

# Probation officers in Turkey

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## **Chapter 8**

### **Impact**



Probation is a community-based criminal justice intervention that was originally designed as an alternative to incarceration (Phelps, 2018). It became part of the criminal justice system in many countries in North and South America, Europe, Asia, and Africa in the early 1900s. The probation system in Turkey was implemented in 2005 as one of the major reforms in the Turkish criminal justice system. As of October 2020, there are more than 400,000 cases managed by 4,467 probation experts (e.g., psychologists, sociologists) and juvenile and adult probation officers (J/POs) working in probation offices across Turkey (TMJ, 2020).

Turkey poses unique challenges for the implementation of probation services, such as lack of evidence-based risk assessment tools and intervention programs (Altın et al., 2015), high caseloads, and punitive attitudes of the general public (Karakuş et al., 2011). As always, J/POs play an important role in the successful outcome of probation interventions. They struggle to balance their law enforcement and rehabilitation roles toward probationers while handling increasing numbers of cases with limited opportunities for training, feedback, and supervision. These circumstances put J/POs under a lot of stress and uncertainty within a predominantly punitive criminal justice system.

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the professional experiences and training needs of Turkish J/POs and to examine the relevance of J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes for (i) one of the most common mental health problems J/POs experience (job burnout), and (ii) recidivism risk perceptions regarding probationers. We further aimed to develop a brief RNR-based intervention program and examine its impact on J/POs punitive and rehabilitative attitudes. Lastly, we investigated if gender role attitudes impact individuals' punitiveness judgements by examining how they moderate punitiveness toward male and female offenders, for violent and non-violent offenses. This study aimed to better understand the Turkish context in which probation services are spreading rapidly.

## Scientific Impact

Turkish probation services have been introduced only recently. This dissertation contributes to the limited empirical knowledge on the Turkish probation system, more specifically punitive and rehabilitative attitudes of Turkish J/POs and the general public. Research on probation services in Turkey is still in its infancy and I hope the studies in this dissertation pave the way toward more evidence-based practices to probation in Turkey. How J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes play a role in J/POs' burnout and recidivism risk perceptions is relevant not only for practitioners in this field, but may inspire researchers to study other factors that may be linked to J/POs' mental health, how they treat probationers and how these factors impact recidivism rates.

In order to reach the (probation) research community, four studies were published in international, peer-reviewed journals, as well as presented at international conferences. One study is still under review. All published articles (except for Erdem et al., 2018) were published open access to increase their reach. Preliminary findings of four studies (except for Ersayan et al., 2021) were presented in international conferences (European Association of Psychology and Law in Turku, Finland and Mechelen, Belgium) and at a national symposium in Turkey (10<sup>th</sup> Year in Turkish Probation Services Symposium).

This research demonstrated that rehabilitation-based interventions might be useful in changing J/POs' attitudes toward probationers. In light of findings that show rehabilitative interventions are effective in reducing recidivism rates, future studies could explore how more rehabilitative attitudes of the J/POs influence recidivism rates. Furthermore, more studies on the impact of offender gender on J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes, and in turn, recidivism rates are warranted. These implications clearly show that research on Turkish probation interventions would greatly benefit from the availability of data on recidivism rates.

In terms of public attitudes, traditional/egalitarian gender role attitudes seem to play a significant role in punitive and rehabilitative attitudes toward offenders. Further

studies could explore how these punitive and rehabilitative attitudes translate into behavior toward offenders and probationers. Our findings show that gender role attitudes need to be included in public punitiveness studies as a potential determinant.

### **Societal Impact**

The studies in this dissertation provide an indication of how rehabilitation-based training may be effective in changing J/POs' attitudes toward probationers. The effectiveness might be larger if the training is implemented with the use of an evidence-based risk assessment tool. This practice would likely enhance implementation quality, which in turn would increase the chances for a successful outcome of probation interventions. The introduction of evidence-based risk assessment tools and rehabilitation-based interventions for Turkish juvenile and adult probationers should be prioritized.

On a practical level, the findings in this dissertation are relevant to stakeholders involved in probation. Our results indicate the relevance of J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes for their experience of job burnout. This may guide policy makers in their decision making concerning whether more rehabilitation-based policies could be implemented within the probation service. Such efforts would not only result in more successful probation outcomes (i.e., decreased recidivism rates), but also increased well-being in J/POs (i.e., decreased job burnout).

The influence of gender role attitudes on public punitiveness sheds light on the importance of fostering egalitarian gender role attitudes on a societal level. This requires a top-down and a bottom-up effort, starting from law making to primary education. The impact of such an attitudinal shift in Turkish society would be important not only for equality in criminal justice, but also in education, family and work.

The studies in this dissertation sparked a collaboration with the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and UNICEF Turkey. We gave several trainings to J/POs as part of the data collection process or as incentives. The training in Chapter 6 was subsequently improved as part of the larger DENGİ (Denetimli Serbestlik Gençlik Programı-Youth

Probation Program) project. The Turkish Ministry of Justice initiated the DENGİ project with funding from the EU, the Turkish government and UNICEF in 2015. The aim of the project was to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the juvenile justice system in Turkey. An effective, preventive and rehabilitative intervention system for juveniles under probation was implemented in 21 pilot cities. The author of this dissertation functioned as the primary investigator and led a consultancy team of seven people from Koç University and elsewhere. The project took 18 months to complete.

The team started with reviewing the current situation of juvenile probation in Turkey and visited three European countries (Spain, Portugal and England) to explore best practices in juvenile probation systems. Juvenile law, risk assessment and intervention programs in these countries were studied thoroughly. Trainings on four topics (interviewing skills with juveniles and risk assessment, anger management, interpersonal communication and mindfulness) were delivered to 36 experts designated as future trainers. More than 500 probation officers attended subsequent trainings and the consultancy team worked as supervisors at each step. Manuals for the trainers and trainees were prepared for each training topic including theoretical background, practice questions and tips. These trainings paved the way to the designation of JPOs who became exclusively responsible for the probation period of juveniles. What was previously managed by different people at each step of the probation trajectory (first interview, risk assessment, individual sessions) was now handled by one JPO to establish better rapport with the juveniles. Another important change following our findings and consultancy was separating the juvenile and adult probation facilities. This was a major change in order to prevent contact that would increase juveniles' exposure to more criminal individuals. We mentioned the importance of including families for the successful integration of juveniles into the society and proposed family interventions. This was welcomed, but for budgetary reasons this project was postponed to a later date by the Ministry.

We conducted several regional meetings with the probation offices and stakeholders (municipalities, law enforcement, Ministry of Youth, Ministry of

Education, etc.) to enhance collaboration between them in order to ensure the success of the juveniles' probation period. Several reports for the Ministry of Justice and UNICEF were prepared at each step to communicate our work, the findings, and recommendations for the future of juvenile probation. While these changes were being introduced, we were approached by other officials for different projects. For example, we conducted focus groups to investigate the daily life experiences of incarcerated youth and prison staff, followed by social skill trainings to the juveniles in Metris Prison. The manuscripts about this work are in preparation.