

# Colorado Probation Research in Brief

## *Examining the Impact of Ohio's Progressive Sanction Grid, Final Report*

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**Key Words:** technical violations, violations response, behavior change, revocation, high risk offender

### Summary/Conclusions

The researchers explored the results of Ohio's implementation of a progressive sanctions guideline to assist officers in responding to violations. The guidelines were designed and tested with agents of the Adult Parole Authority. The study used four different components to create a fuller picture of the implementation, the outcomes, and the overall benefit of the policy change. It appears the full effect of the guidelines was not realized, due to its actual use at the line level; regardless, there were still some positive results, with better outcomes found for the higher risk offenders, particularly when sanctions were combined with treatment.

### Limitations of Information

The study was conducted early in the implementation, so results may now be different with wider use of the guidelines. Similarly, due to the length of the study, results are limited to parolees, who were not in the later stages of supervision. Also, there were "significant pre/post-test differences on several key background factors, not surprisingly, since the samples were not matched at the point of selection."

**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.

## Effectively Responding to Violations

Researchers at the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction investigated the implementation and effectiveness of a new progressive sanctions guideline. The new program provides parole officers with a violation matrix to assist in determining the response to violations. This new system of responding to violations is different than the previous method in that it takes into account the offender's risk level, limits the use of incarceration as a response, and replaces a less structured checklist with a risk-based decision matrix. Although the matrix is structured, it allows for officer discretion in choosing the appropriate response.

The researchers compared a sample of 1,040 male and female parolees, who were on parole prior to introduction of the new guidelines, to a sample of 1,012 parolees, who were under supervision with the guidelines. Procedurally, half as many parolees were taken back for revocation hearings under the new guidelines, and those that did go back were more likely to be higher risk and more likely to be revoked. Also, under the new guidelines, there was a "26 point reduction during this period in the overall percentage of returns who are low risk.

Other relevant findings include a significant reduction in reoffending rates, when sanctioning was combined with programming/treatment; while those parolees who received only punishment (reprimands, restrictions) demonstrated poorer recidivism outcomes. This effect was particularly strong for high-risk violators who "benefited substantially from having at least one prior programming sanction."

These results were achieved, while keeping the community safe. Specifically, "the introduction of progressive sanctions has played no independent role in increasing recidivism, even under a more limited use of revocation hearings."

### Practical Applications

- ✓ When formulating a response to a violation, the probation officer should take into account the seriousness of the violation and the risk level of the probationer, to ensure responses that are proportional to the misconduct.
- ✓ Use treatment and program interventions early and "front-load" supervision for higher risk probationers.
- ✓ Initiate discussions within your unit or department in regard to violation response and explore the differences in sanctions used.
- ✓ When community safety is not a paramount issue, explore all possible options before requesting a court hearing. This may include changes in probation officers, changes in treatment providers, reassessment, or multiple treatment episodes.
- ✓ Minimize supervision of low risk probationers. For those assessed as low risk, violation responses need to be minimally intrusive, so as not to disrupt the very protective factors that make them low risk.
- ✓ Obtain incentives that are readily available to reward behavior change and balance violation responses.

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