

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Probation, Mental Health, and Mandated Treatment

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Summary/Conclusions

The authors conducted a national survey of offenders diagnosed with a mental illness and supervised by a probation agency. The researchers explored the differences between mentally ill probationers who received regular supervision and mentally ill probationers who were supervised on a special caseload. First, the researchers identified the characteristics which differentiated the specialty caseloads from the traditional caseloads, and then they were able to observe some differences in the outcomes of the specialty caseloads versus the traditional caseloads. It appears successful PMI's were treated consistent with the eight principles of effective intervention.

Limitations of Information

Because this was the first study of its kind, the results cannot be compared to other evaluations to determine consistency in the findings. The authors note they relied on supervisors to respond to the study, which "cannot perfectly represent these approaches." Additionally, in lieu of using data, such as termination or recidivism rates, the researchers relied on the probation representatives' perception of the outcomes to determine which type of supervision was more effective.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Probationers with Mental Illness

Mental health disorders occur three times more often in the criminal justice population than in the general population. This article is the result of "the first national survey of probation agencies' approaches to supervising PMI's" (probationers with mental illness).

It is not uncommon to have a number of PMI's on a caseload and frequently they have difficulty meeting the terms and conditions of probation. Probation officers are seldom equipped or have the time to deal with the complex issues presented by a PMI. As a result, PMI's are rearrested at a higher rate than probationers without mental health issues. There are several probation offices in the country that have targeted PMI's with specialty caseloads. The researchers' sample included 66 agencies with specialty caseloads compared to 25 traditional agencies. To be denoted "specialty" an agency had to maintain more than one probation officer (PO) assigned to a caseload consisting of PMI's only.

The researchers found five differences between the specialty and traditional agencies: "(a) exclusive mental health caseloads, (b) meaningfully reduced caseloads, (c) sustained officer training (d) active integration of internal and external resources to meet PMIs' needs, and (e) problem-solving strategies as the chief means for addressing treatment noncompliance."

The researchers found that the specialty supervisors were more likely than the traditional supervisors to perceive that their agency was effective in re-

ducing the risk of revocations for PMI's and increasing the PMI's overall well-being; however, it will require further study. It is likely if the criminogenic needs are aggressively addressed, through well matched resources, the success rates of PMI's will improve.

Practical Applications

- √ Conduct quality assessments to identify criminogenic needs and address them through collaborative case planning.
- √ Consider using mental health caseloads.
- √ Hire PO's with mental health backgrounds or offer specific training and education.
- √ Utilize MI skills to problem-solve and avoid threats of incarceration; jail should be a last resort.
- √ Develop a core knowledge set for prosecutors, defense bar, and judges, and provide meaningful training.
- √ Maintain close relationships with treatment providers and advocates who can assist with social resources.
- √ Attend regular staffings with treatment providers.
- √ Enter mental health codes in Eclipse. With the proper data, probation is in a better position to acquire the resources it requires to address the needs of PMI's.

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