Probation, Effectiveness of

What We Know

The United States Bureau of Justice Statistics defines probation as “a court-appointed period of correctional supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to incarceration.” More rarely, probation follows a period of incarceration.

- At the end of 2016, 4,537,100 persons (approximately 1 in 55 adult Americans) were under supervision in the community, which includes probation and parole (i.e., community supervision following a prison term). Of these persons, 81% were on probation.
- In 2016 the number of adults under supervision in the United States decreased for the ninth consecutive year. There was an 18% decrease in persons under supervision in the community from 2007 to 2016.
- There are approximately 91,000 probation and parole officers in the United States.
- The purposes of probation are to help probationers obey the law (to prevent further crimes), to rehabilitate them (i.e., reintegrate them into society) and to protect public safety.
- Probation sentences vary depending on local laws, the perceived risk posed by the probationer, and the severity of the offense.
  - The probation officer is responsible for assessing the risk that the probationer will commit new crimes by using standardized risk-assessment tools.
  - The probation officer can use “static” and “dynamic” information to assess the probationer’s risk of reoffending. Static (i.e., generally unchangeable) information consists of basic facts about the individual such as sex, age at first conviction, number of previous prison sentences, and type of offense(s). Dynamic (i.e., amenable to change) information includes potential strengths and risk factors such as education level; vocational experience and employability; residence; relationships; lifestyle; drug and alcohol misuse; and emotional well-being.
  - Some cases do not require that the probation officer have contact with the offender. These are referred to as “banked” probation caseloads, in which there is little or no supervision. This type of probation limits the time spent and resources used by a probation officer working with a probationer; officers only make referrals for the probationer to local services. Banked caseloads represent the majority of probationers in the United States.
  - More involved cases may require the probation officer to make unscheduled visits to probationers’ homes or workplaces and/or monitor them electronically (e.g., through GPS). These are considered specialized intensive cases (i.e., cases involving sexual or drug offenses) and have a “caseworker” model. Probation officers can develop case-management plans to help probationers establish employment and find housing; they may also provide individual counseling. Given the increased resource utilization required by this model, few cases are handled in this fashion.
  - In a study, researchers found that probation officers were incorporating evidence-based correctional strategies in their work with probationers with mental health issues. These strategies included spending time discussing mental health needs (versus strategies that focused on deterring the probationer from committing new...
crimes), teaching problem-solving skills, and affirming the probationers’ efforts to rehabilitate such as attending counseling and group therapy and achieving therapeutic goals(12)

- Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of probation
  - Probation is considered cost-effective because probation services cost approximately $4,000 a year per person versus $32,000 or more per year per person for incarceration (19) Over the last few decades there has been a shift in probation from a punitive approach to adherence to principles of risk, need, and responsivity. A risk assessment is completed to evaluate the needs of the probationer and their risk to re-offend. Providing treatment services in proportion to the offenders risk to re-offend can reduce recidivism. Instead of punishing failure, probation officers are promoting success. Probation officers help probationers problem-solve, receive treatment, and connect to appropriate resources (e.g., motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral interventions, alcohol and drug treatment, sexual offending counseling) that are more likely than incarceration alone to facilitate long-term behavior change (1)

- In a longitudinal study of 359 probationers with mental illness, researchers examined the use of specialized mental health caseloads (SMHC) compared to traditional probation. Researchers found that participants in SMHC had less recidivism; traditional probationers were 2.68 times more likely to be rearrested (18)

- In 2019, researchers who reviewed outcomes of 415 probationers assigned to substance abuse treatment programs found a significant reduction in recidivism. Probationers who failed to complete a drug treatment program were more likely to be rearrested than probationers who completed treatment (2)

- The mental health and resiliency of probation officers themselves is a key aspect of the effectiveness of probation for probationers. Having an excessive caseload has a negative impact on probation officers, compromising their ability to provide timely and effective services for probationers
  - Working in the corrections system can lead to stress and burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion) for probation officers (11)
  - In 2018, investigators found that probation officers who had higher caseloads of persons with mental illness had significantly higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depressive symptoms (4) Burnout, role conflict (i.e., when incompatible demands are placed on an employee), and work stress are predictors of depressive symptoms among probation officers. Depressive symptoms can affect one’s work performance and cause absenteeism (3)

**What We Can Do**

- Develop an awareness of your own cultural values, beliefs, and biases and develop knowledge about the histories, traditions, and values of your clients. Adopt treatment methodologies that reflect the cultural needs of the client (2,8,13)

- Become knowledgeable about the effectiveness of probation to accurately assess a client’s personal characteristics and needs concerning mental health, substance abuse, and reentry into the community

- Share information about probation with your colleagues

- Partner with probation officers when working with juveniles in various contexts such as child welfare, group homes, and schools, and when working with adults in the court system such as by providing psychological assessments for offenders (15)

- Advocate for organizational changes that can alleviate work stress and burnout in probation officers such as lower caseloads

- Advocate for more field placements within the criminal justice system (e.g., in prisons, in probation services) for master of social work candidates to increase their knowledge of the criminal justice system, build skills in assessing clients in the system for risk of recidivism, and learn to write court reports (i.e., objective reports on the progress of clients in the criminal justice system for judges and attorneys) (6,15)

- Advocate for the use of treatment courts in lieu of incarceration and rigorous evaluation of treatment court programs (e.g., drug court) to determine whether they are effective in meeting the needs of probationers and reducing recidivism (17)
References


