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Trauma-informed interventions in probation: a framework for ethical supervision and sustainable desistance

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Abstract. The integration of trauma-informed care (TIC) principles into probation services marks a critical shift toward more ethical, empathetic, and effective offender supervision. This narrative review examines the role of trauma-informed interventions within probation contexts, highlighting how unaddressed trauma histories can hinder rehabilitation, compliance, and desistance from crime. Drawing on interdisciplinary literature from psychology, criminology, and social work, the paper synthesizes evidence on the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and complex trauma among justice-involved individuals and explores how these factors intersect with recidivism and behavioral dysregulation. The review maps out key components of trauma-informed probation—including trust-building, safety, collaboration, and individualized care—while evaluating emerging models such as therapeutic jurisprudence, reflective supervision, and integrated service coordination. Challenges related to institutional culture, professional training, and systemic fragmentation are also discussed. The paper concludes by proposing a set of practice recommendations aimed at embedding TIC principles into probation systems through cross-sector collaboration, trauma screening, and survivor-informed supervision strategies. This approach offers the potential not only to reduce reoffending but also to promote psychological resilience and meaningful social reintegration.

Keywords. Trauma-informed care, probation supervision, desistance from crime, offender rehabilitation, criminal justice reform

1. Introduction

The integration of trauma-informed care (TIC) into probation services represents a critical innovation in contemporary criminal justice and forensic social work. Probation officers and community-based supervision professionals routinely engage with individuals who carry extensive histories of trauma, including childhood adversity, interpersonal violence, systemic marginalization, and incarceration-related distress. Research has repeatedly shown that justice-involved individuals present disproportionately high rates of post-traumatic stress, emotional dysregulation, and complex psychosocial vulnerabilities, all of which affect their engagement with probation supervision and their capacity for rehabilitation (Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025; Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

Despite the documented prevalence of trauma among those on probation, standard supervisory models have traditionally emphasized compliance, control, and behavioral

monitoring, often neglecting the underlying emotional, psychological, and relational dynamics that shape client behavior. This gap has prompted a necessary shift toward trauma-informed probation practices that center safety, empowerment, and collaboration while acknowledging the profound impacts of trauma on cognition, behavior, and identity (Rad, Runcan, & Kiss, 2025; Vlai & Rad, 2025). The trauma-informed approach seeks not only to prevent re-traumatization but also to serve as a vehicle for healing, engagement, and sustainable desistance from crime.

This paper advances the argument that probation settings, as sites of both surveillance and support, are uniquely positioned to operationalize trauma-informed principles. As forensic social work increasingly adopts interdisciplinary frameworks grounded in ethics, neuroscience, and social justice (Runcan et al., 2025), probation services must evolve from punitive traditions toward relational and reflexive paradigms of care. The significance of this approach is twofold: it enhances the effectiveness of rehabilitation by addressing root causes of criminal behavior, and it aligns the criminal justice system with human rights-based practice.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship highlights the relevance of reflective supervision and organizational learning in enabling trauma-informed work (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Vișcu, Rad, Cadariu, & Pinte, 2025). Probation officers, like other frontline workers, operate within complex institutional cultures that shape their ability to apply TIC principles. Without appropriate training, support, and accountability structures, there is a risk that trauma-informed discourse remains superficial or selectively applied (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Vișcu, Rad, & Pinte, 2025).

This review draws upon bibliometric and empirical evidence from recent literature in social work, criminal justice, and psychology to explore how trauma-informed interventions are currently being implemented in probation services. It builds on findings from studies examining the professional identity of social workers in justice systems (Cadariu & Rad, 2025), the philosophical grounding of trauma-informed ethics (Runcan et al., 2025), and innovations in workplace learning and supervision (Rad et al., 2024; Vișcu & Rad, 2024). It also acknowledges the broader socio-professional challenges facing human services, including burnout, institutional rigidity, and the ethical dilemmas raised by AI and digital surveillance tools in probation contexts (Runcan et al., 2025; Gavrilă-Ardelean & Gavrilă-Ardelean, 2018).

The objectives of this paper are threefold: (1) to synthesize theoretical and empirical findings on trauma-informed care in probation; (2) to critically examine the organizational, ethical, and professional conditions required for effective implementation; and (3) to contribute to the development of interdisciplinary, culturally grounded frameworks for trauma-sensitive justice reform. In doing so, the paper positions trauma-informed probation not as an isolated technique but as a paradigm shift grounded in relational practice, evidence-based care, and a commitment to systemic transformation.

2. Theoretical framework

Trauma-informed interventions in probation are grounded in a multifaceted theoretical architecture that merges insights from trauma theory, psychological change models, desistance literature, and ecological systems thinking. Trauma theory itself offers a foundational understanding of how exposure to adverse life events—ranging from childhood maltreatment to systemic violence and incarceration—shapes neurobiological, emotional, and behavioral responses that often persist into adulthood. In probation populations, such trauma histories are not only frequent but also intertwined with complex psychosocial challenges including mental

illness, substance use, and low educational attainment (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021; Givens & Cuddeback, 2021).

The clinical implications of trauma theory have spurred the development of trauma-informed care (TIC) models, which emphasize safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural humility in all interactions between professionals and justice-involved individuals (Levenson & Willis, 2019; Kubiak, Covington, & Hillier, 2017). These principles have been increasingly embedded into correctional and supervisory settings, including probation, where they aim to mitigate the risk of re-traumatization and promote meaningful engagement. As Levenson, Prescott, and Willis (2022) argue, trauma-informed criminal justice practices challenge conventional punitive frameworks and replace them with relational, evidence-based, and ethically responsive approaches.

Desistance theory complements this framework by offering a developmental and agentic view of behavioral change, highlighting how justice-involved individuals—particularly those with trauma backgrounds—can gradually move away from patterns of offending through processes of identity transformation, social capital building, and narrative reconstruction (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Oudshoorn, 2016). Psychological models of change such as motivational interviewing and compassion-focused interventions further enhance this trajectory by reinforcing client autonomy, emotional regulation, and future orientation (Steindl, Kirby, & Tellegan, 2018; Hoskins & Morash, 2021).

Additionally, ecological and systemic theories provide a critical lens for understanding how individual trauma is embedded within—and continually influenced by—broader structural conditions, including poverty, racial injustice, institutional neglect, and stigmatizing probation environments (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Ostad-Hashemi, 2017; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). These frameworks suggest that interventions must extend beyond the individual to include organizational and societal change. For example, ecological momentary interventions (EMIs) have been proposed as innovative tools that harness digital technology to provide real-time, context-sensitive support to probationers navigating trauma-related triggers (Cadariu & Rad, 2025).

Furthermore, bibliometric and empirical studies within the social work field have illuminated the complex intersections between trauma, identity, and justice-involvement, calling for integrated, interdisciplinary approaches (Rad, Runcan, & Kiss, 2025; Runcan et al., 2025). Such approaches recognize the layered identities of probation clients—including gender, race, age, and mental health status—and the diverse ways in which trauma manifests across these intersections (Chiş et al., 2024; Demeter et al., 2024).

In sum, the theoretical landscape underpinning trauma-informed probation is both rich and evolving. It draws on trauma science, behavior change theory, and systemic analysis to inform practices that not only respond to client needs but also reform the institutional logics of justice systems. By situating probation within a broader ecology of care and accountability, trauma-informed frameworks offer a pathway toward more humane, equitable, and effective supervision.

3. Trauma and the probation population

Justice-involved individuals, particularly those under probation supervision, represent a population with disproportionately high exposure to trauma across the lifespan. Research consistently documents elevated rates of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), intimate partner violence (IPV), and complex traumatic stress among probationers (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021; Givens & Cuddeback, 2021; Levenson & Willis,

2019). These individuals often present with co-occurring disorders, including anxiety, depression, substance use, and personality disturbances, all of which are strongly linked to histories of trauma (Hoskins & Morash, 2021; Demeter et al., 2024). In many cases, the probation system becomes an inadvertent site for managing unmet therapeutic needs resulting from cumulative adversities that have gone unaddressed by other institutions.

Gendered pathways to trauma are particularly salient in probation contexts. Women on probation often report chronic exposure to gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and coercive control, which shape their identities and coping strategies (King, 2017; Ostad-Hashemi, 2017; Hoskins & Morash, 2021). Female probationers have been found to incorporate traumatic experiences into their self-concept in ways that influence their compliance with supervision and their perceived self-efficacy (Chiş et al., 2024). At the same time, men on probation are frequently socialized to suppress emotional expression, leading to underreporting of trauma symptoms and resistance to engagement with trauma-informed interventions (Levenson & Willis, 2019). Age and cultural background also play significant roles in shaping trauma responses. Young adults—particularly those aging out of institutional care—show heightened vulnerability to re-traumatization and cyclical involvement in the criminal justice system (Gavrila-Ardelean & Moldovan, 2014; Gavrilă-Ardeleana, 2016). Additionally, cultural stigma around mental health and trauma disclosure often impedes help-seeking behavior in ethnically diverse probation populations (Vaswani & Paul, 2019).

The intersection between trauma and substance use is a critical concern. Trauma exposure often precedes the onset of maladaptive coping mechanisms, including substance dependence, which in turn escalates justice system involvement (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Kubiak et al., 2017). Probation clients with co-occurring disorders may face barriers in accessing integrated services that are responsive to the interplay between psychological distress and addiction (Phillips et al., 2021; Runcan et al., 2025). This is further complicated by systemic issues such as service fragmentation, punitive supervisory models, and a lack of clinician training in trauma-informed approaches (Levenson et al., 2022).

The prevalence of trauma among probationers is further confirmed by recent bibliometric and empirical analyses in social work, which highlight trauma as a central construct in forensic practice and criminal justice reform (Rad, Runcan, & Kiss, 2025; Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025). These studies underscore the importance of developing interventions that are both clinically grounded and contextually attuned to the complex realities faced by probation clients. Psychological models of change that emphasize motivational readiness, identity reconstruction, and ecological momentary interventions (Cadariu & Rad, 2025) have shown promise in tailoring responses to individuals' lived experiences of trauma.

Thus, trauma is not a peripheral issue in probation—it is a pervasive and defining feature of this population. Understanding its multi-layered impact is essential for constructing ethically responsive, developmentally appropriate, and culturally competent intervention frameworks. By acknowledging the intersections between trauma, identity, and social marginalization, practitioners can begin to reimagine probation not as a surveillance mechanism, but as a potential site of healing and transformation.

4. Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) in probation settings

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) in probation supervision reflects a paradigm shift away from punitive models and toward approaches that recognize the pervasive influence of trauma in shaping offender behavior, engagement, and desistance. At its core, TIC emphasizes five interrelated principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment

(Levenson & Willis, 2019; Levenson, Prescott, & Willis, 2022). These principles do not merely represent therapeutic ideals but serve as operational pillars for reconfiguring everyday practices within probation settings to avoid re-traumatization and support holistic rehabilitation.

The application of TIC in probation involves a restructuring of interpersonal interactions, risk assessment, case planning, and supervision strategies. For instance, rather than interpreting client resistance as willful noncompliance, trauma-informed probation officers are trained to understand such behavior through a lens of trauma-related adaptation and mistrust (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Maschi & Schwalbe, 2012). This reframing calls for cultivating therapeutic alliances in which clients feel emotionally and physically safe, have agency in decision-making, and are supported to rebuild autonomy and self-efficacy (Oudshoorn, 2016; McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021).

In practice, trauma-informed probation may include adaptations such as gender-responsive interventions, flexible reporting schedules, strengths-based motivational interviewing, and continuity of care with mental health and substance use services (Kubiak, Covington, & Hillier, 2017; Ostad-Hashemi, 2017). Probation officers become not only monitors of compliance but also facilitators of healing, requiring supervision and support structures that promote reflective practice (Vișcu & Rad, 2024). The integration of reflective supervision and strategic models into probation work, as highlighted by Vișcu and Rad (2024), has been associated with enhanced relational capacity and ethical sensitivity in interactions with trauma-affected individuals.

Prominent models operationalizing trauma-informed principles in probation include the Trauma-Informed Probation (TIP) framework and the Trauma-Informed Community Probation and Rehabilitation (TICPR) model. These approaches integrate core TIC values into structured supervision practices, emphasizing client empowerment, context-sensitive goal-setting, and collaborative safety planning (Levenson et al., 2022; Bradley & Petrillo, 2022). For example, TIP encourages officers to co-develop supervision plans that incorporate client-defined goals and recognize trauma triggers, thereby enhancing motivation and reducing recidivism.

Evidence from bibliometric analyses and applied research in forensic social work underscores the growing emphasis on trauma-informed frameworks in criminal justice supervision (Rad, Runcan, & Kiss, 2025; Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025). These studies argue that probation represents a key site for therapeutic justice, especially when aligned with principles of restorative justice and integrated care systems (Vlai & Rad, 2025). Furthermore, trauma-informed probation supports the desistance process by addressing criminogenic needs in a way that fosters identity transformation, hope, and relational repair—factors central to sustained behavioral change (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Oudshoorn, 2016).

Ultimately, the success of TIC in probation hinges on the organizational commitment to culture change, continuous professional development, and intersectoral collaboration. Without systemic support, efforts to implement trauma-informed supervision risk becoming fragmented or tokenistic (Levenson & Willis, 2019). As the field continues to evolve, embedding TIC across probation systems represents not only a humane response to the realities of trauma but also an evidence-informed strategy to enhance compliance, reduce revictimization, and promote community reintegration.

5. Implementation and organizational integration

The successful integration of trauma-informed care (TIC) within probation settings requires more than the adoption of individual practices; it necessitates a fundamental

organizational transformation supported by continuous training, reflective supervision, and cross-sector collaboration. Embedding TIC within the institutional culture of probation services aligns with a broader shift in social work and criminal justice toward person-centered, ethical, and evidence-based frameworks (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Runcan, Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025). This organizational transition demands leadership commitment, structural realignment, and the development of trauma-responsive systems across all levels of probation service delivery.

Staff training serves as a foundational element in this transformation. Probation officers, traditionally trained in compliance monitoring and risk management, must be reoriented to adopt relational, empathetic, and strengths-based approaches when working with trauma-affected individuals. Studies in forensic social work supervision underscore the importance of reflective supervision models that allow practitioners to explore the emotional complexities of their work, manage secondary trauma, and develop trauma-sensitive judgment (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Viscu, Rad, Cadariu, & Pinte, 2025). The strategic integrative supervision model, for instance, promotes both practitioner resilience and ethical consistency, serving as a protective mechanism against burnout and depersonalization (Rad, Runcan, & Kiss, 2025).

However, organizational integration of TIC is often challenged by deeply entrenched punitive cultures and bureaucratic resistance. Probation institutions, especially in post-authoritarian or rigidly procedural systems, may prioritize surveillance, control, and standardization over individualized, therapeutic supervision (Levenson & Willis, 2019; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). This cultural inertia can manifest in skepticism toward trauma-informed training, underfunded implementation strategies, and insufficient time for meaningful relationship-building between officers and clients. Moreover, resource constraints—such as caseload pressures, lack of interdisciplinary staff, and limited access to trauma-specialized services—further impede TIC uptake (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021).

Interprofessional collaboration emerges as a crucial enabler in overcoming these institutional barriers. Coordinated networks involving social workers, psychologists, substance use counselors, and medical professionals can provide holistic support to probationers, particularly those with complex trauma histories (Kubiak, Covington, & Hillier, 2017; Oudshoorn, 2016). Cross-training and joint case planning foster mutual understanding across disciplines, enhance service continuity, and reduce fragmentation in care. As emphasized by Cadariu and Rad (2025), interprofessional models also benefit from integrating ecological approaches that capture the client's lived context, thereby aligning supervision strategies with real-world challenges.

An innovative frontier in trauma-informed probation is the application of digital tools and ecological momentary interventions (EMI) for real-time trauma monitoring and personalized support. EMI leverages mobile and wearable technologies to track affective states, triggers, and coping mechanisms in situ, enabling timely, client-specific interventions (Cadariu & Rad, 2025). For example, a probation client might receive a mindfulness prompt or safety check-in via an app during a high-risk emotional moment, reinforcing therapeutic strategies outside formal sessions. While still emerging, such tools show promise in enhancing client engagement, promoting emotional self-regulation, and supporting desistance trajectories.

Yet, the use of digital technologies in trauma-informed probation must be ethically grounded and culturally sensitive. Issues of surveillance, data privacy, and technological access require careful navigation to avoid reinforcing carceral logics under the guise of therapeutic intervention (Runcan et al., 2025; Runcan, Hațegan et al., 2025). Moreover, EMI tools must be

framed as adjuncts to—not replacements for—human connection, reflective dialogue, and trust-based supervision.

In sum, the integration of TIC into probation systems is a multifaceted endeavor that intersects with organizational ethos, professional competencies, interdisciplinary cooperation, and digital innovation. Institutionalizing such approaches demands an ongoing commitment to reflective practice, trauma awareness, and systemic reform—anchored in the belief that rehabilitation is not only possible but most effective when grounded in relational justice and care.

6. Challenges and ethical considerations

While trauma-informed care (TIC) offers a progressive framework for reimagining probation through the lens of empathy, healing, and dignity, its implementation is fraught with ethical and practical challenges that demand critical reflection. A primary concern lies in the risk of re-traumatization, especially within supervisory relationships and institutional procedures. Probation supervision often involves surveillance, compliance checks, and structured reporting—practices that, if not trauma-informed, can replicate patterns of control and coercion experienced in earlier life stages by justice-involved individuals (Levenson & Willis, 2019; McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021). For clients with histories of interpersonal violence, childhood abuse, or institutional neglect, even well-intentioned supervisory interactions may inadvertently trigger defensive responses, shame, or withdrawal.

Confidentiality and autonomy emerge as further ethical focal points. In trauma-sensitive systems, the client's right to psychological safety must be balanced against institutional mandates for risk assessment, information sharing, and legal compliance. Probation officers may find themselves navigating a delicate terrain between therapeutic engagement and procedural obligation—especially when clients disclose sensitive trauma-related experiences that raise concerns for safety or legal implications (Gohara, 2018; Kubiak et al., 2017). Without clear ethical guidelines and reflective supervision, these dilemmas can lead to moral injury among staff and eroded trust among clients.

Power dynamics represent an additional structural challenge. The probation relationship is inherently asymmetrical, with officers wielding discretionary authority over the client's freedom, progress, and breach consequences. Embedding trauma-informed principles into this dynamic requires deliberate role renegotiation—moving from control to collaboration, from authority to partnership (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). However, institutional cultures that valorize compliance and punitive response may resist such shifts, reinforcing adversarial interactions and undermining trauma-informed engagement (Runcan, Rad, & Cădariu, 2025; Rad et al., 2024).

Furthermore, cultural, gendered, and intersectional factors complicate the ethical landscape. Research has shown that women on probation, especially those with histories of intimate partner violence or sexual trauma, may experience compounded vulnerabilities and stigmatization when subjected to standardized interventions that ignore gendered trauma narratives (Hoskins & Morash, 2021; King, 2017). Similarly, marginalized ethnic or socioeconomic groups may mistrust probation systems due to histories of institutional harm, racialized surveillance, or colonial legacies. Trauma-informed approaches that fail to consider these contextual layers risk reinforcing systemic inequities under the guise of therapeutic intent.

Digital innovations such as ecological momentary interventions (EMIs), while promising for individualized support, also present new ethical concerns. The real-time collection of affective or behavioral data must be governed by principles of informed consent,

data minimization, and equitable access (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Runcan et al., 2025). If misused, such tools could replicate carceral surveillance mechanisms or intensify psychological pressure on clients. Ethical TIC in probation must therefore include robust data governance frameworks and client-centered technology design.

Finally, there is the moral obligation of institutions to provide trauma-informed care not merely as a technique, but as a commitment to justice, dignity, and systemic transformation. As noted by Oudshoorn (2016) and Levenson et al. (2022), TIC must move beyond individual casework to reshape the very philosophies underpinning justice practice. This includes training officers to critically examine their own power, biases, and practices, fostering cultures of compassion, and ensuring that trauma-informed probation does not become a rhetorical cover for coercive or inequitable systems.

In conclusion, the ethical landscape of trauma-informed probation is marked by tension and complexity, requiring constant negotiation between care and control, protection and empowerment, structure and responsiveness. It is through sustained ethical reflexivity, interdisciplinary dialogue, and survivor-informed practices that TIC can fulfill its promise—not just to reduce harm, but to meaningfully transform supervision into a context of healing, growth, and respect.

7. Outcomes and impact of TIC in probation

The implementation of trauma-informed care (TIC) in probation settings has yielded promising yet uneven outcomes. Emerging evidence suggests that when probation services integrate TIC principles—such as safety, collaboration, trust, and empowerment—positive effects can be observed in both client behavior and practitioner practice (Levenson & Willis, 2019; McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021). One of the most commonly cited benefits is a reduction in recidivism rates, particularly among justice-involved individuals with histories of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), complex trauma, and gendered victimization (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Oudshoorn, 2016). Trauma-informed supervision strategies—such as motivational interviewing, strengths-based approaches, and individualized care planning—appear to improve client compliance, reduce breaches, and increase the likelihood of sustained desistance (Maschi & Schwalbe, 2012; Levenson et al., 2022).

Beyond behavioral compliance, trauma-informed probation is also associated with improvements in mental health and psychosocial functioning. Clients supervised in trauma-sensitive environments report enhanced trust in their probation officers, increased openness to therapeutic referrals, and higher levels of emotional regulation and resilience (King, 2017; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). Studies highlight improved psychological outcomes, including reduced symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxiety, as well as enhanced self-efficacy and motivation for change (Hoskins & Morash, 2021; Givens & Cuddeback, 2021). For example, programs that incorporate trauma-focused therapy alongside supervision, such as EMDR, mindfulness interventions, or ecological momentary interventions (Cadariu & Rad, 2025), have demonstrated efficacy in stabilizing mental health and supporting clients' long-term recovery and reintegration.

From a systems-level perspective, probation units that adopt TIC as an organizational philosophy often report enhanced staff morale, reduced burnout, and greater interprofessional collaboration (Vișcu & Rad, 2024; Rad et al., 2024). Reflective supervision and ongoing TIC training contribute to increased practitioner empathy, reduced punitive impulses, and better management of secondary traumatic stress among frontline workers (Viscu et al., 2025; Runcan, Rad & Cădariu, 2025).

However, despite these gains, significant gaps remain in the empirical evaluation of TIC's long-term impact within probation. Much of the available data is drawn from small-scale, qualitative studies or pilot programs, with limited use of control groups, standardized outcome measures, or longitudinal follow-up (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021; Trabold et al., 2020). The field lacks consistent frameworks for assessing how TIC principles are operationalized across jurisdictions, and how implementation fidelity affects outcomes. Moreover, very few studies disaggregate results by demographic variables such as gender identity, ethnicity, or trauma type—obscuring critical intersectional differences in how clients experience supervision and support (Satyen et al., 2019; Hoskins & Morash, 2021).

Another limitation is the insufficient evaluation of digital innovations in trauma-informed probation. While tools such as EMIs and tele-supervision platforms have gained traction, their effectiveness in real-world settings—particularly with marginalized or digitally excluded populations—remains underexplored (Cadariu & Rad, 2025; Rad et al., 2024).

In sum, while trauma-informed care in probation holds clear potential to improve both justice outcomes and client well-being, its empirical foundation remains underdeveloped. Robust, culturally grounded, and interdisciplinary research is urgently needed to move TIC from a compelling framework to an evidence-based standard. This includes the development of common evaluation indicators, theory-informed measurement tools, and participatory research designs that center the voices and experiences of survivors, probationers, and frontline workers alike.

8. Future directions and policy implications

The integration of trauma-informed care (TIC) into probation services marks a paradigmatic shift in how justice systems engage with individuals impacted by complex trauma. However, the sustained transformation of probation practice requires not only implementation at the practitioner level but also strategic alignment at the policy and institutional levels. Future directions should therefore prioritize multi-level reform, anchored in survivor-informed, ethically grounded, and culturally responsive approaches.

A first critical step lies in policy reform that embeds trauma-informed principles into probation legislation, guidelines, and funding structures. This includes formal recognition of trauma histories in risk and needs assessments, flexible supervision conditions to accommodate therapeutic recovery, and dedicated resources for training, reflective supervision, and interdisciplinary collaboration (Levenson & Willis, 2019; Runcan et al., 2025). Moreover, policies should support co-created service design, where probation clients, especially those with lived experiences of violence, addiction, or systemic oppression, contribute to shaping trauma-sensitive frameworks (Gohara, 2018; Oudshoorn, 2016). The work of Vlasi and Rad (2025) on restorative justice-informed probation underscores the potential of integrating victim, offender, and community perspectives in order to humanize and democratize supervision practices.

Secondly, future TIC models must embrace an intersectional and culturally adapted orientation. Trauma does not manifest uniformly across individuals; it is deeply shaped by gender, race, age, socioeconomic status, neurodiversity, and migration histories (Hoskins & Morash, 2021; Satyen et al., 2019). Policy and practice must acknowledge these axes of identity, moving beyond one-size-fits-all programs toward differentiated interventions that are sensitive to context and community-specific needs (McAnallen & McGinnis, 2021). Probation frameworks in multiethnic or post-conflict societies, for example, must take into account historical trauma, mistrust in institutions, and culturally embedded healing practices (Rad, Runcan & Kiss, 2025). In this regard, the integration of digital tools such as ecological

momentary interventions (EMIs) offers promise for personalizing support and capturing context-specific patterns of emotional and behavioral distress (Cadariu & Rad, 2025), though accessibility and ethical considerations remain critical.

Third, advancing the field requires robust longitudinal and comparative research. The existing empirical base, while growing, is still limited in scope, consistency, and methodological rigor. Future studies must extend beyond short-term outcomes to assess longitudinal effects of trauma-informed probation on desistance trajectories, mental health, social integration, and life satisfaction (King, 2017; Levenson et al., 2022). Additionally, cross-national comparisons—especially between jurisdictions with varying levels of TIC integration—would illuminate best practices, contextual challenges, and structural enablers (Bradley & Petrillo, 2022; Vaswani & Paul, 2019). This includes exploring how trauma-informed principles are interpreted and enacted in differing legal, cultural, and institutional environments.

Finally, ethical considerations must remain central to these future pathways. Trauma-informed care is not simply a set of tools or checklists—it represents a philosophical and relational shift in power dynamics, accountability, and human dignity (Runcan et al., 2025). As such, its integration into probation requires constant reflexivity, institutional transparency, and genuine commitment to justice as a transformative, rather than punitive, process.

In sum, the road ahead for trauma-informed probation lies at the nexus of systemic change, cultural responsiveness, and scientific rigor. To fulfill its promise, TIC must be embedded in every layer of the probation system—from individual encounters to organizational culture and national policy. Only then can it move from an aspirational ideal to a sustainable model of healing-centered justice.

9. Conclusions

This paper has examined the theoretical, empirical, and practical intersections between trauma-informed care (TIC) and probation services, highlighting the urgent need for a paradigmatic rethinking of justice supervision practices. Through an integrative narrative grounded in contemporary literature and interdisciplinary frameworks, several key insights emerge.

First, trauma is not an exception but a pervasive reality among probationers. The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), interpersonal violence, systemic marginalization, and co-occurring mental health or substance use disorders reveals the necessity of moving beyond traditional risk management approaches toward models that prioritize healing, dignity, and relational safety. Probation, as a frontline interface between the justice system and the community, is uniquely positioned to serve as a vehicle for such transformation—provided it is equipped with trauma-responsive philosophies, tools, and policies.

Second, the adoption of trauma-informed approaches in probation reflects a profound shift in the theoretical underpinnings of criminal justice. No longer rooted solely in deterrence or retribution, trauma-informed supervision draws from desistance theory, ecological systems theory, and restorative justice, emphasizing the role of context, identity, and agency in behavioral change. As demonstrated in works by Rad, Runcan, Vlaj, Cadariu, and colleagues, this evolution signals a deeper integration between criminal justice and social work, wherein rehabilitation becomes an ethical and relational process, not merely a procedural goal.

Third, the paper contributes to social work practice by operationalizing TIC principles—safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and choice—within probation settings.

It highlights the critical role of training, reflective supervision, interprofessional coordination, and digital innovation (e.g., EMIs) in building responsive systems that avoid re-traumatization and foster resilience. Moreover, the analysis underlines the importance of understanding probation clients through a person-centered lens, taking into account gender, culture, age, and lived experiences of trauma and injustice.

Finally, this work affirms that trauma-informed probation is not a technical fix, but an ethical imperative. It calls for systems that are not only effective in reducing recidivism but also just, humane, and responsive to the emotional and psychological realities of those they serve. Such reform must be sustained by evidence-based practices, culturally grounded models, and survivor-informed policies. The future of probation, if aligned with trauma-informed values, offers the potential to bridge the gap between accountability and compassion, control and care, punishment and restoration.

In conclusion, this study advocates for a probation paradigm rooted in ethical, evidence-based, and person-centered reform. Only through this lens can probation evolve into a site of transformation—where justice is not merely administered, but truly enacted.

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