Research in Brief

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Use of Electronic Monitoring in Community Corrections

KEY POINTS

- Electronic monitoring provides a lower-cost alternative to incarceration but is more expensive than traditional probation or parole.
- Electronic monitoring is generally effective at reducing recidivism for people convicted of serious offenses and classified as medium- and high-risk, compared to supervision as usual.
- Electronic monitoring shows reductions in general and sex offense recidivism rates for people convicted of sex offenses, compared to supervision as usual.
- There is no evidence that electronic monitoring is effective at reducing recidivism rates for people classified as low-risk for re-offending or convicted of less serious offenses. Using electronic monitoring for this population, which might typically do well on traditional supervision, is more expensive and may increase the risk of incarceration for technical (i.e., non-criminal) violations.
- Electronic monitoring is more expensive than traditional supervision, but the crime reduction benefits generally outweigh the increased cost of electronic monitoring when used for people convicted of serious offenses or classified as high-risk to reoffend.

Policy and Purpose

Electronic monitoring is a tool that can be used in a number of community supervision scenarios.[i] The primary purpose of electronic monitoring is to allow supervision officers to better monitor the whereabouts and movements of a person who is on probation or parole through a body-worn global positioning system (GPS) or radio-frequency enabled device. Electronic monitoring may be used as an alternative to incarceration by imposing a restriction on a person's liberty without requiring the person to serve that time in jail or prison, or it may be imposed as an enhanced form of supervision for individuals on probation or parole who are at a higher risk for re-offending, or who have serious prior convictions. As an alternative to incarceration, it offers an intermediate sanction to the sentencing judge, serves as an early release mechanism for incarcerated individuals, or may be imposed as an alternative to revocation for individuals who have violated the conditions of standard parole or probation. It may also be imposed as an alternative to standard parole or probation for individuals that need to have more intense monitoring. Electronic monitoring is intended to reduce recidivism by deterring criminal and non-compliant behavior and reducing opportunities for new offenses. It is also intended to increase detection of said behavior.

Correctional agencies began to use radio-frequency electronic monitoring in the 1980's and GPS technology in the early 2000's. Today, electronic monitoring is used at the federal level and by state and local agencies in all 50 states.[1] The Pew Charitable Trusts[2] estimates that 125,000 accused or convicted individuals were monitored on electronic monitoring in 2015, up from 53,000 in 2005. The use of electronic monitoring continues to expand, particularly as the push to lower prison and jail population has spread nationwide and several large-scale studies have shown positive effects on recidivism. However, electronic monitoring is a resource-heavy venture for agencies to undertake and research shows limits to its effectiveness in decreasing re-offending.

[i] Note that electronic monitoring is commonly used in pretrial supervision, but this brief is focused on use in the post-conviction supervision setting.

Summary of Research

The effectiveness of electronic monitoring in reducing recidivism depends on the agencies' purposes for using electronic monitoring (e.g., to reduce recidivism or increase detection of criminal activity), the targeted intervention group (people classified as high risk or the general supervision population), and the measure of recidivism used (e.g., revocation or reoffending). Several major studies show that electronic monitoring is successful in reducing some forms of recidivism for more serious probation and parole populations.[3] A recent meta-analysis[4] also showed that electronic monitoring resulted in reductions in recidivism for people convicted of sex offenses and when used as an alternative to an incarceration sentence. **Research evidence does not support the use of electronic monitoring for low-risk or low-level offending populations who would otherwise be assigned to supervision as usual.**

The research demonstrates strong evidence that electronic monitoring is successful in reducing rates of reconviction, technical violations, and absconding for people on probation and parole who are classified as high-risk, or convicted of serious offenses. Three high-quality studies[5] showed reductions in recidivism rates for people who were classified as high-risk to reoffend or convicted of serious offenses and who were on electronic monitoring while on probation or parole, compared to those who were on community supervision as usual. Another high-quality study[6] showed reductions in arrests for high-risk parolees, but also increases in both technical and non-technical violations compared to the group without electronic monitoring. The authors conclude that electronic monitoring is successful at reducing criminal activity but increases detection of parole violations which contributes to higher revocation rates.

The research demonstrates promising evidence that electronic monitoring reduces reoffending for people placed on electronic monitoring as an alternative to prison based on a high-quality study by Belur and colleagues.[7] There is also strong evidence that electronic monitoring reduces recidivism for individuals convicted of a sex offense based on three high-quality studies.[8] However, the Belur and colleagues meta-analysis[9] also showed that electronic monitoring was *not* successful at reducing the incidence of re-arrest or violations, but was successful in reducing reconviction and re-imprisonment. There is insufficient research on whether electronic monitoring works to reduce recidivism for people on community supervision who are classified as low-risk or convicted of less serious offenses. There are no high-quality or medium-quality studies examining the effectiveness of GPS or radio-frequency electronic monitoring for this group of individuals specifically.

Electronic monitoring provides a lower-cost alternative to incarceration, but is more expensive than traditional probation or parole.[10] While the daily cost of electronic monitoring is greater than supervision as usual, several cost-benefit studies show that money saved through reductions in criminal justice case-processing (e.g., arrest, court, probation, jail, prison) and avoided victimization due to reductions in recidivism offsets the cost of electronic monitoring.[11] Thus, the research base supports the use of electronic monitoring to target higher-risk or more serious individuals who may otherwise be incarcerated. However, agencies should be cautious about expanding the use of electronic monitoring into the general probation or parole population simply to provide more intense monitoring. **Using electronic monitoring on a population that would normally do well on traditional supervision has not been shown to be effective and may come with a number of unintended consequences.** First, the added daily costs of electronic monitoring may reduce money for other funding priorities aimed at reducing recidivism, such as access to high-quality rehabilitative programming. Second, the monthly maintenance cost of electronic monitoring is often passed down to people on supervision who may not have the ability to pay, which may then lead to violations for non-payment. Third, electronic monitoring has the potential to increase detection of technical violations,[12] which may result in a higher rate of returns to prison compared to less intrusive forms of supervision. Fourth, studies show that officers spend a large amount of time sifting through electronic monitoring alerts and that they may ignore real-time alerts completely,[13] which may affect officers' abilities to engage in other activities aimed at encouraging re-entry success (e.g., case-planning).

In sum, both GPS and radio-frequency electronic monitoring show success in reducing re-offending and absconding for people classified as high-risk and convicted of serious offenses compared to traditional supervision, and when given as an alternative to incarceration. However, there is no evidence that electronic monitoring provides benefits to the general probation supervision population. Furthermore, research suggest that electronic monitoring may result in a higher technical violation rate for certain groups due to the increased detection of non-compliant behavior.

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Endnotes

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2 Pew Charitable Trusts. (2016, September). *Use of Electronic Offender-Tracking Devices Expands Sharply*. (Issue Brief). Downloaded from https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2016/10/use_of_electronic_offender_tracking_devices_expands_sharply.pdf.

3 Bales, W., Mann, K., Blomberg, T., Gaes, G., Barrick, K., Dhungana, K., & McManus, B. (2010). *Quantitative and qualitative assessment of electronic monitoring*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Downloaded from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/230530.pdf; Gies, S. V., Gainey, R., Cohen, M. I., Healy, E., Yeide, M., Bekelman, A., & Bobnis, A. (2013). *Monitoring High-Risk Gang Offenders with GPS Technology: An Evaluation of the California Supervision Program Final Report*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Downloaded from https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/244164.pdf; Gies, S. V., Gainey, R., Cohen, M. I., Healy, E., Duplantier, D., Yeide, M., & Hopps, M. (2012). *Monitoring High-Risk Sex Offenders with GPS Technology: An Evaluation of the California Supervision Program, Final Report*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice. Downloaded from: https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/238481.pdf; Padgett, K. G., Bales, W. D., & Blomberg, T. G. (2006). Under surveillance: An empirical test of the effectiveness and consequences of electronic monitoring. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5(1), 61-91.

4 Belur, J., Thornot, A., Tompson, L., Manning, M., Sidebottom, A., Bowers, K. (2017) *A Systematic Review of the Effectiveness of the Electronic Monitoring of Offender*. What Works Crime Reduction Systematic Review Series. London: University College London. Downloaded from https://whatworks.college.police.uk/Research/Systematic_Review_Series/Documents/Electronic_monitoring_SR.pdf.

5 Bales et al. (2010); Gies, et al., (2012); Padgett, K. G., Bales, W. D., & Blomberg, T. G. (2006). Under surveillance: An empirical test of the effectiveness and consequences of electronic monitoring. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 5(1), 61-91.

6 Gies et al., 2013.

7 Belur et al., 2017.

8 Bales et al., 2010; Belur et al., 2017; Gies et al, 2012.

9 Belur et al., 2017.

10 Bales et al., 2010; Omori, M. K., & Turner, S. F. (2015). Assessing the cost of electronically monitoring high-risk sex offenders. *Crime & Delinquency*, 61(6), 873-894.

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The strength of the evidence reviewed in this brief is assessed according to our Evidence of Assessment Criteria and Hierarchy of Study Design, which are posted online: robinainstitute.umn.edu/research-brief.