

# Probation officers in Turkey

Citation for published version (APA):

Ersayan, A. E. (2022). *Probation officers in Turkey: the relevance of attitudes toward offenders*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University]. Maastricht University. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220921ae>

## Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2022

## DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20220921ae](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220921ae)

## Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

## Please check the document version of this publication:

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## **Summary**



The Turkish probation services have been implemented in 2005 as one of the reforms to meet EU requirements (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 2021). The basic aim of the services is rehabilitating offenders in the community and preventing recidivism by providing an alternative to incarceration. It is also expected to ease the burden on the increasingly overpopulated correctional facilities. Today, there are almost 700,000 case files managed by approximately 4000 Juvenile and Adult Probation Officers (J/POs)<sup>9</sup>. They are responsible for monitoring probationers' compliance to the court orders, assisting courts in the decision process by preparing social investigation reports that include information about the offender and suggestions for the services appropriate to his/her needs. The studies in this thesis were primarily designed to add to the limited research literature on probation services, specifically on J/POs in Turkey.

### **Samples and Measures**

Our samples for four of the studies were POs and JPOs. For logistical, time and permission reasons, we collected the data for each study separately. Except for Chapter 5, all studies included J/POs as participants. For each study, we were first required to obtain official permission from the Ministry of Justice. For the qualitative study reported in Chapter 2, we invited 220 employees from the Istanbul Bureau of Probation regardless of their rank and title. Fifty-seven J/POs and 5 directors were recruited. In the study in Chapter 3, our sample comprised 116 J/POs out of 220 J/POs who were invited from the same probation office. For the study in Chapter 4, we recruited 252 J/POs from 21 probation offices across Turkey. The sample included the J/POs who voluntarily agreed to participate on the first day of a training they were attending. Fifty-nine J/POs from three probation offices in Istanbul accepted our invitation for the study in Chapter 6. We employed snowball sampling to recruit participants from the general population for the study in Chapter 5 and collected these data over the internet.

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<sup>9</sup> I use J/POs as an abbreviation for juvenile and adult probation officers throughout the thesis. The term "juvenile probation officer" was not used in the Turkish probation system until very recently. The officers worked with both juvenile and adult probationers.

We used the *Correctional Goal Scale* (Cullen et al., 1985), the *Support for Rehabilitation Scale* (Cullen et al., 1985), and the *Attitudes toward Prisoners Scale* (ATP; Melvin et al., 1985) to measure punitive and rehabilitative attitudes toward probationers. We used the ATP in the very first study with J/POs (Chapter 3). This scale measures punitive and rehabilitative attitudes on a continuous scale. In the next study (Chapter 6), we used two separate scales to measure punitive and rehabilitative attitudes. We replicated findings from previous studies that found these could be viewed as two separate dimensions rather than the two ends of a continuum. In our last study (Chapter 4), this finding was once again supported.

We assessed recidivism risk perception by single items worded in accordance with the method of prior studies as “*What percentage of the youth you work with do you think are likely to re-offend?*” (Vincent et al., 2012) and “*How would you rate the recidivism risk of the juvenile in the vignette?*”. Job burnout was measured by means of the *Maslach Burnout Inventory* (MBI; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). In order to gauge the complexity of the concept of public punitiveness toward offenders, we used separate items to measure *how, how severely and why* the public wanted to see offenders punished. In that study, gender role attitudes were measured with the 25-item short-form of the *Sex Roles Egalitarianism Scale* (SRES-BB; King & King, 1990).

## **Results**

The study in Chapter 2 was initiated by a group of J/POs who mentioned their training needs concerning several topics, including risk assessment and interview techniques. Thus, we first designed a study to assess their professional experiences and training needs. The research design was adapted from Freire’s (1970) Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology. POs were not only participants in the research project but were also actively involved in all phases of the research action process. The findings from interview and follow-up focus groups indicated that J/POs needed professional support, training on interviewing skills, improvements in their physical work environment for rehabilitative services, and a structured risk assessment tool. They reported not having enough knowledge to assist in the rehabilitation of offenders,

yet the intensity of their caseloads did not leave much room for professional development. They had to manage lots of paperwork, which tipped the scale of their job to law-enforcement although they were highly motivated to improve their rehabilitative skills. The four major needs they stated were in line with their pro-rehabilitative attitudes, that is, private spaces for interviews and individual sessions with probationers, risk assessment tools to assess probationers' needs and design of appropriate interventions for rehabilitation. We discussed the practical implications of our findings and suggested some strategies to improve the quality of probation services in Turkey.

Large caseloads and role conflict have been reported as factors in J/PO burnout in several prior studies (Stephens & O'Donnell, 2001; Wirkus, 2015). Chapter 3 focused on negative attitudes toward probationers as another potential factor in J/PO job burnout. Research has documented that negative attitudes toward offenders are quite common among criminal justice system professionals, however, there is a lack of such studies in probation officers. It was important to address this gap in the probation literature, because the findings could be relevant for J/PO recruitment and job burnout prevention. Our findings showed that more favorable J/PO attitudes toward probationers are related to a lower sense of depersonalization and stronger experience of professional accomplishment. Contrary to our hypothesis and prior research, we found attitudes toward probationers to be unrelated to emotional exhaustion. That is, negative attitudes were not associated with the depletion of emotional resources among J/POs. I discussed the possible reasons (e.g., demographic makeup of our sample, differences in the work context) for the lack of association between emotional exhaustion and J/PO attitudes and the implications of our findings for future research.

Chapter 4 elaborated upon J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes by examining their link to J/POs' recidivism risk perceptions. The J/POs were asked to estimate juveniles' recidivism risk on the basis of case vignettes, using their unstructured professional judgement. The factors that influenced their judgements are not known. The results of our study indicated that gender of the offender and punitive attitudes of the J/POs interacted in predicting recidivism risk perceptions. Only for

male juvenile offenders, more punitive attitudes of J/POs were related to higher recidivism risk perceptions in J/POs. Female juvenile offenders were not perceived as posing a higher risk of recidivism even when the J/POs scored high on punitive attitudes. The link between demographic factors and J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes presented a mixed picture, which is consistent with the existing literature. The role of extralegal factors (i.e., gender of the offender) and personal characteristics (i.e., punitive attitudes of the J/POs) on J/POs' recidivism risk perceptions once again emphasize the urgent need for an evidence-based tool for more objective risk assessment of probationers in Turkey and implementation of risk assessment tools at large. Furthermore, the relationship between J/POs' punitive and rehabilitative attitudes, recidivism risk perceptions, and gender of the juvenile offender may be of practical relevance for interventions aimed at improving J/POs' attitudes toward juvenile probationers.

In Chapter 5, we aimed at expanding our understanding of punitive and rehabilitative attitudes by studying them in a general population sample. We investigated if gender role attitudes impact public punitiveness by examining how they moderate individuals' punitiveness toward male and female offenders, separately for violent and non-violent offenses. We based our hypotheses on the *chivalry* and *evil woman* perspectives. Our results showed that the gender role attitudes of our participants were a determinant of public punitiveness. However, what we have found was not what we had predicted according to the chivalry and evil woman hypotheses. For example, participants with higher gender egalitarianism scores recommended longer sentences for male than female offenders who committed murder. That was an unexpected finding. On the other hand, no significant differences in the recommended length of sentence, choice for aim of incarceration, or support for rehabilitation toward male and female offenders were observed among participants with less gender egalitarian attitudes for violent versus non-violent offenses, so chivalry and evil woman hypotheses were not supported in our study. I discussed the relevance of these findings for the Turkish context where gender traditional values are relatively

prominent. The need for further studies in samples from other countries and other criminal justice professionals, such as judges, are noted.

The study in Chapter 6 aimed at examining the impact of a brief training program based on the Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model on Turkish Juvenile Probation Officers' (JPOs) punitive and rehabilitative attitudes toward justice-involved youth and recidivism risk perceptions. Our findings suggested that a training that reduces punitive attitudes may not promote rehabilitative attitudes to the same extent. Therefore, punitive and rehabilitative attitudes may not be the two ends of the same spectrum, as some studies have suggested. Interventions should be designed so that punitive and rehabilitative attitudes are addressed separately. Our findings further show that punitive attitudes can be decreased via a relatively brief rehabilitative-focused training program, although the long-term effects of the program are still unknown.

### **General Conclusions and Recommendations**

Probation services have been introduced as a community-based alternative to incarceration for the rehabilitation of offenders. Juvenile and adult probation officers (J/POs) play an important role in every probation system. They are expected to balance competing public safety, punishment, and rehabilitation goals while managing large caseloads. This thesis provides insight into Turkish J/POs' occupational needs and focuses on understanding the link of J/POs' attitudes toward probationers with J/POs' recidivism risk perceptions and job burnout. Our results suggest the relevance of punitive attitudes for J/POs' recidivism risk perceptions and experience of job burnout. Our findings also provide preliminary evidence for the positive effect of a brief rehabilitation-focused training on reducing J/POs' punitive attitudes. Gender of the probationer could be a factor that influences how J/POs treat probationers. Whether these results can be generalized to J/POs in other countries and to other professionals in the justice system should be examined. Gender role attitudes of the public seem to be playing a role in punitive attitudes toward offenders among the general public. Whether this also holds true for J/POs is an interesting area for further research.