of other factors through a regression analysis. The only individual items that reached or were close to statistical significance included the use of rewards and a non-blaming attitude by the worker.

Smith, Schweitzer, Labrecque, and Latessa (2012) in a United States study provided training to 21 youth and adult probation officers in effective practices including anti-criminal modeling, reinforcement, effective disapproval, structured learning, problem solving, cognitive restructuring, and relationship skills. They then analyzed audiotapes

from 272 clients, including those supervised by the trained officers and those in a control group. The results were somewhat mixed, with trained officers who used more skills generally doing better, but with varying results across the different locations. The authors referred to limitations, including the fact that the experimental group was selected by departmental administrators and the officers selected offender participants.

Raynor, Ugwudike, and Vanstone (forthcoming) examined videotapes of 75 clients supervised by 14 staff in the probation service of the channel island of Jersey. They coded each tape for overall use of skills. Using regression analysis, they found that the workers with more skills had clients with significantly lower re-offending rates. They also found that individual skills of verbal and non-verbal communication, motivational interviewing, and problem solving were significantly related to lower recidivism after two years.

The Impact of Probation Officer Skills

All of the studies that could be located which examined the practices of probation officers, whether through examining file notes or audiotapes of interviews or by direct observation, have found that when probation officers use evidence-based practice skills their clients have lower recidivism. All but one of the studies showed a significant difference between the recidivism rates of those supervised by more skilled officers and recidivism rates of those supervised by less skilled officers. The extent of the differences varied and in some cases varied according to risk levels of the clients (as I will discuss later).

Trotter (1996) reported that the clients of those officers who showed evidence in file notes of using the evidence-based model had a further offense rate after one year of 28 percent, compared to 44 percent for those who did not use the model. After four years the difference was 46 percent to 64 percent. Taxman (2007) reported a rearrest rate of 32 percent for clients supervised in the Proactive Community Supervision group, compared to 41 percent in the non-Proactive Community Supervision group. Pearson et al. (2010) reported a rate of reconviction of 41 percent after two years for clients in the citizenship group, compared to 50 percent in the comparison group. Bonta et al. (2011) reported a further offense rate of 25 percent recidivism after two years for officers trained in effective practice skills, compared to 40 percent in a control group. Trotter (2012)

reported that those supervised by workers rated as using more evidence-based practices had a further offense rate after two years of 62 percent, compared to 81 percent for those supervised by workers with low ratings on the skills. Robinson et al. (2011) reported a rearrest or failure on supervision rate of 34 percent for moderate- to high-risk clients supervised by untrained staff, compared to 26 percent for moderate- to high-risk clients supervised by trained staff. Raynor, Ugwudike, and Vanstone (forthcoming) found that 26 percent were re-convicted after two years when supervised by more skilled officers compared to 58 percent supervised by less-skilled officers.

Six of the eight studies examined in this review show that clients supervised by workers with more skills have lower recidivism than clients supervised by workers with less developed skills. The differences were between 20 percent and 55 percent. In relation to the other two studies, Andrews et al. (1979) reported strong correlations between the use of individual skills and client recidivism but did not report an overall impact of the use of skills. The only study that has not shown clear differences between recidivism rates of those supervised by workers using evidence-based practices and other clients is the Smith et al. (2012) study. While their results generally favored those who were trained in and used evidence-based practices, the results were mixed. The researchers found that clients of high-fidelity officers (those rated as using more skills) had lower incarceration rates and arrests for new crimes but had more technical violations. The authors discuss limitations in the methodology that might explain the results.

It seems reasonable to conclude that if probation officers or others who supervise offenders on court orders use evidence-based practice skills, their clients are likely to offend less often.

Skills or Practices that Are Consistently Related to Reduced Recidivism

While it seems clear that probation officers with evidence-based practice skills are likely to have clients with lower recidivism, there is less clarity about the precise nature of the effective practice skills and which of those skills contribute most to reductions in offending. In this section I outline the skills identified in the studies and consider the extent to which each impacts recidivism.

Prosocial Modeling and Reinforcement

Prosocial modeling and reinforcement has been included as one of the skills in each of the studies, although in some of the studies it is defined as anti-criminal modelling and reinforcement (Bonta et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012). Despite the different terminology, prosocial modeling and reinforcement and anti-criminal modeling and reinforcement share similar characteristics. Both involve modeling prosocial values such as fairness, reliability, and non-criminal lifestyle and reinforcing statements and activities of offenders that reflect those values. They also involve carefully and respectfully challenging pro-criminal comments and actions (e.g., making excuses for offending). Taxman (2007:19) summarizes the concept in terms of “using incentives and sanctions to shape offender behaviours” (p. 19).

Most of the studies examined in this review that have considered the relationship between prosocial modeling and reinforcement have found strong relationships to low recidivism. Andrews et al. (1979) found that differential reinforcement of probationers’ prosocial and anti-criminal expressions and the expression of prosocial sentiments was related to low recidivism. Trotter (1996) found that evidence of prosocial modeling in file notes was more closely related to reductions in recidivism than any other skill, and Trotter (2012) found the use of rewards by youth probation officers to be related to recidivism (although not quite at statistically significant levels). Raynor et al. (forthcoming) found prosocial modeling significantly related to low recidivism at one-year and two-year follow-up (although it was only statistically significant after one year).

Bonta et al. (2011), on the other hand, found that behavioral skills, including effective use of reinforcement and disapproval, were not significantly related to low recidivism. They found cognitive skills (discussed below) to be the only skills related to recidivism, after taking risk into account. Their definition of cognitive skills was, however, a broad one and incorporated some of the micro-skills that other researchers (e.g., Trotter, 1996, 2012) referred to as prosocial modeling and reinforcement—for example, helping offenders re-frame pro-criminal expressions into prosocial ones.

Each of the other studies considered in this paper incorporated the concept of prosocial modeling and reinforcement. They did not, however, examine its specific relationship with recidivism. Prosocial modeling and

reinforcement is therefore a core component of each of the eight studies examined in this review. It was significantly related to recidivism in four of the five studies that considered its direct relationship with recidivism.

Problem Solving

Most of the studies refer to the use of problem-solving techniques. Sometimes these are included as part of cognitive techniques (e.g., Bonta et al., 2011) and sometimes they are defined as a separate skill (e.g., Trotter, 1996, 2012). The definitions of problem solving are nevertheless reasonably consistent across the studies. The definitions commonly involve identifying offense-related problems (e.g., family issues, accommodation, drugs), setting goals to address the problems, and then developing strategies to address the goals. There is, however, variation in the way problem solving is undertaken, particularly in terms of the extent to which the problems to be worked on and the goals that are set are developed by the clients, the worker, or the two in collaboration. Trotter (1996, 2012), for example, emphasizes working with client definitions of problems. Robinson et al. (2011) suggest that the most important aspect of the skill is allowing the client to articulate the problem and the potential solution. Taxman (2007) refers to working with one criminogenic need and at the same time working with an interest of the client in order to motivate the client to commit to the change process. Bonta et al. (2011), on the other hand, emphasize working with criminogenic needs that are identified through a risk assessment undertaken by the worker.

Support for problem solving in whatever form is provided by most of the studies. Andrews et al. (1979) found that problem solving with a concrete community focus was significantly related to recidivism. Trotter (1996) found that problem solving (emphasizing a focus on client-defined problems and goals) was related to recidivism but only significantly related to compliance with conditions rather than re-offending. Raynor (forthcoming) found that problem solving was significantly related to reduced offending at both one-year and two-year follow-up. Bonta et al. (2011) found cognitive techniques to be significantly related to recidivism and included problem solving as part of cognitive techniques. Smith et al. (2012), Robinson et al. (2011), Pearson et al. (2010), and Taxman (2007) all included problem solving in their repertoire of skills, although they did not examine its specific relationship to recidivism.

It seems that problem solving is a key skill in effective supervision; however, there remains some doubt about the extent to which problem solving should be a collaborative process that involves working on offense-related issues as the client defines them or whether it should involve working on criminogenic needs that emerge from a risk assessment undertaken by the worker.

The Use of Cognitive Techniques

Many of the studies have included the use of cognitive techniques. Perhaps the best example of a cognitive technique is the ABC technique referred to by Lowenkamp, Alexander, and Robinson et al. (forthcoming), which involves teaching offenders about Antecedents that lead to Behaviors that lead to Consequences. As already mentioned, there is some overlap in the various publications between the definitions of cognitive skills and problem solving and prosocial modeling and reinforcement skills. Bonta et al. (2011), for example, refer to a cognitive technique known as cognitive restructuring as including reinforcement and problem solving. Similarly, prosocial modeling in Trotter (2012) includes helping clients to reframe their pro-criminal comments into prosocial ones and reinforcing client comments that reflect an understanding of the relationship between thoughts and behaviors.

Despite the confusion over definitions, the studies generally support the use of cognitive techniques. Cognitive techniques were part of the overall group of skills in each of the studies, with the exception of the two earlier studies by Andrews et al. (1979) and Trotter (1996). Some of the studies examined the relationship between cognitive techniques and recidivism. Bonta et al. (2011) found that the only intervention techniques predicting lower recidivism were cognitive techniques—however, as I have noted, cognitive techniques were broadly defined. Raynor et al. (forthcoming) found cognitive restructuring significantly related to reduced offending, but only at one-year follow-up. Trotter (2012) did not find a significant association between worker use of cognitive behavioral techniques and recidivism; however, the author noted that cognitive behavioral techniques were used infrequently.

Worker-Client Relationship

Again, there are varying definitions of the concept of the worker-client relationship. Andrews et al. (1979) used a psychological test of empathy and found that scores on an empathy scale were unrelated to client recidivism (a

finding replicated by Trotter, 1996). Similarly, the practice of reflective listening when identified through the examination of audiotapes of interviews was found to be unrelated to recidivism by Andrews et al. (1979). Bonta et al. (2011) examined relationship skills, which included role clarification and active listening skills; however, these were not found to be independently related to reduced recidivism at statistical levels. Trotter (forthcoming) found that clients who were judged by the observer to be disengaged in the interview still benefited from the use of skills by their workers. Engagement in the interview was defined as a relationship measure.

On the other hand, Raynor et al. (forthcoming) found that verbal and non-verbal communication were related to low recidivism at one year and two years, but not the way the interview was set up or the legitimate use of authority, both of which were also defined in the study as relationship skills (as opposed to structuring skills such as problem solving). Trotter (2012) found a non-blaming attitude by the probation officer to be significantly related to low recidivism. Smith et al. (2012) found that offenders who perceived a trusting relationship with their supervisor were significantly less likely to be arrested for a new crime.

The relationship was included in each of the other studies, albeit with different definitions. Robinson et al. (2011) referred to active listening, role clarification, and feedback. Taxman (2007) referred to expectation and ground rules. These studies did not, however, consider the specific interaction between the client-worker relationship and recidivism.

Like prosocial modeling and problem solving, the varying definitions of "relationship" make it difficult to generalize about its nature or its relationship to reduced recidivism. The studies seem to support a hypothesis that the practice of active listening or the use of empathy may not necessarily be important in probation supervision; however, a process that leads to a trusting and non-blaming relationship may be.

Risk Levels of Clients

Andrews and Dowden (2006), among others, have argued that medium- and high-risk offenders generally benefit more from intensive correctional interventions and that low-risk offenders benefit less from intensive interventions. The studies considered in this paper provide varying support for this principle. Each of the studies have used some sort of actuarial assessment of risk; in some cases

(e.g., Trotter, 1996, 2012; Bonta et al., 2011) the Level of Supervision Inventory (Andrews & Bonta, 2008) in one of its forms.

Smith et al. (2012) found most impact with high-risk offenders; however, the impact was not statistically significant overall. Robinson et al. (2011), on the other hand, found among a group trained in effective practices that the greater impact on offending was with moderate-risk offenders, with less impact on high-risk offenders. Trotter (1996, 2012, forthcoming) found in both studies that low-medium and high-risk offenders all had lower re-offending when their workers had good skills. Pearson (2010) found that medium-to-low- and medium-to-high-risk clients benefited from skilled intervention but that high-risk offenders did not. Taxman (2007) included risk assessment as one of the effective practice skills that led to improved outcomes, but did not specify the impact of the various skills on offenders with different risk levels. Similarly, Raynor et al. (forthcoming) did not specify the impact on offenders with different risk levels.

Other Factors

A number of other factors were referred to in the various studies but have not been examined often enough to reach any firm conclusions about them. Taxman (2007) found that community support and referral were related to lower recidivism. Pearson et al. (2011) found that contact with other agencies was related to reduced recidivism. Pearson et al. (2010) and Raynor et al. (forthcoming) also found that motivational interviewing training was related to reduced recidivism.

Role clarification has also been included in some of the studies (Bonta et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Trotter, 1996, 2012) as part of the repertoire of effective practice skills. Bonta also refers to discussions about conditions of probation as being related to higher recidivism (Bonta et al., 2011). There is, however, insufficient data on the direct relationship to recidivism to reach any firm conclusions about these practices.

Conclusion

The research on effective probation supervision has come a long way since the seminal study by Andrews and colleagues in 1979. The studies have some limitations, particularly in terms of the varying nature of the definitions of skills used by different researchers. For example, elements of prosocial modeling and reinforcement and problem solving are

included in cognitive techniques by some researchers. Problem solving is focused on client definitions of problems in some studies and on risk-related problems in others. The client-worker relationship in particular is defined in different ways in different studies. For example, different studies have examined relationship in terms of empathy, active listening, trusting, non-blaming, expectation, engagement in interviews, ground rules, and role clarification.

Nevertheless, all of the studies that have examined the use of skills and client recidivism found that when probation officers used certain practice skills, their clients offended less often. In seven of the eight studies this was at statistically significant levels.

The more recent studies have built on the earlier studies, particularly on the seminal work undertaken by Andrews et al. (1979). Each of the studies examined included prosocial modelling, problem solving, and worker-client relationship, with the more recent studies also including cognitive techniques and the role that client risk levels may play in the supervision process.

It seems reasonable to conclude that prosocial modeling and reinforcement, problem solving, and cognitive techniques are core skills for reducing recidivism in probation supervision. These three skills have been present in the studies in one form or another (even though cognitive skills were less specifically examined in the earlier studies), and they have generally shown significant associations with recidivism.

It is difficult to reach any firm conclusions about the impact of the worker-client relationship. Trusting and non-blaming relationships with good communication seemed to be more effective than those characterized by reflective listening practices or even engagement of the client in the interview.

Of the five studies that examined risk, four found that medium-risk probationers benefited from skilled supervision more than high-risk probationers did. In two of the studies, low-risk offenders exposed to effective practice skills also had lower recidivism. The previous research generally suggests that medium- to high-risk offenders benefit from intensive interventions; however, the supervision offered in the studies identified in this paper was not necessarily intensive. The studies generally examined practice skills in routine probation supervision; they seem to suggest that when supervisors have good

skills, their clients offend less often regardless of their levels of risk.

Further Research

We know that the application of certain skills in probation supervision is likely to lead to lower recidivism when compared to the absence of those skills. We know that certain key skills relate to low recidivism; however, the definitions of these skills in some cases remain unclear. Detail about the practice of good supervision is not generally available in the refereed journal articles, presumably because of the space limitations. Some of the studies have attempted to describe the skills examined in their studies in detailed reports, for example, Lowenkamp et al. (forthcoming); however, in most cases the workbooks, training packages, and examples of good and not-so-good skills are not available in the public domain. Publication of the precise nature of the skills, including transcripts of interviews, would help further training and implementation of practice skills.

Many other skills have also been identified as evidence-based practices in probation but have not been specifically examined in the research referred to in this paper. Taxman and Sachwald (2010), for example, refer to 18 evidence-based practices, including family therapies, drug testing, and staff qualifications. The cause of evidence-based practice in probation would be furthered by research on these and other practices.

Most of the research (Pearson et al., 2011, excepted) has been undertaken with relatively small samples. More work on the implementation of effective practices across whole organizations, such as that done by Taxman and Sachwald (2010), might provide information regarding the potential for consistent and widespread implementation of the effective practice skills.

Overall, however, the studies pointing to low recidivism rates among probationers supervised by skilled workers clearly suggest that probation supervision can reduce recidivism. Hopefully future research can tell us more about how this is done and how the effective practices can be implemented more widely.

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