

Probation, research and development in Europe

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Abstract

This article presents the findings from a year-long project commissioned by the Confederation of European Probation (CEP). The project aimed to support CEP to effectively engage with existing research on probation and to prioritise key research areas for the future. Between 2023 and 2024, we reviewed papers published in four key journals over a 10-year period and used the review to develop a typology of probation research. That typology informed the design of an online survey which was distributed to over 900 probation staff, and the survey results were then discussed in several focus groups with senior leaders in probation, with stakeholders and partners, and with frontline practitioners. In this paper, we present findings from all three activities and use them to highlight key barriers to research engagement by those working in probation, and to identify priorities for future probation research.

Keywords

probation, probation research, community sanctions and measures, offender supervision, research impact, research-informed practice

Introduction

In this paper, we report and discuss the results of a project commissioned by the Confederation of European Probation (CEP) to assist it in developing its first research and development strategy.¹ CEP was established in 1981 and has 75 full members representing probation services in more than 40 jurisdictions, as well as 40 honorary members, 26 individual members and 16 affiliate members (mostly academics or other probation-

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related professionals). CEP's overall vision is for probation services 'to contribute to safer communities by rehabilitating and reintegrating people who have offended and providing the best possible interventions to reduce re-offending and the impact of crime'.

The rationale for the 'Research and Development Project' (RDP), on which we report here, was that CEP can only realise its vision by engaging with the best available research evidence (and wider scholarship) about rehabilitation and reintegration. For the promotion and development of probation *to be effective* in these terms, it must engage proactively with the generation and exchange of reliable knowledge about rehabilitation and reintegration. Equally, for it to be *ethical*, it must be engaged with scholarship that seeks to provide normative clarification of the principles and standards that apply to probation services and work. So, while both empirical research and normative scholarship are not within the mission of CEP, they are crucial to the realisation of its vision. With this in mind, the RDP's main aim was to help CEP to improve the scale, effectiveness and the quality of its engagements with research and knowledge exchange activities, broadly defined, so as to assist its pursuit of its aims around the professionalisation and promotion of probation.

An extensive literature, across many different human services professions, highlights the importance of 'evidence-based' or 'research-informed' practice in improving policies and professional practice and in securing better outcomes for service users (e.g. [Boaz et al., 2015](#); [Wakefield et al., 2022](#)). In broad terms, it has been argued that policy and practice need to be informed by three important elements; (1) the best available evidence about what is effective, (2) recognition and engagement with professional experience and expertise and (3) taking service users' experiences seriously. Taken together, these three sources are key in the development of effective services ([Barratt and Cooke, 2001](#)). Indeed, [Nutley et al., \(2023\)](#) contended that the ways in which research is combined with other influential forms of knowledge (such as that which is rooted in practitioner and service user experience) can and should shape the nature and quality of service provision. Importantly, there is agreement that practitioners need to be trained with the requisite skills and knowledge to enable them to access, interpret and evaluate available research evidence, including opportunities to engage with research in order to develop their professional performance ([Graaf and Ratcliff, 2018](#); [Wakefield et al., 2022](#)). The ways in which practitioners engage with and use research also speak to longstanding debates about the nature and limits of professionalism in probation, and about the consequences of its managerialisation in recent decades ([McNeill, 2001](#); [Robinson, 2003](#); [Tidmarsh, 2022](#)). Some recent studies have noted troubling gaps between research informed by practice and practice informed by research, including in probation and social work (cf. [Wakefield et al., 2022](#)).

From the academic side, interest in bridging these gaps has grown significantly in recent years, not least because of increasing pressure on the sector to justify public investment in research. Much has been written recently about research 'impact' and how we might best conceptualise and evaluate it. Yet, as [Reed et al. \(2021: 2\)](#) note, 'the relationship between research and societal impact is far more indirect, non-linear, and complex than many evaluation frameworks allow'; as a result, different kinds of impact-related activity will require to be evaluated in different ways. More broadly, [Hammersley \(2002\)](#), for example, draws a key distinction between 'engineering' and 'enlightenment'

roles that impactful research may play; in the former, the focus is on producing specific knowledge (and related innovations) to address a particular policy or practice need; in the latter, the focus is on more fundamental re-framing of understandings of the wider issues at stake or problems at hand. While ‘engineering’ may deliver significant and measurable impacts in the short and medium term, ‘enlightenment’ may produce much more profound but also more diffuse and indirect impacts that are hard to measure and to attribute to specific research or researchers. In this project, because we recognised and were interested in both kinds of impact, and in the uses of both empirical and normative work on probation, we defined research and scholarship very broadly (see below).

To achieve our project’s main aims, we undertook a year-long (2023–24) process of dialogue with CEP members, partners and stakeholders, and with managers and frontline practitioners.² This paper reviews what we learned in this process. In the next section, we outline how we developed a typology of probation research, and how we used this typology in a subsequent online survey that was completed by over 900 respondents working in European probation services. After reporting the survey findings, we include insights gained from discussing these results (and the broader issues) in a series of online focus groups held with senior leaders in probation, stakeholders and partners and practitioners. These focus groups involved discussion of the survey findings but also allowed us to deepen our understanding of probation research needs as well as identifying barriers to engaging with research for probation practitioners. They also helped us to explore whether and to what extent frontline staff should be considered critically reflective practitioners, and therefore as *primary* users of research, or whether they should be seen more often as *secondary* users whose role is mainly to implement policies, strategies and practices that others have deemed research-informed or evidence-based.

Project design and methods

Drawing from a research design which sought to evaluate research impact in social work/care practice (Buckley and Whelan, 2009), our project consisted of three main elements. First, we undertook a content review of four prominent English-language probation journals, chosen for their relevance to probation work and its development, examining articles published between 2013 and 2023. These journals were *Probation Journal*, *European Journal of Probation*, *Federal Probation* and *The Irish Probation Journal*. These journals were seen both in CEP professional networks and in probation research networks (i.e. by our colleagues in the European Society of Criminology’s Working Group on Community Sanctions and Measures) as highly relevant journals. Second, we used a survey to gather views of probation professionals (including those working in policy, management and practice) about their engagement with and use of research. Third, we discussed our survey findings and the wider issues in online focus groups with senior leaders in probation services, key stakeholders and practitioners across Europe. These methods aimed to capture a breadth and depth of perspectives to allow us to assess the perceived impact and use of research in probation’s ongoing development. We discuss each of these elements in turn below, explaining both our methodological approach and our findings.

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (No. 400230036). CEP provided assistance in advertising the research across European probation services. At the request of the research team, CEP invited each member organisation to identify a 'country champion' who assisted both in survey translation for their country and in distributing a survey link. Each 'country champion' was asked to send the link to all eligible staff in their probation service. Frontline practitioners, managers and senior leaders were all invited to participate. Administrative staff were not included because the research focus was on those probation professionals with direct client contact, and those who manage them or shape related policies. Survey participation was anonymous and respondents were required to indicate their informed consent before progressing to answer survey questions.

Survey respondents were also invited to express interest in participating in the focus groups, and this was the main means of focus group recruitment for practitioners. Senior leaders and stakeholders were recruited through the CEP but were approached directly and confidentially by the research team. All focus group participants provided written consent prior to engagement in focus groups and additional oral consent was obtained at the start of all groups. Focus group transcripts were pseudonymised.

Reviewing probation research and developing a typology

To help us develop a typology of probation research that we could use in the survey, we reviewed the titles and abstracts of all 663 articles published between 2013 and 2023 in the four probation journals. [Table 1](#) shows the breakdown by journal:

Although many research papers on probation are published in other less specialised journals and in books, we reasoned that these specialist journals, which are aimed at and well-read by probation professionals, as well as by researchers, would provide a sounds basis for the development of a typology. [Brooker et al. \(2023\)](#) recently conducted a systematic review including three of the four journals we examined. They found that just under half of the articles could not be classed as empirical research. This was also reflected in our review. However, since, as noted above, we were interested not only in the influence and use of empirical research but also of wider bodies of knowledge and forms of scholarship relevant to probation, we included all the published papers.

We generated descriptive codes inductively. Codes were chosen to describe the content and focus of the articles reviewed from each journal. They were subsequently reviewed and agreed by the other co-authors to ensure that they adequately captured the main topic or topics addressed in each article. Once we had an exhaustive list of 123 descriptive

Table 1. Numbers of papers published in four journals.

Journal name	Number of articles reviewed
European Journal of Probation	125
Federal Probation	217
Irish Probation Journal	126
Probation Journal	196

codes, we organised them into 16 over-arching themes, before analysing their frequencies. Table 2 lists the themes in the emerging typology in rank order and notes the frequency with which they appeared across all four journals.

Responses to presentation of these results both at both academic and professional conferences in late 2023 provided some assurance of the utility of the typology. That said, responses also led us to recognise that, by its nature, a retrospective review of this sort could not reveal *current or emerging* priorities and concerns, especially in relation to issues that may have come to prominence very recently. With that in mind, and on the advice of those probation professionals and academics to whom we had presented our initial typology, we added two items; one on new technologies and one on violent extremism, radicalisation and de-radicalisation. The final version of the typology, as used in the survey, therefore included 18 items.

Survey results

Our survey was disseminated amongst CEP member organisations between November 2023 and January 2024. As noted above, the survey invited probation professionals at all levels to contribute views about their experiences and uses of research in the development of probation services and practices. While the survey was prepared in English, we also used translation software to offer translated versions; these translations were checked and improved by country ‘champions’ who volunteered to help recruit participants for the survey in their jurisdiction and to ensure the survey’s accessibility.

Table 2. Themes in articles in probation journals, by frequency.

Themes	EJP	FP	IPJ	PJ	Total
Evidence-Based Policy and practice/Practice models	53	102	52	76	283
Probation as an institution	56	90	26	96	268
Desistance and social integration	55	36	52	77	220
Assessing and managing risks and needs	4	62	32	10	108
Supervisee groups/Diversity	10	20	26	38	94
Types of offending	3	23	22	24	72
Sentencing and courts	5	47	5	13	70
Supervisee health and mental health	9	11	6	16	42
Other Professions, partnerships and organisations	5	14	12	10	41
Types and/or experience of community sanctions	19	5	5	10	39
Compliance, consent Co-production	15	8	3	10	36
Prison and parole	6	15	3	3	27
Media and Public attitudes to Probation	4	1	2	4	11
Explanatory theories for Probation work	2	0	5	3	10
Research methodologies	3	0	0	0	3
International issues	1	0	1	0	2
Total	250	434	252	390	1326

In what follows, we provide some detail about the survey respondents, before going on to present findings that explore how and to what extent respondents had accessed and engaged with research, and what barriers got in their way. We then explore their experiences of (and perceived need for) training and the ways in which they use research in their work. Finally, we discuss which research topics they think are most important for probation's future development.

Respondent profile

The survey attracted 926 responses from the countries listed in [Table 3](#). Where we have the information, we include an estimate of the total number of staff who would have been

Table 3. Survey respondents by country.

Country	Number of Responses	Number of Eligible Participants	Response rate
Germany	209	4800	4.4%
Italy	158		
France	71	5051	1.4%
Croatia	66	84	78.6%
Ireland	60		
Austria	60		
Portugal	54		
Moldova	42		
Romania	41		
Latvia	40	366	10.9%
Estonia	24		
Netherlands	23		
Slovenia	21	40	52.5%
Belgium	18		
Finland	15		
Czechia	7		
Jersey	4		
Liechtenstein	2		
Lithuania	1		
Bulgaria	1		
Macedonia	1		
Portugal	1		
Slovakia	1		
Luxembourg	1		
Turkey	1		
UK	1		
Albania	1		
Montenegro	1		
Catalonia, Spain	1		
Total	926		

eligible to complete the survey and therefore of what proportion completed the survey within each country.

Clearly, the very uneven levels of participation mean that, despite the high number of participants overall, the survey cannot be statistically representative of the views of the probation workforce in Europe, or even in most participating countries. This is discussed further in the ‘Study Limitations’ section below. Importantly, when it comes to interpreting the results, we also recognise that it is likely that those more interested in research were more likely to respond to an invitation to complete such a survey. That said, it is worth noting that 16% of survey respondents said that they never engaged with research.

Of the 926 participants, 647 (69.9%) were frontline practitioners, 167 were frontline managers (18.0%), 81 were senior managers (8.7%) and 31 were working at the policy level (3.3%). **Figure 1** provides details on their levels of experience. Almost 7 in 10 of the respondents had been working in their organisations for more than 5 years, and about half had more than 10 years of experience.

Accessing and engaging with research

Figure 2 describes how often respondents typically engaged with research and/or related theories in their jobs. While more than one third described frequently engaging with research (at least once a month), 42.7% reported relatively rare engagement (no more than a few times per year). As noted above, given that respondents opted into participation in a survey about research, it was somewhat surprising that 16% reported never engaging with it at all.

Perhaps more encouragingly for researchers, asked a slightly different question – about when they last accessed research and/or theories to use in their work – only 5.4% said that they had never done so. 19.5% said that they had done so within the last year, 22.0% in the

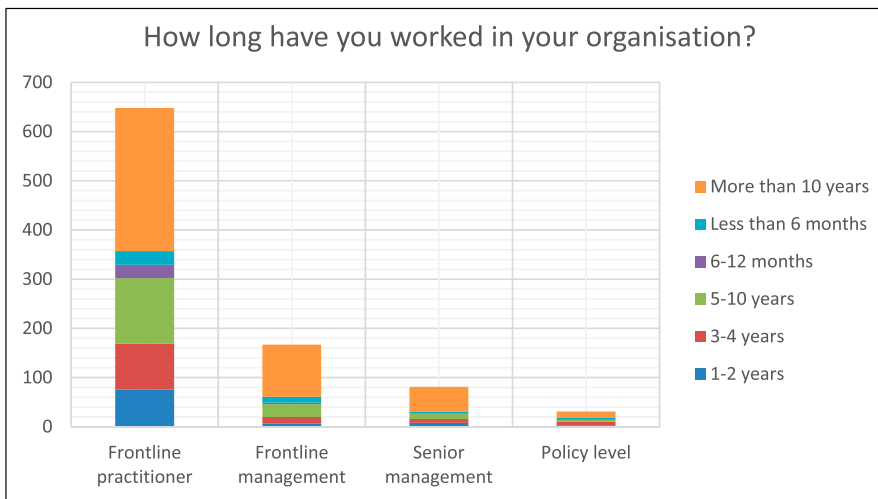


Figure 1. Respondents' levels of experience.

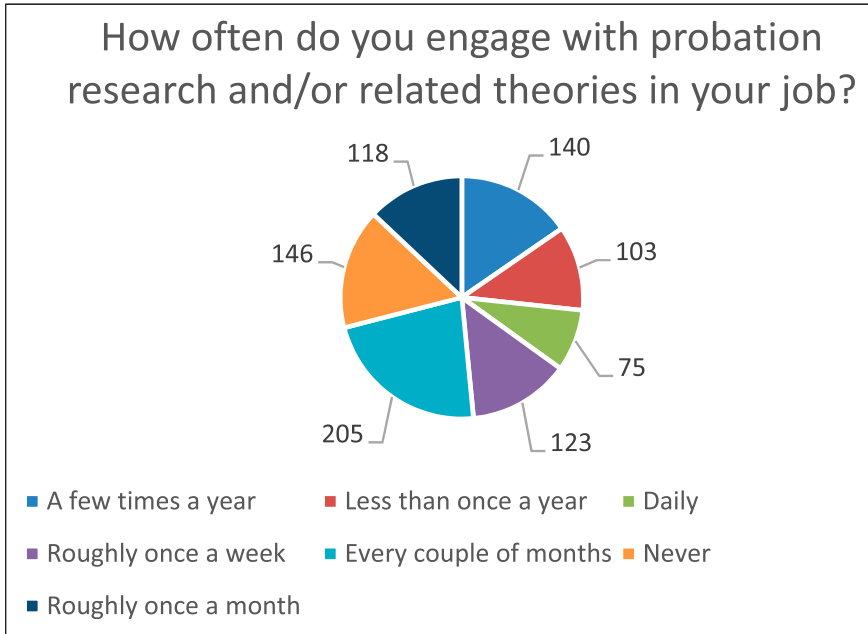


Figure 2. Frequency of engagement with research.

last 6 months, 26.3% in the last month and 26.9% in the last week. [Figure 3](#) describes *how* they had accessed research (respondents were able to select as many of these as applied):

It is notable that more traditional modes of access still seem to predominate, at least for our (admittedly experienced) respondents. For them, social media, podcasts and blogs appear to be used quite rarely as a means to access research, perhaps because they would be unlikely to be accessible during working hours.

We also asked respondents about their participation in research as part of their work. About one third had never been involved with research, and a further 30.2% reported only very rare involvement. While only 6.6% had frequent involvement, 29.1% had participated in research ‘sometimes’. Almost half (47.0%) of the respondents reported that they had participated in research conducted within the organisation.

In relation to the challenges faced in attempting to access research, respondents were asked to tick as many of the items in [Table 4](#) as applied. Perhaps unsurprisingly, lack of time emerges as the key issue, although resource limitations are also an issue for a significant number. This is an issue to which we return below.

Training and current uses of research

Looking back on the training that they had received in preparation for working in probation, we asked respondents which kinds of research they had learned about (allowing them to select as many of the following topics as applied). [Table 5](#) presents the responses.

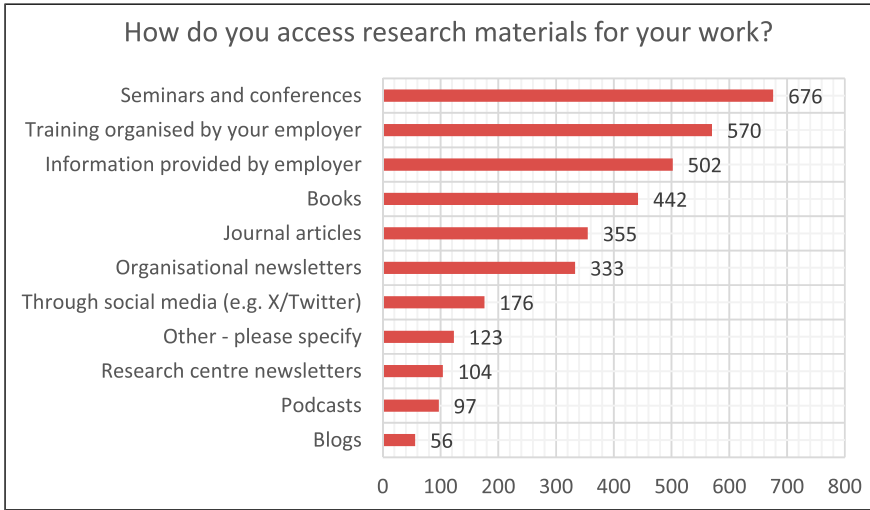


Figure 3. How was research accessed?.

Table 6 describes *how* the respondents make most use of research in their current roles. Research seems to be used most frequently to assist with assessment, intervention design and client evaluation.

Subsequently to the focus group discussions of these findings (reported in the next section), we examined whether the respondents’ current roles influenced when and how they most used research. Table 7 shows differences between frontline practitioners, frontline managers and senior managers/people working at the policy level. The results follow a predictable pattern with more senior staff naturally being somewhat more likely to use research in staff training and in developing policies and procedures.

We also asked respondents which kinds of research they used most in their role (using the same topic list mentioned above). This question used a scaled response, where ‘1’ meant ‘never’ and ‘5’ meant ‘always’. Table 8 shows the resulting ranking of research topics in terms of their reported frequency of use. The answers suggest that research on

Table 4. Challenges in accessing research.

Challenges	Count	percent of Count
Limited time to access research due to workload	659	34.2%
Limited time to attend seminars/research events	449	23.3%
No funding available to support this	259	13.4%
Not enough support from employer to access research	227	11.8%
Relevant research is rarely available in my first language	190	9.9%
Difficult or inaccessible language of research resources	94	4.9%
Other - please specify	50	2.6%
Total	1928	100.0%

Table 5. Research topics covered in initial training.

Response	Count	percent of Count
Research that helps probation to support desistance from crime and social integration	558	13.2%
Research that improves the assessment and management of risks	468	11.0%
Research that helps probation to understand and respond to different types of offending	363	8.6%
Research on mediation and/or restorative justice	291	6.9%
Research that develops evidence-based models of probation practice	282	6.6%
Research that focuses on how probation organisations and their staff do their work	264	6.2%
Research on violent extremism, radicalisation or de-radicalisation	262	6.2%
Research that helps probation to understand the needs of different kinds of people under supervision	257	6.1%
Research on victims' rights and/or working with victims	222	5.2%
Research that focuses on the health and mental health of people under probation supervision	218	5.1%
Research that focuses on how probation relates to sentencing and the courts	167	3.9%
Research on the uses of new technology in probation (e.g. artificial intelligence. Electronic monitoring, telephone-based supervision, automated reporting booths, use of apps, etc.)	155	3.7%
Research that reveals how people experience different kinds of supervision	148	3.5%
Research that helps probation understand and promote compliance with supervision	145	3.4%
Research that explores how probation relates to other professions and organisations, and partnerships with them	140	3.3%
Research that discusses the impact probation work has on practitioners	134	3.2%
Research that explores the role of volunteers in probation work	64	1.5%
Research related to framework decisions that enable cooperation in criminal justice among EU countries	58	1.4%
Other - please specify	47	1.1%
Total	4243	100.0%

evidence-based practices, on desistance and on risk is often used, but it is notable that research on probation organisations and their staff also seems important; indeed, it is rated second-most highly.

Most respondents (62.5%) reported that they had received training from their employer on how to access and use research and theories related to their job, but 67.8% nonetheless felt they would benefit from further training of this kind. Just over 60% of respondents had already received further (i.e. post-qualifying) professional qualifications through their employer but, even so, almost 70% felt they would benefit from further professional qualifications.

Table 6: Uses of research, by role.

Uses of research	Frontline practitioners	Frontline managers	Senior managers/Policy level
Conducting assessments	19.9%	16.0%	9.8%
Designing interventions	20.5%	17.0%	14.5%
Evaluating/monitoring clients	15.3%	11.5%	8.8%
Staff training	5.0%	14.7%	17.2%
Group work with clients	6.1%	6.3%	6.1%
During supervision with clients	8.8%	5.3%	5.7%
Developing policies and procedures	2.5%	11.5%	20.6%
Writing reports	16.7%	12.5%	10.8%
In order to seek career advancement	2.5%	3.4%	3.0%
Other	2.7%	1.8%	3.4%

Future research priorities

Perhaps the most important question we asked sought the respondents' views on which were the most important areas of research for probation's future. They were invited to select five from the list of topics already mentioned above. In [Table 8](#), the topics are ranked by the frequency with which they were selected by respondents, so that those deemed most important (overall) appear first.

The results suggest that, at least amongst our respondents, the priority accorded to certain topics reflects the CEP's continuing commitment to promoting social integration. Arguably, the top three items are all concerned with identifying and addressing needs that might otherwise hinder desistance and integration. It is notable that health and mental health issues amongst probationers feature so prominently in this regard. The concomitant focus on risk and on offending is reflected in the 4th and 5th ranked items. Subsequently to the focus group discussions (see below), we looked more closely at whether staff in different roles (and with different degrees of seniority) suggested different priorities, but we found very little variation in the rankings reflected below, except that more senior staff were more likely to prioritise research on new technologies.

Focus group discussions

During March and April 2024, we gained further insights by discussing these results (and the broader issues) in a series of five online focus groups which included one meeting with senior leaders in probation (n = 8), one meeting with CEP stakeholders and partners (n = 8), and three meetings with practitioners (n = 21). We made clear from the outset that these focus groups would be conducted in English as this is the working language of the CEP (and the first language of the researchers). We acknowledge that this will have had an impact on participation. If time and funding had permitted, we would have ideally held the focus groups in different languages and/or with simultaneous translation. The practitioners

Table 7. Research most often used in role, by topic.

Research most often used in role, by topic	Average rating
Research that develops evidence-based models of probation practice	2.68
Research that focuses on how probation organisations and their staff do their work	2.63
Research that helps probation to support desistance from crime and social integration	2.15
Research that improves the assessment and management of risks	2.10
Research that helps probation to understand the needs of different kinds of people under supervision	1.73
Research that helps probation to understand and respond to different types of offending	1.55
Research that focuses on how probation relates to sentencing and the courts	1.51
Research that focuses on the health and mental health of people under probation supervision	1.43
Research that explores how probation relates to other professions and organisations, and how it works in partnership with them	1.42
Research that reveals how people experience different kinds of supervision	1.33
Research that helps probation understand and promote compliance with supervision	1.30
Research on violent extremism, radicalisation or de-radicalisation	1.28
Research on victims' rights and/or working with victims	1.22
Research on the uses of new technology in probation (e.g. AI, EM, telephone-based supervision, reporting booths, use of apps, etc.)	1.04
Research that discusses the impact probation work has on practitioners	0.96
Research related to framework decisions that enable cooperation in criminal justice among EU countries	0.95
Research that explores the role of volunteers in probation work	0.74
Research on mediation and/or restorative justice	0.71

who participated came from England, France, Germany, Ireland, Jersey, Italy, Portugal, Scotland, Slovenia and Turkey. Where we quote practitioners below, we locate them only by European region, to protect their confidentiality.

In this section, we discuss what we learned in the various focus groups; firstly, about survey participation and research engagement; secondly, about the role of research in probation training and practice; and thirdly, about future research priorities.

Participation and research engagement

Most of the practitioners we spoke to had been recruited to the focus group discussion via the survey itself; they confirmed that the survey had been distributed by their employer (that is, via the 'country champions' mentioned above) by email. But some had become aware of this project only via postings on social media and the CEP website or its expert groups, suggesting that in many countries the invitation to complete the survey had not

Table 8. Most important areas of research for probation's future.

Areas of research	Count	percent of Count
Research that helps probation to support desistance from crime and social integration	588	14.5%
Research that focuses on the health and mental health of people under probation supervision	402	9.9%
Research that helps probation to understand the needs of different kinds of people under supervision	339	8.3%
Research that improves the assessment and management of risks	321	7.9%
Research that helps probation to understand and respond to different types of offending	305	7.5%
Research on the uses of new technology in probation (e.g. AI, EM, telephone-based supervision, reporting booths, use of apps, etc.)	255	6.3%
Research that develops evidence-based models of probation practice	222	5.5%
Research on mediation and/or restorative justice	219	5.4%
Research on violent extremism, radicalisation or de-radicalisation	202	5.0%
Research that explores how probation relates to other professions and organisations, and how it works in partnership with them	201	5.0%
Research that discusses the impact probation work has on practitioners	199	4.9%
Research that helps probation understand and promote compliance with supervision	157	3.9%
Research that focuses on how probation organisations and their staff do their work	147	3.6%
Research on victims' rights and/or working with victims	132	3.3%
Research that focuses on how probation relates to sentencing and the courts	115	2.8%
Research that reveals how people experience different kinds of supervision	101	2.5%
Research that explores the role of volunteers in probation work	68	1.7%
Research related to framework decisions that enable cooperation in criminal justice among EU countries	68	1.7%
Other - please specify	19	0.5%
Total responses	4060	100.0%
Respondents	812	

reached all eligible staff. The practitioners shared our view that those who completed the survey, like those who we met in focus groups themselves, were more likely to be more enthusiastic about probation research than many of their colleagues. They also noted that high workloads and limited time meant that only those with an interest in research might have been prepared to commit the time to complete the survey.

In discussing the results related to how often people access research, focus group participants were not surprised. Even interpreting 'access' and 'engagement' broadly (to include training events and conferences, blogs and articles), practitioners stressed that accessing research is not easy for very busy practitioners. Indeed, some were surprised that such a high proportion of survey respondents reported engaging with research quite

regularly. Most of the practitioners were also not surprised at the low levels of use of social media and other online paths to accessing research; one noted that this lack of online engagement might reflect the [assumed] age of the survey respondents: 'Probably it has to do with the age of the participants and how long they've been on the job because they're more experienced people, so I would guess they were older' (Practitioner, Central Europe). The senior leaders also speculated that the age of respondents may have been a factor here.

Practitioners reported that engagement with research is much more commonly facilitated during working hours, through in-house training events, and via (research-based) manuals. One or two noted that professional associations and trade unions sometimes produced valuable material: 'fairly interesting booklets and pamphlets which had an awful lot of academic research and information about how things were operating' (Practitioner, North-Western Europe). Some received newsletters via email, or attended online seminars, but conferences and training events were reported as the main ways in which research was accessed.

Practitioners did recognise the importance of keeping up to date with new research, partly because of the pace of social change. On this point, one practitioner commented on the need for academic researchers to lobby in the political arena:

'if research doesn't fit well with the actual politics in that country, that might lead to the fact that employers are not that willing to bring their own probation officers in contact with that research and this could lead to the conclusion that maybe researchers need to contact politics more offensively to kind of like... get them to know why it would be better for the whole society' (Practitioner, Central Europe).

In the practitioner focus groups, several participants noted that probation leaders and managers may be more interested in the implementation by practitioners of something that they [the leaders] have deemed to be evidence-based or research-informed, rather than encouraging reflective, research-informed practice at the frontline. This more managerial approach would then make leaders and managers the main conduits of relevant research, evidence and theory, with practitioners left only as secondary or vicarious research users.

In discussing barriers to accessing and using research, high caseloads were a recurring theme, not just in the discussions with practitioners, but also in the meeting with senior leaders. Senior leaders recognised that one way around this problem was to '[t]ry to connect their (probation officers') daily life with (research) results'. Though practitioners in different areas had different ideas of what a high caseload was (in numerical terms), they also recognised that the composition of the caseload (and especially having high numbers of high-risk cases) mattered. Either way, time constraints and workload pressures were the main themes, alongside the pressure to meet managerial targets:

'There was a much greater focus on achieving targets rather than looking at how best practice can be employed and I think that was the thing that overshadowed everything in that respect' (Practitioner, Northern Europe)

Some practitioners felt that younger practitioners who had been more recently recruited (within a more managerialised and risk-focused era) had less interest in research. However, another practitioner noted that:

‘When you do work with people and sort of discuss the possibility of research, then people become interested. But it [i.e. research engagement] doesn’t seem to be part and parcel of the role at the moment. They see that [i.e. research] happening elsewhere and not something that they are really are involved in or could be involved in’ (Practitioner, Northern Europe).

Another said: ‘I think there is a gap between research and practice and social work in general, but especially regarding the probation-related topics. I think that is kind of sad’ (Practitioner, Central Europe).

Some also reiterated the point noted above about language, saying that not enough research is available in translation. One practitioner reported that there were no podcasts or blogs available in their own language. A similar point that was reinforced in the focus group with senior leaders: ‘we have a language barrier’.

Research in probation training and in practice

When we turned to the survey results related to what kinds of research had been important in professional education (or ‘formation’), most practitioners could relate a wide range of theoretical material and empirical research that had been (and remained) important to them. Some also stressed the importance of practice-based learning via placements.

In making sense of when research is and is not used in practice, it came as no surprise to the practitioners that the survey results suggested that use of research evidence was frontloaded in the practice process. At the beginning of the process, the focus is primarily on completing risk assessments and writing reports; thereafter, ‘prescribed instructions’ from employers about the ‘next steps’ in interventions tended to guide implementation more than research. A similar point was made (from a different perspective) by one of the senior leaders: ‘Are people underestimating the extent to which they use research... because they are not the ones that who designed the intervention but the intervention nonetheless has research behind it?’

Yet for some respondents, this was partly why research had become slightly divorced from practice; once intervention is in train, practitioners tend to work by habit, by instinct and/or by following procedures. It was noted that practitioners can feel ‘de-professionalised’ to some degree, particularly where leaders and managers are telling practitioners what to do (i.e. what tools, programmes and approaches to use) rather than encouraging critically reflective practice. Many practitioners, from different parts of Europe, agreed that research is often implemented ‘top-down’. But it was also noted that different professional backgrounds (e.g. law, social work, and social sciences) might lead people to practice differently and to use research differently; some might prefer a more proceduralised approach.

In terms of the types of research most commonly used in practice, there was less consensus; a wide array of topics was mentioned. However, one recurring topic of conversation in the practitioner focus groups concerned the need to better understand how

supervision is experienced by probationers; and how that experience differs for different kinds of people (i.e. in relation both to diversity issues and different kinds of offending histories).

Participants also noted the importance of research on the supervision and mental well-being of practitioners themselves.

Future probation research priorities

When we discussed the survey findings related to future research priorities, one of the stakeholders noted that:

‘It’s really quite a practitioner-weighted set of results which of course is highly, highly important, but at the same time perhaps not weighted in terms of some of the kind of vision of where probation might go or some ideas that are around about involving communities and so forth and you know, promoting that kind of thing’ (Senior Leader).

As we noted above however, when we analysed the sub-groups (by level of seniority), we found very few differences.

The stakeholder focus group also stressed the importance of research on public understanding of probation (which suggests probation is poorly understood). This was linked to the need to ‘improve the visibility and promotion of probation among judges and prison services and you know politics and community services’ (Senior Leader).

Another issue not included in the survey, but which was stressed by the stakeholders was probation leadership:

‘the importance of leadership and probation in influencing context, the political context, the justice context and some people have been very, very successful because they were powerful leaders, always open to receive information... I think it would be an important priority for CEP, how probation leaders can increase their capacity to influence context and that is so difficult...because sometimes you have to row against the political tide’ (Senior Leader).

Reviewing the ranking of research priorities, one of the senior leaders noted that: ‘[p]robation is about helping, supporting... so I am not all that surprised that desistance, social integration is very high, but also the needs [of service users]’.

The practitioners had many comments and ideas on research priorities. All agreed with the survey respondents that health and mental health were increasingly important areas in which it is important to remain aware of new and emerging research. As one of the senior leaders noted, practitioners are confronted with these issues on a daily basis.

One practitioner [from Central Europe], bemoaning the emphasis on risk assessment, argued that ‘[w]e should more focus on methods that integrate people into society because it’s the most valuable thing we can add to the treatment of offenders’. Another [from Southern Europe] argued that the use of technology in probation will be a priority in the future because of the emergence of AI. Another noted that a good AI tool would be useful to help communicate with clients where language is a barrier. Conversely, a third practitioner [from Central Europe] noted that there is already a requirement to interact and

use technology far too much during the working day: ‘The big question is for me, do I work for the machine or does the machine work for me’.

The low priority in the survey accorded to ‘research on how people experience probation supervision’ provoked significant discussion. For one participant, this survey finding made sense as a product of the emphasis on targets: ‘I would say it [probationer experiences of supervision] is more university interest and less practical interest... that’s really interesting and obviously it’s our duty that it would be less painful, but that’s the reason’ (Practitioner, Central Europe). Another offered a slightly different view, suggesting that research of this sort may seem like less of a priority because building good relationships with clients helps practitioners to understand how they experience supervision. Some suggested that there might be a fear among some practitioners related to not knowing what to do with negative feedback, or how to respond to unmet need (in the absence of resources). Even so, as one practitioner said:

‘I’m surprised it’s so far down the list because I think it is important, it’s very important how people experience different kinds of supervision and I think it’s something that sometimes is avoided because it leads to discussions about how punitive supervision [is], we like to, perhaps, think that supervision isn’t punitive, in that it’s helpful’ [Practitioner, Northern Europe].

Setting the survey aside, we also asked focus group participants more directly about what kinds of research can develop effective and ethical probation services, in line with CEP’s mission. One senior leader noted that:

‘What practitioners have identified [in the survey results] seems to be more around one-to-one practice but there doesn’t seem to be a wider perspective and something [the CEP Board] might consider should feature in [CEP] future strategy’.

One of the stakeholders commented that:

my general recommendation would be to stimulate research in your own service no matter the topic really, but to sort of raise the bar a bit and look outside your own pond... it’s very stimulating to have researchers involved in your work... I think the CEP could support such research around Europe and also multi-site studies or refer to calls etcetera for funding (Senior Leader).

In terms of developing the R&D strategy, one other important issue, one senior leader suggested, was to identify where research is already well-developed, and where more research is needed.

One practitioner noted a concern about the misapplication of research on adults to work with young people. Another stressed the importance that people training to become probation officers/social workers develop a greater understanding of people coming from different parts of society (those from various different social backgrounds, ethnicities, etc.); otherwise, they might not grasp/appreciate the difficulties that clients encounter when attempting to change and move forward:

‘This is a very, very, very important topic when you’re talking about ethical probation practices because you need to be fair. So, we need research which makes really vivid and visible the lives and circumstances of people under supervision so that practitioners can better understand the context in which people are living and the struggles they may be having’ (Practitioner, Central Europe).

Another stressed the need for practitioners to understand the research and theories behind models of practice, because in direct client work the application of theory and practice might need to be adjusted according to the individuals/clients circumstances. Such knowledge could and should also guide innovations in practice:

‘I think the key thing is evidence that our interventions are effective but also looking forward a little bit to what might be the most effective ways of working, it might not be things we’re doing at the moment... but research would inform a vision for the future and I think this is an opportunity to be brave’ (Practitioner, Northern Europe).

We also asked how researchers can best engage with professionals and other stakeholders and, conversely, how practitioners can better engage with research. In the discussion with academics, some noted difficulties in gaining access to probation organisations to conduct research, suggesting that issues around data privacy and GDPR can constitute barriers. One stakeholder stressed the importance of creating a dialogue early in the process, so that research projects are co-designed and/or more responsive to the needs and priorities of practitioners and others in probation organisations. But the academics had noted that probation leaders and agencies needed to be open to research even in areas that they did not identify as being immediately useful.

Another response (from a practitioner) was that together we [practitioners and researchers] need ‘a common vision about what probation is’ and that ‘we should create a common vision of the probation process’. In the stakeholders’ group, there was also discussion of the need to look beyond probation and to get all the justice professionals (but especially judges and probation staff) and the academics into the same (virtual room) in order to ‘get ideas flowing’.

Study Limitations

Clearly, there are several limitations of this study. Firstly, the four journals chosen for review were English-language journals, resulting in an inevitable bias towards topics of interest in their countries of publication and/or in that linguistic community. The inclusion of a wider range of relevant journals published in different languages would allow interesting further analysis, including comparisons with our findings.

Secondly, whilst every effort was made to ensure wide participation in each CEP member country, there were very large variations in response rates. Therefore, meaningful comparison between country responses is not possible. Whilst we do not know the reasons why certain countries were more responsive than others, it would be useful to investigate this further to overcome possible barriers to participation. In future research, a

representative sample from each country would allow robust comparisons of experiences and perspectives of those working in probation.

Thirdly, we have no data on the distribution of roles within European probation services (from frontline probation officer to senior manager or policy-maker), so cannot draw conclusions about whether any particular occupational group is over or under-represented in our study. Given that almost 7 out of 10 respondents were frontline staff, our results mostly represent their experiences and perspectives. Whilst all views are important, it might be useful to focus more closely on other sub-populations. For example, a more comprehensive survey of senior probation managers in Europe, as those who potentially control training programmes and/or access to research, might be very interesting.

Fourth, the challenges around language that have been highlighted above are an important limitation to this study. The use of ‘country champions’ working in the probation space to translate the survey attempted to mitigate any issues around mistranslation and misinterpretation of the survey questions. While this was certainly helpful, more systematic and professional translation (in both directions) would have been preferable if time and resources had allowed. Similarly, whilst the working language of the CEP is English, focus groups conducted in a range of languages and/or with simultaneous translation might be considered in future research designs (and costings) from the beginning.

Finally, the inclusion of service user perspectives was, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study. Yet, as [Nutley et al. \(2023\)](#) argues, service user voice is key to probation effectiveness and to helping improve outcomes. We also found a lack of research involving service users in our journal review – something we suggest should become a more prominent focus in probation research generally.

Discussion

Priorities for probation research

Having completed the survey and focus group discussions, we returned to our typology of probation research topics, including sub-categories, finally arriving at the version presented in [Figure 4](#).

Amongst the topics included in that typology, our analysis of the survey data and focus group discussions led to the identification of six main priority areas for probation research. The identification of these six areas was partly related to their perceived importance in general but also reflected participants’ assessments of where the existing knowledge base for probation work was considered inadequate. Importantly, one cross-cutting issue that recurred across the six areas was recognition of the need for greater attention to diversity.

First, the topics of desistance and integration were highlighted as high-priority areas because they speak directly to the core function of probation. While a great deal is now widely known about desistance *in general*, there is much more to be learned about supporting *diverse pathways* to desistance and integration *from* different types of offending, *for* different types of people and *in* different cultural and systemic contexts.

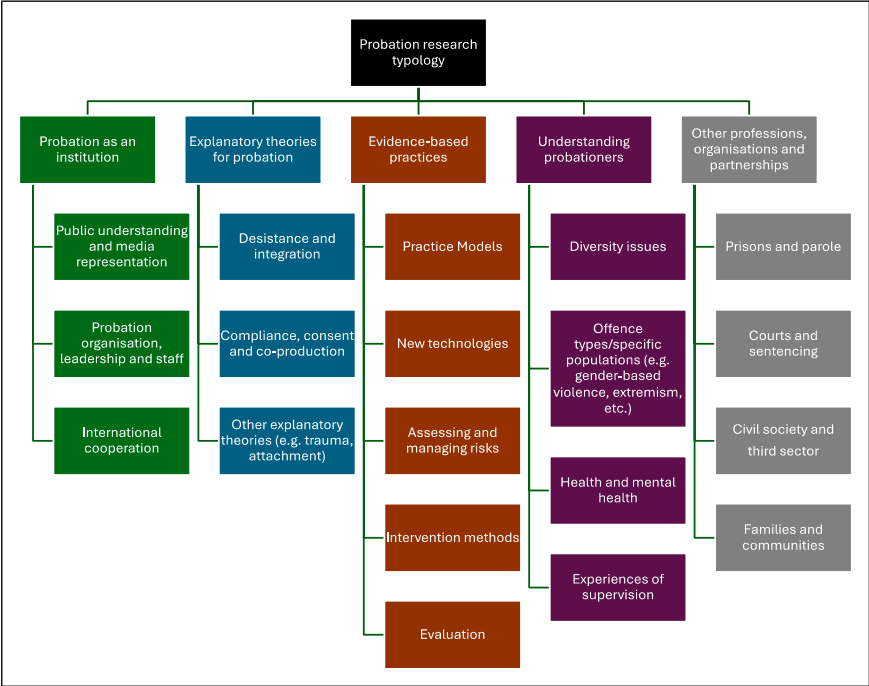


Figure 4. Probation research typology.

Second, probation institutions, cultures and practices were identified as potential areas in which further research might benefit the professionalism and development of probation. Further research about different constructions of probation (in social, cultural, legal and organisational terms), including comparative research across different countries, could inform the development of new models and visions of probation going forward.

Third, probationer experiences of supervision was a strong focus in focus group discussions, particularly in practitioner groups, yet, interestingly, was less highly prioritised in the survey data. In the discussions, it was argued that a better understanding of the diversity of experiences of probation supervision could and should inform development, thus incorporating research, practice and lived experience perspectives in improving outcomes for service users (Wakefield et al., 2022).

Fourth, participants highlighted a need for greater awareness of and evidence about the extent and nature of the health and mental health needs of people on probation. Both survey and focus group respondents reported increasing levels of need in this area, with more knowledge (and more access to knowledge) therefore urgently required.

Fifth, public understanding and media representations of probation services were topics on which key stakeholders and senior probation leaders placed great emphasis in focus groups. In particular, there was a reference to how probation leaders might most effectively manage their engagement with policy and politics, and how they might better

educate and inform the wider public about probation services. It was noted that there is currently a gap in empirical evidence from research guiding these crucial engagements.

Last, the role of new technologies in probation was an area emphasised across all focus groups. This area was discussed in terms of both the potential benefits and potential pitfalls of new technologies. The evidence base in this area was identified as in need of development.

Forms of research engagement: Primary or secondary users of research?

The survey and the focus group discussions also provided valuable evidence about how and to what extent probation staff engage with research, and about what gets in the way. Crucially, we learned that the main barriers to engagement were high caseloads, limited time, other priorities and pressures (sometimes imposed via performance targets), and accessibility in terms of language. For these reasons, we hear directly (or can reasonably infer) that frontline practitioners are much more likely to engage with research when they have time and space to do so *within* their work schedules, for example, when they are attending training events organised by their services; when accessing and using research is somehow *built into* practice processes; and when research-based material is presented succinctly, in language they can understand (i.e. not academic jargon), and ideally when it is available in their mother-tongue.

Our findings suggested that social media, blogs and other more recently developed pathways to research engagement have limited reach as yet. But it was also noted that our survey respondents and focus group participants may have been older than others in the current workforce, and perhaps less digitally literate or engaged. Since levels of digital literacy in the workforce will increase (perhaps quite swiftly), there is good reason for probation organisations to develop and expand ongoing uses of these kinds of media.

A complex issue that surfaced in the focus groups concerned *what kinds of research engagement* probation organisations should support. Where they are committed to probation professionalism, organisations should not be content to support only a top-down model of research engagement, in which leaders and management develop research-informed approaches for practitioners to implement via prescribed procedures. Relegating probation workers to a role only as secondary users of research would reflect a kind of 'technical proletarianisation' (Derber, 1982) which involves managers prescribing practice or ways of working and in which frontline workers have no control or autonomy over their work, resulting in the loss of professional judgement and confidence in handling complexity and indeterminacy. As research on English probation staff discovered more than 20 years ago, proletarianisation leaves workers feeling '...constrained, controlled and deskilled – or, at worst, rendered redundant – by the procedures that increasingly govern their decisions and actions' (Robinson 2003: 595).

We would argue, in line with the views of the practitioners in our focus groups, that developing probation requires continuous commitment to supporting critical and reflexive research engagement at the frontline *as well as* in the back-office spaces where policies are written and where strategic and operational management decisions are made. To do so requires services, even under the many pressures that many currently face, to explore ways to nurture and sustain active dialogues between practice experience, research findings and

lived experience. We have already noted that the developing research evidence about how people experience supervision can and should play a key part in this dialogue; but more direct and ongoing engagement with the lived experience of their service users should also, in our view, be built into service development, design, monitoring and evaluation. As [Nutley et al. \(2023\)](#) argued, these dialogues are critical to probation's effectiveness and to its ethicality.

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Ethical considerations

This study received ethical approval from the University of Glasgow (400230036) November 06, 2023.

Consent to participate

Respondents to the online survey were provided with an explanation of the research and indicated their informed consent before proceeding with the survey. Participants in focus groups provided written consent prior to engagement with the focus groups and oral consent was also sought at the start of each session.

Author contributions

The project was conceived by Fergus McNeill, but the finalisation of its design, the conduct of the fieldwork, the analysis of the data were shared equally by the three authors. Karyn Mabon coordinated the writing of this paper, to which all three authors contributed in equal measure.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Since this research was commissioned by CEP, and since participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared beyond the research team, data will not be available to other researchers. A copy of the survey and focus group schedule is available upon request to the authors.

Notes

1. During this time period, there was a publication lag due to COVID-19. As few articles mentioned COVID-19 at the time of review, the impact of this on publications was viewed as minimal.
2. We also benefited from dialogue with the European Society of Criminology's Working Group on Community Sanctions and Measures but, in this paper, we prefer to keep the focus on our dialogue with probation and other justice professionals.

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