

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Low Risk Offenders Under Probation Supervision: Risk Management and the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Framework

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Key Words: Community supervision, risk and needs assessment, risk principle, low risk offenders

The Importance of Using Resources Strategically

Summary/Conclusions

The present study examined data gathered through staff interviews and observations in a large Mid-Atlantic state probation department from January 2012 until October 2014. Upon reviewing the data, researchers became interested in themes related to the use of telephone monitoring (TM) for low risk probationers. Depending on the site, use of TM with low risk offenders ranged from 98% to 41% of low risk offender caseloads. Researchers discovered that use by site differed due to policy adaptations, officer perceptions of TM, individual factors (e.g. compliance), and external factors (e.g. judiciary opinion).

Limitations of Information

The study utilized observation and interview data. These types of data are limited to the perception and experience of the researcher. TM was not the original scope of the study, which may have limited the opportunity to uncover more data regarding TM. The study did not provide details regarding the frequency that themes emerged from the interviews and observations. Researchers did not have access to probationer data to include probation outcome as a part of the study.

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.

According to the risk principle of the Risk-Need-Responsivity framework of supervision, probation and parole officers should spend more time and resources on higher risk offenders. Low risk offenders should not require as many resources since they are not likely to reoffend. New technologies, like telephone monitoring, provides an opportunity to manage low risk offenders more efficiently.

From January 2012 to October 2014, researchers collected interview and observation data from a multi-site Mid-Atlantic probation department. Researchers discovered that the use of TM varied from 98% to 41% of a low risk caseload. Overall, the probation department utilized TM for 74% of their low risk offender population. From further examination of the interview and observation data, researchers were able to identify themes that impacted the use of TM.

Researchers discovered that the varying use of TM for low risk offenders was due to different adaptations that were implemented. Some were formal and policy driven, such as refraining from placing probationers on TM with pending new charges or a deferred disposition or only placing probationers on TM after 6 months of supervision. Individual level adaptations like compliance considerations, special populations (e.g. mental health, gang affiliation, sex offender), and level of officer comfort with the probationer were also factors in TM use. Officers limited TM use based upon the belief that the judiciary or public did not

support the use of TM as a supervision tool. Finally, the results of the study illustrate the use of TM is impacted by officers' perceptions of risk and liability. In the study, officers were willing to oversupervise low risk probationers in order to protect public safety.

Practical Applications:

- ✓ Consider using private probation or new technologies like telephone reporting, when available, to monitor low risk probationers.
- ✓ Take an inventory of contacts with low risk offenders to ensure
- ✓ Track time spent on low risk cases and high-risk cases. This can provide you with feedback on how your time is spent. Apply the risk principle of RNR to your caseload by spending time with higher risk cases.
- ✓ Have conversations department wide to brainstorm ideas and policies to minimize oversupervision of low risk probationers.
- ✓ Collaborate across supervision units and department locations to ensure that probationers are receiving consistency in supervision practices.
- ✓ Ask for feedback from your supervisor about your supervision practices related to risk.
- ✓ Find opportunities to separate low and high risk probationers from associating in treatment groups, employment, and recreational activities.