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.