

# Electronic Monitoring vs. Halfway Houses: A Study of Federal Offenders

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The following is a series of excerpts from the author's Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland. Jody Klein-Saffran works with the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

*\* Author Jody Klein-Saffran, who works with the U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, Washington, D.C., copyrighted her Ph.D. dissertation from which this feature is taken, in 1993. She dedicated this substantial work to her husband, Dr. Barry Saffran. Readers interested in contacting Jody Klein-Saffran can do so through the editor of this magazine. \**

## THE ISSUES

In the quest for cost-effective, practical and appropriate alternatives to incarceration, policy-makers have sought to implement a variety of intermediate punishments. The overriding rationale for alternatives to incarceration is to alleviate prison crowding and the financial burden of incarceration that has led to today's "crisis in corrections." With the advent of this "crisis", criminal justice professionals have renewed their interest in community corrections programs. However, unlike the community corrections programs of the past, which had rehabilitation as the main goal, the primary goal of today's community corrections programs is to provide surveillance or incapacitation in a less expensive manner than incarceration. The philosophy behind rehabilitation was premised on reducing recidivism. Currently, community corrections programs are driven by political and economic pressures to devise safe ways to ease prison crowding (Tonry and Will, 1988) in addition to reducing recidivism.

## ABOUT HALFWAY HOUSES

Another way to ease crowded prisons while providing close community supervision is to move inmates to halfway houses during their transition from institutionalization to freedom. Halfway houses have become an integral element in the correctional process and have two primary purposes. First, the punitive component provides a restrictive community-based setting for direct court commitments, intermittent commitments, and selected parole/probation violators who are usually sentenced for less than one year of imprisonment. Except for employment, the offender is

Editor's Note: The author's dissertation is meticulously footnoted with all cited sources identified and credited. Space consideration, not to mention sheer readability, have dictated that Jody Klein-Saffran's careful footnoting and bibliographic work has herein been abbreviated or omitted.

generally restricted to the halfway house facility. In this component, the goal is not directed toward increasing family and community ties, but is strictly punitive in nature.

The second purpose for halfway houses is to provide reintegration and transitional services for offenders who are at the end of their institutional sentence. Individuals placed in halfway houses for this purpose are given less structure and are encouraged to participate in family activities and reestablish family ties. Early recidivism studies of halfway house releases (Setter, 1978) found that aggregated recidivism data alone did not yield a statistically significant difference between federal offenders released through halfway houses and those who were not. However, some types of federal offenders seem to benefit more than others from such programs (Setter, 1978). High-risk offenders show a relatively improved recidivism rate. In addition, according to some research, inmates referred to a halfway house have more stable employment records during the first months after release as shown by the days employed (Beck et al., 1978).

A thorough review of state and county home confinement/electronic monitoring programs for parolees reveals that there has been very little empirical evidence on recidivism of program participants.

## **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of two early release methods on a group of federal inmates: home confinement with electronic monitoring and the traditional release method via halfway house placement.

To summarize, this dissertation describes a one-year follow-up study that compares inmates returning to the community via a home confinement electronic monitoring program with inmates returning via the research will compare recidivism, employment, and drug use of the electronic monitoring and halfway house participants.

## **DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF ELECTRONIC MONITORING**

The concept of electronic monitoring dates back to as early as 1919 when the Army Signal Corps announced that they had developed the technology to permit the tracking of ships and air-planes by the use of radio signals (Freil, Vaughn and del Carmen, 1987:3). In 1961, medical research reported the use of tiny transmitters implanted inside a human being. These transmitters were used to check changes in abdominal pressure, body temperature, oxygen tension, acidity, and radiation intensity (Mackay, 1961). Other systems were being developed by biologists to track animals both on land and in water (Cohen, 1966).

The concept of electronically monitoring offenders dates back to 1964 when Ralph Schwitzgebel et al. described an electronic telemetry system in *Behavioral Science* (Schwitzgebel, Schwitzgebel, Pahnke and Hurd, 1964). Two years later, a discussion of the system appeared in *Harvard Law Review* (1966) and a patent was issued on the system in 1969 (Schwitzgebel and Hurd, 1969). Schwitzgebel proposed a new area of study called "behavior electronics" (Gable, 1986) which he described as the modification of behavior patterns through the use of electronic

devices to reinforce acceptable behavior. From 1964 to 1970, the first electronic monitoring system was used to monitor the location of parolees, mental patients, and research volunteers in Boston, Massachusetts (Gable. 1986).

By the mid-1970s, Schwitzgebel and Bird designed a prototype system for two-way communication between the probation officer and the offender that allowed the use of sensors for physiological monitoring (e.g., heart rate) . Their work was primarily theoretical and focused on technical design and various system configurations necessary for monitoring in social environments. Schwitzgebel felt that his "electronic monitoring system" could reduce recidivism in a number of ways. First, changes in hormonal levels or the introduction of alcohol or drugs into the bloodstream of monitored offenders could give the authorities early warning that quick intervention was necessary to prevent the commission of a crime. Second, the knowledge that the offenders were being closely monitored would have an inhibiting effect on those offenders who feared the increased likelihood of police detection of their criminal acts.

The development of the "electronic bracelet" was inspired by a Spiderman comic strip in 1977 read by Judge Jack Love, a New Mexico district court judge Spiderman was being tracked by a transmitter worn on his wrist (Gable. 1986). The judge persuaded Michael Goss, a computer salesman, to develop a similar device. In 1983, the first of these new electronic monitors was developed by Goss for monitoring five offenders in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Gable, 1986). The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) evaluated the effort and concluded that the equipment operated successfully, and that it was legally tenable and cost-effective as an alternative to incarceration (Ford and Schmidt, 1985).

A second system was developed by Thomas Moody for use in Key Largo, Florida (Gable, 1986), where twelve offenders were monitored over a six-month period. This program achieved similar success to that of New Mexico. By 1985, five states (Florida, Kentucky, Oregon, Utah, and Michigan) had implemented electronic monitoring. Just two years later, on February 15, 1987, 21 states had electronic monitoring programs and 926 offenders were being monitored on that particular day (Schmidt, 1988).

## **NIJ LOOKS AT ELECTRONIC MONITORING IN INDIANA**

One National Institute of Justice study examined the use of electronic monitoring of non-violent convicted felons in Marion County, Indiana. In order to assess the viability of different monitoring methods and compliance with home detention, the prosecutor, judges and probation department agreed to an assumption that there was "no difference" among the monitoring techniques (Baumer and Mendelsohn, 1990:18) This assumption made a field experiment possible by allowing the researchers to randomly assign offenders into different monitoring styles (i.e., manual or electronic surveillance home detention). Some conclusions indicated the following: 1) method of monitoring had no significant effect on the total contacts with the criminal justice system within one year of release; 2) the quality of information recorded by the electronic equipment and the ability to utilize it effectively depend on both the characteristics of the monitoring system and the organizational capabilities of the agency; 3) of all the types of offenders monitored, those convicted of drunk driving were least likely to have any contact with the criminal justice system

within one year of their release.

## **MANUAL/ISP SURVEILLANCE VS. ELECTRONIC MONITORING**

Petersilia and Turner (1990) defined recidivism as the prevalence of a new arrest. Their evaluation examined the probation Intensive Supervision Programs (ISPs) in three California counties (Contra Costa, Ventura, and Los Angeles). Based on a one-year evaluation in Los Angeles County, no difference was observed between the electronic supervised program and the intensive supervision program when arrests are the recidivism measure (Petersilia and Turner, 1990:96). Yet when technical violations are the criterion, ISP or Electronic Supervised offenders in Los Angeles County failed faster than routine probationers. Petersilia and Turner point out that about 25 percent of the participants in the electronic monitoring supervision program had a technical violation and an arrest at the end of one year.

Baumer and Mendelsohn (1990) compared the effectiveness of electronic monitoring with manual surveillance whereby the probation officer monitored the client with random telephone calls. The study found that within the first year of release, 27 percent of the program participants were rearrested.

Erwin (1990:67) reported that the use of electronic monitoring in the Georgia Intensive Supervision Program "did not improve the level of supervision over the surveillance provided by ISP in any meaningful way." In addition, Erwin (1990:72) indicated that among the probationers who completed the electronic monitoring program, "there is a pattern of return to drugs and crime among a significant number of cases soon after they are transferred off the ISP caseload to regular probation supervision." She concludes that electronic monitoring in Georgia's ISP program was a failure and seemed to exacerbate the recidivism rates.

Jolin (1989) evaluated and compared Clackamas County, Oregon, Electronic Monitoring Program with the county work release program and measured recidivism by the number of rearrests, and reconvictions with regard to the nature of crimes. She found not significant difference in the percent of offenders rearrested and reconvicted within 18 to 30 months after release. However, she stated that although electronic monitoring may not be more effective in reducing recidivism, and while recidivism rates for electronically monitored house arrest programs are as high as for other programs, they may cost less and perhaps be less disruptive or intrusive than other comparable programs (Jolin, 1989).

## **ADMINISTRATIVE CONSIDERATIONS: PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT STILL REQUIRED**

Another administrative change occurs with regard to caseload size. Electronic monitors alone are insufficient to enforce a viable home confinement program (Beck and Klein-Saffran, 1989). There also needs to be personal involvement with the offender on the part of a supervising agent to insure that the offender is working, the living arrangement remain stable, and the offender is not engaging in prohibited behavior such as substance abuse. To achieve the goals of offender accountability and public protection, program administrators note that the optimal caseload size

should not exceed 25 offenders.

While electronic monitoring equipment automates the monitoring process, it also creates a considerable amount of work for the surveillance officers. This includes: verifying and approving participant release plans and home placement, providing 24-hour surveillance, enforcing drug screening, approving employment, and mastering equipment maintenance and operation. These duties are all in addition to the day to day progress and violation reports.

## **COMMUNITY SUPERVISION AND RECIDIVISM**

During the community supervision phase of this study, the arrest rates of electronic monitoring participants were similar to those of the halfway house participants. While none of the independent variables were statistically significant, a careful examination indicated that individuals released via electronic monitoring were less likely to be arrested or revoked within one year of release to community supervision. One reason for halfway house participants to be more likely arrested during the one year follow-up is because while they are in the halfway house they are more likely to associate with other ex-offenders. This association may carry over to the community at the time of release from the program. Although ex-offenders are not permitted to associate with one another, the halfway house atmosphere promotes this association. However, the study findings suggest that the criminal behavior during the community supervision phase was very similar for the two groups of offenders.

These findings lead one to question why the electronic monitoring participants were so similar to the halfway house individuals with regard to their criminal activity during community supervision. It may be that neither program is effective in changing offenders lifestyles. Although both programs try to reintegrate offenders into the community to lead productive lifestyles, these programs may have fallen short in teaching the offender to resist temptation in the community. Additional data might reveal differences among these offenders in the types and amount of activity they engaged in during community supervision. Another possibility is that there are indeed no differences in their criminal behavior. However, even if there are no differences in recidivism between these two samples, electronic monitoring would appear to be a superior release method because the program costs less than does halfway house placement. Hence, rather than interpreting the recidivism findings as a program failure, it might be beneficial to promote electronic monitoring as a fiscally conservative approach to community reintegration.

Although we found no differences between the two groups with regard to drug use during the one year follow-up, we did find that the longer an offender spent in prison the more likely (9) he was to have a positive drug test during the first year of release. It might be helpful to provide more drug counseling and consistent programming within prisons and to maintain drug aftercare continuity throughout the period of supervised release. Such programming may reduce the violation rate for drug offenders and enhance the aftercare treatment.

## **IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT**

In analyzing both continuous employment and recidivism only those who successfully completed

the electronic monitoring and halfway house programs were included in the results. This analysis did not support the hypothesis that offenders released via electronic monitoring have more job changes and less continuous employment than individuals released via halfway house placement. These results are more positive than expected especially since they depict an improvement over the current way of releasing offenders. If individuals are employed for longer periods of time they are earning more money and are presumably less likely to recidivate. Prior research revealed that halfway house releases showed lower unemployment rates, more days worked, and more money earned than inmates released directly to the community (Beck. 1981). Furthermore, there is strong evidence that both electronic monitoring and halfway house programs are providing useful service in the area of employment.

Finally, this study does not provide conclusive results regarding the effect of recidivism on electronic monitoring and halfway house programs. In comparing the results of the outcome effects of recidivism and drug use, we find no significant difference. Yet, those offenders released via electronic monitoring benefited more by maintaining continuous employment. One can argue, therefore, that the electronic monitoring of federal offenders should be expanded to other federal jurisdictions and that future research needs to continue to evaluate the recidivism patterns of these individuals.

Author's Note: According to the U.S. Probation Service and the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FY 1991), the cost of keeping a Federal offender in a halfway house was \$31.47 per day, whereas the cost of placing a Federal offender on an electronic monitoring program is \$13.50 per day.