

Offender responsivity to intensive supervision

Intensive supervision became popular in community corrections in the mid-1980s, with a variety of forms developing in various countries. The goal of this type of supervision is to increase parole officer contact with, and more closely monitor, offenders at the greatest risk of reoffending.

This approach is consistent with the accepted principle of reserving the most intensive services for offenders who represent the greatest risk. Further, the development of intensive supervision units has improved the management of these offenders.

In Canada, intensive supervision programs were implemented in the major cities. In Toronto, the program became known as team supervision. The team approach increases the intensity of the process - the offender is responsible to two parole officers and there are two parole officers familiar with each case.

This article, therefore, chronicles the operation of the Team Supervision Unit in Toronto, as well as providing a general assessment of offender responsivity to intensive supervision. What type of offenders receive intensive supervision? The target population for the Team Supervision Unit is offenders released on statutory release (after serving two thirds of their sentence) who have scored negatively on the Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale and/or are in need of more focused help with their re-integration into the community (based on their criminal history and past releases).

Offenders released on "one-chance" conditional release are another target group for this unit. These offenders are usually placed on this type of release (instead of statutory release) because of a history of violent behaviour. If their conditional release is revoked for any reason, they must then serve the rest of their sentence in an institution.

Parole officers from other Toronto offices also refer offenders to the unit. These offenders tend to be either simply difficult to supervise or have an increasing risk of recidivism because of the resurfacing of factors relating to their criminal history (intensive supervision is used as an alternative to suspension of their conditional release).

Finally, the unit usually monitors untreated sex offenders referred to the high-risk sex offender program at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry. Program providers and therapists have a close working relationship with the unit's parole officers. Initial offender response to intensive supervision The first few weeks are the most critical for offenders released under intensive supervision.

Therefore, offenders receive documentation prior to release outlining the expectations of intensive supervision, their institutional case management officer further outlines the process and the offenders receive a detailed orientation session upon release.

However, many offenders run into problems within the first few days of release. They often do not believe that the parole officers will monitor their activities as closely as they do.

Further, the officers take immediate action (including suspension of conditional release) to deal with any breach of the conditions established by the National Parole Board or the parole officers themselves.

In the first four months of 1995, the unit issued 25 suspension warrants. Five of the warrants were issued within days of release because the offenders did not follow through on an agreed-on plan established at their initial interview.

These warrants were subsequently cancelled and the offenders returned to the community after they reviewed their release conditions and agreed to abide by them. Offenders quickly get the message that the terms of the intensive supervision process are mandatory and not negotiable.

Some offenders initially think this type of supervision is excessive and intrusive. However, they soon learn that although they are in the unit because of their risk of reoffending, the parole officers are very willing to help with their reintegration into the community.

The parole officers all have excellent working relationships with local program coordinators, doctors, mental health professionals, social assistance personnel and housing authorities.

When an offender faces a problem in adjusting to community living, the parole officers are able to quickly refer the offender to the appropriate service. This helps convince offenders that the team will provide assistance, not just exercise control.

Up-to-date offender assessments are also crucial in getting offenders to "buy into" intensive supervision.

Like all forms of conditional release, an offender risk/needs assessment is completed within 30 days of release. A full review of the offender's current needs, relating them to past criminal behaviour, is very effective in demonstrating the need for intensive supervision to the offender.

Parole officers then develop a correctional plan with the offenders to address the needs identified in their assessments. Given the unit's clientele, the list of needs is usually long. A systematic analysis of these needs makes it very clear to the offenders why they are in certain programs and why their activities require close supervision and regular contact with parole officers.

The frequency of offender-parole officer contact also depends on the individual offender's risk/needs assessment. Minimum contact during the first phase of intensive supervision consists of two face-to-face interviews per week, plus one weekly unannounced curfew check (curfews range from 9:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.). Parole officers There are two teams of two parole officers at the Team Supervision Unit. These teams combine to manage up to a total of 48 offenders.

Parole officers must operate as active interventionists in intensive supervision, so they must be capable of appropriately confronting offenders.

Given the background of these offenders, it is also critical that any action be taken immediately to ensure that the risk to the public is appropriately managed.

The parole officers must be able to act assertively and take control, while at the same time establishing a positive rapport with offenders and their families.

The parole officers must also work effectively with other government agencies, the police, program providers, private after-care agencies and the public.

The strength of the intensive supervision approach and the responsiveness of offenders to it are directly linked to the quality of the unit's staff. Since the unit's target population includes offenders who either are not suitable for discretionary conditional release or have failed on past releases, there tends to be a greater need for regular intervention. Is intensive supervision successful? It is difficult to measure the success of intensive supervision, given the many variables involved. However, the key to offender responsiveness to intensive supervision is the degree to which parole officers explain the steps taken to assist the offender's reintegration into the community.

This communication is vital to making the offender understand that the intent of intensive supervision is to manage their risk of reoffending and to assist them in becoming law-abiding citizens by directing them toward appropriate community programs and activities.

Throughout the supervision period, periodic offender risk/needs assessments and linking risk assessment to the development/ revision of a correctional plan are also critical.

This process makes it very clear to the offender which areas of his or her life contribute to criminal behaviour and what action will be taken to manage that risk.

Intensive supervision's increased frequency of contact allows for the close monitoring of factors that contribute to criminal behaviour, through regular face-to-face contact, home and work visits (both during the day and in the evening), and regular contacts with significant individuals in the offender's life.

The unit closely monitors offenders with established and documented crime cycles with regard to the factors connected to their crime cycles. Parole officers review these factors during every contact with the offender - whether it be an office interview, a community meeting or a curfew check.

Of course, there are always offenders who do not respond to any type of intervention or to the accountability involved in intensive supervision.

These offenders are typically not interested in becoming law abiding and, therefore, have no interest in following a correctional plan or working with parole officers.

As a result, their conditional release is usually quickly suspended for failing to comply with release conditions.

On the other hand, many offenders try to meet their release conditions and make progress in dealing with the problems that led to their criminal behaviour.

Several offenders have even returned regularly after the expiry of their sentence to let their parole

officers know they are still functioning in the community.

No research to date suggests that intensive supervision affects long-term recidivism rates. However, it is believed that this approach improves risk management and the potential for an offender's successful return to the community.

Why?

Intensive supervision allows parole staff to quickly intervene with offenders, thereby reducing the chance of their returning to crime. It also allows parole staff to concentrate on working closely with the offenders who require intensive assistance and guidance, which again reduces the chances of recidivism.

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