

Changing Attitudes of American Community Supervision Officers

According to a recent study, the attitudes of community supervision officers in the United States toward overseeing offenders has shifted in focus over the last few years. Research undertaken by Drs. Patricia Harris, Todd Clear and Christopher Baird suggests that the emphasis on assisting offenders has fallen victim to a more authoritative style of community supervision. From the perspective of the assistance model, the community supervision officer attempts to help the offender improve family relationships, acquire employment skills, and generally increase the level of well-being and life satisfaction. A strong treatment or rehabilitative component is attached to the assistance model of supervision. The authority model, on the other hand, is more concerned with controlling the offender's behaviour and ensuring that the conditions of supervision are being observed.

Harris and her colleagues studied the attitudes of community supervision officers employed in jurisdictions in Texas, Minnesota and Wisconsin. A total sample of 223 community supervision officers completed two questionnaires that were designed to measure their general orientation toward community supervision. The two research instruments that were employed, the Authoritative/Assistance Questionnaire and the Correctional Policy Inventory, had been used in two studies that were conducted more than 10 years before the current study. The earlier studies included a national sample of correctional managers and samples of community supervision officers from New York City and Middlesex County in Massachusetts.

In both previous studies, there was strong endorsement of the assistance model of supervision as opposed to the authority model. All available evidence suggested the opposite trend in the more recent sample of supervision officers. Their endorsement of questionnaire items that tap into the rehabilitation functions of supervision were lower than those observed 10 years ago. Items reflecting the concern with authority and restraint, on the other hand, were rated as more relevant to the work of supervising offenders in the community.

The results of this study are consistent with findings of other researchers who have recently completed studies of American community supervision officers. Harris and her colleagues also suggest that their findings confirm more general impressions about a shift of emphasis away from rehabilitative concerns in American corrections.

Harris, P.M., Clear, T.R., & Baird, S.C. (1989). Have Community Supervision Officers Changed their Attitudes toward their Work? *Justice Quarterly*, 6, 233-246.