

THE ELECTRONIC MONITORING OF OFFENDERS

Question: Does electronic monitoring reduce the criminal behaviour of offenders?

Background: In order to control correctional costs and promote a safe reintegration of offenders into society, community-based alternatives to imprisonment have been adopted. One alternative to incarceration is the electronic monitoring of offenders in the community.

Electronic monitoring (EM) programs were first developed in the United States to enforce the house arrest of offenders. Offenders could be sentenced to remain in their homes and their whereabouts monitored by electronic equipment (e.g., ankle bracelets) worn by them. EM programs offered an apparently inexpensive alternative for offenders who would have been imprisoned were it not for EM. Most evaluations of EM programs do not provide clear results due to methodological weaknesses. Some studies have raised the possibility that EM may actually widen the "correctional net" (i.e., added control that is not necessary to manage the offender safely). There is also very little evidence to show that EM programs reduce the likelihood of offenders returning to crime.

The present study used a quasi-experimental methodology to evaluate the impact of EM

on future crime and whether it functioned as a true alternative to incarceration.

Method: Three provinces that have established EM programs participated in their evaluation - British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Newfoundland. Detailed criminal history and personal-demographic information was collected on 262 male offenders under EM supervision. These offenders were compared to 240 inmates and 30 probationers who were matched to the EM offenders on important offender risk factors. The criminal activity of all the offenders was recorded one year after completion of their program or release from prison. One of the programs (Newfoundland) combined EM with a cognitive-behavioural treatment program.

Answer: Despite the fact that the EM programs in the three provinces differed in some significant ways (e.g., one program received the offenders directly from the courts and the other two received referrals from the prisons), the results were remarkably consistent. Being placed in an EM program had no appreciable impact on the future criminal behaviour of the offenders. They continued to engage in as much crime as those who remained imprisoned or those who received a sentence of probation. In addition, a significant proportion of the EM offenders were

sufficiently low risk to suggest that they could be safely managed in the community without the enhanced restrictions imposed by EM.

Although a cost-effectiveness analysis was not conducted, the findings cast doubt on the potential savings promised by EM. The costs of purchasing equipment and monitoring low risk offenders when alternatives such as temporary absences from prison and probation supervision are readily available appear counter-productive. Supplementary analysis also showed that a reduction in future criminal behaviour resulted only when some of the offenders were given high quality treatment programming.

Policy Implications:

1. As long as EM programs target relatively low risk offenders, and many of them do, they are unlikely to offer a cost-effective alternative to incarceration. Unless we can demonstrate benefits with moderate risk

offenders, EM programs may actually increase correctional costs by “widening the net” without improving public safety.

2. In terms of long-term public safety, the probability that offenders will re-offend after completing EM supervision remains the same as for those who are not electronically monitored.
3. Correctional interventions that aim to reduce criminal behaviour are more likely to come from the application of treatment programs rather than intensive monitoring programs.

Source: Bonta, J., Wallace-Capretta, S., & Rooney, J. (1999). *Electronic Monitoring in Canada*. Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.

For further information contact:

James Bonta, Ph.D.
Solicitor General Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0P8
Tel (613) 991-2831
Fax (613) 990-8295
e-mail bontaj@sgc.gc.ca

Also available on Solicitor General Canada's Internet Site @<http://www.sgc.gc.ca>