Pre-Sanction Reports in Ireland: An Exploration of Quality and Effectiveness

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Summary: This study explores issues of quality and effectiveness in relation to pre-sanction reports in Ireland. It reviews the literature available in three jurisdictions, England and Wales, Scotland, and the Republic of Ireland, and questions if quality is important in pre-sanction reports. There has been a lack of research on pre-sanction reports in Ireland to date. Little is known about how these reports are perceived by the courts, how they influence sentencing and if they adhere to best practice guidelines for effective report writing. This research attempts to address some of the gaps in knowledge by examining the influence of pre-sanction reports on sentencing and whether they are written in accordance with evidence-based Probation Service guidelines. From the data, a very high take-up rate by judges of recommendations made in pre-sanction reports emerged. The findings also reveal good adherence by probation staff to the guidelines for preparing high-quality pre-sanction reports. However, some sections of the reports adhered more closely to the guidelines than others. The study concludes that there was some evidence of inconsistency and unevenness in the quality and effectiveness of pre-sanction reports in Ireland. The implications for probation practice are discussed and a number of recommendations made to develop effective pre-sanction reports practices, including the need for a more robust quality assurance system.

Keywords: Probation, courts, sentencing, community sanctions, alternatives to custody, pre-sanction reports, take-up rate, adherence to guidelines, offence, judges’ views, effectiveness, quality assurance.