



Developing evidence based practice skills in NSW Community Corrections

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY4

TABLES6

LITERATURE REVIEW7

 Effective Practice skills7

 Developing skills across organisations9

METHODOLOGY10

 Aim.....10

 Design and Procedure10

 Sample.....14

 Analysis14

RESULTS14

 Staff Interviews14

 Analysis of interviews21

 Group Practice Supervision Sessions.....23

DISCUSSION27

 References31

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A number of studies have found that when probation officers, and others who supervise correctional clients in the community, have good intervention skills their clients are more likely to be engaged in supervision and to have low recidivism rates. The skills include, role clarification, pro-social modelling, problem solving, cognitive and relationship skills.

This project undertaken in NSW Community Corrections aimed to examine the extent to which training in practice skills and participation in Group Practice Supervision (GPS) could improve the use of correctional workers' skills and whether it would lead to higher levels of engagement and lower recidivism for corrections clients. The project was undertaken across six pilot sites in NSW. Interviews were conducted with 84 staff from the pilot sites both before and after the training and practice supervision began. Audio-tapes of worker/client interviews were also provided by workers to research staff before and after training. Tapes of Group Practice Supervision sessions were also provided.

The interviews revealed that staff were very positive about the Group Practice Supervision (GPS) as well as the intervention model as a whole. For example, all of those interviewed found that Group Practice Supervision at least somewhat helpful with 86% saying that they found the sessions very or extremely helpful. The interviews also showed that the workers believed that their skills increased following the introduction of the project. While this was not at statistically significant levels, there was a strong and statistically significant change in the workers view that their clients could change. The workers also were more likely to believe that they could help their clients to change.

Similarly, the analysis by research officers of the pre and post audio-tapes provided by workers showed that workers skills had shown a moderate improvement and that clients were more engaged in the interviews. The researchers also found that the workers were more optimistic and enthusiastic in the interviews. This was at statistically significant levels with the researchers finding that workers were often enthusiastic 23% of the time before the group practice supervision was introduced to 77% following their introduction.



Analysis of data provided by NSW Corrective Services and the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research also showed benefits for the pilot group. The pilot group was significantly more likely to have undertaken PGI (Practical Guide for Intervention) sessions and have facilitated third party contacts. The pilot group was significantly more likely to receive warnings and to have failures to report documented. Medium to high-risk clients in the pilot group who had more than 10 contacts with their workers had fewer re-offences and significantly lower imprisonment rates while on their orders.

The imprisonment rate of this group was very low at 1.1% compared to the control group at 7.8%. This seems like an outlier, however, numerous studies have found effective practice skills to be related to as much as 50% reduction in recidivism rates (Trotter 2013, Chadwick et al 2015) yet these studies have not, to our knowledge, examined the inter-relationship between risk levels, frequency of contact and recidivism. The overall reduction in recidivism relating to practice skills in previous studies may disguise an even greater impact on high-risk clients who receive frequent contact with their individual workers.

To sum up: The Group Practice Supervision project has had a beneficial impact on staff behaviour and attitudes. It has also had an impact on the behaviour of clients including a significant reduction in imprisonment for medium to high-risk clients having more frequent contact with their primary workers, in comparison to a matched control group. These results are consistent with an ever-increasing body of research which indicates that good supervision skills lead to good outcomes. It is not necessary to point out that a reduction in imprisonment rates has untold benefits for the community. Our study suggests that continued and even more rigorous application of the skills would provide enhanced benefits.

TABLES

Table 1: How helpful were the sessions?

Table 2: Clients understand my role

Table 3: To what extent do you think clients know what happens to the information they give you?

Table 4: Who sets the goals, you or the client?

Table 5: Are there any problems or issues that you think would be inappropriate to work on?

Table 6: To what extent do you think offenders can change?

Table 7: To what extent do you feel that in your role you can help offenders change?

Table 8: I am friendly

Table 9: I care about clients' feelings

Table 10: Pre and Post Training Global Score 7 or more

Table 11: Were clients highly engaged in the interview?

Table 12: The worker is often optimistic

Table 13: The worker is often enthusiastic

Table 14: Mean number of PGI sessions and 3rd party contacts for pilot and control groups

Table 15: Mean number of warnings and fail to report by pilot and control group

Table 16: Re-offending for medium to high-risk offenders who had more than 10 contacts with their workers

Table 17: Imprisonment for pilot group medium to high risk offenders who had more than 10 contacts with their workers



INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on a project undertaken in NSW Community Corrections which involved training and participation in Group Practice Supervision (GPS) to support the use of effective practice skills. The report begins with a literature review on the topic and then outlines the methodology and results of the project. This is followed by limitations and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An increasing number of studies and reviews of studies have found that community-based offender supervision can be effective in reducing recidivism rates. A number of literature reviews have suggested that when supervisors use particular skills offenders under their supervision re-offend significantly less often than offenders supervised by workers who do not use these skills (Dowden & Andrews 2004; Chadwick et al. 2015; Trotter 2023). Chadwick et al (2015) for example, found that the average recidivism was a little over 36% for offenders supervised by trained officers compared to a little under 50% for the status quo, a 13% difference (or 28% lower for trained officers depending how the figures are interpreted). The argument presented by these authors is not that offender supervision always works, but that appropriate forms of intervention are effective if appropriate skills are offered by workers.

Effective Practice skills

Chadwick et al. (2015) and Trotter (2023) reviews identified similar supervision skills as being effective. These include pro-social modelling and re-inforcement, problem solving, cognitive techniques, relationship factors and role clarification.



Pro-social Modelling and Re-inforcement

Pro-social modelling and re-inforcement, has been shown to be effective in a number of studies in adult and juvenile settings (Andrews et al. 1979; Bourgeon et al. 2010; Trotter 2023; Raynor et al. 2014). It involves workers modelling pro-social behaviours (e.g. reliability, fairness), positively re-inforcing clients' pro-social comments and behaviours (e.g. seeking work, accepting responsibility for offences) and challenging clients' pro-criminal comments and behaviours (e.g. excuses for offending).

Problem Solving

The studies suggest that effective interventions also address the issues which have led people to offend, sometimes referred to as criminogenic needs (Bonta & Andrews 2017). Criminogenic needs may include employment, family relationships, drug use, peer group associations, finances or pro-criminal attitudes. A number of studies also suggest that working collaboratively with people who have offended, and focusing on the issues or problems which they themselves identify as problematic, leads to lower recidivism (McNeill & Whyte 2007; Trotter 1996, 2013). There is also support for problem solving approaches whereby workers canvass a wide range of client issues, reach agreement on problems to be addressed, set goals and develop strategies to achieve those goals (Dowden & Andrews 2004; Trotter 1996, 2013).

Cognitive behavioural techniques

Cognitive behavioural interventions, which help clients to address thinking patterns which relate to crime, have also been found to be effective. Dowden and Andrews (2004) in their meta-analysis of core practices, found that cognitive techniques may be the most influential of the skills. There are, however, varying definitions of cognitive techniques with problem solving and pro-social modelling sometimes included within the definition (Trotter 2013).

Worker/Client/Relationship

A meta-analysis by Dowden and Andrews (2004) identified the client/worker relationship as one of the elements of core correctional practice. Relationship skills are also referred to in other reviews (e.g. Bonta et al., 2008; Bourgeon et al., 2010; Trotter, 2006, 2013). These

studies generally suggest that probation officers are more effective if their relationships with clients are characterised by empathy, openness, warmth, humour, enthusiasm and a positive view about the clients' capacity to change.

Role Clarification

Effective work in criminal justice may also involve what Rooney (2009) and Jones and Alcabes (1993) refer to as client socialisation or what others have referred to as role clarification (Trotter 2015). One aspect of role clarification involves helping the client to accept that the worker can help with the client's problems even though the worker has a social control role. Other aspects of role clarification involve exploring the client's expectations, helping the client to understand what is negotiable, the limits of confidentiality and the nature of the worker's authority. Research in mental health (Videka-Sherman 1988) and child protection (Trotter 2004) has explored the use of this skill in practice. Less work has been done in corrections settings although several studies (see Trotter 2015 for a review) found that role clarification skills are part of a group of skills which are related to reduced re-offending by clients.

Developing skills across organisations

Despite the developing knowledge about effective practice, there is evidence to suggest that evidence-based practice skills are not used routinely in probation and parole supervision (Taxman & Sachwald 2010). While there is some evidence that practice skills may be increased by training and coaching (e.g. Young Farrell & Taxman 2013) this work has mostly been done with relatively small samples rather than considering the development of skills across whole organisations. Where the focus has been on whole organisations, such as the study by Raynor et al (2014), the focus has often been on the relationship between skills and recidivism rather than on the impact of training on the use of specific skills (Trotter 2013).

A study by Bonta et al (2011), focused on a more widespread application of skills, found that training and coaching in effective practice skills led to increased use of skills by workers and lower recidivism by their clients compared to a control group which did not receive the training and coaching. However, a replication of this in another jurisdiction in Canada did not find the same results (Bonta et al 2019). They found in audio recordings supplied by participants



that there were inconsistent changes in officers' skills and the trained officers did not have lower recidivism rates compared to the control group, although they did find that the use of cognitive techniques by workers was related to lower recidivism. They also found that by 10 months more than half of the probation officers had discontinued involvement in the professional development activities.

A more recent study undertaken in youth justice in two Australian states found, on the other hand, that there were significant increases in the use of effective practice skills following training and coaching across the whole organisation including direct practice and management staff (Trotter & Evans 2023). The limitations of this study are acknowledged by the authors, nevertheless before the training and coaching, research officers rated only 23% of the tapes of interviews analysed as revealing some use of effective practice skills compared to 50% following the training and coaching.

This report focuses on a similar project undertaken in NSW adult corrections, a much larger organisation than the organisations in which the youth justice research was undertaken.

METHODOLOGY

Aim

This report considers staff views about the training and participation in Group Practice Supervision (GPS), before and after training and Group Practice Supervision, the changes in use of overall and specific skills and levels of client engagement before and after training and GPS. It also examines patterns in client re-offending.

Design and Procedure

The design of the study was a before/after comparison using quantitative methods (Bachman & Schutt 2007). The limitations of this design are addressed in the discussion section of this paper.

The procedure was as follows: The effective practice skills were introduced to senior staff to gain their support for and understanding of the intervention. Training was then provided by the

trained senior staff in different forms across the identified pilot sites. In some offices half day training was offered whereas in some offices specific training in the skills was offered predominantly through group supervision workshops.

Group Practice Supervision was encouraged to be undertaken at each pilot site on a regular basis throughout the project. Staff were asked to provide an audio-tape of an interview they had recently conducted with a client. Client consent was gained at the time of recording for the audio tape to be used for research purposes, consistent with university and departmental ethics. Staff participants in the training were invited to be involved in the research project. Following their informed consent, the tapes supplied to the training were used as the pre-tapes for the research project.

During GPS staff, usually in groups of 3 to 6 participants, including the facilitator, would listen to the tape with the worker and help the worker identify when skills were used and when they could have been used but were not used. To assist with this, the participants used a checklist of the key skills. The focus, consistent with the best practice skills, was on positive feedback to workers with careful challenging of poor use or absence of skills.

In a separate process, for the purposes of the research, researchers coded for skills evident in the pre-training audio-tapes and tapes recorded 2 to 6 months following the commencement of the project. The audio-tapes were coded using a coding form developed for this purpose in previous research (Trotter 2012; Trotter & Evans 2012). The data was then analysed to determine changes in use of skills between the pre-training tapes and the post-training tapes. The framework for coding the skills involved research officers listening to the tapes and coding for each of the skills as they were identified. The researchers would often go back and forth within the tape to carefully examine whether particular skills were being used. After listening to the complete tape, the research officers would then code each section and the global score. Much of the time of the research officers was spent making judgements about the skills and re-listening to different sections of the tapes as well as listening to each tape from beginning to end.

The coding manual

As mentioned the audio-tapes were coded using a coding manual developed for a previous project (Trotter & Evans 2012) and in consultation with others doing similar work, in particular James Bonta and colleagues in Canada and Peter Raynor and colleagues in UK (Bonta et al. 2011; Raynor et al. 2014).

The coding manual is divided into 15 sections: set-up of the interview; structure of the interview; role clarification; needs analysis; problem solving; developing strategies; relapse prevention/cognitive behavioural techniques; pro-social modelling and re-inforcement; nature of the relationship; empathy; confrontation; termination; use of referral/community resources; non-verbal cues; and incidental conversations. Each of the 15 sections contains a number of items which can be rated on a five-point scale. For example, the problem-solving section included: problem survey and identifying criminogenic needs; problem ranking; problem exploration; setting goals; timeframe; review; developing a contract; developing strategies; ongoing monitoring; and time spent conducting problem solving. For the skill to be rated highly it needed to be implemented in a way which was consistent with the research about good practice referred to in the literature review.

The researchers used the following scale to code an overall 10-point global score on the use of the effective practice skills:

1. The worker did not utilise any of the effective practice skills;
3. The worker used minimal effective practice skills;
5. The interview showed some use of the effective practice skills;
7. The worker used several of the effective practice skills in a deliberate manner;
10. The worker deliberately used the effective practice skills in an efficient and successful manner.

In rating the global score, the researchers took into account each of the ratings of the individual skills and allocated a score on their judgement of the overall level of skills used by the worker in the interview. The global score correlated significantly with each of the measures of the extent to which workers used individual skills. For example, the correlation

between use of pro-social modelling skills was .643 and with relationship skills .766. The correlation between the global score and client engagement was also high at .679.

Coders rated the pre- and post-tapes for engagement of clients in the interview using the following scale:

1. Client is not engaged in the interview, is non-responsive, giving monosyllabic responses;
3. Client partially engaged in the interview, thought responses still limited;
5. Client is occasionally engaged in the interview and is responsive to a proportion of what the worker is saying;
7. Client appears engaged in the interview although may appear distracted or disinterested at times;
10. Client is actively engaged in the interview, evidenced by taking notice of what worker is saying i.e. listening, responding to the worker, actively learning.

The use of individual skills was also coded using the following scale regarding the time spent using the skill during the interview. High scores were given when the coder assessed the worker as using the skills correctly and frequently.

1. None
2. Not much
3. Some of the time
4. Quite often
5. A lot

Inter-rater reliability

The coding manual has been tested previously for inter-rater reliability. The coding manual scores demonstrated high levels of inter-rater reliability in earlier research (Trotter 2012, Trotter & Evans 2023). For example, for 20 cross-coded interviews undertaken (Trotter 2012) the spearman rho correlation on the overall global skill score between first and second coders was .741 (n 40, p.000), for client overall engagement (.424, p.031) for time spent discussing role clarification it was .548 (p..006), for time spent on problem solving it was .626 (p.002) and



for pro-social modelling .561 (p.005). Note that a previous study (Trotter 2012; Trotter & Evans 2012) also found that scores, using the manual, allocated by research officers following analysis of audiotapes of interviews were significantly associated with low re-offending and order completion. For example, interviews which were scored at 5 or more for skills were associated with 50% higher order completion rate compared to interviews scored at 4 or less on a 10-point scale.

Sample

Fifty four tapes were supplied, 24 pre-training (supplied before the intervention) and 30 (during the period of the GPS). The remaining tapes were supplied by different workers. The workers were employed as Community Corrections Officers (CCO's) with responsibility for supervising people placed on various corrections orders including parole and community based orders. The relatively small sample is discussed in the limitations section later in the paper.

Analysis

The tapes were coded and entered into SPSS and analysed to determine both the overall use of skills and the use of the individual skills. The use of skills was compared using comparisons of means and cross tabs in order to examine the differences between skill scores on the pre and post tapes.

RESULTS

Staff Interviews

Eighty-four interviews were conducted with staff to ascertain their views about the intervention and their responses to GPS. Fifty-three interviews were conducted prior to the intervention and 31, 6 to 12 months following the start of the intervention. The average years of service of the total group who were interviewed was 5.5 years, with an average of 3.2 years in their current role as supervisors of offenders on court or parole board orders. Seven staff

(8%) identified as indigenous. The mean number of group sessions attended was 5.8, with a range of 1 to 15. Less experienced staff were more likely to be involved in the group sessions.

Different forms of training and exposure to the intervention model were provided in different offices. Some presentations regarding the model were done in the group sessions, some were done as separate half day training sessions. More than one third of those involved in the sessions who were interviewed (11/29) indicated that they didn't receive formal training other than the introduction to the group sessions. Nevertheless, overall, the participants were positive about the group sessions they attended with 88% saying it was very helpful or extremely helpful and all of those interviewed finding the sessions at least somewhat helpful as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. How helpful were the sessions?

Somewhat helpful 14% (4/29)

Very helpful 55% (16/29)

Extremely helpful 31% (9/29)

Some worker comments about the training and the sessions are outlined below.

"I have found it really helpful listening to myself. I am my own worst critic, this has helped me see where I am doing well, where I can improve or stop doing certain things. I have adapted things from the feedback received in the session".

"Listening to each other gives you a good idea where you can lift your skills. Strength's focus is good. Makes it a positive experience and really lifts confidence. Helped me think about areas that I do not use as much. Most interviews there are a lot of skills used".

Role Clarification

In relation to role clarification, workers were more likely to report that their clients had a good understanding of the role of the workers following the introduction of GPS as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Clients understand my role

Pre	33% (17/51)
Post	46% (13/28)

An important factor in relation to role clarification relates to helping the clients to understand what happens to information they give to the worker and how that information it might be used. Again, the workers felt that their clients were more likely to understand or completely understand this following the intervention as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. To what extent do you think clients know what happens to the information they give you?

Completely understand

Pre	18% (9/51)
Post	29% (8/28)

Worker comments post training included:

"Depending on the person. If I've got someone who's bad at reading and writing, then I'm not going to give them written material. It's always about the person - maybe a mix of a couple. Always explain verbally. Often going through their responsibilities".



"Give them the opportunity to ask questions, we go through their orders, making sure there is a continual checking in process".

"I always make sure to express to offenders that we both have responsibilities. Almost every interview I remind them of their obligations and my obligations. I find it important to repeat things and clarify any questions they have. I make the Supervisions Expectation conversation a recurring theme when things start going downhill... I also ask them to share back their understanding. I ensure they know I am here to help but also have obligations to report breaches".

"I try to break down scenarios in ways that they can better comprehend. We need to be able to explain in detail what we can and cannot do during supervision, but how we can support them to achieve".

Problem Solving

In relation to problem solving the workers also reported that their skills had increased. For example, the workers were more likely following the intervention to report that they set goals with the clients rather than the worker or the client setting the goals themselves as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Who sets the goals, you or the client?

Both myself and the client together

Pre 45% (23/51)

Post 59% (17/26)

Worker comments post training included:

"They choose the goals, but then I generate conversations around that goal in order to validate it and that it is a good thing to aim towards. We need to make sure that their goals are real for them, even if they think I might see them as trivial".



"They set them, I discuss what is appropriate, relevant, doable, define it; I ensure realistic and relevant to their needs and order/offending. Not our lane if not relevant to offending".

"We discuss goals and I might give them ideas around the practicality of achieving a goal. How realistic it is. You don't want to them to be disappointed or feel defeated. It takes away from motivation. To start the ball rolling I'd get them to give me where they're like to see themselves".

"We do try to make it collaborative, and have some buy in, but we're trying to work towards goals that will work towards reducing reoffending. We try to focus the goal into a particular area but have them then set the goal".

The intervention model suggests that workers should help clients to work on a range of issues. Workers indicated after the training that they were likely to see more problems as appropriate.

Table 5. Are there any problems or issues that you think would be inappropriate to work on?

Yes – Pre 6% 3/48

Yes - Post 50% 13/26

Worker comments post training included:

"Once you build a rapport with them, they trust you and can confide in you. They'll talk about issues with people - conflicts with associates, especially high-risk situations they might be trying to avoid. Concerns about people. General worries as well - things that aren't as impacting - a family member, someone who's sick, things that impact their emotional state".

"Relationship problems, drug and alcohol, mental health, homelessness is a big one, even just conflict with their peers or feeling peer pressured".

"A lot of stuff, a lot of family history issues. Usually domestic and family violence in the home, AOD, bad friends, negative associates".



"I feel this is the hardest part of the job, allowing space to bring their issues and problems to you in a safe and trusting way. If we don't, we don't get their true responsivity, fears and disappointments that we need to work through for the success of their order".

"I think it depends, though, it helps create rapport but also, I'm not their counsellor and I'm not here to sit with their worries and feelings. We need to be able to acknowledge where they are at".

"I think too much sometimes – even offenders who have finished their supervision or have been suspended are coming into the office to disclose their lapse. And some of them reach out to let me know that they are having struggles with their mental health".

Pro-social Modelling

Pro-social modelling involves, among other things workers having a positive attitude about the possibility that clients can change and that the workers can help the client to change.

Workers were significantly more positive about this following the intervention.

Table 6 shows the number of workers who reported that they believed offenders could change or change quite a bit.

Table 6. To what extent do you think offenders can change?

Pre 76% (39/51)

Post 100% (29/29)

p.003

Workers were also more likely to feel, following the intervention, that it is within their role to help offenders change as shown in Table 7.



Table 7. To what extent do you feel that in your role you can help offenders change?

Yes, I can help them change

Pre 34% (17/50)

Post 52% (15/29)

p.096

Worker comments post training included:

“My focus is I strive to be what offenders need me to be, I strive to find what they have to offer in each session; assess each interview and their presentation; look to get 100% of what they have to give; it’s the only way for it to work; adjust and be flexible with delivery; find what works for them; person centred; crucial for responsivity and engagement and best outcomes”.

“I think we just have to be openminded and a bit flexible – sometimes people don’t understand that these guys live in chaos and expecting them to be on time always isn’t very realistic”.

“Not perfect – but I do pride myself on having good rapport with the offenders and having the ability to challenge”.

“The approach that I like to take is 1. Building rapport and trust, and 2. Working on the positive affirmations – strength focus. That really decides how they approach supervision. You get better offender buy-in”.

Relationship

Following the intervention, workers also reported that their relationship skills had improved. They were, for example, more friendly and more likely to take clients feelings into account, as shown in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8. I am friendly



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Pre 49% (25/51)

Post 63% (17/27)

Table 9. I care about clients' feelings

Pre 50% (25/50)

Post 59% (16/27)

The workers were also asked to make general comments about the intervention and GPS:

"I love to learn, and I love being involved in this. I can't imagine them not rolling this out statewide".

"This could be included in the reviews. This has meant an increase in workload. There has been no support in terms of workload. I have learnt a lot from GPS so far - I am getting used to it. I have to get used to positive feedback - I generally thrive on constructive criticism".

"This is a good idea. Difficulties balancing the role. Time constraints working with clients can be tricky. This model made me feel more confident. At the start of working here, I felt I wasn't really being a social worker. Since we started this, I feel like I belong working here".

"GPS has ended up being a very supportive environment and very useful and I have been able to vent in the room with the support of professional supervision".

"More training needed for facilitators, having someone listen to the facilitation and give feedback. On the facilitation part – I thought the training was really good all round, support was good. I really enjoyed it".

Analysis of interviews



Workers provided 54 tapes of interviews which were analysed by research officers for use of the effective practice skills. Twenty-four were provided before the intervention began and 30 following the intervention. Six workers who provided tapes of first interviews also provided tapes of a second interview. Otherwise, the tapes were provided by different workers for first and second interviews.

Research officers rated each of the interviews on a scale of 1 to 10 based on their overall use of the skills with 10 being complete use of the skills and 1 being no use of the skills. The mean overall rating or global score was 7.2 reflecting a generally good use of the skills. This increased marginally following the intervention. Table 10 shows that the number of interviews which were rated by workers as having good use of skills increased from 45.8% to 50%.

Table 10. Pre and Post Training Global Score 7 or more

Pre 46% (11/24)

Post 50% (15/30)

Researchers also rated the extent to which clients were engaged in the interviews. The mean rating on this item was above 7 reflecting a generally high level of engagement by clients in the process. There was also a higher level of engagement by clients following the intervention increasing from 42% to 50% as shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Were clients highly engaged in the interview?

Pre 42% (10/24)

Post 50% (15/30)

Enthusiastic and Optimistic

While there was a general improvement in skills and client engagement following the intervention the differences were relatively small and not at statistically significant levels.

There was however a significant change in the levels of optimism and enthusiasm detected by the coders. As shown in tables 12 and 13 workers judged as being optimistic in their interviews increased from 21% to 79% following the introduction of GPS. Workers judged as displaying high levels of enthusiasm moved from 23% to 77%.

Table 12. The worker is often optimistic

Pre 21% (2/24)

Post 79% (11/30)

p.042

Table 13. The worker is often enthusiastic

Pre 23% (5/24)

Post 77% (17/30)

p.008

Group Practice Supervision Sessions

To better understand how (GPS) sessions were both implemented and facilitated, recordings of these sessions were included in the analysis. Across the six pilot sites, only two sites submitted recordings of their GPS sessions. Each of these sites submitted 7 tapes each. The average length of the GPS sessions was 17 minutes, ranging from the shortest session of 5 minutes to the longest at 29 minutes.

The structure and content of GPS varied considerably both between and within sites. For example, one site used the audio recording as a prompt to discuss the worker skill in a group-

based setting using the check-list and in the following session GPS was less structured with no use of check-list or audio recording.

While each of the sessions brought with them a strengths-based perspective, highlighting what skills the worker used, there was limited time spent discussing skill development, with the discussions being relatively short and superficial.

Corrective Services Data

Records were supplied by NSW Corrective Services of a total of 3242 people under community supervision. Of those 75% (2471/2968, 274 missing data) were male and 15% were female, 26% (846/2913, 329 missing) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Straight Islanders. The main birth countries represented included 66% (1775/2568) Australian, 1.9% (57/2568) from Vietnam and 1.4% from New Zealand (46/2568) with 20% unknown. The mean LSIR (risk assessment score) was 28 (median 29). The mean was the same for both control and pilot groups as the data was purposely matched to be similar risk in the two groups. The most common order was CCO (44%), NCB (26%) and ICO (21%). Mean length of the orders was 14.6 months. The mean number of prior sentences (custody, CCOs or other sentences) was 18 (median or mid point 5).

The number of contacts those under supervision had with staff was provided. This included the number of contacts staff trained in the model had with their clients as well as a general number of contacts by all staff for both the pilot and control groups. The mean number of contacts with pilot group workers was 2.3 (3.1 for medium and high risk). The mean number of contacts with other staff including the control group or others in the organisation was 5.8 (7.9 for high-risk clients) suggesting that supervisees were often seen by staff other than their primary workers.

As shown in table 14 those in the pilot group were significantly more likely to have undertaken PGI sessions and have contact with third party contacts. PGI sessions refer to the Practice Guide for Intervention, a suite of structured exercises used by CCOs during supervision sessions to enhance behaviour change and help supervisees to address their criminogenic needs. Third party contacts significant, refers to worker contacts with significant others such

as family or friends whereas third party contacts casework refers to worker contact with other professional services.

Table 14. Mean number of PGI sessions and 3rd party contacts for pilot and control groups.

	PGI Sessions	3 rd Party Contacts Signif.	3 rd Party Contacts Casework
Pilot	5.76 (N1485)	2.40 (N1485)	5.31 (1485)
Control	4.56 (N1485)	2.13 (N1485)	3.95 (N1485)
Significance	p.001	p.038	p.001

The pilot group also had significantly higher numbers of fail to report and significantly higher numbers of warnings as shown in table 2. This possibly counter-intuitive finding is addressed in the discussion section of this report.

Table 15. Mean number of warnings and fail to report by pilot and control group.

	Warnings	Fail to Report
Pilot	.93	1.37 (N1485)
Control	.74	1.12 (N1485)
Significance	.001	.003

Data on recidivism was provided by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR). Overall, the differences in the recidivism rates between pilot and control groups were not statistically significant on the two measures used - any further offence within two years from the beginning of the court order (29.4% pilot and 29.1% control) and any sentence of imprisonment in that period (5.8% pilot and 6.8% control).

The number of contacts between pilot group workers and those under their supervision was quite low and there may not have been sufficient level of contact to have a consistent impact on recidivism. It makes sense therefore to consider the recidivism of those clients who received higher levels of contact with their workers. Where clients received more than 10 contacts with their workers the clients had better outcomes. For example, when there were more than 10 contacts, the imprisonment rate within two years was 63/944 (6.7%) in the control group and only 7/208 (3.4%) in the pilot group.

Some studies have also suggested that supervision is likely to be more effective with medium to high-risk clients. It is argued that low risk clients are unlikely to re-offend and that resources may be wasted on them. It is also argued that risk assessment scales such as the LSIR can predict risk with some degree of accuracy (Fazel & Favril 2024 for a recent review). To gain a truer picture of the effectiveness of the intervention offered in NSW Community Corrections, there is value therefore, in considering the differences between the pilot and control groups for medium to high-risk clients who have received more than 10 contacts with their workers.

Table 16 shows the re-offending rate for the pilot group who had more than 10 contacts with their allocated workers and were medium to high risk as defined as 29 or more on the LSIR. The LSIR score of 29 is above the mean score in our sample and is generally considered medium to high risk for community samples (Thomsen 2018). As shown in table 16, the re-offending rate was 39.1% for the pilot group and 44.6% for the control group.

Table 16. Re-offending for medium to high-risk offenders who had more than 10 contacts with their workers

	Re-offend within 2 years
Pilot	38.9% (37/95)
Control	44.4% (103/232)

While the difference in the re-offending rate does not reach statistical significance there is a statistically significant difference between the imprisonment rate for the pilot group high risk offenders who had more than 10 visits with their pilot group workers and offenders receiving 10 or more visits with other workers. Table 17 shows that only 1.1% of clients in the pilot group were sentenced to a period of imprisonment in the two years following the

commencement of their order. Those who had more than 10 contacts with workers in the control group had an imprisonment rate of 7.8%.

Table 17. Imprisonment for pilot group medium to high risk offenders who had more than 10 contacts with their workers

	Imprisoned
Pilot	1.1% (1/95)
Control	7.8% (18/232)
Significance	p.018

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found that staff were positive about the training model and about Group Practice Supervision. For example, 86% of those interviewed said that they found GPS very helpful or extremely helpful. Workers also felt that their skills improved following the introduction of GPS. Analysis of audiotapes of interviews also showed that workers skills had improved. While the development of skills was relatively moderate there were clear, significant and substantial changes in workers enthusiasm and optimism and their belief that clients could change and that they could help them change.

Analysis of data provided by Corrective Services NSW and the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research also showed benefits for the pilot group. The pilot group were significantly more likely to have undertaken PGI sessions, referrals to casework services and to have contact with third party caseworkers. The pilot group was significantly more likely to receive warnings and to have failures to report documented. High risk clients in the pilot group who had more than 10 contacts with their workers had fewer re-offences and significantly lower imprisonment rates.

The imprisonment rate in particular looks like an outlier at only 1%. On the other hand, numerous studies have found effective practice skills to be related to as much as 50% reduction in recidivism rates yet these studies have generally examined the inter-relationship between risk levels, frequency of contact and recidivism (Trotter 2013, Chadwick et al 2015). The few studies that have done this have suggested that higher levels of contact (sometimes referred to as dosage) with medium to high risk offenders are related to lower levels of recidivism (Sperber et al 2013). The overall reduction in recidivism relating to practice skills may disguise an even greater impact on high-risk clients who receive frequent contact with their individual workers.

The study has limitations. The interviews which were conducted represent only a proportion of the community corrections officers working in Corrective services NSW. The 54 tapes of worker/client interviews available for analysis represents a very small proportion of the total number of interviews conducted in NSW Corrections during the period of the study. Perhaps because of the small numbers, while the findings are generally positive and consistent with other research, for the most part they do not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Previous research found greater increases in worker skills following the introduction of the training and coaching in effective practice supervision. For example, research undertaken in youth justice in two Australian states found up to 50% increases in the use of skills (Trotter & Evans 2023).

Also, while the workers expressed very positive views about the skills and about the groups, there was some commentary from workers in relation to the need for more formal training in the skills and for addressing the additional time commitment involved in the group practice supervision. It was also apparent that the groups were often quite short in duration.

It is apparent from this study that those under supervision often did not get consistent supervision with one worker and that this may have reduced the influence of the group supervision project. It seems that leave, secondments, and various other staff commitments result in clients often being seen by workers other than the primary workers

Another somewhat puzzling outcome of this study is that there were only moderate changes identified in the use of skills and client engagement levels in the pilot group and yet there were changes in client recidivism. A considerable amount of literature has identified the importance of professional workers believing in the capacity of clients to change and of the importance of workers seeing it as part of their role to help client's change (e.g. Seligman 2011). It may be that was an important factor in the improved outcomes for clients.

Another, perhaps counter intuitive finding is that clients of pilot group workers had significantly higher numbers of warnings and failures to report. On the other hand, the effective practice supervision model encourages workers to balance social control and welfare roles. This includes actively monitoring compliance with the order, being clear about expectations and following through on failures to comply. It seems likely that the use of warnings and documentation of failures to comply is a reflection of active and enthusiastic supervision by workers rather than poor compliance by clients.

To sum up, previous research, referred to earlier in this paper, points to the difficulties involved in changing staff practices in correctional departments. Despite these difficulties it seems that the introduction of group practice supervision in NSW community corrections has had a real impact on the attitudes of staff, on their approach to their work and on the recidivism of clients. We believe this study provides a strong argument for continued attempts to embed effective practice skills in Corrective Services NSW and other criminal justice organisations.

Future roll out of the group practice supervision initiative may be assisted by the following:

Recommendation 1: Ongoing training

Acknowledging that training is one strategy to embed effective practice skills into organisational culture, scheduling ongoing, annual training provides an opportunity for staff to refresh their knowledge as well as allowing for new staff to be trained in the model. Training should include opportunities for all staff to practice and receive feedback on their skills.

Recommendation 2: Scheduling regular Group Practice Supervision (GPS) sessions

Making GPS part of the office routine is an important element of implementation, emphasising the importance of incorporating it into business as usual. GPS sessions could be scheduled for at least one hour on a regular basis (at least monthly) with sufficient tapes provided to sustain a one-hour discussion.

Recommendation 3: Support for people leading the sessions

Our research suggested that the extent of the implementation of GPS was often dependent on the level of support by management, both in workload and professional recognition.

Sometimes the sessions deviated from the model. Providing additional support to the GPS leaders, through professional development or other methods may allow for a more consistent implementation of the model.

Recommendation 4: Workload considerations

Attempts could be made to address the issues of additional workload involved in GPS in terms of explanations to staff and presenting it as an alternative rather than an addition to one to one supervision and adjustment of other workload factors.

Recommendation 5: Nomination of a site leader

There is value in formally recognising a GPS leader in each of the participating locations. This has multiple benefits including facilitating the GPS sessions, co-facilitating workshops and training as well as being a central person for practice team to liaise with.

Recommendation 6: Maximise contact with workers for medium and high-risk clients.

The number of medium to high-risk clients who had more than 10 contacts with their workers was quite small. Our research suggests that a focus on maximising the frequency of contact with the primary worker would lead to lower recidivism including lower imprisonment rates.



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