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**NIJ Grant #2013-IJ-CX-0062<sup>1</sup> Project Summary:  
Assessing the Influence of Home Visit Themes and Temporal Ordering on High-Risk Parolee Outcomes**

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**Introduction**

Over 4.7 million adults were under community supervision in the United States at the end of 2014, of which 856,900 (18%) were on parole (Kaeble, Maruschak, & Bonczar, 2015). Over a quarter of the adults entering prisons nationwide in 2014 were admitted due to failure on parole (Carson, 2015). Thus, successful reentry is of urgent importance as states grapple with the effects of severe fiscal challenges squeezing correctional budgets. While participating in evidence-based programming significantly lowers revocation rates (Andrews & Bonta, 1998), the general question of how supervision influences parole outcomes remains unanswered. Advancing the development and management of comprehensive strategies for improving successful offender outcomes is quintessential to successful reentry.

Parole officer fieldwork is integral to community supervision, whether it is home visits, employment verification, or collateral contacts made with a treatment program provider or law enforcement official. Home visits, in particular, provide an opportunity for purposeful face-to-face encounters between officer and offender that may be distinct from other fieldwork. Unfortunately information on what constitutes a home visit, its use as a tool of supervision, and its influence on offender outcomes is largely absent in the literature. Given the time, expense, and potential risk home visits pose for officers, there is a critical need to understand their influence on supervision outcomes. This understanding must include measures of their quality.

Parole officers are charged with the dual role of assuring felony offender compliance with sentence and prison release conditions while assisting with community reentry. The natural home environment is a key locale for promoting and monitoring behavior change. Likewise, interactions during home visits yield ideal conditions to understand if and how therapeutic jurisprudence unfolds. Knowledge about what occurs during home visits is important to both researchers and practitioners seeking to develop best practices across all supervision components (DiMichele, 2007, DeMichele, Payne, & Matz, 2011). Further, home visit interactions occur with people in the parolee's life who often provide emotional, residential, financial and/or social support. Understanding how socio-cultural bonds and social influence are developed among parole officers, parolees, and their support networks during home visits may inform ways to blend surveillance and rehabilitation goals and decrease supervision failures (Braswell, 1989).

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Officers who effectively incorporate awareness of the risks, needs and responsivity of offenders and balance emphasis on treatment needs and surveillance may be able to make the most of their limited face-to-face encounters with offenders in the office and in the field, including visits to the offender's homes. This is especially true for intensive supervision cases wherein the "supervision package" requires parolees to maintain employment and stable housing, participate in programming, abide by stringent conditions, and make frequent parole officer contact (Petersilia & Turner, 1993). How supervision is implemented can significantly impact parole outcomes. Skilled officers can make a significant contribution to offender supervision success. Unfortunately, little research has examined this issue and explorations of the influence of parole officers' supervision styles on outcomes yield inconsistent findings. In sum, there are several gaps in the literature regarding the use and variance of home visits in community supervision and how they impact offender outcomes.

### **The Current Study Goals and Objectives**

The goal of the current research project was to determine the influence that home visits, as a component of parole supervision, have on parole outcomes. We proposed to answer two fundamental questions:

1. What are the key descriptive attributes of a home visit (content and purpose) as a component of parole supervision?
2. What is the effect of home visits (number, content, purpose, and timing) as a component of supervision on multiple supervision outcomes: positive drug tests, violation of parole conditions, arrests for technical violations, arrests for felonies, and revocation of parole?

The objective of the study was to document the content of home visits and examine how the key attributes of those interactions are recorded in the comment fields by the parole officer. To accomplish this we set out to answer the following questions: What are the key descriptive attributes of a home visit (substance) as a component of parole supervision? What issue(s) is (are) the primary subject matter (purpose)? What is the nature and content of the dialogue that occurs between parole officer and parolee? How are these issues captured/recorded? Are those data representative and accurate documentation of parole supervision activities? Home visits related to parole supervision outcomes? What other indicators (e.g., parolee demographics, history, prison episode, and supervision activities) influence parole outcomes when accounting for home visits? Finally, are home visits a dimension of supervision intensity unique from traditional measures of control?

### **The Study Site**

The Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles is responsible for reviewing statutorily eligible inmates for discretionary release from prison. At the time of this study the Board also supervised over 23,000 parolees with a staff of 300 parole officers and caseloads that average 84 throughout field offices across the state. Today the supervisory function is the responsibility of the newly formed Department of Community Supervision. Georgia parole officers monitor parolee compliance with conditions, respond to violations, and match parolees with needed services.

Parole officers, all with baccalaureate degrees, undergo eight weeks of intensive training and complete additional training annually to maintain law enforcement certification. Training includes agency policies and procedures as well as issues associated with offending (substance abuse, mental illness, education, employment, childcare, and transportation). Officers also carry firearms and are

responsible for arresting parole violators. Thus, training includes firearms, building and body searches, arrest and handcuffing procedures, self-defense, and safety awareness training. Semi-annual firearms requalification training includes a review of the use of force continuum when confronting danger or when taking parolees into custody. Officer required on-duty safety equipment includes a bulletproof vest, pepper spray, handcuffs, asp baton, and taser.

In Georgia, parole officers are required to conduct home visits for all parolees on standard, high, and specialized supervision status, only contact or “call-in” status is exempt. Contact standards are dictated by parolee supervision level assignment, determined initially by a validated actuarial risk instrument (Meredith, Speir, & Johnson, 2007). By policy, regardless of risk score, parolees serving for egregious or high profile offenses are assigned to the highest level – specialized supervision. Policy also requires offenders serving for violent and sex offenses be assigned to high or specialized supervision. High and specialized supervision requires two interactions with the parolee outside the office each month, with at least one face-to-face at the home and a second at the parolee’s place of employment or home. Standard supervision requires one interaction with the parolee outside the office, face-to-face at the home or place of employment, every 90 days. Details of parolee conditions, violations, responses, program participation, and field contacts are electronically recorded in the agency’s Case Management System (CMS).

## **Data and Measures**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed to address knowledge gaps in the understanding of parole home visits and their influence on supervision outcomes. The combination of field observations, qualitative analysis of parole officer documentation, and quantitative analysis of an historical cohort of parolees completing supervision allow for a broader understanding of parole home visits and their influence on supervision outcomes.

### *Field Observation Data*

Field observation data, collected during parole officer ride-a-longs, were captured on 383 home visits with high risk parolees and 64 parole officers in 13 offices around the state. The two purposes of the field observation data were to describe home visits and to determine whether officer documentation was a valid measure of interactions. The study sites were selected by the research team in collaboration with a team of agency senior-field staff who were assembled for the purpose of improving field supervision practices. They represent both urban and rural locations, as well as all geographical regions of the state. To begin the qualitative data collection process, a focus group conducted with those senior staff provided the research team with a better understanding of home visits and preparation for field work. The productive sessions resulted in edits to the original data collection form, a revised ride-along strategy, a recommendation to attend a monthly staff meeting at each pilot site, as well as information about securing body armor.

Three mandatory participant/observer training sessions provided the research team with a general overview of observational research, research ethics, and field safety. In addition, draft “scripts” to be used when obtaining research consent from parole officers, parolees, and other adults present during home visits were tested and modified. Viewing videos depicting interactions between community supervision officers and offenders allowed the team to finalize a strategy to ensure consistent documentation of observations. Researchers were then paired with parole officers and conducted preliminary ride-a-longs in non-pilot site offices.

Once training and pilot testing was completed, all six research team representatives conducted the ride-alongs in the 13 selected study sites. Subsequently, research team members logged into

parolee's online Case Management System (CMS) portal to verify each parolee's status (to ensure they were high risk) and examine the officer's case notes to complete the data collection form. The completed field work phase of the study included 49 hours of observations, with a range of 16 to 122 visits each for the six research team member (to include 61 observations by the Principal Investigator). The nature and content of the dialogue between the officer and parolee were captured in a series of check-box topics on the observation form completed by the researcher after each visit. The officer details were also captured in the same series of check-box topics on the observation form.

### *Agency Data*

This study employed multiple sources of longitudinal data collected by Georgia criminal justice system agencies for the quantitative historical analysis of supervision outcomes. The state's Parole Case Management System (CMS) houses data on all parolees statewide and served as the primary source of data. CMS tables capture information about parolees and their supervision activity – demographics, supervising officer, risk levels, treatment tracks, interactions with parole officers, violations and sanctions, and supervision outcomes. These data were extracted for a cohort of parolees who completed supervision 2011 to 2013. The data include all prison-to-parole exits types and parole supervision levels; parolees who transferred to another state were excluded. For parolees with multiple supervision episodes in the three year study period, only data from their most recent episode were used. The resulting sample included 28,284 parolees. The parolee profiles were then matched to the state's computerized criminal history (CCH) records repository, which includes charge and conviction details for all arrestees fingerprinted in Georgia. Lastly, Department of Corrections (DOC) inmate assessment and incarceration history data were added. The resulting dataset provided for a unique set of five supervision outcomes could be examined.

For the qualitative historical analysis of parole officer home visit documentation, the additional Parole Case Management System (CMS) "case notes" table served as the primary data source. The CMS case notes table includes all automated open-format text entries of field visits conducted by parole officers. To focus on changes in supervision practice over time, all parolees (N= 11,268) were examined that entered parole in 2008, 2010, and 2012. Nearly one million case notes were entered by parole officers on the cohort (N = 982,312 notes). All case note entries identified as "successful face-to-face field or face-to-face collateral field visits at a residence" were selected, using close-ended fields attached to each text note. This step resulted in a total of 142,333 documented home visit entries. This subset of case notes was further screened to identify only parolees who were on high or specialized supervision at either the beginning or the end of their parole period, resulting in a total of 81,552 case notes.

### **Qualitative Analyses**

During the qualitative field observations officers completed between 1 and 21 "successful" home contacts per shift, where the parolee or someone else is present at the home. On average officers were able to complete eight home visits per ride-along, although the number of home visits completed in rural districts were less given the longer drive between residences. Rural visits ranged from 1 to 14, with an average of three per day. All of the home visits were unscheduled, except four (1%). Two thirds of the observations occurred during morning hours. The parolee was the only person the officer interacted with for the vast majority (74%) of the home visits. When other people contributed to the interaction, they were most often the parolees' immediate family (50%) or romantic partner (26%). Visits typically lasted less than 8 minutes and approximately 40% finished in 5 minutes. Home visits occurred inside of the residence (53%), at the door (12%), on the porch (13%), in the yard (13%), or other locations (8%).

The nature and content of the dialogue between the officer and parolee were captured in a series of check-box topics on the observation form completed by the researcher after each visit. In describing the content of the field interactions, two categories of discussion topics were identified: surveillance/rules and needs/programs. The most frequent surveillance/rules topics discussed included: employment status (60%), other issues (36%), fees and payments (27%), recent law contact (21%), and following instructions (17%). The most frequent needs/programs topics discussed included: employment (26%), substance abuse recovery (19%), physical health (15%), and mental health symptoms (10%).

Within a few days of the observation, the researcher accessed the CMS system on-line to compare his/her observations with the interaction details entered by the officer in case management notes. A validation study was conducted to assure that the historical case notes available for analysis in the CMS system were indeed reflective of the officers' summary of the content of home visits. The sole purpose of the validation study was to assess the confidence that the data reported in CMS accurately and consistently represented the content of home visit interactions.

The degree of correspondence between observation form topics identified by observers and CMS case notes ranged from a low of 88% concordance for the topic of employment status to a high of 96% concordance for the topic of mental health symptoms. Overall, results show that more topics of conversation were observed than were recorded in the CMS case note, but the representativeness of topics reported in CMS was consistent with those observed in the field. Therefore, while some topics are under-documented, the validation study suggests that the case notes entered are an accurate reflection of the subject matter discussed during the home visit.

Once CMS case notes were determined valid measures of home visit activities, qualitative analysis of the parole officer text case entries were conducted with NVivo software tools to identify three main attributes of the case notes: the topics of discussion, the tone of the interaction, and with whom the parole officer interacted. To assist, a word frequency count was generated to identify what words appeared most often. Two members of the researcher team reviewed the frequency distributions, read through a random set of case notes to assess their content, and began the iterative process of identifying topics contained in the case notes. A single case note could, and often did, contain more than one topic of discussion. Those researchers had to work through capturing the topical content of the case notes; specifically, how to categorize the individual topics under common themes about supervision and the parolee's life. Words that appeared at least 20 times were then grouped under the following 12 themes or spheres of life: education, contacts with the criminal justice system, electronic monitoring, employment, health, housing, income (including supplemental security income), movement or transportation, substance use, treatment, supervision fees or costs, and searches. Subsequent searches for synonymous terms for each theme were conducted and the results were reviewed to ensure that the narrative fit with the subject matter of the theme or sphere of life.

A similar process was utilized to identify the tone of comments in case notes. The research team developed a list of 55 words that were descriptors of negative comments (e.g., lazy, warned, reprimanded) and 56 words that were descriptors of positive comments (e.g., encouraged, congratulated, good job). Fewer case notes contained at least one positive word than one negative word. A comment was classified as positive if the statement was encouraging, supportive, and/or optimistic of the parolee's behavior (e.g., "doing a good job at work; working hard to keep from using drugs"). A comment was classified as negative if it was discouraging, critical, and/or pessimistic of parolee's behavior ("he has no intention of doing what I ask; He wants to not work and live off his girlfriend"). A single case note entry could contain a mixture of positive and negative terms. If a comment contained a negative term or a positive term, but was judged to not reflect any tone, it was regarded as descriptive and classified as neutral.

Finally, the same process was used to identify who the parole officer interacted with during the home visit. Relying on the word frequency output generated in NVivo, two coders were used to develop a list of words that were descriptors of persons (e.g., mother, GF, wife brother, uncle). The top three themes discussed by parole officers during home visits included the parolee's contact with the criminal justice system, housing or verification of residence, and employment. The next most common spheres of life discussed with parolees were electronic monitoring issues, treatment, and substance use. Among the least often discussed topics were travel requests, transfers or relocation issues, and education.

## Quantitative Analyses

The historical cohort resembled the current supervised population in Georgia and samples reported in the literature (Luallen et al., 2013; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006; Petersilia, 2009; Wilson, 2005). The parolees were mostly male (88%), nonwhite (61%), and unmarried (85%). Over half (59%) did not have a high school education or equivalency diploma. When starting parole, they were generally 35 years old. Petersilia (2003) explained that the age of parolees is older than in previous decades due to offenders receiving longer prison sentences.

The cohort was primarily sentenced to prison for property offenses (36%), personal (33%), and drug offenses (22%). While the longest supervision episode was 22 years, the length of supervision averaged 1.8 years ( $\mu = 642$  days). Mental health problems were found among 27% of the parolees. A somewhat higher percentage (38%) had a drug problem. In addition, they had amassed roughly 11 arrests prior to the parole episode with 70% and 71% having at least one major drug or parole/probation violation arrest, respectively. Most of the parolees had less than three prior incarcerations ( $\mu = 1.06$ ). Just over a quarter (27%) of the cohort had been previously revoked from parole or probation. Few of the parolees (9%) served less than 2 years in prison, for which a third (35%) of their crimes were property related and a quarter (25%) were personal offenses. Prison disciplinary problems were documented for 61% of the cohort. Almost half (47%) of the cohort was supervised at a high or specialized level at some point during their parole cycle. The parolees' supervision levels typically changed two times and they had two parole officers. On average, the cohort had about a year of employment during supervision. They reported 3 or more addresses ( $\mu = 2.32$  changes), few program failures ( $\mu = .39$ ), and almost half (44%) of parolees had a violation in the first six months of parole. Finally, the mean number of successful home visits was 17.8.

Violations were the most prominent negative supervision event and had the shortest survival time. Approximately two-thirds (61%) committed a technical violation, generally nine months after starting supervision. A third (35%) of parolees failed a drug test, with an average survival time of less than 15 months. Of the 28,284 parolees, 20% were arrested for a technical violation after about a year and a half. Nearly a quarter of the parolees were arrested for a new felony offense, with a typical survival time of 19 months. Revocation (13%) was the least likely outcome with the longest average occurrence time of nearly 2 years.

Finally, the bivariate results guided the multivariate analysis and informed discussions of preliminary findings in preparation for writing research articles. Multivariate logistic regression analyses were completed on all outcomes of interest by two independent analysts (Drs. Meredith and Hawk). Those independent findings were reconciled in order to inform the final multivariate Cox regression survival analyses of each outcome.

## Major Findings

### *Qualitative Study*

This study provides a unique look at the thematic content, tone, and cast present in home visits for high risk offenders on parole supervision. The accuracy of this data was validated through an observational study of home visits to assure parole officers' documentation of home visits mirrored what trained observers identified as the subject matters addressed during the home visit. While acknowledging that the positive tone of the home visit, especially acknowledgement of the positive steps parolees had taken were under-represented in parole officer's documentation, the degree of concordance was significant such that we are confident that the case management system data accurately reflect the subject matters discussed during home visits.

Our findings indicate that discerning whether or not a parolee has had contact with law enforcement or the criminal justice system is the predominate subject of home visit conversations. Over half of documented comments consisted of no more than a statement indicating that the parolee reported no arrests. This finding also suggests that officers' documentation about home visits serve more of the surveillance than the behavior change goal. Recent studies (Bonta et al. 2008) indicate that poor adherence to the RNR principles and practices produce little or negative impacts on recidivism. Focusing on unchangeable risk factors or supervision conditions increased recidivism rates an average of 6% while RNR adherence produced an average of a 30% *decrease* in recidivism (Andrews, Bonta, & Hoge, 1990).

Housing and employment constituted the second and third most common home visit themes. Much research shows that housing and employment status are significant need factors that influence parole success (Nally, Lockwood, Ho, Knutson, 2014). Further, when the subject matter was housing and employment, the tone of the home visit was more likely to be positive than negative. However, a more nuanced analysis of the validation study found that officers' written comments frequently did not reflect the positive tone observers noted in many home visits. Our review of officer comments in the larger analysis also found a limited number of positive comments while the vast majority were rated as neutral. This raises a question as to whether officers' comments reflect what they perceive to be what is important to their organization or of particular importance to their supervisor. Another explanation is that the notes serve as a synopsis of top concerns about a particular parolee rather than a reflective summary of the visit. Clear and O'Leary (1983) found that officers shift supervision emphasis based on their perceptions of the organizations explicit and implicit philosophy.

Our study found that only a small portion of home visit conversations included individuals other than the parolee. It may be that supervision contact requirements minimize the value of the role of the offender's family members and significant others in supervision. Studt (1972) found that officers had to return to the home on another occasion when the parolee was home in order to "count" the contact. While officials may acknowledge that family members can provide valuable information and support for offender reentry, organization policies may inadvertently work against developing alliances with significant others. Studt (1976) highlighted how home visits impact the family as well as the parolee. While parolees must submit to the conditions of supervision, including unscheduled home visits, family members must endure and accept unplanned intrusions into the home at all hours. Organizations seeking to maximize the level of cooperation and pro-social support that family members can make to successful reentry, should carefully consider how to productively engage these significant others while respecting their rights and privacy.

## *Quantitative Study*

The first major finding is that the context in which parolees are monitored is important. Higher numbers of home visits were associated with better supervision outcomes – all of them. To significantly lower noncompliance and recidivism, officers need to be responsive to parolees, considering their risks and needs. When supervision is conducted in the home, thought to be a comfortable environment, providing more insights into the parolee’s lifestyle, and allowing for concerned others (e.g., parolees’ family, partner, friends) to participate in case management, the likelihood of supervision success increases. Interactions in these settings, may enable parole officers to apply their training regarding the challenges faced by offenders, how to reduce recidivism factors, and offer significant support and counseling (Clear & Latessa, 1993; Kennealy et al., 2013; Taxman, 2008). More generally, field contacts may be less scripted and rigid than institutional responses that occur in the parole office so the parolee may be more receptive to what the officer is saying. While the effect size of home visits was small, it was cumulative – each home visit reduces the hazard of each supervision failure – pointing to home visits being of considerable consequence as part of the supervision package.

Second, we found that after controlling for the effects of home visits, measures of parolee characteristics, history, prison sentence, and supervision activities were significant predictors of supervision outcomes, as well. As noted above, the demographics results are similar to previous studies (Luallen et al., 2013; Steen & Opsal, 2007; Wilson, 2005). Males and younger parolees experienced more failures. Nonwhites and unmarried parolees violated more. However, whites were more likely to be revoked and revoked sooner (among similarly situated parolees). This finding is contrary to the current literature, thus warrants further research. These results may be region specific and not nationally applicable or generalizable to other parole board decisions. It is also possible that there is a moderating factor not calculated here. Replication and expansion of this study model is necessary to enhance our understanding of this effect.

A parolee’s substance abuse history and low education increases the likelihood of drug test failures. These factors, pervasive for people who have been incarcerated, are commonly used to predict parole outcomes (Olson & Lurigio, 2000). Clearly, previous drug problems are a good indicator of current drug use. Programs addressing these collateral challenges are instrumental to rehabilitation. Similarly, the finding that histories of mental illness and criminal justice contacts effect parole outcomes was also expected based on the literature (Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Hughes, Wilson, & Beck, 2001; Kassebaum, 1999; Petersilia, 1985; Steen & Opsal, 2007). The role of mental illness in supervision failure should not be underestimated. Moreover, prior criminal history – arrest counts, charge types, incarceration, and revocations – are consistent indicators of noncompliance and recidivism. These issues are prevalent among offenders generally, in prisons, and under supervision (Harcourt, 2007; Petersilia, 2009). The most serious criminals are those placed on ISP, receiving the greatest number of home visits. The ability of supervisors to respond to these individuals is critical. Among prison domain predictors, it makes sense that the parolee’s preceding sentence might impact supervision success, or lack thereof. Sentence length, offense type, and prison discipline problems are indicative of TVs, arrests, and revocations.

Finding that home visits co-vary with established measures further suggests the need to model the context of supervision intensity. In addition to examining parolee heterogeneity, it is of particular administrative concern to understand the effects of supervision activity on parole outcomes. Instability during reentry seems to be problematic for supervision success. When a parolee’s supervision level changes, parole conditions are altered increasing the likelihood of a new violation. Violations tend to occur more frequently among those parolees newly released from prison and are predictive of felony arrests and revocations, so opportunities to decrease the odds and timing of those events can help with multiple supervision outcomes. Similarly, parolees assigned to a new officer must develop a new

relationship, increasing the odds the parolee will get into trouble. To create a working relationship between parolees and officers, agencies should focus on long-term pairings. Other lifestyle destabilizers that can trigger negative events include unemployment, mobility, and program failure. Parolees with stability seem better able to stay compliant and desist from crime. Finding ways to keep parolees employed and in stable housing will reduce parole failures. Home visits are likely to provide the best atmosphere for officers to detect instability and offer practical solutions. More studies need to consider the measures presented here from each predicting domain alongside home visits on multiple supervision outcomes. In fact, a replication of this study among probationers would be useful.

## Conclusions

Parole officers are charged with the dual role of assuring felony offender compliance with sentence and prison release conditions while assisting with community reentry. The natural home environment is a key locale for promoting and monitoring behavior change. Therapeutic jurisprudence informs contemporary community supervision's focus on building the essential skills necessary to effectively support the initial transition to the community, then the successful completion of supervision by fostering dual surveillance and change agent skills. Continuing the legacy from the early history of community supervision, this blended approach requires basic and advanced skill training with sustained coaching that includes interaction recordings, self-assessments and expert feedback. Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision (STICS), (Bonta et al., 2011; Bourgon & Gutierrez, 2012), Strategic Techniques Aimed at Reducing Rearrest (STARR) (Robinson, Lowenkamp, Holsinger, VanBenschoten, Alexander, & Oleson, 2012), and Skills for Offender Assessment and Responsivity in New Goals (SOARING2) (Taxman & Serin, 2016) are skill development programs for training officers in communication skills, cognitive-behavioral interventions, and responsivity to crime desistance.

This study finds there are more dimensions to supervision than have been traditionally examined. We included the traditional variable used to test the effects of supervision level and home visits as competing intensity measures. Supervision level may determine how often a parolee is seen, but the context of that frequency has a separate correlation with supervision outcomes. These results suggest the impacts of supervision intensity are complex and unlikely to be captured with only measures of supervision level assignments, which are proxies for parolee risk and offense behavior. Officers may monitor their clients closely but also find intensive supervision in a home context more amenable to flexing the range of their case management training. We need to disentangle home visits as a measure of supervision intensity as providing control or treatment opportunities. Exploration of how home visits improves outcomes (qualitative dimension of what happens in a home visits) is necessary to further grasp why home visits are significant. Overall, this study adds to the literature exploring the content and impact of home visits as a supervision tool.

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