

Probation Intensity Effects on Probationers' Criminal Conduct¹

Charlotte E. Gill,² Jordan Hyatt & Lawrence W. Sherman

Background

Probation is one of the most frequently-used criminal sanctions in the U.S., but it suffers from a lack of resources. Thus, probation agencies need to identify effective and efficient supervision practices. Intensive supervision probation (ISP) is one of the few strategies that has been rigorously evaluated. This approach to supervision involves increasing supervision for high-risk clients, often through frequent contact with the probation officer in small caseloads. The aim of this study is to synthesize the results of existing evaluations of ISP to examine its effectiveness at reducing recidivism.

Methodology

Selection Criteria:

Eligible studies had to meet the following criteria: (1) examine the effect of a change in supervision intensity on subsequent recidivism compared to 'regular' probation (however defined); (2) be methodologically rigorous (randomized controlled trial or quasi-experiment with subject-level matching); and (3) measure recidivism in terms of new arrests, convictions, and/or violations of probation.

Search Strategy:

We performed a systematic, exhaustive search for studies. This included a keyword search of online abstract databases and criminal justice agency websites, and hand searches of leading journals. We found 47 studies for inclusion in a meta-analysis: 38 randomized trials and 9 quasi-experiments.

Main Results

Our meta-analysis indicates no effect of ISP on new arrests across the randomized trials. There is a small, non-significant reduction in arrests among quasi-experiments, based on a small sample including more recent studies that appear to show more promise. ISP increases the likelihood of a technical violation across all studies, most likely due to the increased surveillance that results from enhanced supervision.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, we conclude that ISP strategies, as currently designed, are ineffective in reducing recidivism. However, some individual studies showed more promise. These newer initiatives were built around behavioral management techniques rather than a search for the optimal caseload size or number of contacts. We recommend further investigation of these promising strategies, and more qualitative research into the nature of the officer-client interaction to identify best practices.

¹ Title registered with the Campbell Collaboration Crime and Justice Group (Sept. 9, 2009). Protocol under review. Suggested citation: Gill, C. E., Hyatt, J., & Sherman, L. W. (2009). *Probation intensity effects on probationers' criminal conduct: Title Registration*. Campbell Systematic Reviews.

<http://www.campbellcollaboration.org/lib/download/677/>

² Corresponding author: Center for Evidence-Based Crime Policy, George Mason University, email: cgill9@gmu.edu