

# Probation Services

Probation services consist of a variety of probation-oriented programs, including traditional probation, intensive supervision and school-based probation.

## Traditional Probation

Traditional probation is a disposition in which youth are placed on informal/voluntary or formal/court-ordered supervision. This type of probation is known as the cornerstone of the juvenile justice system because juvenile probation officers have contact with virtually every case that enters the system with responsibilities ranging from screening cases to the supervision of cases (Kurlychek, Torbet and Bozynski 1999). It was derived from a logical extension of the English common law practice of the conditional suspension of punishment (Roush 1996). The first step beyond the common law practice was taken in Boston, Mass., in 1841 when John Augustus requested that the court allow him to post bail for a man charged with being a common drunkard. The court agreed, and Augustus was ordered to return with the defendant in 3 weeks, at which time he was to show convincing signs of reform. At sentencing, instead of the usual imprisonment, the judge imposed a fine of 1 cent and ordered the “reformed” defendant to pay costs. This revolutionary concept was gradually extended to include women and children.

Although juvenile probation is the cornerstone of the system, it also serves a cache for the juvenile court. Probation supervision is the overwhelming dispositional choice of juvenile court judges (Torbet 1996). Probation was ordered in 58 percent of the more than 1 million cases that received a juvenile court sanction in 1999. The frequency of use, however, is generally attributed to the limitless nature of probation services (probation departments cannot limit intake) and its inexpensive cost, relative to other sanction options, rather than its performance. Traditional probation is often accused of providing only a “slap on the wrist” to offenders, rather than accountability. The juvenile courts are portrayed by critics as a revolving door, with youth often rearrested for new crimes while still under court-ordered supervision (Kurlychek, Torbet, and Bozynski 1999). Moreover, evaluations of regular probation supervision have not been very encouraging. Peter Greenwood (1996) concluded that “an overworked probation officer who sees a client only once a month has little ability either to monitor the client’s behavior or to exert much of an influence over his life.” Lipsey (1992) found that for youth with multiple risk factors (e.g., several prior arrests, arrests at an early age, drug or gang involvement, parental problems), “probation as usual” was not an effective option.

## Intensive Supervision Programs

One of the most commonly cited reasons for traditional probation’s failure is heavy caseloads, which prevent probation officers from providing anything more than superficial instructions and infrequent contacts. This fundamental problem with traditional probation fueled the concept of intensive supervision programs (ISPs). ISPs differ from traditional probation in that they are characterized by higher levels of contact with probation officers or caseworkers, smaller caseloads, and strict conditions of compliance. Such programs generally encompass a wide variety of risk control strategies, including multiple weekly face-to-face contacts, evening visits, urine testing, and electronic monitoring. Most ISPs also incorporate the delivery of a wide range of services to address offenders’ needs.

The basic premise of an ISP is to provide a high level of control over an offender for public safety, but without the additional costs associated with incarceration. This attractive premise led to a dramatic proliferation of ISPs in the 1980s, and by 1990 virtually every State had developed some type of ISP (Krisberg et.al 1994). Initial research examining the influence of ISPs suggested that they led to a significant decrease in reincarceration (Erwin 1986) and rearrests (Pearson 1987) among adult offenders. However, critical reviews of the research demonstrated that the data did not support the conclusions unequivocally (Sherman, et al. 1997).

Today, the literature on juvenile ISP programs is mixed and, as a result, inconclusive. Some research finds that ISPs are at least as effective as incarceration in reducing recidivism (Wiebush 1993; Krisberg, Austin, and Steele 1989; Barton and Butts 1990). For example, Wiebush (1993) used a quasi-experimental design to compare the outcomes of ISP participants with 1) youths who were incarcerated and then released to parole and 2) a group of felony offenders sentenced to regular probation. The study found that ISP youths had recidivism outcomes that were no worse than the other two groups. Similarly, Barton and Butts (1990) conducted a random assignment field experiment of 500 youths in Detroit, Mich. The study concluded that the ISPs were as effective as commitment. Moreover, the ISPs provided a significant savings in the cost of juvenile corrections—about one-third of the cost of commitment. In contrast, some evidence suggests that ISPs are ineffective. Land, McCall, and Williams (1990) used a random assignment design to examine the North Carolina Intensive Protective Supervision Project. The majority of program participants were status offenders (i.e., runaways or truants). The program was designed to enhance both the degree of supervision and the provision of services. The authors found that the youth with no prior delinquent offenses had fewer delinquent offenses compared with the control group, but the ISP youth with prior delinquent offenses had more delinquent offenses.

Finally, although research has not revealed a significant relationship between intensive supervision and recidivism, there is some evidence that ISPs with treatment components may produce a significant reduction in rearrests. Research on adult ISPs (Petersilia and Turner 1993; Jolin and Stipack 1991; Latessa 1993; Byrne and Kelly 1989) finds that when treatment services are combined with increased supervision, rearrests are reduced. However, it is not clear whether the treatment, the supervision, or a combination of the two produced the positive outcomes.

## **School-Based Probation**

Another approach to reforming probation is school-based probation. This type of program creates a partnership between juvenile probation departments and local schools that places probation officers directly within the confines of the school. The program targets students who have been charged with delinquent offenses and/or are under the supervision of the court. The benefit of school-based probation is that it increases the contact between the officers and the youths. Under a traditional probation model, an officer may contact the youth only once or twice a month. But with the probation offices directly in the schools, officers can provide almost daily informal contact as well as much more frequent formal meetings during, before and after school hours. Being located in the school also permits officers to check attendance, discipline records, and other information about probationers on a daily basis, as well as to check with

teachers about academic progress. Consequently, officers develop more substantial personal relationships with youths, resulting in improved communication and understanding (Safe and Responsive Schools Project 2002). School-based probation officers can also: 1) intervene in crisis situations involving juvenile probation clients; 2) assist schools in handling disruptive behavior by probationers or other youth; 3) coordinate interventions with the schools and other agencies; 4) coordinate reentry efforts for youth returning from a juvenile justice facility; and 5) serve as an agent of early intervention for disruptive or truant youth who are not yet involved in the juvenile justice system (Stephens and Arnette 2000).

Although school-based probation is still a relatively new concept and no comprehensive evaluation has been completed, preliminary evidence suggests that it has a favorable impact on school attendance, day-to-day school conduct and recidivism (Clouser 1995; Metzger 1997; Griffin 1999). There is also some evidence that school-based probation demonstrates improved academic performance (Clouser 1995) and is cost-effective (Metzger 1997). In a comparison of 75 randomly selected school-based probation clients with 75 regular probation clients matched on age, race, gender, crime, and county of supervision, Metzger (1997) found that school-based probation clients spent significantly more time in the community without being charged with new offenses or placed in custody and less likely to be charged with serious crimes. Metzger also found several other important benefits—including closer overall supervision, better school attendance, fewer instances of serious recidivism, fewer placements, and far fewer placement days—resulting in an estimated cost savings of \$6,665 for every case assigned to school-based probation.

Recently, Torbett and colleagues (2001) surveyed probation officers, probation chiefs/supervisors, and school administrators in Pennsylvania. All three groups reported high levels of satisfaction with the school-based probation program, including the services the program provides, the effect the program has on the school climate, and the communication that the program facilitates between the schools and the juvenile courts. Moreover, more than 90 percent of the probation officers—and 79 percent of the school administrators—believed the program is effective in reducing recidivism among probationers. While not definitive, these results suggest that school-based probation should be considered a promising alternative in a graduated sanctions system.

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