

# A Tale of Two Studies: Lessons Learned from GPS Supervision in California Corrections

By Stephen V. Gies

***Author's Note:** Findings and conclusions reported in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

Is technology the answer to monitoring the nation's growing number of parolees? Recent advancements and a growing interest in global positioning systems (GPS) as a supervision tool have spurred conversation about the goals for parole programs and policies in both monitoring and rehabilitating offenders. In community corrections, GPS technology is traditionally used as a supervision tool to track the movement of offenders. It has been used with a wide variety of offender types and within different criminal justice contexts (e.g., preadjudication, dispositional and post-release).<sup>1</sup> Two recent studies supported by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) examined the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's use of GPS technology as one way to monitor parolees. The first study involved high-risk sex offenders, whereas the second focused on high-risk gang offenders. Despite using a geographically similar sample of parolees under comparable procedures with the same GPS technology, the researchers

found contrasting results. Yet, the studies agree on one thing: GPS monitoring has a role in achieving diverse criminal justice objectives.

## Findings of the Studies

The study of sex offenders compared 516 parolees — half received traditional parole and half received GPS supervision.<sup>2</sup> The risk of a sex-related violation was nearly three times as great for the traditional parole group compared to the GPS supervision group. Similarly, the risk of arrests in general was more than twice as high for the traditional parole group. Overall, these findings are consistent with most of the recent research regarding the deterrent effect of GPS technology.<sup>3</sup> The second study<sup>4</sup> examined 784 gang offenders<sup>5</sup> released from prison to various counties in the state of California. Half of them received GPS supervision and the other half received traditional parole supervision. In contrast to the first study, the odds of technical and non-technical violations were greater among the parolees on GPS supervision. However, the GPS group was less likely to be rearrested overall (26 percent lower).

At first glance, these contradictory findings may cause corrections personnel to reconsider the use of GPS as a supervision tool for gang offenders, and the lack

of consistent findings across the two studies draws into question the benefit of GPS usage overall. However, a close scrutiny of the purpose, goals and operating procedures of each program yields quite a different story.

## Taking a Closer Look

There are many similarities between California's GPS monitoring programs for gang and sex offenders on parole (see Table 1). For instance, rather than offering GPS as a standalone concept, both use the technology as a monitoring tool integrated into an overall supervision regime. As a result, both programs are composed of two distinct components: GPS monitoring and traditional supervision. The GPS component employs an active system (i.e., a data point is taken every minute) that combines cellular and GPS technology to automatically track the location of a parolee. The supervision component involves traditional, recurrent contact where an agent meets face-to-face with the parolee on a regular basis. There are, however, a few essential differences that likely lead to the contrasting results in the studies. The first difference is the use of treatment enhancement provisions. The sex offender program includes a treatment component that

**Table 1. California’s GPS Monitoring Programs**

	Sex Offender Program	Gang Offender Program
Design		
Strategy	Deterrence /rehabilitation	Focused deterrence
Goal	Return to community	Return to custody
GPS Type	Active and passive	Active
Duration	Length of parole period	Intermittent (as needed)
Caseload	20 high /40 passive	20
Screening	Static-99	Gang eligibility assessment criteria
Infrastructure		
Equipment	Single piece	Single piece
Monitoring Model	Vendor operated	Vendor operated
Notification System	Yes	Yes
Supervision Specifications		
Subject Matter Training	Yes (sex offender)	No
Orientation	Yes	Yes
Drug testing	If applicable	Mandatory
Supervision Specifications	More contacts per month	Fewer contacts per month
Integration	Yes	Yes
Treatment Option	No	Yes

requires parolees to attend weekly classes. The gang offender program, on the other hand, does not include a treatment requirement. The second difference is that the operational goals of the two programs differ greatly. The goal of the sex offender program is to use the technology to gather information that can enhance supervision, heighten the certainty of treatment and discourage future crime. The goal of the gang offender program, as with many other gang programs, is to remove individual gang members from the community by quickly identifying violations, enforcing strict revocation rules and returning the offenders to prison.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations

The studies suggest that GPS technology might serve a variety of criminal justice purposes (i.e., a traditional deterrent mechanism, a focused-deterrent tactic or a treatment enhancement

provision), but its success is conditional on the goals and structural design of the overall supervision program. Policymakers might want to simultaneously consider both the intended population and the goals of the program during its initial conceptualization. These formative decisions will likely drive the structural design. Recommendations include:

- Decide who will be placed on GPS supervision (e.g., look at what type of offender will be eligible);
- Establish the phase of the criminal justice system (e.g., preadjudication, dispositional and post-release) in which GPS supervision will be used;
- Find ways to sensibly integrate the supervision specifications with GPS technology; and
- Define a minimum quantity of face-to-face supervision based on parolee risk level

and the incurred cost of traditional contact with the probation officer.

The above decisions will undoubtedly impact the program goal. For instance, if the plan is to use GPS with high-risk violent parolees, the goal of the program, like that of the gang program, might be as a focused deterrent to quickly identify violators in order to return them back to prison as soon as possible. Conversely, if the plan is to implement an alternative to incarceration for nonviolent offenders with histories of substance abuse, policymakers might choose to focus on encouraging treatment attendance.

Policymakers might also wish to consider the inclusion of other cooperative program elements that facilitate the goals of the program, such as drug testing requirements and/or sanctions for poor behavior. For example, a program designed to encourage treatment should have a requirement to

attend an outpatient facility built into the supervision protocol.

Many other important considerations can also help to develop a GPS supervision plan from conceptualization to reality in a manner that collaboratively reinforces the overall program goals. These recommendations simply touch on some of the most salient deliberations that ultimately drive the structural design.

<sup>4</sup> Gies, S., et al. 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Howell, J.C. 2000. *Youth gang programs and strategies*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.



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## Conclusion

GPS is not the sole solution to monitoring the nation's growing number of parolees and cannot replace face-to-face contacts between agents and parolees. However, it seems to be a multifaceted tool to support and supplement existing methods of parole supervision that can be configured in a variety of ways to support diverse criminal justice objectives.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brown, T.M.L., S.A. McCabe and C. Wellford. 2007. *Global positioning system (GPS) technology for community supervision: Lessons learned*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

<sup>2</sup> Gies, S., R. Gainey, M. Cohen, E. Healy, D. Duplantier, M. Yeide, A. Bekelman, A. Bobnis and M. Hopps. 2012. *Monitoring high-risk sex offenders with GPS technology: An evaluation of the California supervision program final report*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice.

<sup>3</sup> Bales, W.D., K. Mann, T.G. Blomberg, G.G. Gaes, K. Barrick, K. Dhungana and B. McManus. 2010. *A quantitative and qualitative assessment of electronic monitoring*. Tallahassee, Fla.: Florida State University, College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Center for Criminology and Public Policy Research.