



Philadelphia Low-Intensity Community Supervision Experiment

A low-intensity community supervision program for low-risk criminal offenders on probation or parole in Philadelphia was found in a well-conducted randomized controlled trial to cause no increase in crime compared to the usual, more-intensive supervision of such offenders. Thus, reduced supervision of such offenders may be a viable approach to reducing costs in the criminal justice system.

I. Description of the Intervention:

Low-Intensity Community Supervision was implemented as a program for criminal offenders on probation or parole identified as being at low risk of committing a serious crime (based on prior criminal behavior and other factors). Under the program, these offenders received low-intensity community supervision by a probation officer (averaging 2.4 visits with the officer per year), instead of the standard higher-intensity supervision (averaging 4.5 such visits per year). In the study described below, the program was delivered by two probation officers with caseloads more than two times larger than standard probation caseloads (323 clients vs. 135).

II. Evidence of Effectiveness:

A. Evaluation Method: A randomized controlled trial of Low-Intensity Community Supervision in Philadelphia, with follow-up one year after random assignment.

This study randomly assigned 1,559 offenders on parole (from a short sentence in county jail) or probation in 2007-2008 to either (i) a treatment group that received Low-Intensity Community Supervision or (ii) a control group that received standard supervision.

The sample members had been identified – via a computer algorithm – as being roughly in the lower half of active cases in likelihood of committing a serious crime, based on prior criminal behavior and other factors. Sample members averaged 41 years of age. 67% were male, and 48% were African-American.

B. Effects of Low-Intensity Community Supervision, one year after random assignment:

These are the effects on the primary outcomes that the study measured at the one-year follow-up, compared to the control group.

- There were no significant differences between the treatment and control group in prevalence or frequency of new criminal charges for any offense, including violent offenses.
- There were no significant differences between the two groups in likelihood of incarceration in local jails, or days incarcerated.
- There was also no pattern of *non-significant* differences between the two groups in the above outcome measures.

Overall, about 15-16% of the sample had an offense during the year, and about 15-16% were incarcerated.

C. Discussion of Study Quality:

- Prior to the intervention, the treatment and control group were highly similar in demographics and prior criminal history.
- The study had no sample attrition, since all outcomes were measured using administrative court records. (The records cover arrests and incarcerations within Philadelphia, but not elsewhere.)
- The study appropriately kept sample members in the group – treatment or control – to which they were originally assigned (i.e., the study used an “intention-to-treat” analysis). (Shortly after random assignment, approximately 18% of the whole sample was deemed not to meet the eligibility criteria for the program – e.g., because they were participating in court-ordered drug treatment. The ineligible treatment group members received standard supervision, but for the analysis were kept in the treatment group. The ineligible control group members also received standard supervision, and for the analysis were kept in the control group.)
- The study evaluated the program as delivered at scale in the West and Northeast regions of Philadelphia, thus providing evidence of its effects in real-world implementation conditions.
- Study limitations:
 - (i) The study evaluated the program as implemented by just two probation officers. Replication of these findings in another site with other officers would be desirable, as noted below.
 - (ii) The study analysis indicated that its sample was large enough to detect a difference between the treatment and control groups in overall offending (it had 80% power to detect an effect of 0.14 standard deviations). However, this analysis was based on the original randomized sample of 1,559 offenders. It may not have taken into account that 18% of sample members did not receive their assigned intervention – a fact that could partly explain the lack of observed differences in outcomes between the treatment and control groups.

D. Thoughts on what more is needed to build strong evidence: A second well-conducted randomized controlled trial carried out in another setting, with other probation officers, to show that the effects generalize to other settings where the program might normally be implemented.

III. References

Barnes, Geoffrey C., Lindsay Ahlman, Charlotte Gill, Lawrence W. Sherman, Ellen Kurtz, and Robert Malvestuto. “Low-Intensity Community Supervision for Low-Risk Offenders: a Randomized, Controlled Trial.” *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 159-189.