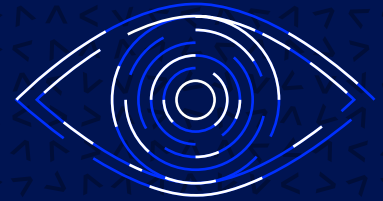


# Community Supervision Research Agenda



## OVERVIEW

This document is an overview of Arnold Ventures’ community supervision research agenda. It is guided by AV’s mission of maximizing opportunity and minimizing injustice. The purpose of the research agenda is to develop and build the evidence base on community supervision policy and practice, as a core component of our strategy of advancing community supervision policy that is oriented to *promoting success rather than catching failure*. Arnold Ventures’ community supervision strategy has four broad goals, which serve as the basis for this research agenda:

1. To deliver better outcomes for people on supervision, their families, and communities
2. To reduce revocations and costly incarceration for supervision violations
3. To decrease the size and footprint of the community supervision system
4. To promote justice and improve fairness

This agenda outlines various research objectives that are aligned with our strategic goals. *We have particular interest in a subset of these objectives—studies that examine how to incentivize behavior change and better outcomes for those under community supervision; studies that examine supervision reforms and alternatives; studies that examine the process and outcomes of reducing the size and footprint of the supervision system; and studies that explore the mechanisms of ensuring justice and fairness.* Several of our research objectives, given their emphasis on evaluations or assessments of policy reforms, would be best achieved through researcher-practitioner partnerships.

In its mission to maximize opportunity and minimize injustice, Arnold Ventures’ research philosophy is to support research that accurately and significantly reduces the most pressing uncertainties affecting policy. More information about our approach to funding research is [available here](#). This research agenda is an approach to achieving the above goals intended to complement our policy advocacy, strategic litigation, and strategic communication efforts and investments.

## OUTCOMES OF INTEREST

Our research agenda includes outcomes at three important levels: *individuals; systems; and society*. At the individual level, we are interested in measures of crime, offending, and recidivism and the extent to which supervision policy and practice is associated with reductions in offending behaviors. We are also interested in studies that broaden our understanding of public safety and the role of community supervision in promoting success and behavior change for individuals under supervision. Success and behavior change indicators could include measures of: employment, economic stability and mobility; education, training and skills development; housing and residential stability; family stability and functioning; health, mental health, and wellbeing as well as access to treatment services and public benefits. At the systems level, we are interested in measures of the size of the supervision population, disparities, resource allocations, expenditures, and budgets, cost savings and efficiencies, and system processes, procedures, and decision points. At the societal level, we are primarily interested in measures of public safety and studies that include measures of the extent to which supervision policy serves in the broader public interest of being efficient, effective, legitimate, and fair.

This research agenda does not delineate objectives and questions for probation and parole systems, separately. However, we recognize that there are important differences in probation and parole that are relevant to their potential for policy change, such as the size and purpose of the systems, characteristics of the population, relationship to the broader criminal justice system, key decision-makers and decision-/intervention-points, and stakeholders. This research agenda is intended to spur the development of studies on both the probation and parole systems and populations. Proposals to study one or both systems are welcomed.

## **Goal 1: *To deliver better outcomes for people on supervision, their families, and communities***

With 4.5 million people on probation or parole, the number of people under community supervision has more than doubled over the past four decades.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there is strong evidence that probation and parole in their current form are failing to deliver on their promises of improved public safety and rehabilitation. Probation is intended to be an alternative to a jail or prison stay, while parole is intended to help individuals transition from incarceration to the community. However, recidivism rates among those on probation and parole are high and community supervision revocations are a major driver of prison admissions

across the country.<sup>2</sup> Research suggests that community supervision could deliver better public safety outcomes if the right resources are focused on individuals who have the highest risk of reoffending.<sup>3</sup> The current community supervision system is not achieving sufficiently good outcomes while imposing significant costs on individuals, families, and communities. To understand how the system can deliver better outcomes, our research agenda is animated by the following key objectives and illustrative key research questions.

### **Goal 1 Objectives and Questions**

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- 1. *Examine the impact of community supervision policy and practice on individual, family, and community outcomes:*** For example, how are the characteristics of probation and parole conditions and terms (e.g., sentence lengths, conditions of supervision, fines and fees, and reporting requirements) related to individual behaviors and supervision success or failure?
  - 2. *Examine the mechanisms by which positive behaviors and outcomes are incentivized by community supervision policy and practice:*** For example, what probation and parole policies and practices (e.g., early discharge, programs, credits, goal-oriented supervision terms, nudges, active or inactive supervision practices, officer-supervisee relationship), incentivize behavior change, compliance, successful term completion, and long-term success? What policies and practices incentivize behavior change among probation/parole officers and supervision agencies/offices?
  - 3. *Examine the landscape of community supervision innovations/reforms and policy alternatives to community supervision:*** For example, what alternative policies and practices (e.g., community service, fines, deferred judgments, suspended sentences) are available to sentencing judges in lieu of probation terms and to releasing authorities in lieu of post-release supervision and what is the impact of these innovations/reforms/alternatives?
  - 4. *Examine adoption and implementation of evidence-based practices and policies:*** For example, what tools or resources accelerate the adoption and sustainability of evidence-based community supervision practices and policies (e.g., risk-need-responsivity principles, cognitive-behavioral techniques, treatment-based intensive supervision probation, and use of effective reinforcement)?
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## **Goal 2: To reduce revocations and costly incarceration for supervision violations**

Though community supervision can function as a low-cost correctional option when compared to prison, supervision failures are common and costly both socially and fiscally. On any given day, nearly one in four people in prison are incarcerated for community supervision violations. In 20 states, more than half of the prison admissions are for supervision violations.<sup>4</sup> Prison stays due to revocation cost \$9.3 billion annually.<sup>5</sup> While some technical violations may be indicative of criminal activity, some evidence suggests that technical violations are poor proxies of new crime.<sup>6</sup> Community supervision exposes the supervised population to incarceration and the harmful outcomes associated with incarceration, such as poorer health and mental health outcomes and economic and residential instability. When individuals go to jail or prison for technical violations, they experience these harms simply for violating the rules of their supervision and without having committed a new crime. To understand how to reduce revocations and costly returns to incarceration for technical violations, our agenda is animated by the following key objectives and illustrative key research questions.

### **Goal 2 Objectives and Questions**

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1. *Examine the use of technical violations and revocations:* For example, how do probation and parole agents and judges use technical violations and revocations to affect and in response to individual behavior (e.g., to encourage behavior change, to discourage or prevent the commission of new crimes, in response to patterns of behavior, to increase public safety)?
  2. *Examine alternatives to revocations:* For example, does limiting the number and scope of supervision conditions reduce admissions to prison from probation and parole? Do policies that reduce the length of probation and parole terms reduce revocations?
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## **Goal 3: To decrease the size and footprint of the community supervision system**

With evidence that the failures of the current approach to supervision are costly and driving prison admissions, reducing the number of people on supervision and directing resources to those who have a high risk of reoffending better positions supervision agencies and individuals for success.<sup>7</sup> Probation is the single most common criminal sentence in the U.S. and is given for felonies and misdemeanors. At yearend 2016, 40 percent of the total adult probation population was serving a misdemeanor sentence and the majority were serving sentences for primarily nonviolent offenses. Persons serving probation terms for violent offenses accounted for just 20 percent of the probation population the same year.<sup>8</sup> While the parole population is significantly smaller than the

probation population and includes those with more serious offenses, the majority of individuals on parole were initially incarcerated for nonviolent offenses at yearend 2016.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the community supervision system enforces a multitude of conditions for those on supervision, many of which have not been empirically linked to having public safety benefits. Some community supervision conditions can be particularly burdensome and intrusive, particularly those that govern routine aspects of an individual's life (e.g., curfews).<sup>10</sup> To understand how to reduce the size (how many people it touches) and footprint (how it reaches into people's lives) of the system, our agenda is animated by the following key objectives and illustrative key research questions.

## Goal 3 Objectives and Questions

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1. *Examine the landscape of community supervision reforms/innovations, alternatives, and practices on system outcomes:* For example, how do community supervision reforms/innovations, alternatives, and practices (e.g., sentencing fewer individuals to community supervision, reducing the length of supervision sentences, eliminating or capping incarceration for technical violations, limiting supervision conditions, eliminating fines and fees, or dosage probation and parole) affect system outcomes? What are the public safety implications of these innovations, alternatives, and practices?
  2. *Examine the process and outcomes of “right-sizing” or “scaling down” the system to be more focused on those who have the highest risk to public safety:* For example, how does the allocation of probation and parole resources to high-risk populations or during the initial months of supervision terms affect system and individual outcomes? What is the scope and impact of community supervision policy and practice that is focused on low-risk individuals or cases (e.g., misdemeanor probation, private probation)?
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## Goal 4: To promote justice and improve fairness

The impact of community supervision on individuals, their families, and communities is widespread and significant. Further, the community supervision system is reflective of other components and decision-points in the criminal justice system in being comprised of a disproportionate number of people of color and people with lower incomes.<sup>11</sup> Millions of individuals, including those who have committed misdemeanors, are subjected to correctional control without a clear public safety benefit. The terms and conditions of supervision, such as frequent drug testing, regular reporting, supervision fines and fees, and restrictions on movement, can inhibit rehabilitation and success for individuals on supervision, as people often already struggle to maintain employment and stable housing, to access medical and drug treatment, and to meet their family and community obligations.<sup>12</sup> Given that supervision is often not rehabilitative or restorative, it does not routinely lead to public safety benefits and other positive outcomes for individuals, families, or victims, and has a disproportionate impact on people of color and those with lower incomes, many question whether the system is fair and legitimate. Some studies have shown that those on community supervision perceive the system as unjust and unfair.<sup>13</sup> Instead of being oriented to catch failure and focused on rule compliance absent risk and needs, there is an opportunity for community supervision to be restorative and rehabilitative for individuals, families, victims, and communities. To understand whether and how community supervision can be a vehicle to promote justice and improve fairness, our agenda is animated by the following key objectives and illustrative key research questions.

## Goal 4 Objectives and Questions

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1. *Examine the extent of justice and fairness in the system:* For example, what factors are associated with racial and economic disparities, including individual (supervisee) behaviors and characteristics, agency and staff characteristics, and characteristics of community supervision terms and conditions, and other contextual factors?
  2. *Explore the mechanisms of ensuring justice and fairness in the system:* For example, what tools or resources are available to probation and parole agencies, judges, and other relevant stakeholders to monitor and improve fairness and equity in system processes and outcomes?
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### CONCLUSION

Arnold Ventures is committed to expanding the research foundation to improve policy and practice in community supervision. Critically, while the failures of current community supervision policy and practice are evident, we know less about solutions. There is much work to be done to better understand the practices and policies that are related to positive outcomes and how to reduce the gap between what the evidence does show is effective and standard operations in community supervision. Commonsense reforms consistent with this evidence are feasible and testable. We are committed to supporting research that advances such solutions.



## ENDNOTES

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