



# Baden-Württemberg

BEWÄHRUNGS- UND RICHTSHILFE

## "Supervision of probation during the crisis"

An investigation by the Bewährungs- und Gerichtshilfe Baden-Württemberg

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In recent months, the effects of the Corona pandemic have demanded a rather unusual and challenging private and professional everyday life from all of us, which has caused changes in customary sequences as well as serious restrictions.

The clients of the Bewährungs- und Gerichtshilfe Baden-Württemberg (BGBW), who often are in difficult social situations, are also directly affected by these circumstances. Isolation, existential fears, living in a confined space in precarious couple or family constellations, excessive demands, addictive drug use - the range of possible risk factors for reoffending increases against the background of necessary restrictions of the pandemic. At the same time, the social services of all aid networks are forced to reduce their offers or to reduce them to a minimum and this at a time when our clients need the support of professional helpers even more.

The Probation and Judicial Assistance has also stopped personal client contacts as of 16<sup>th</sup> of March 2020 with only few exceptions. The contact with clients, which is now most exclusively by telephone has fundamentally changed the usual counseling setting and the structure of the daily work of our probation officers. Nevertheless, BGBW's mandate and services are continued to be offered during the current crisis.

The current situation has prompted the Central Department of Social Work in Probation and Judicial Assistance to take a closer look. The questions of how subordination to a probation officer is designed in times of crisis and how the task of helping and supervising in such extreme conditions can be implemented with the clients were of particular interest. This has led to a study entitled "Supervision of probation during the crisis".

The study, which covers Baden-Württemberg in total, consists of evaluations of memos from electronic client documentation and a questionnaire in which probation officers were asked about their assessment. The evaluation of the memos was or is carried out on the one hand randomly with two files per month within the 9 BGBW facilities for the months from April to September 2020 and an additional evaluation of memos provided by employees who participated in the survey voluntarily. The results presented below refer to a total of 51 file notes. The questionnaire was completed by 52 probation officers. The results for April and May 2020 and the evaluation of the questionnaire are now available and will be explained in the following.

The employees of BGBW were informed about the survey and the related inspection of files. They were informed that when the files were inspected, it would be evaluated from whom the contact was made, which topics were discussed during the conversation, whether agreements had been made with the clients, to what extent the telephone contact corresponded to the defined intensity of care and whether the case was ongoing or in the initial survey phase. The same procedure was followed for the inspection of files in cases reported by employees.

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### Results of the inspection of the file

In April, probation officers contacted 67% of the cases. In May, this was the case for 61%. Therefore, the majority of probation officers established contact with their clients, but there was also the fact that clients contacted their probation officers directly.

With regard to the topics discussed, the subject areas were based on those specified by the social diagnostics program used in Baden-Württemberg – the "Resource Risk Inventory (RRI)". Multiple answers were possible. It shows that the range of the discussed topics is wide also in the context of the telephone consultation. There is an accumulation in both months in the field of employment/activity, presumably due to the absence of a daily structure for many clients, short time work or the threat of unemployment and the associated existential worries. Conditions and instructions were also frequently discussed, which on the one hand reflects the probation service's monitoring mandate, but on the other hand also displays that many clients had great uncertainties regarding the fulfilment and possible consequences of the pandemic. The need to talk about the financial situation, the social environment and health issues is also reflected. With regard to the topic of risk management, a decrease can be observed between April and May.

The following two graphics provide an overview of the issues discussed during the telephone contacts between probation officers and clients:

Figure 1 Issues discussed by telephone during the probation period in April 2020

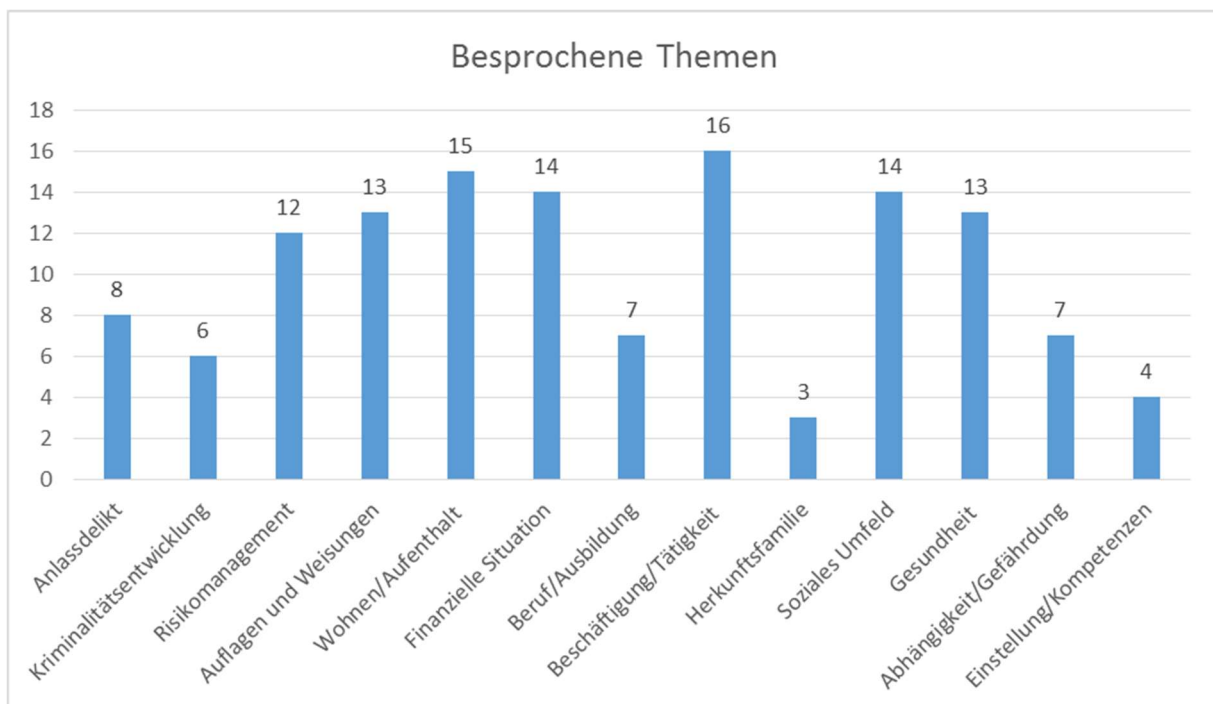
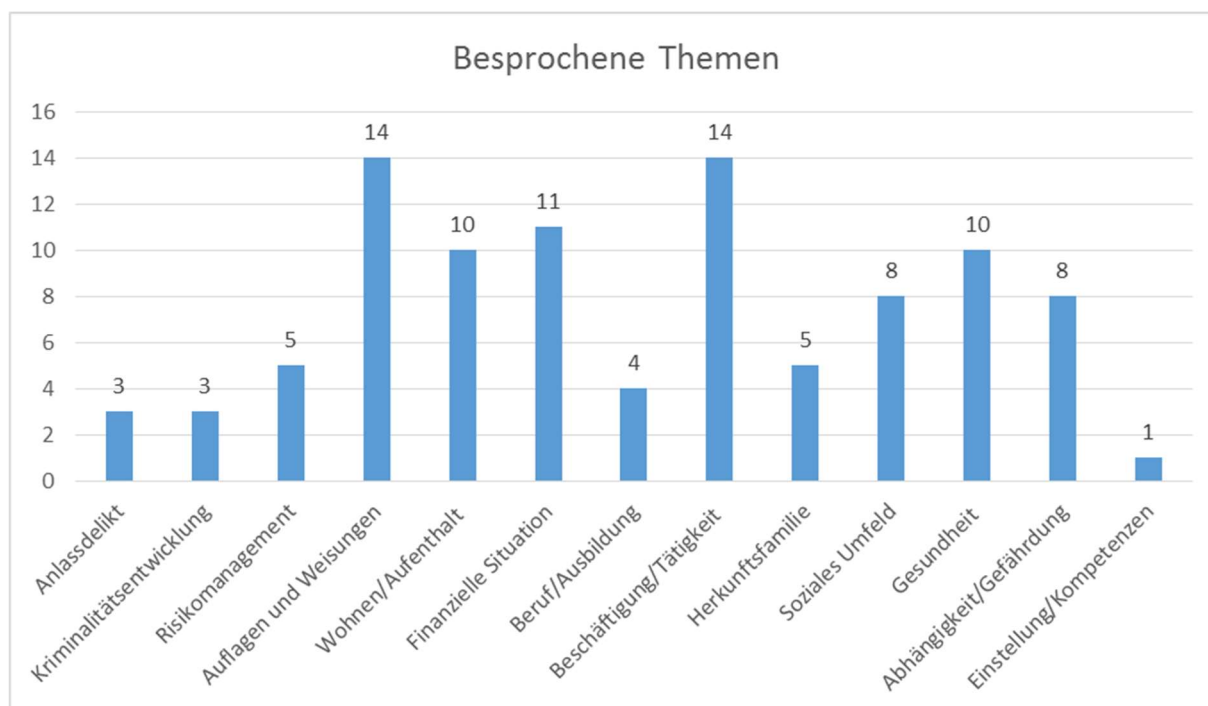


Figure 2 Issues discussed by telephone during the probation period in May 2020



It was also evaluated whether agreements were made between the probation officers and their clients during the telephone contact. In April, this was the case in 88.57% of the cases, in May in 77.42%. The agreements covered both, the agreement on the manner and time of the follow-up contact as well as concrete goals and work steps. This demonstrates that in most cases, a binding agreement was reached and a connection to the follow-up date was given, which can create additional security for the clients, especially in the current situation.

The results so far show that the majority of clients were also contacted during the Corona Pandemic in the exact intended intensity of care. In April, this was the case in 72.73% of the cases, in May in 77.42%. In 27.27% (April) and 22.58% (May) of the cases, the question of whether clients are currently in telephone contact with their probation officers as frequently as when personal contacts could have been carried out instead, was consequently rated "no" even if the telephone contacts were more frequent than the intensity of care basically required. Against this background, this result is even more significant and displays that a close relationship with the probation officers could be ensured, since in some cases telephone contacts took place more frequently than originally planned personal contacts.

Among the cases evaluated, in April 22.1% were in the initial phase and 16.13% in May. All other cases were ongoing. In addition, the probation officers could also incorporate new clients during that time.

### Results of the probation officers survey

Throughout Baden-Württemberg, 52 probation officers took part in the survey using a questionnaire. This equals a participation of about 12% of the full-time employees of BGBW. The questionnaire consists of tick boxes, scaling questions and free text boxes. In the following, the results obtained are explained in respect to the underlying questions.

*Despite the current situation, I am in telephone contact with my clients*

69% of the probation officers answered this question with "applies" and 31% with "partly applies". None of the interviewees indicated the option "does not apply". This result also shows that a connection to the respective probation officer is guaranteed to a high degree even in the current crisis.

*Do I notice changes in my clients' needs due to the current situation? If so, which ones?*

This question was answered "yes" by 52%. In addition to the need to discuss personal or fundamental questions about life with the probation officer, the focus is increasingly on current worries, needs and the associated existential fears as well as fears for the future. Clients need tips on how to structure their day or how to deal with sudden isolation and increased stress. Because of the restrictions and the associated insecurity, clients are also increasingly asking their probation officers practical questions about everyday life. One colleague describes this situation as follows: *"Some of them are insecure and seek advice on decisions that they would have made themselves in the past."* An increased need for the client to talk and communicate was mentioned several times, as well as the need to talk about the pandemic and how to deal with the restrictions and prohibitions. It was also reported that clients are currently more open towards their probation officers. These observations are accompanied by a very different contact behavior of the clients. While some clients are currently more likely to contact their probation officers, even demanding personal interviews, others use this special situation to go underground and avoid supervision by the probation officer.

*During the telephone contacts, topics are raised which have not been addressed in previous personal contacts.*

While 31% answer this question with "not applicable", there are some interesting observations among the probation officers interviewed, who can identify changes to the usual context of supervision with regard to the topics. In addition to fears in connection with the Corona Virus and questions about further developments and the associated future opportunities on the labor market, the focus is increasingly on how to deal with the regulations and administrative offences that have already been committed. With regard to all questions and concerns about the development of the COVID-19, for the first time probation officers find themselves in a situation where, at best, vague statements can be made about the needs or worries of the client, as this uncertainty and insecurity affects everyone. This is undoubtedly a major professional challenge. Questions about dealing with loneliness and boredom are raised by some clients. According to the interviewees' assessment, loneliness also leads clients to communicate more concerns from different areas of life to their probation officer than to other contacts. Emergency care and schooling for children as well as the associated excessive demands, the couple relationships strained by conflicts and spatial narrowness are also central topics of the telephone counselling. There are also reports of conversations about political attitudes or a self-critical approach to their own handling of money in "normal" everyday life. Presumably, there are multi-layered factors, which allow a more in-depth examination of oneself and a more distanced view of one's own life, which leads one of the interviewees to observe: *"Mistakes and omissions are more readily acknowledged by clients and can therefore be dealt with more effectively."*

### *Could I also conduct initial survey interviews through telephone contacts?*

Another interesting aspect of this study was the extent to which telephone consultation can be used in the current situation to conduct initial surveys and thus connect clients to the probation service from the outset, even during a crisis. 46% of those questioned stated that they had carried out initial interviews with positive experiences in the current situation, 33% had initial interviews that, in retrospect, they considered unsuitable in the context of telephone counseling and around 21% had no new cases for initial interviews during the period of the survey.

A more detailed examination of the above reasons leads to the following conclusions: Among the 46% with good experiences, there are statements such as, *"due to the open-minded behavior of a client, an initial survey could be completed. This came as a great surprise to me. The attitude of the client was very positive"* or, *"I myself asked more direct questions and received detailed answers"*. Positive experiences are also reported in terms of reliability and ability to reach agreements. Clients responded to the telephone appointment as agreed, their behavior was described as *"more relaxed and not as tense as in a personal conversation"*. The discussion of the offence, on the other hand, was cancelled several times for the personal interview. Others report that the initial assessment on the phone took less time than during personal contact, a working relationship could be established more quickly and topics marked with shame could be discussed more easily. Some of the interviewees had positive experiences with survey interviews, but with limitations. It is reported that telephone surveys have been satisfactory, but this is attributed to the fact that the client and probation officer knew each other before. There is also the assessment that telephone surveys of those clients who live in orderly conditions or who were already on probation and therefore know the processes ran favorably. Some of the interviewees are decisively lacking the facial expressions and gestures of their counterpart. This makes the course of the conversation more difficult and one has to listen much more closely or pay attention to one's own wording in order to prevent misunderstandings. While some state that clients are even more talkative on the phone, others experience the telephone consultation or survey as less communicative.

Out of the 33% of respondents who have conducted telephone surveys but do not find this setting suitable, some fear that they will not be able to establish a working relationship with clients in this way. These circumstances make it difficult to build up trust, and clients react very suspiciously to answer questions in person or even tell their life story to someone they do not know. It is also described that the personal impression of a client is made more difficult because perceived feelings and reactions cannot be included in the probation officer's assessment. This makes it impossible to assess whether the statements correspond to the overall impression. In addition to the lack of facial expressions and gestures, the topic of language barriers is also mentioned, which is even more difficult to overcome during telephone contact than during personal conversation. With regard to the lack of facial expressions and gestures, the following statement by one of the interviewees is particularly interesting as it describes very impressively how the facial expressions and gestures of the two conversation partners can determine the dynamics in different ways: *"It is difficult to judge whether what is being said has been received. On the other hand, clients also tell more because they don't see my reaction."*

Undisturbed conversations are often not possible with clients who live in cramped conditions or even in accommodation. The issue of discretion was also raised in this context. One interviewee described a clear position on the subject of the initial survey on the telephone: *"Doesn't seem appropriate to me, so I have clarified fundamental issues."*

The result of the question *"The clients are currently less likely to seek contact with the probation officer themselves"* corresponds to the statements made by the interviewees in the free text

boxes and reflects a very different contact behavior of the clients. While some clients currently contact their probation officers more often, even vehemently demanding personal interviews, others use this special situation to go underground and evade supervision by the probation officer. On a scale of 0 ("Does not apply") to 10 ("Fully applies"), 47% of those questioned had answered in the range of "not applicable" or "less applicable" and 53% with "rather applicable" to "fully applies".

An impressive insight into the experiences of the last few months in the practice of the probation officers of the BGBW can also be found in the answers to the question *"What other experiences have you made with regard to telephone counseling?"* On the one hand, the opportunities and limitations of this special setting become very clear, on the other hand, there is feedback, which could be trend setting for the future.

Some of the interviewees made it clear through their assessment that a telephone call cannot replace a personal conversation. Telephone conversations have more admonishing content and are not very motivating. When trying to deepen the conversation, clients withdraw into generalities.

Another perception is that the clients' inhibition threshold to tell untruths on the phone is lower than in personal contact. In addition, telephone counseling is similar to personal counseling: Clients who are reliable in themselves can be reached easily by telephone counseling and vice versa. One interviewee reported that four of her clients with addiction problems relapsed in the period under review. Dealing with this and other acute crises on the phone is a great challenge. The following quote describes this situation very clearly, is however in principle more confident regarding the practicability of the telephone consultation: *"I got to know some clients on the phone from scratch, they were more talkative. If the connection with BTM [narcotics] clients in particular broke off when there was something to be clarified, it caused me stomachache. For the future, it would make sense to alternate telephone appointments and personal conversations."* Some of the interviewees go even further in their assessment and describe that in the current situation it is more natural and easier to talk on the phone about current but also fundamental topics in life. In some cases, this has led to detailed conversations that hardly differ from personal contact. As already determined by the inspection of files, clients were sometimes contacted by telephone more frequently than personal conversations would have been intended to take place. In some cases, clients were written to on the fixed telephone appointments, as is often the case with personal contacts.

Positive effects of telephone counseling were also reported: *"Some telephone calls were surprisingly long. Clients were more relaxed in their familiar surroundings" or "clients who I did not expect to hear from me, clients who I thought would have problems with the situation coped well with it. Mood is more relaxed on the phone, the struggle for appointments is eliminated, calls from the home office have a familiar atmosphere, and clients touch on private issues of their own accord."*

Savings in travel and time were also reported as positive effects on several occasions. Positive experiences have been reported in terms of preliminary talks within the framework of victim-offender mediation as well as with some judicial assistance assignments. One of the interviewees adds to her experiences a suggestion for the future: *"It is uncomplicated and very practical, clients can sometimes be reached more reliably than if they have to come to appointments. It works much better than expected. All topics can be discussed very well; especially for purely organizational matters, personal meetings are not necessary. There is no need to travel, which is a great advantage. It would be desirable that in future more emphasis is placed on telephone consultation."*



## Summary and outlook

In summary, it can be said that the study has succeeded in taking stock of the overall design of "supervision of probation during the crisis" on the one hand, and on the other, in shedding light on the experience and assessment of this special situation from the perspective of practitioners. Based on the questions posed, this sample shows that the support of professional helpers was guaranteed for the clients of the BGBW.

The assessments of the asked practitioners allow the conclusion for the BGBW that telephone consultation and/or consultation by video chat could be a serious option for suitable cases in future.

In this respect, the results show how important it is for social work to remain flexible and adaptable. The main focus should be on how to reach the addressees in the best possible way in order to fulfill their mandate even in unforeseen crisis situations such as those we are currently experiencing. The fact that it can be achieved and the importance of addressing the issue of "supervision of probation during the crisis" has now been made clear by this study based on the work and assessments of the probation officers at the BGBW. The identification of different dynamics and observations during the past months illustrates that the gained experience can certainly be used profitably in the future for the design of the care context between probation officer and client.