

Maximum Impact:

Targeting Supervision on Higher-Risk People, Places and Times

Public Safety Policy Brief

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Executive Summary

One out of every 45 adults in the United States is under some form of criminal justice supervision in the community.¹ These offenders commit a

disproportionate share of the nation's street crime: recent national statistics indicate that more than half of jail inmates were on probation, parole or pretrial release at the time of their arrest.²

Among these high-rate lawbreakers, a majority of the serious crimes are committed by a small fraction of people, in a small number of crime-ridden neighborhoods, during the first few months of probation or parole.³

This concentration of crime—by person, place, and time—offers extraordinary opportunities for policy makers to improve public safety and save millions in corrections budgets. At a time when states are facing historic budget deficits, state leaders can prevent a large share of the nation's criminal activity and cut corrections costs by helping probation and parole agencies focus their efforts on higher-risk offenders, in higher-risk neighborhoods, at higher-risk times through a strategy of targeted supervision.

Several states have begun to take advantage of the strategic opportunities offered by the concentration of crime. Arizona, Nevada and Pennsylvania, for example, have shortened supervision time for offenders who follow the rules of their release, thereby reducing the number of low-risk offenders on active caseloads and allowing probation officers to focus their efforts on those who are breaking the rules. In Maryland, parole agents are assigned to neighborhood-based caseloads in four parts of the state, a tactic that is credited in part with a 31 percent reduction in arrests compared to traditional supervision.⁴

Despite these and other changes, efforts at reforming community supervision strategies are still nascent. While recognizing the need





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ABOUT THE PROJECT

In 2006, the Pew Center on the States launched the Public Safety Performance Project to help states advance fiscally sound, data-driven policies and practices in sentencing and corrections that protect public safety, hold offenders accountable and control corrections costs.

The Pew Charitable Trusts applies the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems. The Pew Center on the States identifies and advances effective policy approaches to critical issues facing states.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This document is part of a series of primers for policy makers about the critical choices they face in developing strategies to improve the public safety return on taxpayer dollars. For more on this topic, please visit our website at www.pewcenteronthestates.org/publicsafety.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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An earlier version of this document was reviewed by Amy Solomon and Scott Johnston. Ms. Solomon is Senior Research Associate at the Urban Institute's Justice Policy Center. Mr. Johnston is Chief State Supervisor for the Missouri Board of Probation and Parole. While these experts have screened the report and provided useful comments, neither they nor their current or former organizations necessarily endorse its findings or conclusions.

for change, many states spread their efforts too thin. Some agencies fail to adapt because of bureaucratic inertia: it's just "the way they've always done business." Others face political pressure and legal requirements to maintain active caseloads of low-level offenders, depleting resources that could be used more efficiently on those who are more likely to re-offend.

However, the growing recognition that crime is heavily concentrated, along with mounting pressure on state budgets, is compelling more policy makers to encourage community supervision agencies to target the riskiest cases. By using risk assessment instruments to identify higher-risk offenders, community corrections departments can place them on higher-intensity caseloads to reduce crime and returns to prison. At the same time, they can save money and free up caseloads by allowing lower-risk offenders to earn their way off supervision by complying with the terms of their probation or parole. States can cut additional costs by consolidating their resources using a geographically targeted approach to put community corrections officers and intervention programs where they are needed most.

Ultimately, a new strategy of targeted community corrections can help cut the massive and still rising parole and probation rolls, while at the same time saving money and reducing crime. [📄](#)

Frontload Resources: Targeting Supervision at Higher-Risk Times

Offenders on probation and parole are at the highest risk of re-arrest during the first few months on community supervision. A 2008 report produced by the National Research Council (NRC)⁵ reviewed records from over 240,000 offenders released from prison in 13 states, and found the overall probability of arrest is roughly twice as high in the first month of supervision as it is in the 15th month.

Perhaps equally as important, the arrest rate between months 15 and 36 for the group was uniformly lower. This suggests that supervision resources may have only marginal effects on offending after the first year back in the community. While arrest rates decline over time for all offense types, they decrease precipitously for drug and property offenses (Fig. 1). Between months 1 and 15 of supervision, the NRC report states, the chance of arrest for property and drug offenses drops by 40 percent.

The challenge for policy makers and corrections professionals is to respond to these facts by designing and testing new approaches to offenders during this initial "at risk" period. The first of the approaches to concentrated community supervision, **concentration by time**, focuses limited community corrections resources—including officers' time and program services—at the start of the offender's term of pro-

bation or parole. By “frontloading” resources and supervision, community corrections managers can be proactive; offenders become the focus of community supervision before—not after—they violate a specific rule or commit a new crime. Offenders who succeed during this initial period will either have proven that they were low risk to begin with or they will have reduced their risk level, for example, by completing a substance abuse treatment program or securing housing and employment. In either case, their success allows supervision agencies to shift resources to higher-risk offenders.⁶

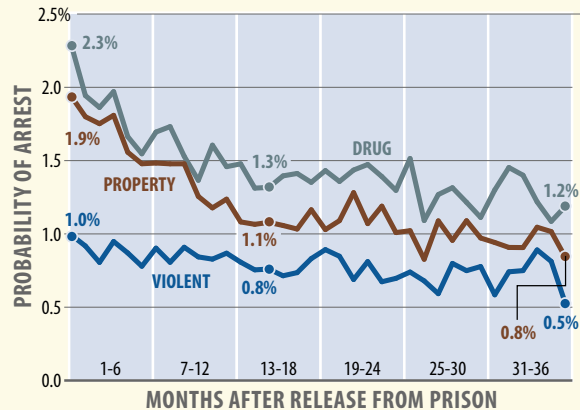
Frontloaded supervision strategies are likely the first step toward shorter, more intensive supervision terms nationally. Texas, the state with the nation’s largest community corrections population (accounting for more than 10 percent of offenders under community supervision in the country today),⁷ has recently shortened maximum community supervision terms from 10 to 5 years for certain drug and property offenders.⁸ Several other states have adopted similar measures, including Pennsylvania, which passed a law in 2008 to move parolees onto “administrative” (or unsupervised) parole after one year if they comply with their conditions of supervision,⁹ and Delaware, which in 2003 reduced most maximum probation terms to two years for violent felonies, one and a half years for drug offenses, and one year for other offenses.¹⁰

While some states are developing strategies to concentrate resources in the early months of supervision, other states are passing laws that allow the imposition of long-term or lifetime supervision on certain categories of offenders, based on the assumption that the threat they pose to the community will *not* diminish over time.

While this strategy runs counter to a concentrated supervision model, it is important to keep in mind that for many legislatures—and the public at large—there is deep and understandable skepticism about the prospects for change in certain groups of offenders and a sense of justice that demands long periods of monitoring. Because these longer supervision terms for violent and sex offenders stretch the

RISK OF ARREST HIGHEST IN FIRST MONTHS AFTER PRISON

Between months 1 and 15 after release from prison, the chance of arrest drops by 40 percent.



NOTE: Probabilities adjusted for time off the street

SOURCE: Analysis by Richard Rosenfeld and Robert Fornango, originally presented in *Parole, Desistance from Crime, and Community Integration*, National Research Council, 2007

already thin resources of most community corrections agencies, they put an even higher premium on frontloading supervision for offenders whose crimes and risk levels are less severe.

Impact Players: Targeting Supervision at Higher-Risk Offenders

The second dimension of a concentrated supervision strategy, **concentration by offender**, targets limited resources toward the offenders who pose the greatest risk to the community. Research over the past 25 years has led to the development of a new generation of risk assessment tools that are able to predict with fairly strong accuracy the probability that an individual will commit more crimes.¹¹ Once the subgroup of offenders posing the greatest risk of committing new offenses is identified, the next step is developing an effective, evidence-based *risk reduction* strategy that addresses their treatment, service and supervision needs. Research has demonstrated that closer supervision of probationers and parolees alone is not the answer; it only increases their revocation and re-incarceration rate.¹² However, there is considerable evidence that concentrating both services and supervision on these



higher risk, higher rate offenders will result in significant reductions in crime and victimization.¹³

To accomplish this, community corrections agencies must be able to employ a wide range of strategies to manage their work and the size of their caseloads, which are estimated at about 100 offenders per probation officer and 60 per parole officer.¹⁴ The most direct approach is to assign the higher-risk cases to probation or parole officers with smaller caseloads, thus allowing them to provide intensive supervision and services, while leaving medium- and lower-risk cases to officers with larger rolls. While research shows that the quality of supervision has more impact on outcomes than the simple frequency of contacts between officers and offenders,¹⁵ the American Probation and Parole Association has suggested that the best results can be achieved with the following caseload standards: intensive caseloads (20:1), moderate to high risk (50:1), low risk (200:1), and administrative caseloads (1000:1 or more).¹⁶

New technologies offer another way for states to intensify supervision of higher-risk offenders. A wide range of technological innovations can make the task of monitoring offenders much simpler, allowing frontline staff to track offender locations, movements, drug and alcohol consumption, risk level, and progress in treatment. Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) systems and other related electronic devices allow authorities to monitor remotely offenders' whereabouts. In other cases, offenders check in at ATM-like kiosks (that verify their identity) in their neighborhoods rather than consuming time and expense in travel to face-to-face meetings. Meanwhile, rapid-result drug tests and alcohol sensors give immediate reports on whether offenders have been using prohibited substances. Several states are investing heavily in these technologies, sometimes called "techno-corrections," as a way to supplement traditional, labor-intensive supervision practices or replace more expensive incarceration.¹⁷

Lawmakers in Arizona and Nevada recently passed legislation to help their community corrections agencies target higher-risk offenders by providing incentives for positive behavior change. A 2008 Arizona

law grants 20 days off of probation terms for every 30 days they remain in full compliance with the rules of their supervision.¹⁸ In 2007, Nevada increased from 10 days to 20 days per month the credits that parolees can earn by complying with supervision conditions and paying fees and victim restitution.¹⁹ Nevada lawmakers also expanded the incentive to probationers, allowing them to earn 20 days off of their supervision terms for each month in compliance as well. The state projected these measures would save \$28 million by 2009.²⁰ By creating a powerful incentive for offenders to obey the rules and meet their financial obligations, these laws help reduce caseloads, allowing officers to focus their energy and program slots on higher-risk offenders who are more likely to commit new crimes.

Location Matters: Targeting Supervision on Higher-Risk Places

A disproportionate share of probationers and parolees live in a small number of neighborhoods where, research indicates, they are at an increased risk of re-offending.²¹ For example, in Michigan, Wayne County is home to the highest number of parolees (over 20,000), the highest annual number of violent crimes (over 23,000) and the highest incurred cost of incarceration (over \$430 million).²² Home to just 44 percent of Wayne County's adults, Detroit accounts for over 75 percent of the county's total correctional population.²³

The third component of a concentrated supervision strategy, **concentration by location**, refers to the assignment of geographically determined caseloads as well as the deliberate siting—and concentration—of programs in these higher stakes, resource-poor neighborhoods.²⁴ These strategies gained momentum when Geographic Information Systems (GIS) allowed analysts to map where offenders lived and thereby confirmed the hunches of practitioners across the country. The maps dramatically displayed the heavy concentration of offenders in certain neighborhoods, as well as the distance those areas were from probation and parole offices and resource sites. For example, analysis by the Justice Mapping Center (Fig. 2)

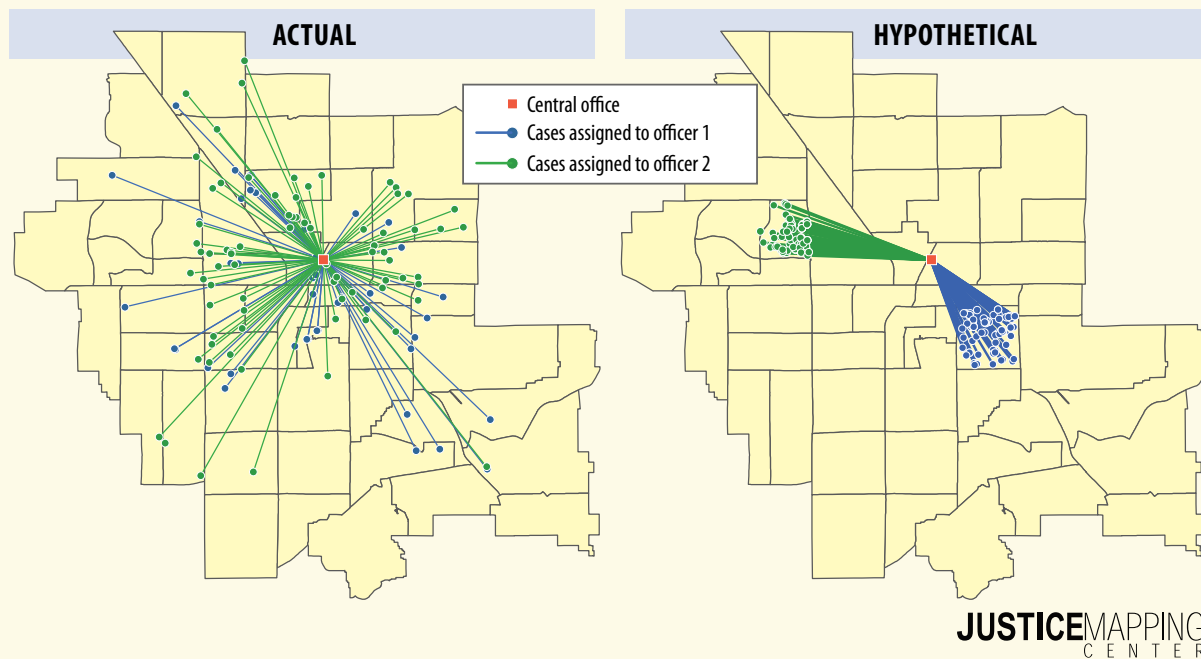


showed how geographically-determined caseloads could create efficiencies in Clark County, Nevada. Rather than supervising a randomly scattered group of offenders, officers could save travel time and gain community partners by focusing on one section of the city. Clark County, as well as counties in several other states, is now experimenting with this data-driven strategy in community corrections to determine workload needs and assign caseloads.

Additional research is needed to pinpoint the value of concentrating community supervision by location. Maryland's Proactive Community Supervision initiative employs a wide range of evidence-based practices, including geographically-based caseloads, and has been shown to reduce re-arrests of parolees by 31 percent compared to a control group under traditional supervision.²⁵ Several other studies have explored the impact of resource availability, quality and location on

OFFENDER CONCENTRATION ALLOWS FOCUSED CASELOADS

The maps below plot just two actual and hypothetical caseloads of equal numbers of probationers and parolees in Clark County, Nevada. Many zip codes could be supervised by just a few dedicated officers, rather than dozens of officers with scattered caseloads. Supervision officers can save on travel time and become better acquainted with specific communities if they work with geographically concentrated caseloads.



Creating maps and accompanying workload reallocation plans is the first step in designing supervision strategies for these high-risk communities. Similar mapping strategies might be used to identify the location of various programs, faith-based organizations and other supportive resources in these areas and to highlight gaps in services. Developing one-stop centers for services, assigning officers to neighborhoods, and encouraging stronger partnerships with neighborhood groups and law enforcement have all been identified as best practices.

the behavior of offenders under community supervision.²⁶ These findings suggest that community change facilitates offender change.²⁷ While there are a variety of community change models to consider—the “Justice Reinvestment” approach pioneered by the Council of State Governments Justice Center; the “broken windows” strategy recommended by the Reinventing Probation Council; the Weed and Seed strategies popular with the Office of National Drug Control Policy; and restorative justice initiatives to name a few²⁸—the renewed focus on the impact of communities on offenders appears long overdue.



Concentrating supervision resources by location carries implications for new program development and evaluation. Ensuring probationers and parolees remain crime- and drug-free and follow the other rules of their community supervision is a complex task, necessarily requiring the coordination of agencies and organizations in both the government and the community. Many communities, however, lack a sense of ownership and genuine involvement in local supervision. And many probation and parole agencies are reluctant to tackle community-wide issues in an era of scarce resources.

Yet combating recidivism with corrections resources alone is insufficient. The reentry effort is gaining momentum in successfully pulling together law enforcement and other government agencies, not-for-profit service organizations, faith-based groups, treatment providers and other community groups to share in developing solutions to improving public health and safety. This effort puts community corrections agencies at the table with other stakeholders, who hold an equal or greater interest and responsibility for solving these complex issues.

Probation and parole officers can and should take a stronger leadership role in these initiatives.²⁹ They have the ability to be catalysts for change in the lives of large numbers of offenders in higher-risk communities and, in turn, to improve the quality of life in these communities as a whole.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, the total population of this country's community corrections system nearly doubled (from 2.6 million to 5.1 million offenders),³⁰ probation and parole terms became longer, and supervision strategies aimed more and more at control of offender behavior. Ironically, however, these changes have led to higher costs as a significant number of probation and parole "failures" enter—or reenter—our prison system each year.³¹ Only 57 percent of the 2.2 million adults discharged from probation in 2006 were successful, compared to 69 percent in 1990.³² Among the parole population, the numbers are even lower:

The growing recognition that crime is heavily concentrated, along with mounting pressure on state budgets, is compelling more policy makers to encourage community supervision agencies to target the riskiest cases.

only 44 percent of the 520,000 parolees discharged in 2006 fulfilled the conditions of their supervision, compared to 50 percent in 1990.³³ In some states, as many as two out of every three prison admissions are for probation and parole revocations.³⁴

Thankfully, several innovative community corrections practices are bucking these national trends. A growing research base and an emerging consensus among corrections experts have identified a number of successful approaches, including use of reliable assessment instruments to identify offenders' risk levels and develop case management plans that target the individual's specific risk factors. Other successful practices include partnering with law enforcement and community organizations such as health-care providers and faith-based organizations, and incorporating family, friends and employers directly into assessment, case planning and supervision to provide the broadest possible base of support. Finally, monitoring increasingly includes rewards and incentives for positive behavior, as well as swift and certain sanctions, such as community service or short jail stays, for violations of supervision rules.

Combined with these approaches, concentrated supervision strategies can help to achieve positive results for public safety and offender reintegration. The current climate, in which states are actively searching for solutions to reduce crime and corrections costs, provides policy makers a important opportunity to test and benefit from these new strategies. 

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