

Electronic Monitoring Reduces Recidivism

By Philip Bulman

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

A large NIJ-funded study¹ of Florida offenders placed on electronic monitoring found that electronic monitoring significantly reduces the likelihood of failure under community supervision. The decline in the risk of failure is about 31 percent, compared to offenders placed on other forms of community supervision.

Researchers from Florida State University's Center for Criminology and Public Policy Research compared the experiences of more than 5,000 medium- and high-risk offenders who were monitored electronically to more than 266,000 offenders not placed on monitoring during a six-year period. The researchers worked with the Florida Department of Corrections to secure approval, obtain administrative data, and obtain assistance to access local probation offices for interviews. They interviewed offenders, probation officers, supervisors and administrators to learn more about electronic monitoring.

Increasing Use of Electronic Monitoring

States now employ electronic monitoring in a variety of situations, such as a pretrial supervision alternative to jail, an alternative to imprisonment for some offenders, and a mandated supervision requirement for some felons released from prison. Some states now mandate monitoring for released sex offenders. More than 5.1 million offenders in the U.S. are under some form of community supervision, and monitoring may increase over time as states seek less expensive

alternatives to imprisonment. The cost of imprisonment is about six times higher than the cost of monitoring.

The first home confinement program that used electronic monitoring started in Florida's Palm Beach County in 1984. Florida was a suitable site, having used electronic monitoring of released felons for decades, mostly on higher-risk offenders. At the end of June 2009, the state had 143,191 offenders on supervision, including 2,392 under electronic monitoring. Researchers drew information on people who were under supervision between June 1, 2001, and June 30, 2007. The study used Florida's risk classifications to focus on medium- and high-risk offenders. In addition, the researchers interviewed 105 offenders — 97 percent who were under electronic monitoring and 3 percent who had been prior to the interview. Thirty-six probation officers who oversee such offenders and 20 administrators who oversee the program were also interviewed.

Overall Findings

The researchers found that global positioning systems (GPS) typically were more effective in reducing failure than radio frequency (RF) systems. Overall, electronic monitoring had less of an impact on violent offenders than on sex, property, drug and other types of offenders. Still, there were significant decreases in the failure rate for all of these groups. In addition, electronic monitoring had similar effects across age groups.

Based on the interviews, the researchers found that the administrators felt electronic monitoring had achieved the primary goals of ensuring offender compliance to the terms of their supervision, tracking offenders, reducing recidivism and protecting the public but that the system can be improved by reducing false alerts

and by having courts select the most appropriate candidates. In addition, the administrators see monitoring as a tool that helps probation officers do their jobs, not as a replacement for personal contacts with offenders.

Effects on Personal Relationships

The interviews revealed that probation officers and offenders believe that monitoring has a negative impact on offenders' relationships with their spouses, children and friends. Most of the offenders said they felt a sense of shame about being under electronic monitoring and that they were unfairly stigmatized. Some said media reports about monitoring focus mostly on sex crimes, which may lead the public to believe that everyone on monitoring is a sex offender. One offender said the electronic monitoring system "serves as a scarlet letter." Another reported, "Every time it goes off, we think the police are coming to arrest me." Perhaps the most poignant comments concerned the effects on children. One offender said, "I've got a child who straps a watch on his ankle to be like daddy." Another said, "When it beeps, the kids worry about whether the probation officer is coming to take me to jail. The kids run for it when it beeps."

Effects on Employment and Housing

Offenders and officers alike were almost unanimous in their belief that the visibility of the monitoring systems makes it much more difficult for offenders to get and keep jobs. Offenders told stories of job interviews taking on a different tenor as soon as an interviewer noticed the devices. In addition, sometimes the systems would issue an alarm indicating that the signal had been lost when offend-

ers were inside a building. They would then have to take a break from work and walk outside, often for 15 minutes, before the signal was reestablished. This did not please employers.

Electronic monitoring did not deter offenders from finding housing. However, the various residency restrictions on sex offenders did. Many courts mandate that offenders repay the state for the cost of electronic monitoring, but offenders often had trouble making the payments. Many could not find jobs, perhaps, in part, because the monitoring equipment itself made it more challenging to obtain and maintain employment.

Recommendations/ Outlook

Both offenders and administrators believe that the use of electronic monitoring results in lower levels of absconding, probation violations and recidivism, but that the electronic monitoring system needs improvement. Some recommendations for policymakers and practitioners

include the following:

- Policymakers and the courts should reserve electronic monitoring for high-risk offenders who pose the most threat to the public;
- Given the cost savings involved, policymakers may want to consider expanding monitoring programs;
- Practitioners should determine if there are procedures that could minimize the negative effect on the offenders' personal relationships with their spouses, significant others and their children;
- Policymakers should reevaluate the state, county and city zoning restrictions on residency for sex offenders to address the negative unintended consequences that may jeopardize, rather than enhance, public safety; and
- Policymakers should reevaluate the offenders' reimbursement requirements for the use of electronic monitoring technology, considering the

hardship it creates because of their other personal financial responsibilities and their low potential for any type of stable employment.

Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of electronic monitoring in other states, to address its current problems, to help discover other situations in which it could be used and to find ways to improve the system.

ENDNOTE

¹ Bales, William et al. May 2010. A quantitative and qualitative assessment of electronic monitoring. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230530.pdf>.

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