

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Effective Supervision Strategies: Do Frequent PO Changes Affect Client Outcomes?

Clark-Miller, J. and Stevens, K. 2012. *Effective Supervision Strategies: Do Frequent Changes of Supervision Officers Affect Probationer Outcomes?* Federal Probation 75:3.

Key Words: therapeutic alliance, rapport, supervision, revocations, recidivism, probation failure

Summary/Conclusions

Researchers wanted to look at the affect on probationer outcomes in relation to the number of probation officers a client has over the period of supervision, as well as the length of time multiple officers are assigned to one probationer. A study was designed to test two hypotheses: 1. As the number of probation officer's assigned to one client increases, the client's odds of successfully completing probation decreases; 2. When multiple officers are assigned to one case, the longer each officer stays assigned to the case, the better the odds the client completes supervision successfully.

Limitations of Information

The study did not include juveniles nor probationers in specialized programs. Researchers were unable to control for proper treatment matching, as a possible reason for probation failure. Instead, they used the number of services in relation to the risk level as a proxy. It appears that they did not control probation officer variables, such as skill level, demographics, experience, or prior training. Also, they did not explore the impact of changing officers earlier in supervision, versus later, when clients are at less risk to reoffend.

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.

The Affect of Changing Officers

There has been no research on the impact of the number of probation officers (PO) assigned to a client's case on the offender's odds of completing supervision. Research indicates the relationship between the PO and the offender can be influential on the outcome of supervision. The researchers wanted to explore the affect of multiple officers, suspecting that the process of reassignment disrupts the rapport.

The study used a sample of 5,134 offenders, who terminated probation in 2009, from a probation department in Texas. The researchers offered two hypotheses. First, "the number of officers an offender has during the term of supervision is correlated with failure to complete supervision." For example, a client with 10 different PO's assigned to his case will have a lower success rate than a client with two PO's assigned over the same period. Second, "the proportion of sentence time that was supervised by each officer will be positively correlated with probation success." In other words a client who has one PO during his sentence will have a higher success rate than a client with three PO's, spread over 8 months each, in the same time period.

Failure was defined as the termination of supervision based on a technical violation or a new crime. Several analyses were conducted to control for a number of variables, such as risk, needs, and number of programs completed. Results supported the hypotheses. For example, with regard to Hypothesis 1, a client with "three different probation officers is 15% more likely to fail than an offender

with only one officer." Regarding Hypothesis 2, results indicated the longer any PO stays on a case, it increased the chances of client success. Notably, when one PO supervised a case the length of the term, the odds of successful completion increased by 58%.

Practical Applications

- ✓ In order to minimize the affect a PO can have on outcomes, it is recommended to adopt a standard method of sanctions and incentives that is used with fidelity by all officers.
- ✓ Avoid reassigning cases for administration purposes that only benefit the department and not the client.
- ✓ When a reassignment occurs, the new PO should be mindful of the unspoken disruption in the client's relationship to probation. Rapport and trust must be rebuilt
- ✓ Recognize that risk to reoffend goes down the longer a client remains on probation. If possible, delay case transfers until after the client has had a period of stability and demonstrated compliance.
- ✓ Remember that 30% of positive change is influenced by the client's relationship with the probation officer. Use motivational interviewing skills to build rapport early in the relationship.
- ✓ Consider reviewing departmental policies to ensure that all officers are managing cases in the same general manner, so that disruptions are not complicated by different rules for common activities, such as travel permit or the matching of incentives to behavior change.

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