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Do Community-Based Corrections Have an Effect on Recidivism Rates? A Review of Community Supervision, Supportive Reintegration, Electronic Monitoring Programs and Their Impacts on Reducing Reoffending

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Do community-based corrections have an effect on recidivism rates?

A review of community supervision, supportive reintegration, and electronic monitoring programs, and their impacts on reducing reoffending.

This paper will examine the impact and effect community-based corrections have on the reduction of recidivism for adult offenders. More specifically, I will focus on three commonly used types of such corrections in the United States: community supervision, supportive reintegration, and electronic monitoring. I propose that these community-based correctional programs will reduce reoffending rates.

I will first provide a theoretical perspective to provide a foundational support, followed by a background of community-based corrections and their usage in contemporary American courts. I will then review the research regarding community supervision, supportive reintegration, and electronic monitoring, and discuss how these programs affect recidivism, how they may be improved, and implications for future research. Offender-community integration is more relevant than ever as prison populations continue to increase and more inmates are being released back into society (U.S. Department of Justice 2009). Community-based corrections, if utilized appropriately and efficiently, have the potential to decrease overcrowded prisons, be more cost-effective than incarceration, and reduce reoffending rates (Bouffard and Muftic 2006).

Theoretical Perspective

Francis Cullen's (1999) social support theory evolved out of conflict theory and contends that the perceived and actual amounts of instrumental, expressive, or emotional supports that one receives

from their communities can help former offenders abstain from criminal activity and reconnect or reintegrate into conventional society. Cullen explains that the social support approach is particularly suited to rehabilitate prisoners since recidivism has been shown to be reducible via programs that develop interpersonal skills, provide counseling from caring providers, and offer multiple social services (Regoli, Hewitt, and Delisi 2008). Through his theory, Cullen has developed a three-part “crime control agenda” which argues that “social support may serve as a public idea that can help organize a progressive approach to crime control” (p. 188). First, Cullen states that increasing social supports to families and communities is “good criminology” because empirical evidence demonstrates that social support is inversely related to individual offending and to macro-level crime rates (1999). The research reviewed in this paper also supports this concept and statement, especially in regards to supportive integration as a form of community corrections. Second, he asserts that social support “makes sense as beneficial because it resonates with Americans’ personal and imagined experiences” (p. 196). In other words, the idea of social support strikes most people as common sense and is consistent with the personal experience of knowing the value of having been helped and supported throughout one’s life. Third, Cullen concludes that “social support leads to specific policies that are humane and efficacious” (p. 201). That is, social supports will improve the lives of those at risk for crime and those likely to reoffend. As a result, communities and the general public will witness a decrease in criminal activity & recidivism, and an increase in safety.

Cullen’s (1999) argument for social support also calls for the reaffirming of rehabilitation. The rehabilitative ideal maintains that investing resources in offenders will help to reduce their recidivism. In addition, he also asserts that there is increasing evidence that “punitive, non-supportive programs do not reduce recidivism, whereas appropriately designed programs that offer support to offenders lessen criminal propensities” (p. 202). Cullen’s theory also reinforces the findings in this paper which indicate that community-based corrections with a more surveillance-oriented focus (electronic monitoring and

community supervision) did not reduce reoffending, whereas programs that offer some form of therapeutic component and address specific offender needs (supportive reintegration) did reduce re-arrest rates.

Background

Though alternatives to incarceration have been implemented for several decades, research has produced mixed results as to whether or not these programs actually have an effect on recidivism rates. These varying results are often attributed to inconsistencies in how programs are implemented, funded, and the political perspective driving the research (Ostermann 2009). However, one issue that cannot be disputed is that with the increasing incarceration rates, more and more individuals, families, and communities are being affected by incarceration. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2009), at least 95 percent of all state prisoners will be released from prison at some point. These individuals are often released back into the community with little to no supports or resources to aid them in reintegrating successfully and providing them with alternatives to a criminal lifestyle (Harrison and Schehr 2004). It is not surprising then that the recidivism rate in America is over 50 percent (for this paper, and the research results contained within, recidivism is defined as any new arrest) (U.S. Department of Justice 2009).

The prison population in the United States, now over 2.5 million people (U.S. Department of Justice 2009), more than tripled between 1980 and 2000 (Padgett, Bales, and Blomberg 2006) and continues to increase annually (U.S. Department of Justice 2009). This trend of mass incarceration was largely as a result of the American “war on drugs” and get-tough tactics in the 1970s and 80s (Ostermann 2009). In the following years, the discretionary powers of judges and parole boards were significantly diminished, as mandated sentence lengths were implemented. This movement significantly contributed to more incarceration and longer sentences, especially for non-violent drug

offenders (Ostermann 2009).

As a result of the ballooning prison populations and overcrowding issues, alternative sanctions became more widely used, largely as a necessity and less so as a productive, effective option (Harrison and Schehr 2004). As such, community-based correctional programs were inundated with up to three-times as many participants, but without proper compensation in the form of adequate funding, staffing, or appropriate supervision from the legal system (Ostermann 2009). Additionally, fluctuating financial support, as well as a lack of uniform regulations and management created inconsistencies in how community programs operated, and the quality of service and control offered. Unfortunately, this trend of overburdening community programs without proper resources continues today and inevitably decreases the effectiveness and impact of their intended purpose. This failure to be able to properly address the demand with the resources provided is most evident when examining community supervision, the most frequently used form of community-based corrections.

Community Supervision

Community supervision, for the purpose of this paper, is defined by either participation in parole or probation. Parole includes adults that have been conditionally released to the community and are subject to being returned to jail or prison for rule violations or any other offense. Probation is used in lieu of incarceration (U.S. Department of Justice 2009), typically for more minor or first-time offenses. Both types of community supervision include standards and conditions that the offender must comply with, or risk being (re)incarcerated if in violation. When participating in either of these programs, individuals are appointed a parole or probation officer that enforces the expectations and requires the offender to check in either by phone or in-person at a determined interval. At the end of 2007, approximately 1 in every 45 adults in the United States was supervised in the community, either on probation or parole (U.S. Department of Justice 2009). With such large numbers of individuals

under some form of community supervision, it seems appropriate to question and assess the effectiveness of this frequently used program.

Probation was first introduced in the United States over 150 years ago and is still the most widely used form of community-based corrections today (Bonta et al. 2008). Beginning in the late 1970s, the enforcement aspects of supervision took precedent, as sentencing goals favored retribution, incapacitation, and punishment (Taxman 2008). To accommodate this shift, community supervision moved its focus from rehabilitation to punishment, with increased layers of conditions and requirements placed on the offender. This shift developed concurrently with the influx of offenders mandated to supervision, and probation officers consequently became overwhelmed with caseloads and bureaucratic minutiae (Taxman 2008). Even if a rehabilitative focus was still encouraged, officers would not have the time, training, or resources to implement such approaches.

Research conducted by Bonta et al. (2008) found that recidivism rates for parolees (24.5 percent) were almost half of that compared to those released without any form of supervision (42.9 percent). In addition, these researchers revealed three significant relationships in how probationer-offender interactions produce higher success rates. First, the more time devoted to dealing with a “criminogenic need” (defined as factors that produce or tend to produce crime or criminals – i.e. substance abuse, family dysfunction, etc.), the lower the recidivism rate. Second, the more topics covered during a probation meeting, the higher the recidivism rate. Lastly, the more time that the probation officer spent discussing the conditions of probation, the higher the recidivism rate (Bonta et al. 2008). These results indicate that the quality of the officer-offender meetings is imperative in addressing core issues that may lead individuals to (re)commit crimes. Though more face-to-face meetings may be beneficial, this is not always realistic due to time and budget constraints. Therefore, for community supervision to be most effective, officers need to use the time they have properly and concentrate on the factors that lead their clients to (re)offend (Bonta et al. 2008). Additionally, Taxman

(2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 studies of various community supervision programs and found that programs that incorporated some form of treatment (e.g. mental health, substance abuse, anger management) had an average reduction in recidivism of 21.9 percent, while surveillance-oriented programs tended to have no impact on recidivism. This evidence reiterates the need for a balance between punishment, social control, and treatment to address criminogenic needs that will ultimately reduce re-arrest rates.

Though community supervision research and findings produce mixed results in regards to recidivism reduction, they do acknowledge that if executed properly and with attention to the individual needs of the clients, they can be useful programs in reducing re-offense rates (Bonta et al. 2008). However, regarding probation specifically, the majority of offenders mandated to this sanction (51 percent) have been convicted for committing a misdemeanor (U.S. Department of Justice 2009), and thus may generally be less likely to reoffend. This dimension is important to note because it may inevitably reduce recidivism rates and mislead researchers into believing that probation as community supervision is causing the reduction, when in fact it is actually occurring due to the nature of the offender. Regardless, research has shown reductions (though not statistically significant) in recidivism for participants in community supervision as compared to those without, and also for parolees, who are often more serious offenders (Bonta et al. 2008). It may be supervision within the community could be more effective for parolees and/or more serious offenders if programming was enhanced and strengthened.

A more intensive form of community supervision that has shown significant re-arrest reductions for all types of offenders is supportive reintegration (Harrison and Schehr 2004). This form of community-based correction can incorporate probation or parole, while also expanding the human service element by providing extensive individualized services and support within the community.

Supportive Reintegration

Supportive reintegration is a broad term used for any type of program that provides assistance in some form for offenders after their release from incarceration. This may include case management, vocational training and placement, mental health treatment, family reunification, and/or transitional housing (Ostermann 2009). These programs are most common in urban areas and are often in the form of day reporting centers (DRCs). These centers provide multiple supportive services under one roof and can also be combined with other forms of conditional release from incarceration (i.e. an add-on to probation). DRCs also try to incorporate the offender's family to strengthen ties and extend counseling services to make the transition home easier for everyone (Craddock 2004). Another common form of supportive reintegration specifically focuses on employment. Vocational agencies run exclusively for the recently released offer comprehensive services including job readiness skills, training & retraining, GED courses, and employment placement (Harrison and Schehr 2004). Of the three community-based correctional programs discussed in this paper, supportive reintegration is by far the most intensive, holistic, and progressive.

Eggers et al. (2006) developed a vocational program and implemented it in several Pennsylvania jails. This program taught new, desirable vocational skills and also helped to place participants in full-time employment. After one year, released offenders who participated in their program were re-arrested at a much lower rate (12.1 percent) than those released without vocational support or placement (46.5 percent). Additionally, research conducted by Zhang, Roberts, and Callanan (2006) found that participants who successfully completed a California post-release reintegration program reoffended much less (15.5 percent) than those that did not participate (52.8 percent). This program offered individuals supportive programming that included services such as literacy enhancement, affordable housing, and parenting classes. Even participants that only engaged in one or a few of the program courses reduced their likelihood of being re-arrested. Further evidence supporting

this type of dynamic program was established by Sherman et al. (1998) who found that reintegration programs that focus on rehabilitation with “risk-focused” treatments were successful in reducing future criminal behavior. These treatments included mental health counseling, vocational training & placement, and substance abuse programs. Research on supportive reintegration consistently support its impact and reduction on criminal recidivism.

Though nearly all research reviewed found statistically significant reductions in reoffending with those participating in supportive reintegration programs, this type of community-based correction was most influential and successful with specific types of offenders. Researchers consistently revealed that arrest history, offense types, and length of time already served in prison influenced offenders' success within supportive reintegration and the services offered (Ostermann 2009; Craddock 2004; Eggers et al. 2006). In other words, individuals with a lengthy and frequent arrest rate, those that are violent or habitual, and those that have served extended periods incarcerated were more likely to reoffend, regardless of participation in supportive programs (though recidivism was still reduced after participation in supportive reintegration) (Craddock 2004). These factors could be used for placement and referral purposes, as well as providing a better understanding of who these programs best serve. By recognizing what types of offenders benefit most from certain types of programs, we can then implement them more efficiently and productively. This will in turn save money, maximize recidivism reduction, increase community involvement, and decrease prison populations effectively.

Electronic Monitoring

Electronic monitoring (EM) is often used synonymously with “house arrest” or “home confinement,” but these terms often confuse or mislead the general public. Electronic monitoring as a form of alternative to imprisonment is regularly used for offenders that may pose a flight risk, are awaiting trial or sentencing, or have been released from incarceration, and EM was implemented as a

condition to release. Monitoring is done when an electronic anklet is “installed” on an offender (securely placed on the individual's ankle and only to be removed by law enforcement) with GPS or radio frequency (RF), and will allow the court system to track the offender's movements (Padgett et al. 2006). Predetermined locations are approved and their times and routes are programmed into the EM system. Thus, the term “home confinement” is not entirely accurate because offenders are still able to attend appointments outside of the home, go to work, pick up their children from school, etc. Though EM is not as commonly mandated as other forms of community-based corrections, it is still quite prevalent and was estimated to be used with more than 100,000 offenders in 2007 (Demichele, Payne, and Button 2008).

In a study conducted by Padgett et al. (2006), it was found that high-risk offenders are 67.4 percent less likely to reoffend or violate their court orders than their counterparts sentenced solely to probation without EM. Their study also revealed that offenders placed on EM were significantly less likely to abscond during their sentence than those on probation alone. This form of community correction, as compared to the other types discussed in this paper, is the least researched and most ambiguous in known effectiveness. In addition, the Padgett et al. (2006) study is the only one that has shown a significant decrease in recidivism by those on EM. Renzema and Mayo-Wilson (2005) provide the most thorough assessment of research measuring the relationship between EM and offender performance and conclude “that applications of electronic monitoring as a tool for reducing crime are not supported by existing data” (p. 220). However, with so many offenders on EM, further examination of statistical outcomes and re-arrest rates of participants should be a pressing concern.

Because of the limited research and statistical evidence available, it is difficult to conclude whether EM is an effective tool in reducing recidivism, or even as an alternative sanction to incarceration. Most offenders that are placed on EM are higher-risk (habitual and/or violent), hence why extra monitoring is required. Because of this, these types of offenders may be more prone to

reoffend anyway, thus skewing the outcome data. EM may be excessive for first-time offenders, but may be appropriate for a low-level drug offender, who may not necessarily require incarceration, but may benefit from the added monitoring.

EM has the potential to be a very important component in corrections, but more research and analysis is necessary in understanding how this program could be better utilized. Those reintegrating back into society from imprisonment could benefit from EM for the additional supervision, but with the advantage of being back in their home and able to live more independently (i.e. maintaining employment and family involvement). Electronic monitoring may also be beneficial to many offenders already on probation (used as an add-on), or awaiting trial and still in need of supervision. If incorporated with other forms of community-based corrections, EM would be more likely to decrease re-arrest rates and could thus reduce incarceration costs by limiting imprisonment.

Conclusion

Underlying all of the research I have reviewed is a theme of needed renovations and improvements upon existing community-based correctional programs to be more efficient, of higher quality, and with better developed placements specific to offender types. Though much of the general research available provides mixed results and attitudes for the effectiveness of community-based programs, there is still a strong belief that these programs can produce even better results if a focus on program implementation was enhanced. If programs such as community supervision, supportive reintegration, and electronic monitoring were utilized specifically for the types of offenders that do best while participating in them, both recidivism and financial burdens could be reduced. Successful programs are invaluable for reintegrating individuals back into their communities, lowering prison populations, and recidivism.

The research I have reviewed revealed mixed results in community-based correctional

programs. These programs are not necessarily appropriate for all offenders, nor are they as successful as they could be. However, there seems to be a general consensus among the researchers that these different types of programs could be used to a far greater extent than they are now, with greater efficiency, and higher success rates. Community-based correctional programs need to be dynamic, multi-faceted, and specifically designed to address certain types of offenders. Until these programs are restructured and refocused, researchers will not be able to effectively study their full potential for reducing recidivism. At this time however, general research does not convincingly support the benefits and utilization of community supervision and electronic monitoring. On the other hand, supportive reintegration appears to be influential and successful in reducing re-arrest rates. This can most likely be attributed to the multi-faceted nature of this type of program and its focus on rehabilitation. Offering services and resources that allow offenders to address and possibly overcome multiple issues, limitations, and impediments, as well as connect with a supportive network, seems to be a convincing combination for reducing re-offenses.

Future research is needed on all types of correctional programs, both prison and community-based. More information is also necessary on offender typing with the intention of better understanding proper placement within community corrections and recidivism rates by demographic information (e.g. race, age, location, etc.). Furthermore, comparing our correctional systems, programs, and outcomes to other Western nations may provide thoughtful insights into alternative penal structures and possibilities.

For community-based corrections to be fully understood and utilized, we need to have a deeper appreciation of how they work, with what types of offenders they benefit most, and how their implementation can be best employed to maximize recidivism reduction, decrease correctional costs, and increase public safety.

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