Campbell Crime and Justice Group Title Registration Form
(Submit to Charlotte Gill at gillce@sas.upenn.edu)

Instruction: Briefly address each item below. Provide enough information to allow the CCJG the ability to evaluate the scope of the review, appropriateness for the Campbell Collaboration, and any possible overlap with existing registered reviews.

1. Title of the review
   Probation Intensity Effects on Probationers’ Criminal Conduct

2. Background and objective of this review (briefly describe the problem and the intervention).

   Probation is one of the most frequently-used criminal sanctions in the US (American Correctional Association 2000), but it also suffers from the public perception that it is a ‘soft’ approach to crime for often serious offenders who are highly likely to recidivate. Subsequently, many probation agencies have struggled to access sufficient funding (Petersilia 1997). This highlights a clear need for probation agencies to identify practices that are both effective in reducing recidivism, and an efficient use of scarce resources.

   The programming and services that are often provided in conjunction with or on referral from probation, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, drug courts, and skill building programs, have been extensively evaluated, showing mixed effects on repeat offending (e.g., Taxman 2002; MacKenzie 2006a, b). Yet comparatively little attention has been paid to the impact of probation supervision itself on crime: the number of cases a probation officer handles, the number of contacts between officer and client, the duration of the contact and its content, and the nature of the interaction. Supervision is perhaps considered an uninteresting part of the probation process, “in the background of other programming” and therefore “inconsequential to effectiveness” (Taxman 2002: 14). On the contrary, supervision – particularly the amount and intensity of supervision – is a crucial part of probation not only because it is the bedrock of programming, but also because in a chronically under-funded enterprise it may constitute the only interaction with the agency that a client receives, and thus may directly impact future criminal behavior.

   An exception to this trend is the large body of literature dedicated to the rigorous evaluation of intensive supervision programs (ISP) for serious offenders on probation and parole. However, this evidence has not yielded consistent results, and only recently has the opposite scenario – decreased intensity of supervision – been tested. There has been no systematic attempt at identifying, summarizing, and analyzing what we know about the overall impact of changing probation intensity. Thus, the objective of this systematic review is to form a comprehensive picture of the state of knowledge on how the intensity of probation supervision affects recidivism.
3. Define the population

Both juveniles and adults who are on probation will be included in the review. However, because supervision is likely to differ between juveniles and adults, results for the two age groups will be reported separately.

4. Define the intervention

Eligible studies will test the effect of changing the intensity of probation supervision on subsequent crime. A change in intensity could be brought about by increasing or decreasing the ratio of probationers to probation officers in a probation agency; increasing or decreasing the number or frequency of contacts, between a client and his/her probation officer; or increasing or decreasing the number or frequency of other methods of control by probation officers, such as drug tests or home visits. Studies that estimate the impact of these specific measures on recidivism will be considered. It is expected that most studies will test increases in probation intensity rather than decreases, but changes in both directions will be eligible for inclusion in the review.

5. Outcome(s) (what is aimed to accomplish – Primary and secondary outcomes should all be mentioned)

The primary outcome of interest is reoffending by probationers, whether measured by arrests or reconvictions. Technical violations of probation will also be considered separately.

6. Methodology (What types of studies are to be included or excluded and what will be your method of synthesis? Will you use meta-analysis?)

The primary focus of the review is research on programs or initiatives that test the effect of changing the ratio of probationers to probation officers on later crime, in comparison to a counterfactual group that remains part of the ‘standard’ caseload. Studies will also be assessed for the effects of additional features or measures of supervision intensity, such as drug tests, home visits, and the number of contacts.

Only studies rating at least Level 4 on the Maryland Scientific Methods Scale (SMS: Farrington et al. 2006) will be included in our review. That is, they will measure recidivism outcomes in multiple experimental and control units, controlling for potential bias from confounding factors by random assignment, subject matching, or multivariate statistical controls (quasi-experimental designs should also include before/after measures of crime; random assignment assumes those differences are random). While Cook and Campbell (1979) saw Level 3 studies as the minimum interpretable research design, we justify excluding them on the basis that we already know of a large body of primary research that is of very high quality.

The SMS omits certain other research designs that maximize internal validity (Farrington et al. 2006: 19-20). If studies are found that cannot be easily classified on the SMS but include before/after measures of crime and a comparable control group, they will also be considered for inclusion.

Meta-analysis will be attempted where possible. As such, eligible studies should
include the data necessary to compute effect sizes, and effect size data will be coded and reported. However, it may not be appropriate to conduct a meta-analysis on the entire set of studies due to the disparate nature of the interventions, participants, and outcomes. For example, Petersilia and Turner (1993) note that, despite the large amount of research on ISPs, there is no generic definition of ISP. Common characteristics may include reduced caseloads, closer surveillance, drug testing, treatment, and employment. Moderator analysis may be used to deal with reasonable heterogeneity in the nature of the treatment and the characteristics of the sample (e.g., risk level).

Qualitative studies will not be included in the review, but relevant qualitative data will be used to inform the background, framing, and analysis of our questions.

7. Do you need support in any of these areas (methodology, statistics, systematic searches, field expertise, review manager etc?)

The second author has extensive experience in systematic review methodology, and is a member of the Campbell Collaboration Crime & Justice Group Steering Committee. The lead author is familiar with the C2 process and literature search strategies, but is conducting a meta-analysis for the first time and may seek advice regarding data analysis.

8. Lead reviewer(s) with contact information

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9. References


