



COMMUNITY SUPERVISION & PUBLIC SAFETY

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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, 1.4 million individuals were incarcerated in State and Federal prisons in the United States, which is 0.6% of the U.S. adult population (Carson, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). However, far more people are under community supervision, outside of jails and prisons, as punishment for criminal offenses. In 2019, an additional 1.4% and 0.3% of the U.S. adult population were serving time under probation and parole supervision (Oudekerk & Kaebler, 2021).

Despite the guidance, support, and oversight that community supervision aims to provide, these populations are struggling. Recidivism and unemployment rates are exceedingly high among those previously convicted of a crime. The best data we have suggests that 71% of those released from prison are re-arrested within five years of release, 46% return to prison within five years of release (Durose & Antenangel, 2021), and 55% are unemployed eight months after release (Visher et al., 2008). To help improve post-conviction outcomes and public safety, policymakers need clear evidence about the effects of community supervision programs and how to make them better.

WHO IS SUBJECT TO COMMUNITY SUPERVISION?

In the United States, five out of six individuals convicted of a crime are sentenced to probation in the community instead of prison (Carson, 2020; Oudekerk & Kaebler, 2021). Probation is a less-severe punishment than prison; accordingly, people sentenced to probation are typically convicted of less severe offenses. In 2019, 22% of individuals on probation were convicted of violent crimes, 26% were convicted of drug crimes, 25% were convicted of property crimes, and 14% were convicted of public order crimes; two-thirds of those sentenced to probation were convicted of felonies and one-third were convicted of misdemeanors (Oudekerk & Kaebler, 2021).

Among those sentenced to prison, 74% are ultimately released to parole in the community prior to the completion of their sentence (Carson, 2020). Individuals initially sentenced to prison and later released to parole are generally convicted of more serious crimes than individuals initially sentenced to probation, but less serious crimes than individuals who are not granted parole. In 2019, 32% of individuals on parole were convicted of violent crimes, 30% were convicted of drug-related crimes, and 19% were convicted of property crimes.

Despite these differences, individuals under both types of community supervision are at substantial risk of future incarceration. In 2019, 31% and 37% of exits from parole and probation, respectively, were due to incarceration, detainment, absconding, or other reasons than the satisfactory completion of community supervision (Oudekerk & Kaebler, 2021).

More broadly, individuals previously convicted of a crime are disproportionately male (93%), disproportionately Black (32.8%) or Hispanic (23.2%) (Carson, 2020), and face a variety of challenges. On average, previously-convicted individuals have lower rates of educational attainment, less prior employment experience, less access to reliable transportation, less stable housing, and less savings than individuals without histories of criminal justice involvement (Raphael, 2011; Doleac, 2016; Yang, 2017a; Looney and Turner, 2018; Holzer, Raphael and Stoll, 2003; Ciolfi, Levy-Lavelle and Salas, 2016). In addition, there are substantially higher rates of mental illness and substance use disorder issues among this

group (Bronson and Berzofsky, 2017; Bronson, Stroop, Zimmer and Berzofsky, 2017). These challenges exacerbate the difficulty this population faces while under community supervision in their communities; they also highlight the potential importance of community supervision in providing support and guidance to help this group succeed.

THE GOALS AND STRUCTURE OF COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

What are the goals of community supervision, and why might these programs be counterproductive? Community supervision provides restrictions and oversight aimed at deterring people from committing new crimes, by increasing the expectation of punishment for risky or criminal behaviors, as well as removing individuals from high-risk situations (for instance, requirements to stay home at night and not drink alcohol) (Phelps & Curry, 2017; Solomon et al., 2005; LaForest, 2022a).

Failing to meet supervisory requirements results in technical violations that can directly lead to incarceration. (In this research space, incarceration due to technical violations is typically distinguished from incarceration due to a new arrest. Only the latter indicates new criminal behavior.) Technical violations are intended to signal high-risk behavior that may lead to new crimes, but it is unclear that technical violations predict future crime in practice. Even if a supervisee avoids incarceration, the burden of supervisory requirements can negatively affect individuals' integration into the community (for instance, if required meetings with a parole officer require taking time off of work).

Community supervision may also increase access to services, which may improve outcomes related to employment, housing, and general wellbeing; this could indirectly decrease recidivism. However, the net effect of community supervision – whether it results in more burdens than assistance – is an empirical question. Ideal community supervision policies would balance these countervailing effects – maximizing the deterrence and community support aspects of supervision while minimizing the burden.

In general, the structure of probation and parole are the same. Community supervision entails the assignment of a case agent (i.e., a probation or parole officer) who oversees the supervision of the individual; requirements for the individual to meet the agent at pre-specified times and locations each month; and any number of standard and specialized supervisory conditions, assigned by a sentencing judge or parole board, such as drug testing, fee payments, employment, travel restrictions, curfew, restrictions on social contacts, or residency in a group home (LaForest, 2022a). However, within this general structure there is wide variation in community supervision policies and requirements across states and municipalities in the United States (Phelps & Curry 2017).

Due to variation in community supervision requirements across places, and the poor later-life outcomes for individuals convicted of a crime, policymakers need better evidence about which community supervision policies and procedures are most effective, when, and why. For example, should more individuals convicted of a crime be sentenced to probation instead of prison? Should more incarcerated individuals be released earlier, to parole? And what community supervision policies, procedures, and conditions produce better outcomes for individuals and improve public safety?

FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE

Despite the scale of community supervision in the United States, evidence on the effects of probation and parole is extremely limited. Below we review existing research, with a focus on empirical studies that estimate causal effects of community supervision policies, programs, and interventions. This means the studies compare a treated group with a plausible comparison group, using randomized experiments or natural experiments that provide compelling counterfactuals (what would have happened without the treatment). This is crucial for understanding what works, and being able to iterate on policies and programs to find solutions that improve outcomes.

When thinking about how community supervision affects outcomes and community safety, researchers typically compare it with one of two alternatives: being incarcerated instead, or being assigned to a different type of community supervision. In the first case, studies consider whether convicted individuals should be sentenced to probation instead of prison, or whether a currently-incarcerated individual should be released to parole. In the second case, studies consider the effect of varying supervision intensities or conditions. We consider each topic in turn.

COMMUNITY SUPERVISION VERSUS INCARCERATION

PROBATION INSTEAD OF PRISON

A probation sentence is an alternative to a prison sentence, for individuals convicted of less severe offenses (typically non-violent crimes with relatively short sentences). For those on the margin of probation or prison, how do those sentenced to probation fare? Would they have done better or worse if initially sentenced to prison instead? Overall, the research evidence is mixed.

Some studies find lower recidivism rates for individuals sentenced to probation instead of prison. For example, Mueller-Smith (2015) uses the random assignment of defendants to judges in Harris County, Texas, to compare outcomes for those sentenced by harsher versus more lenient judges. For those on the margin (that is, a different judge might have made a different decision), those sentenced to incarceration were more likely to be newly arrested and convicted in the future, compared with those sentenced to probation. Aizer and Doyle (2015) use the random assignment of juveniles' cases to judges in Cook County, Illinois, and find that incarceration, relative to probation, greatly increases the likelihood of future incarceration.

Other studies find no difference between prison and probation, in terms of effects on future outcomes. Loeffler (2013) uses a randomized judge design in Illinois, and finds no effect of incarceration (instead of probation) on future arrests. Using a similar design, Eren and Mocan (2021) find that juvenile incarceration (instead of probation) in Louisiana has no effect on future convictions for violent crimes, but increases future convictions for drug crimes and decreases future convictions for property crimes. Mitchell et al. (2017) use discontinuities in risk score cutoffs in Florida to compare similar defendants on either side of the cutoffs who thus receive different sentences; they conclude that, for drug offenders, prison relative to probation has no effect on future convictions.

Other studies find that probation (versus prison) can lead to worse outcomes. Hjalmarsson (2009) uses discontinuities in sentencing guidelines in Washington State to compare similar people on either side of each threshold; she finds that being sentenced to incarceration, instead of probation, decreases future convictions. Estelle and Phillips (2018) use discontinuities in sentencing guidelines in Michigan to consider effects on people convicted of particular non-violent felony offenses: severe/repeated shoplifting or repeated driving while intoxicated (DWI). They find that harsher sentences (often incarceration versus probation) reduce future felony convictions for those convicted of shoplifting but not for those convicted of DWI. They also use a randomized judge design with the same data and find no effect of harsher sentences for cases where judge leniency matters (that is, where a different judge would have made a different decision). The takeaway is that probation (instead of incarceration) causes somewhere between no effect to a small increase in future felony convictions in this setting. Loeffler and Grunwald (2015) compare people just above and below the age threshold that determines whether defendants are processed as adults or juveniles, in Chicago. They find that, for those convicted of drug offenses, being processed as an adult and thus sentenced to prison (instead of probation as a juvenile) reduces the probability of a future arrest. Finally, Rose & Shem-Tov (2021) use discontinuities in sentencing guidelines in North Carolina and find that incarceration (instead of probation) decreases future incarceration.

Overall, these mixed results suggest that the effects of probation relative to incarceration are context-specific. Descriptive evidence suggests that settings where prison reduces recidivism (relative to probation) may be settings where rehabilitation is emphasized (Loeffler & Nagin, 2022). However, we don't yet fully understand what drives this variation in outcomes – different marginal populations (who is on the margin between incarceration and probation) or different treatments (different prison and/or probation environments)?



PAROLE INSTEAD OF ADDITIONAL INCARCERATION

Being released on parole reduces the amount of time an already-incarcerated individual spends in prison. Evidence on the effect of parole (versus more prison) is extremely thin.

Kuziemko (2013) considers this question in Georgia, using discontinuities in parole board guidelines as well as a mass prisoner release that served as a shock to time served. She finds that additional prison time (versus more time on parole) decreases future incarceration spells. Work-in-progress by LaForest (2022a) uses the random assignment of parole hearing examiners in Pennsylvania. He finds that early release to parole slightly increases returns to prison.

All of that said, the *opportunity* for early release to parole can create powerful incentives that encourage rehabilitation. For instance, avoiding negative peer influences and participation in prison education and treatment programs signal good behavior and motivation to change (to parole boards); if doing so also provides meaningful rehabilitation benefits, this could reduce recidivism after release. Kuziemko (2013) finds that a policy reform in Georgia that removed the option of parole for certain offenders (predominately those convicted of robbery or assault) led to increased disciplinary infractions in custody and increased returns to prison after release. She posits that the cause of this increased recidivism is that, without the opportunity for early release – and the short-term incentive that created – incarcerated individuals did not invest in their own rehabilitation while incarcerated. A recent working paper by Macdonald (2020) finds a similar result. He finds that a truth-in-sentencing reform in Arizona, which reduced parole opportunities for most incarcerated people in that state, increased re-incarceration rates. Like Kuziemko, he concludes that this effect was likely driven by a decrease in program participation while incarcerated.

ELECTRONIC MONITORING INSTEAD OF PRISON

Electronic monitoring (EM) is often an important component of community supervision, enabling law enforcement to observe an individual's whereabouts and be notified if they violate specific rules such as curfew. An advantage of EM is that it provides some of the incapacitation effect of prison, while allowing continued work or school attendance and living with family. It also avoids the criminogenic effects of prison, such as negative “peer effects” from other prison inmates (Bayer et al, 2009; Stevenson, 2017). It can thus be considered a middle ground between community supervision and incarceration.

Internationally, there is substantial evidence that community supervision with electronic monitoring, relative to incarceration, reduces recidivism. DiTella & Schargrodsy (2013) use a randomized judge design in Argentina and find that pretrial release with EM (versus pretrial detention) reduces future arrests. Henneguelle et al. (2016) use a difference-in-differences design in France and find that probation with EM (versus short prison sentences) reduces future convictions. Williams and Weatherburn (2019) use a randomized judge design in Australia and find that probation with EM (versus short prison sentences) reduces future arrests. Leveraging an expansion of EM in Denmark, Andersen and Andersen (2014) find that being assigned to probation with EM (instead of a short prison sentence), paired with a work or education requirement, reduces the likelihood of welfare receipt for young individuals convicted of a crime; Larsen (2017) finds that it increases their secondary school completion rates.

While these results from international settings are promising, little evidence exists on the effects of community supervision with EM in the United States. This gap in the literature makes it difficult to know if using this tool achieves similar benefits in the US context.



CHANGING THE LEVEL AND CONDITIONS OF COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

Federal, state, and local governments have many choices about how to structure community supervision. The requirements placed on individuals under supervision in the community can vary between infrequent check-ins, weekly check-ins, EM, drug testing, travel restrictions, housing requirements and restrictions, employment requirements, and program completion requirements. In this section, we review existing research on how the intensity and features of supervision affect outcomes.

VARYING SUPERVISION LEVELS

Supervision intensity is typically assigned based on a person's perceived risk level: higher-risk individuals are assigned to intensive supervision (with more requirements and meetings), moderate-risk individuals are assigned to standard supervision, and lower-risk individuals are assigned to low-intensity supervision. Most research on the features of community supervision compares these broad levels of supervision intensity to one another. An impressive and surprising number of studies are based on randomized controlled trials (RCTs), where people of similar risk levels were randomly assigned across different levels of supervision. These provide strong evidence on the value of changing supervision intensity.

Petersilia & Turner (1993) conducted an RCT of intensive probation and parole supervision in several sites across the United States, relative to standard supervision, and found that intensive supervision had no effect on new arrests but led to an increase in incarceration for technical violations. Lane et al. (2005) conducted an RCT in California of an individual-specific, program-focused juvenile probation regime and found no impact of this more intensive regime relative to standard probation. Hennigan et al. (2010) conducted an RCT of intensive probation supervision for youth in Los Angeles and found notably worse outcomes for those assessed as low risk who were under 15 years old, relative to standard probation, and no difference in outcomes for other participants. Hyatt & Barnes (2014) conducted an RCT of intensive probation relative to standard probation in Philadelphia and found no effect on future offending. Finally, Barnes et al. (2012) conducted an RCT in Philadelphia of low-intensity probation supervision and found no impact on future offending relative to standard probation.

Studies based on other research methods also find no benefits of increasing (or decreasing) supervision levels. For instance, ongoing work by Banan (2022) uses a regression discontinuity to compare the effects of release to parole supervision relative to release without supervision in North Carolina. For those on parole, she finds a short-term increase in parole violations that offsets a slight decrease in new crimes, relative to individuals released without supervision. There was no long-term difference between the groups. Zapryanova (2020) uses the random assignment of judges in Georgia along with discontinuities in parole board guidelines to identify the effect of additional time spent on parole, relative to release without supervision. She finds no effect of additional time under parole supervision on returns to prison. Georgiou (2014) investigated the effects of parole supervision levels in Washington State, using a regression discontinuity design around two risk score cutoffs that determined supervision level, and found no effect of higher supervision level at either margin.

Ongoing work by LaForest (2022a) finds no effect of individual parole conditions such as curfew and social contact restrictions on future offending, using randomly assigned parole hearing examiners who set conditions in Pennsylvania. He then uses a regression discontinuity in risk scores that determine overall supervision intensity level, and finds slightly different results than the studies described above. He finds that medium levels of supervision (once-a-month meetings) reduce returns to prison relative to high levels of supervision (twice-a-month meetings) among individuals at the medium-to-high risk margin. However, medium levels of supervision also reduce returns to prison relative to *low* levels of supervision (once-every-three-month meetings), among individuals at the low-to-medium risk margin.¹

VARYING SPECIFIC FEATURES OF SUPERVISION

Parole and probation populations are extremely diverse and face a wide variety of challenges, from limited education and exposure to community violence, to substance use disorders and mental illness. For this reason, there is likely a role for more specialized programming that targets the needs of subsets of this broader population. What do we know about the efficacy of these more specialized programs and conditions?

Addressing substance use: There has been substantial interest in whether programs targeting substance use, in particular, can be beneficial components of community supervision. Using drugs and alcohol can lead to poor decisions and illegal behavior, even when that substance use itself is legal. Those whose past criminal behavior was (in part) due to substance use could benefit from targeted programming that reduces their consumption of drugs or alcohol. While there is more promise here than elsewhere, particularly regarding swift, certain, and fair (SCF) sanctioning, results have still been mixed.

Haapanen and Britton, (2002) conducted an RCT of various frequencies of drug testing for high-risk, young parolees in California and found that being randomly assigned to more frequent testing had no significant impact on re-arrests but led to higher rates of violent arrests. A subsequent study by Kilmer (2008), however, found that parolees subject to drug testing were more likely to be employed or in school during the first 30 days of parole.

Among probationers and parolees with substance use issues, SCF sanction programs focus on responding to failed drug tests quickly and consistently, with immediate, short sanctions (e.g., a night or two in jail). Studies of these programs have largely found positive effects. For example, an RCT of one of the first such models, the HOPE program in Hawaii (Hawken and Kleiman, 2009), found that the program significantly decreased future incarceration time. Results of similar programs in other jurisdictions have also been largely positive (Hawken and Kleiman, 2011; Grommon, Cox, Davidson and Bynum, 2013; Hawken et al., 2016; Davidson, King, Ludwig and Raphael, 2019). As additional examples, Kilmer et al. (2013) evaluated the staggered rollout of an SCF program in South Dakota for individuals with alcohol-related convictions, and found that the program decreased repeat DUI arrests and domestic violence arrests, as well as deaths (Nicosia et al., 2016). O’Connell et al. (2016) and Doleac et al. (2020) investigated the effects of an RCT of an SCF program for high-risk probationers with a failed drug test and found suggestive evidence that it decreased both future arrests and incarceration. On the other hand, Lattimore et al. (2016) replicated the HOPE study in Pennsylvania and found no impact of the program on future arrests, perhaps due to differences in the eligible probationer population in that setting. And in earlier work, Harrell and Roman (2001) conducted an RCT of structured graduated sanctions for failing drug tests and found no effects of the policy on new arrests relative to the default sanction regime.

Finally, evidence on the effects of Therapeutic Communities, long-term residential treatment centers for substance abuse, is mixed (e.g., Sacks et al., 2012; Sacks, McKendrick and Hamilton, 2012; Welsh, Zajac and Bucklen, 2014; and Doleac, Temple, Pritchard and Roberts, 2020).

Providing housing: There is also tremendous interest in whether addressing housing needs can be a beneficial component of community supervision, though evidence on this is thinner. Regarding community housing requirements, Lee (2019) looked at the effects of halfway house assignment for parolees, using randomly assigned case managers in Iowa. He found that halfway house assignment (versus standard parole) led to a notable increase in returns to prison due largely to technical violations. Similarly, Doleac et al. (2020) analyze data from an RCT of residential aftercare programs and found suggestive evidence that the programs led to an increase in incarceration. In both studies, the authors posit that negative peer effects were at least partially driving the increase in recidivism. By comparison, studies of multidimensional treatment foster care (MTFC) as an alternative to placement in group homes for delinquent youth generally find beneficial effects of this care program, presumably because it reduces interaction with other at-risk

youth (Eddy, Whaley and Chamberlain, 2004; Chamberlain, Leve and DeGarmo, 2007; Leve, Chamberlain, Smith and Harold, 2012; Bergstrom and Hojman, 2016).

Day Reporting Centers: Day Reporting Centers (DRCs) provide a place for those on parole or probation to spend their days and receive assistance, until they are able to find work. This could help them avoid high-risk situations. Boyle et al. (2013) investigated the impact of DRCs relative to traditional parole supervision using an RCT in New Jersey, and found no notable difference in parolee outcomes. This additional supervision requirement (spending weekdays at a specific place) did not have any net benefit, despite the services offered.

Violence interruption: Parolees at risk of violent crime face unique challenges, and work on how to address those challenges is thin. Ongoing work by Aboaba et al. (2022) analyzes an RCT of Project Ceasefire forums for individuals specifically on parole. They find no effect on future offending, only a decrease in absconding parole violations.

OTHER INTERVENTIONS THAT COULD SUPPLEMENT OR REPLACE COMMUNITY SUPERVISION

Overall, existing evidence suggests that increasing the intensity of community supervision does not reduce recidivism, and many targeted supervision requirements do not appear beneficial either. Are there aspects of other successful community programs that could be integrated into community supervision, to reduce recidivism and improve public safety? Below, we briefly discuss the literature on other types of initiatives and programs that may be relevant to conversations about reforming community supervision (see Doleac, 2021, for a longer review on how to encourage desistance from crime).

One option is increasing access to support services. However, research on community support programs has typically found little effect of such programs. For example, several large-scale RCTs have investigated holistic wraparound re-entry services and found that they either did not improve post-release outcomes or, in some cases, slightly increased recidivism (Doleac, 2019; Grommon, Davidson and Bynum, 2013; Cook et al., 2015; Wiegand and Sussell, 2016; D'Amico and Kim, 2018). Similarly, RCTs of programs designed to improve social support networks found no effect on arrest rates (Pettus-Davis et al., 2017; Shamblen et al., 2017). Evaluations of intensive case management programs and financial incentives aimed at increasing engagement in drug treatment programs have found little effect on recidivism or long-term treatment retention (e.g. Guydish et al., 2011; Scott and Dennis, 2012; Hall, Prendergast and Warda, 2017). These disappointing outcomes highlight the importance of rigorously evaluating, and then iterating upon, the programs that communities implement. There is a lot of work to do on this front.

A more promising avenue is increasing access to mental health care and therapy-focused programs, specifically. Batistich, Evans, and Phillips (2021) found that a low-touch service in Indiana connecting people with mental illness to local mental health treatment upon their release from jail substantially reduced rearrest rates. Several rigorous studies using RCTs to evaluate cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) programs found reductions in future arrests (Van Voorhis et al., 2004; Pearson et al., 2016; Barnes, Hyatt and Sherman, 2017; Heller et al., 2017). However, not all CBT-based interventions were successful, highlighting the importance of implementation details, peer effects, and targeting the right populations with the right programming (Bahr, Cherrington and Erickson, 2016; Dishion and Andrews, 1995; Poulin, Dishion and Burraston, 2001). On the other hand, a large number of evaluations of Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST) programs found mixed results (Schaeffer and Borduin, 2005; Glisson et al., 2010; Sawyer and Borduin, 2011; Butler, Baruch, Hickey and Fonagy, 2011; Smith, 2011; Dopp, Borduin, Wagner and Sawyer, 2014; Cuellar and Dave, 2016; Johnides, Borduin, Wagner and Dopp, 2017; Dembo et al., 2000; Olsson, 2010; Asscher et al., 2014; de Vries, Hoeve, Asscher and Stams, 2018; Fonagy et al., 2018). While MST has potential its effects appear to be highly dependent on the context, population, and program, and we don't yet understand where it works best.

Among initiatives that target employment, the results are often disappointing, suggesting that other underlying needs (e.g., mental health, substance use treatment, housing) may be the root cause of both low employment rates and criminal behavior. If this is the case, then increasing employment alone may not have a direct effect on recidivism. Programs that provide "transitional jobs" to individuals at high-risk of recidivism increase employment during the program period, but have little to no effect on employment after the program period, and also have little to no effect on recidivism during or following the program period (Cook et al., 2015; Valentine and Redcross, 2015; Barden et al.,



2018; Uggen, 2000; Uggen and Shannon, 2014). Evaluations of several job training program also find no effect on future recidivism (Farabee, Zhang and Wright, 2014; Schaeffer et al., 2014).

Providing financial resources, separate from a job, does appear to help. Several studies show that increasing access to public assistance programs and financial assistance decreases recidivism for high-risk individuals (Yang, 2017b; Tuttle, 2018; Palmer, Phillips and Sullivan, 2019).

MAIN TAKEAWAYS FROM EXISTING RESEARCH

Overall, existing research finds mixed evidence on the effects of probation relative to incarceration on recidivism – in some places putting people on probation instead of sending them to prison leads to better outcomes, but in other places it leads to worse outcomes, and in still others it makes no difference. Based on international evidence, substituting probation with electronic monitoring for short prison sentences has the potential to be extremely beneficial.

Releasing individuals from prison earlier, to parole supervision, also does not have clear effects on public safety. However, because most of those in prison would rather be on community supervision instead, the *possibility* of such early release provides an important incentive for meaningful investment in rehabilitation while incarcerated. That investment then reduces new criminal behavior after release. In this way, using the possibility of parole as a carrot that encourages rehabilitation appears to improve public safety.

In terms of the requirements of community supervision, a large and growing literature shows no benefit of more intensive supervision (versus fewer requirements and conditions). More intensive supervision carries substantial costs, however. It is more expensive, and it also puts individuals at higher risk of technical violations that can send them to prison (which itself is expensive). Since additional community supervision requirements appear to have no benefit, our takeaway is that supervisory requirements can be reduced in most settings without any detrimental effect on public safety.

In terms of supervision requirements or services targeted at clients' specific needs, so far only SCF sanctions targeting substance use show beneficial effects. Based on evidence from other criminal justice contexts, increasing access to mental health care (including CBT) is a particularly promising avenue for supervision programs to pursue in the future.

PATHS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a tremendous need for more research in this space. A large number of correlational studies exist, but do not provide evidence on what works. To move this field forward, we need a greater focus on rigorous evaluations that use randomized experiments or natural experiments to divide people into similar treatment and comparison group. Simply



matching people with observably-equivalent comparison groups typically will not provide plausible causal estimates, due to careful selection of program participants based on factors that are unobservable to researchers (such as motivation or high-risk behavior). We expect that useful natural experiments are plentiful, but have not yet been found and exploited. We hope that researchers and practitioners will work together to identify such natural experiments (this requires detailed understanding of local institutions and policy changes), and to share the administrative data necessary for such evaluations.

In terms of specific research questions, we would prioritize the following: First, what types of supervision requirements are effective, and for whom? Existing evidence largely pushes us toward *reducing* supervision requirements, with the possible exception of SCF sanctions for those whose criminal behavior is a function of substance use. Are there other programs that are exceptions to the broader “less is better” rule? Second, does replacing short incarceration spells with electronic monitoring, as is now common in other countries, have meaningful benefits in the US? Are there any unintended costs in the US context that should push us to refine programs here? Third, how does community supervision affect outcomes other than arrests for new offenses or incarceration? Linking individual-level criminal justice data with data from other agencies, such as Unemployment Insurance records on employment, or public benefit data such as food stamp receipt, can provide a more complete picture of individuals’ post-conviction outcomes. Fourth, are there any other programs, no matter how novel, that can be tried and evaluated with the potential to improve post-conviction outcomes? And how intensive would such programs have to be to have meaningful, measurable benefits? Given high recidivism rates in the US, it’s clear that current practice is not working as well as we’d like. It’s time to think outside the box in our pursuit of meaningful second chances and improved public safety.

ENDNOTES

- 1 LaForest (2022a) also finds that the randomly-assigned parole officers appear to have little differential impact on parolee returns to prison in Pennsylvania; they only affect (reported) lower-level parole violations that do not result in imprisonment, and (reported) employment. This suggests that the discretion they have to vary conditions or other aspects of supervision do not have an impact on future arrests or incarceration. Leveraging a survey of parole agents, LaForest (2022b) finds that parole officers that say they focus on interpersonal support are associated with less parole violations, while agents that say they focus on structural support do not appear to have a differential effect on outcomes. Separately, he finds that differences in race and sex among parolee-parole agent pairing lead to slightly worse post-release outcomes, that appear to be driven by structural and societal biases.



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