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### **“What works” in the Social Reintegration of Law Offenders**

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# “What works” in the Social Reintegration of Law Offenders

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## Abstract

*Premise: The issue of social reintegration of the persons who committed offenses arouses interest. Our study aims to draw attention on the need for psychosocial intervention programs based on the model “what works” for the offenders’ social reintegration. This paper brings together key concepts of the probation field, like: criminogenic and social needs, psychosocial intervention programs, ethics of intervention, social reintegration process, trying to explain their role and how they affect people’s lives. So, we started from the premise that psychosocial intervention programs influence the decrease of the criminogenic and social needs, awareness of the consequences of crime and therefore the reintegration in the community of the persons under the supervision of the Probation Service. The research methods consisted of documentation and interview on a sample of 30 subjects, with ages between 19 and 30 years old, under the supervision of the Probation Service. Results: Generally, the perception of the persons monitored in the intervention programs is positive and we notice significant changes in attitudes and behavior in the persons who underwent an intervention program. Conclusions and recommendations: Combining the main components of the community supervision (control and psychosocial assistance) is necessary and, even more, represents the key to success in the social reintegration of the persons who have committed crimes. We believe that new approaches are needed in order to carry many intervention programs that involve many service customers.*

## Keywords:

*“what works” model, psychosocial intervention, ethics of intervention, social rehabilitation, offenders.*

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## **1. Introduction**

The antisocial behavior of a mentally normal individual is generally reversible, and such individual may be socially reintegrated. Offending conduct psychology relies on various social reintegration methods, which have been used in the probation work. The practice of this activity has been structured over time as a complex set of actions and intervention efforts focusing on the counseling and control of people under surveillance.

Probation counselors currently use various methods and strategies in their dealing with offenders, on a case-by-case basis. The choice of a particular method or group of methods is completely pragmatic (Egan, 2009), and it obeys the psychological “what works” paradigm (Lipsey, 1992; Andrews *et al.*, 1990), which focuses on the offender personality’s distinctive features and reintegration needs. The probation department keeps under control the risk of committing new criminal offences, and it develops different customized practices for the people under surveillance, as well as specific group work programs, designed to provide a balanced approach of counseling, control and reintegration, focusing on the last two terms of the relation. Therefore, the purpose of the programs applied by the probation departments is to answer particular criminogenic and social needs of the offenders (Durnescu, 2002), so as to diminish their risk of repetition of the offence and to help the beneficiaries change both their behavior by the acquisition of new skills, and their mentalities and attitudes preventing them from achieve their prosocial objectives. The programs support the learning process, are interactive, stimulate the beneficiaries’ involvement and include exercises related to actual everyday life situations.

### **1.1. Psychosocial Intervention Programs**

The relatively recent theoretical and practical “what works” approach has allowed a shift in focus from the beneficiary’s social well-being to the development of the latter’s personal responsibility. The current model promoted by this practice considers offenders rather as part of the solution than part of the problem (Bazemore, Maloney, 1994).

The “what works” model has the following characteristics: it is oriented towards the cognitive factors which contribute to the criminal behavior; it is organized in such a way as to allow its customization in

accordance with the offender’s needs and characteristics; it is oriented towards capacities that would facilitate the offender’s rehabilitation; it focuses on personal motivation changes.

This model is used to develop modern psychosocial intervention programs, the purpose of which is the social reintegration of law offenders.

Lipsey (1995), McGuire and Priestley (1995) identified the basic criteria that may be used to develop efficient programs. They are: the content of the program must consider the problems associated with criminal behavior, the solving of which diminishes the risk of such conduct in the future; it must include a wide range of intervention targets; it must use methods that proved efficient; it must aim at developing abilities that will help law offenders avoid further criminal activities; the duration of the program and the intensity of its content must be suited to the target group’s level of risk; the personnel involved must be properly trained; measures designed to ensure the integrity of the program and an assessment structure must be implemented.

Here is a short description of two intervention programs, also called rehabilitation programs, which rely on the “what works” principle and the application of which is the object of our research.

The “One to One” program, or OTO in short, involves working with law offenders individually, using a set of counseling programs which have been successfully applied in the UK and Canada. The program was also tested in Romania, in 2006, and has recently been included in the current practice of probation departments. The purpose of the OTO program is to reduce the risk of offence repetition by the beneficiaries of the probation services, by changing their way of thinking and, hence, of acting. In addition to its cognitive-behavioral component, the program also relies on specific techniques used in working with law offenders: motivational interviewing, cycle of change and prosocial modeling.

The “STOP! Think and Change” program is a new version of one of the most famous programs applied in Canada: “Reasoning and Rehabilitation”. Unlike the individual “One to One” program, “STOP! Think and Change” works with groups (Canton, Hancock, 2007).

Reconsidering the assumption according to which any law offence has a social dimension and, therefore, the offender may only be “reformed” in a social context (Cressey, 1955), group counseling is an innovative correctional treatment. As it relies on emotional bonding and

mutual interest among the group members, the working environment is a particularly therapeutic one. Thus, the offender-client brings about both a behavioral disorder and his/her specific life experience, and the individual problems that are described and analyzed by the group acquire meaning both for him/her and for those having experience similar problems, situations and feelings. This treatment consists of free talks, role playing and dramatization. The purpose is to provide consistent life experiences designed to help group resocialization. Resocialization is conceived in terms of independence from exterior control by enhancing the client's self-control, who thus becomes less sensitive to the influence of the negative pressures around him/her.

### **1.2. Ethical Implications of the Probation Counselor – Offender Relation**

As concerns probation ethics, a Deontological Code for probation counselors was passed in 2005, by the Order of the Minister of Justice no. 510/C/4.04.2005, which regulates the professional conduct standards that are compulsory for the people working in this field. We hope that this field of interest will be complemented by the vocational training sessions entitled “Social Mission and Ethic Responsibility in the Probation System (Comparative Analysis)” completed within the “Ethics, Integrity and Transparency in the Romanian Probation System” Project conducted by the Ministry of Justice, by its Probation Directorate, with the financial support of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Foundation, within the Rule of Law in South-Eastern Europe Program started in 2013. The project activities support the mission of the Romanian probation services, the purpose of which is the social reintegration of individuals having committed law offences, but who are not jailed, and the surveillance of their fulfilling the duties that the court of law set for them.

In short, the principles which the work of a probation counselor with an offender-beneficiary of psychosocial intervention programs relies on refer to: respect in the counselor-beneficiary relation, the role of the beneficiary being to help the offender find solutions to the problems that he/she faces; the unconditioned acknowledgement of the beneficiary's dignity and personal value, and of his/her positive or negative behavior, without judging or criticizing; the counselor's transparency and honesty which helps establishing an authentic professional relation, based on

mutual trust and respect; provision of a prosocial behavior model expressing an explicitly anti-criminal attitude, which encourages the expression of the beneficiary’s positive attitudes and behaviors; the utmost confidentiality throughout the intervention; nondiscrimination on grounds of ethnic origins, sex, age, sexual orientation, etc.).

Consequently, in our opinion, the quality of the professional relation between the probation counselor and the offender-beneficiary is directly proportional to: the professional’s faith in the offender’s capacity to change his/her behavior; the counselor’s respect for the assisted person’s individuality, uniqueness and right to self-determination; empathy, which enables the person in charge of the intervention to see the events and the situation from the assisted person’s viewpoint; partnership-based approach, designed to help the beneficiary become aware of his/her problems and get involved in their solving; a calm environment and a relaxed behavior, which may earn the beneficiary’s trust and hence improve his/her professional relation with the counselor.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The purpose of our research, which was conducted in May 2013, is to identify the impact of the intervention programs on the individuals under surveillance from the probation department.

The main objectives consist of determining the roles played by the “One to One” and “STOP! Think and Change” Programs in diminishing the risk of repetition of the offence (in the sense of reducing the number of factors conducive to criminal behavior), in changing thinking patterns (in the sense of developing a consequence-oriented thinking and of becoming aware of the costs of committing law offences) and in the offenders’ behavior (in the sense of their involvement in prosocial lucrative and recreational activities). We will also analyze their perception of the program that they were involved in.

The research methods that we employed were documentation (we studied the surveillance and social reintegration files of the program beneficiaries) and semi-structured interview conducted on a group of 30 subjects, 15 male and 15 female, aged between 19 and 30, involved in the “One to One” and “STOP! Think and Change” Programs, who were under the surveillance of the Probation Department of Iasi Court House.

### 3. Results and Discussions

The first result of our research concerns the reduction of the risk of repetition of the offence by the offenders involved in the programs. We reached this result by analyzing the data collected from the surveillance and social reintegration files of the beneficiaries of the programs referred to above, as well as by conducting interviews with them. This objective was mainly reached by the documentary method, more specifically by studying the beneficiaries' initial and revised surveillance plans, which include the statistical and dynamic (inhibiting and enhancing) factors used to assess the risk of reiteration of their criminal behavior, as well as the beneficiaries' final social reintegration reports, which describe the support and counseling objectives and the degree of fulfillment of these objectives.

According to the analyzed data, we estimated that in 21 subjects (70% of the whole study group), of whom 10 male and 11 female, the risk of repetition of the offence was lower after having participated in one of the rehabilitation programs than before the involvement in these programs. Also, the number of factors conducive to criminal behavior (lack of communication in the offender's family, bad influence of the offender's environment, hallucinogenic drug use, lack of education and vocational training motivation, emotional immaturity, no empathy for the victim) was lower after having attended the rehabilitation program, whereas the number of factors inhibiting criminal behavior (moral and material support from the family members, truthfulness and unquestionable wish to change one's behavior, partial awareness-raising about the seriousness of committing criminal acts) was higher. We also noticed that the program diminished the social and criminogenic needs identified in each subject.

In the other 9 cases (5 male and 4 female) we concluded that the risk of offence repetition was the same both before and after their involvement in the programs. This may be accounted for by the fact that these subjects participated in the rehabilitation program at the court's order and not voluntarily, unlike the other 21 subjects who freely expressed their wish to participate. It is therefore about motivation. As for the 9 subjects with unaltered offence repetition risk, we may speak of extrinsic and not intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation may play an essential role in the offenders' changing process.

We then studied how the beneficiaries think that the intervention programs led to changes in their behavior. Therefore, the subjects were asked whether they think that having participated in these programs will help them avoid repeating the offence in the future and then how they would feel if a considerable period of time would elapse without them committing new law offences. Most of them said yes to the first question, some answers being more elaborate than others.

As the results were confirmed and supported by both the information collected from the beneficiaries' files, and the information gathered further to the interviews, we may say that intervention programs contribute to a great extent to the diminution of the risk of repetition of the offence. In our opinion, this confirms the fact that the “Stop! Think and Change” and “One to one” Programs set out and manage to support the beneficiaries in developing their consequence-oriented thinking, while preventing them from resuming their old behavioral patterns.

We feel the need to point out the extremely important role of motivation in the behavior changing process, the bottom-of-line observation is that some individuals whose motivation is extrinsic do not manage to adopt new behavioral patterns and there is always the risk of them repeating their criminal behavior in the future. An individual's intrinsic motivation is closely connected to that individual's personal needs, as the source that generates it is in the very object of that individual's activity. It is not the means to an end, namely that of deriving some advantages, but a need that arises and develops in the process of its satisfaction. Therefore, the persons under the surveillance of the probation department should be helped to understand the fact that the programs are designed for their personal needs and are useful for their personal development. Since convicted individuals deny or minimize the problems they face, their intrinsic motivation for a behavioral change is most of times low. Although they lack intrinsic motivation, the individuals that participate in rehabilitation programs accept to get involved for fear of negative consequences, which means that they may not perceive the program as useful for their personal development, and hence be reluctant to changing anything in their behavior.

That being said, as concerns the first objective of our research, we may conclude that intervention programs play an important role in



reducing the beneficiaries' risk of repetition of the offence, in the sense that, thanks to their attending the above-mentioned programs, the number of factors conducive to criminal behavior is lower.

The second result of our research refers to the changing on the beneficiaries' thinking patterns thanks to the programs. They become more open and more aware of the consequences of their criminal activity. This has been mainly proven by the answers to the interviews conducted with the beneficiaries. The interview guide also included a set of questions the answers of which were relevant in checking this aspect, namely whether the beneficiaries were aware, at the time of their committing the law offence, of the consequences of their deeds and whether their involvement with the rehabilitation program helped them become aware of the aftermaths of committing law offences in general. In order to check whether the beneficiaries are actually aware of the consequences of their deeds, what the costs and advantages of committing law offences are. Their answers to all these questions enabled us to conclude that 21 of the 30 subjects that were interviewed became aware of the consequences of their misdemeanors thanks to their involvement in the intervention program, although at the time of their committing the law offence for which they were convicted to suspended jail sentence and surveillance from the probation department they were completely or partly unaware of these consequences.

This change was identified in most of the subjects that were interviewed and it may be accounted for by the fact that the rehabilitation programs considered in our research rely on the assumption thoughts and feelings hide behind any human behavior, and in order to stop a socially unacceptable behavior it is necessary to identify and change the thoughts and feelings that generated it. In other words, the programs are designed to identify any thoughts having asocial connotation and to change them in order to get the desired behavioral answer.

Therefore, the purpose of any intervention programs is to develop a consequence-oriented thinking pattern in order to reduce the risk of repetition of the criminal behavior. The results of the interviews conducted on the 30 beneficiaries of the "Stop! Think and Change" and "One to one" programs entitle us to conclude that this purpose was reached for the most part. More specifically, the thinking pattern conducive to the committing of law offences was replaced by a

consequence-oriented one, which led to a feeling of regret for the deeds committed and to the desire of making up for the lost time in most of the offenders-beneficiaries. This desire materialized in their continuing their education or attending vocational training courses.

There were, however, 9 cases (5 male and 4 female) in whom we failed to identify any openness to awareness-raising about the consequences of their offence. When asked what the costs of the crimes they committed were, the subjects paused and then gave an evasive answer. These were the same beneficiaries in whom we failed to identify a decrease in the risk of their repeating the offence.

Therefore, this entitles us to argue that, for the most part, intervention programs play an important role in changing the beneficiaries’ thinking pattern, in the sense that they will develop a consequence-oriented thinking pattern and thus become aware of the costs of committing law offences.

We may also say that, to a great extent, intervention programs play an important role in changing the beneficiaries’ behavior and way of life, in the sense of their involvement in prosocial lucrative and recreational activities. We reached this result further to the analysis of the answers given by the beneficiaries to the questions of our interview. The interview guide also included a set of relevant questions related to the way in which they used to spend their spare time before their conviction to suspended jail sentence under the surveillance of the probation department and to the way in which they spend it now. Moreover, there was also a question related to the lucrative activities currently carried out. The answers were received to our interview enabled us to conclude that: whereas before their surveillance by the probation department the subjects used to spend their spare time in the company of people who had a bad influence on their conduct, which finally resulted in their committing antisocial deeds, they were currently involved in social recreational activities of their own free will. They were also involved in lucrative activities or attended vocational training courses or at least they intended to do these things in the near future. Others had not completed their education and were now experience a feeling of regret and wanted to make up for the lost time. In any event, 21 of the 30 beneficiaries that we interviewed changed their life and did not return to the criminal environment they used to spend their time in, and they were even currently carrying out lucrative and social recreational activities.

The participation of the beneficiaries in the rehabilitation programs was beneficial as it helped them understand the negative effects on their subsequent behavior of their connections with a group of people having criminal preoccupations. The intervention programs achieved their purpose (for 70% of the people in our study group), i.e. they helped the interviewed beneficiaries change their antisocial behavior and learn new behaviors adapted to the social standards specific to the socio-cultural environment where they live and currently carry out lucrative and prosocial recreational activities.

As for the last objective of our research, we reckon the offenders-beneficiaries have a positive perception of the program they attended, in the sense that they became aware of its positive impact on their thinking patterns, behavior and way of life.

This has proven by the answers the subjects gave to the interviews conducted on them. The interview guide also comprises a question relating to the beneficiaries' general opinion on the rehabilitation program that they were involved in. Thus, all 30 interviewees expressed a positive attitude, and 21 of them even think that the program should be recommended to other people that committed law offences, and they also underline the reasons why they say that.

The results that we achieved may be accounted for by the fact that the subjects understood the specificity of the programs that address their personal needs, the purpose of which is to help them grow and rehabilitate. In the beginning, the subjects had different perceptions of their involvement in the program, as they left somewhat forced to attend it and also controlled by the probation counselors. In time, they understood that these programs are designed to support their personal development and that the counselors' intent was to help them reintegrate in the society.

#### **4. Research Limitations and Suggestions**

The main limitation of our research is the small size of the study group, which is not representative of the whole law offending population.

Our research included the subjects-beneficiaries of both programs and did not distinguish between the results of the two programs, one of which was individual and the other one collective.

We recommend further research that would also analyze the perception of the probation counselors of the current psychosocial intervention programs.

In our opinion, this type of research should be extended, and the results obtained should be compared with the results of similar research conducted in other states.

### **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

We believe that this new approach of the activity of intervention and social reintegration of law offenders, which focuses on the importance of the psychological components (impulsiveness, antisocial perspective and no empathy with the victim), to the detriment of the social correlations of the law offence, is beneficial.

We feel compelled to point out that these programs address the offenders’ specific needs, as they provide a well-structured framework allowing intervention for solving these needs and contributing to the diminution of the risk of repetition of the offence and, implicitly, to the increase of the level of community safety. The programs are intended to provide support to the beneficiaries of the probation services and teach them to solve their own problems, to be empathic and flexible, to set goals and find solutions, to develop a consequence-oriented thinking pattern. Thus, the beneficiaries are able to give up their criminal behavior and find ways to prevent their resuming their old behavioral patterns.

We found in our research that the goals of the programs have been achieved to a great extent.

We may therefore conclude that intervention programs have a positive impact on the rehabilitation process of people under the surveillance of the probation department. Although the programs did not have the same impact on all the investigated subjects, we identified a series of changes in their thinking or acting patterns. All the changes we identified were positive. Most of the investigated subjects (70%) currently run a lower risk of repetition of the offence than they did prior to their involvement with the rehabilitation programs. They left their criminality-prone entourage which they were part of at the time of offence commission, and they were now involved in lucrative and prosocial recreational activities. There is a pertinent explanation of the fact that the results could not be generalized to the entire study group.

The subjects who attended the intervention programs at the court's orders manifested strong resistance to change.

We also reached the conclusion that the investigated subjects became aware of the consequences of their misdemeanors, although at the time of their committing the law offence for which they were convicted to suspended jail sentence and surveillance from the probation department they were completely or partly unaware of these consequences. As concerns the general perception of the program, all the beneficiaries expressed positive attitudes towards the program that they attended, especially thanks to the things they learned and to the relations with the probation counselors, as well as thanks to the positive changes of their thinking and acting patterns.

Since the counseling of convicted individuals who are under surveillance is currently done only at their own demand (and only in some cases at the demand of the court of law that may order the convicted individuals to attend a counseling program set by the probation department), and considering the results of our study according to which the individuals under surveillance have a positive attitude towards the psychosocial intervention programs, we recommend the diversification of the programs addressed to law offenders and involving as many of the clients of the department as possible. We also support the development of new strategies of motivation of the potential beneficiaries, especially of those who see their compulsory presence at the headquarters of the probation department as an additional and burdensome duty.

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