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Research Brief

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Evaluation of HOPE Probation

A Summary

Convicted drug-possession offenders (and low-level property and public-order offenders, many of them with illicit drug habits) are rarely given straight jail time; in most jurisdictions they are placed on probation. This places probation departments on the front lines of the struggle to reduce drug-related crime and drug abuse by offenders, but they face a tremendous challenge given resource restrictions and heavy case-loads. Rather than consistently sanctioning probation violations – illegal drug use, missing probation appointments and drug tests, missing required drug-treatment sessions — probation officers and courts typically allow repeated violations to go unpunished. When punishments are meted out, they tend to be lengthy (and costly) jail terms.

There are strong theoretical reasons to think that a probation system that consistently and swiftly punishes probation violations and uses mild rather than drastic sanctions would be more effective in inducing behavioral changes than the current much more haphazard system. A structured sanctions model in Hawaii has dramatically improved probationer compliance without draining department resources. The program, called HOPE (*H*awaii's *O*pportunity *P*robation with *E*nforcement), was first launched by Judge Steven Alm in 2004. In cooperation with probation officers, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and police agencies, he streamlined the process of enforcing probation requirements, introducing random rather than scheduled drug testing and immediate rather than delayed hearings. HOPE uses the threat of short jail stays (typically starting at a few days, servable on weekends for employed probationers, for the first violation and increasing thereafter, eventually escalating to periods of months in residential treatment) as a disincentive for non-compliance. Treatment is mandated only for those who repeatedly violate probation rules; for other probationers with drug problems it is available, but not required.

ABSTRACT

HOPE uses swift and certain, but mild, sanctions to motivate compliance with terms of probation. Preliminary findings show that probationers assigned to a HOPE caseload perform significantly better than probationers assigned to probation-as-usual in terms of drug use, no-shows for probation appointments, new arrests, and probation revocations.

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Preliminary Findings

Evaluations of HOPE, including a randomized controlled trial, are underway, with support from the Smith Richardson Foundation and the National Institute of Justice. Preliminary results from HOPE show that HOPE probationers in the Specialized Probation Unit and in the General Probation unit have improved outcomes compared with probationers assigned to probation-as-usual in terms of drug use, no-shows for probation appointments, new arrests, and probation revocations.

In the Specialized Probation Unit, comparing six-month follow up data to three-month baseline data, probationers assigned to HOPE showed:

- an 85% reduction in missed appointments
- a 91% reduction in positive urinalyses

By contrast, comparison probationers supervised in the Specialized Probation Unit but under probation-as-usual showed:

- a 23% increase in missed appointments
- no improvement on urinalyses

Other key outcomes from the Specialized Probation Unit:

- Arrest rates for comparison probationers were three times higher than HOPE probationers.
- The probation revocation rate was significantly higher for the comparison group compared with HOPE probationers (31% v 9%)

In the General Probation Unit, three month followup data is now available for probationers subject to the randomized controlled trial. Probationers assigned to the HOPE condition showed improved outcomes.

- Probationers in the control group had one-month notice of when their routine scheduled drug test would be administered, while HOPE probationers were subject to regular random testing. Despite advance warning, probationers in the control group were more than twice as likely to test positive on drug tests as probationers assigned to the HOPE condition (26% v 11%)
- Probationers in the control group were more than twice as likely to miss appointments with their probation officers (12% v 5%).

The logic behind HOPE is appealing. The program takes into account known characteristics of offender populations compared to the general population: poor impulse control, high effective discount rates (i.e., valuing even slightly delayed consequences at a steep discount to more immediate consequences, and a strongly external locus of control (i.e., a tendency to attribute events in their lives to luck and the actions of others rather than to their own actions). All of these characteristics suggest that delivering relatively modest sanctions swiftly and consistently should be more effective than sporadically lowering the boom.

The evaluation of HOPE is ongoing through December, 2008 and will include a cost analysis as well as measures of reoffending and incarceration.