

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

The Philadelphia Randomized Controlled Trial in Low Risk Supervision

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Summary/Conclusions

In an effort to better distribute resources, without diminishing public safety, Philadelphia's Adult Probation and Parole Department (APPD) studied the effectiveness of large, low risk caseloads. Using a risk assessment instrument, offenders identified as low risk were randomly assigned to a standard caseload or a large, low risk caseload. These 1,559 offenders were tracked during one year of supervision, with outcomes noted for new arrests or absconding warrants. The study found little difference between the group that received standard "business as usual" supervision and those who were assessed low risk and placed on a low risk caseload.

Limitations of Information

The low risk tool used for assessment predicted "the collective risk of a group of offenders at the start of the probation/parole sentence *not* being charged with any serious offense." The LSI predicts risk to reoffend, regardless of offense type. Another limitation is with generalizing results to juveniles. It may be applicable, but the Philadelphia experiment was conducted with adults.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Low Risk Caseloads

Philadelphia's Adult Probation and Parole Department (APPD) wanted to maximize the use of their limited number of officers, so they decided to explore the use of large, low risk caseloads. Using an assessment tool, which predicted the risk of new charges for a serious crime, the APPD designed a study to determine the effectiveness of the low risk caseloads.

APPD assessed their offenders and randomly assigned 1,559 offenders to either a standard caseload or the experimental low risk caseload. The standard caseload included a ratio of 150 cases per officer, monthly office visits, random urinalysis (regardless of court order), and the officer handled all court matters and violation proceedings, whether a new offense or technical violation. The low risk caseload included 400 cases per officer, office visits every six months, phone contact every six months, drug tests only if court ordered, and officers were not responsible for new offenses but did handle dispositions on technical violations.

The study measured two primary outcomes: new arrests and absconding warrants. They found no statistically significant difference between the arrest rate of the offenders on the standard caseload and those on the low risk caseload. In fact, 14.5% of offenders on the standard caseload were rearrested and 15.4% of the offenders on the low risk caseload were rearrested for any type of offense. Additionally, there was no statistically significant difference in the type of new arrest between the two

groups nor was there a significant difference in the time to arrest. The study did, however, discover a significant difference in the number of absconder warrants issued; the offenders in the standard caseload were 50% more likely to abscond.

In all, APPD determined that they could manage low risk offenders differently without compromising public safety.

Practical Applications

- ✓ Develop options or utilize current ideas for alternative supervision programs for lower risk probationers, such as private probation, banked caseloads, or telephone reporting.
- ✓ Utilize the risk scores of the LSI to determine who can be placed in a program for lower risk probationers.
- ✓ Consider shifting resources so that one officer can handle larger numbers of low risk probationers, leaving additional FTE for higher risk caseloads. For example, one Colorado district moved a large number of clients to a phone reporting system, thereby freeing up an entire FTE to take on higher risk cases.
- ✓ Use the evidence-based RNR principles to target services to the higher risk clients. Do not intervene anymore than necessary with low risk probationers.
- ✓ Require alcohol/drug testing only of those probationers who have exhibited problems with substances or need monitoring during the recovery process.

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