



Too big to succeed: The impact of the growth of community corrections and what should be done about it

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this new report, some of the nation's leading community corrections administrators discuss the consequences of the tremendous growth in probation and parole supervision in the United States over the past several decades. They argue that the number of people under supervision needs to be cut in half.

Originally designed as alternatives to incarceration, the authors find that probation and parole are a deprivation of liberty in their own right and have become key drivers of mass incarceration by serving as a trip wire to reincarceration for many of those under supervision. The authors argue that community corrections populations have risen alongside prison and jail populations but that community corrections has not been funded adequately to meet the needs of a population of individuals beset by poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, mental illness and substance use. Since it is highly unlikely that governments will increase funding to probation and parole, the only realistic alternative is to reduce the number of people under community corrections and preserve some of the funds to provide assistance to those who remain under supervision. The paper discusses several examples of jurisdictions that have done so.

Workloads increase faster than resources

Despite the expansion of supervision alongside incarceration, policy makers have been reticent to provide concomitant financial support for their community supervision agencies, further stretching already-underfunded parole and probation resources across a growing population. While twice as many people were added to community corrections from 1983 to 2008, 88% of additional correctional dollars went to prisons compared to only 12% for probation and parole. These fiscal realities have led policy makers across the country to rely on fees paid by people on probation and parole to bail out shrinking community corrections budgets. To make matters worse, these budgetary shifts occurred while a culture for more 'tough on crime' policies spread nationally with probation departments following suit, adopting more punitive approaches locally.

Impact of the unfunded growth of community corrections

Underfunded and with few alternatives, community corrections officers have learned to default to the most available option they have for those who violate the terms of their probation -- prison. According to research by Phelps, 33% of people in jail and 23% of people in prison in the mid-2000s were on probation at the time of their arrest, a quarter of whom were reincarcerated for nothing more than a technical violation (excluding new arrests). Likewise, 12% of the jail population is comprised of those who were on parole at the time of arrest, as

is 18% of the prison population. About one in five of those are incarcerated for technical violations of parole.

Research published by the National Academies of Sciences found that post-prison parole supervision increases imprisonment through the detection and punishment of low-level offending or violation behavior. Regrettably, these punishments fall more heavily on young African American men than on any other population. While one in 53 adults in America is under probation or parole supervision, one in 12 African American males is under community supervision as is nearly one in five young African American males without a high school education.

What to do?

Jurisdictions throughout the country have begun to experiment with shrinking the size and negative outcomes of probation and parole, reducing conditions, incentivizing good behavior and curbing revocations. The Pew Charitable Trusts reports that in 18 of the states that have participated in the Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI), supervision periods can be shortened by 30 days for 30 days of compliance, while eight JRI states have shortened probation terms. Twenty-two JRI states require the use of graduated sanctions and incentives in lieu of revocation and incarceration; while 16 JRI states have put caps on how long individuals can serve for a technical violation of supervision conditions.

In 2007, the National Institute of Corrections and the JEHT Foundation asked the Urban Institute to convene two meetings of national community corrections experts to articulate best practices in probation and parole, supervision and revocation. The 13 recommendations those experts proffered ranged from incentivizing good behavior through early discharge, using graduated sanctions in lieu of incarceration, supervising clients in their home communities and engaging informal social controls.

From 2013 to 2016, the Harvard Kennedy School Program in Criminal Justice Policy and Management convened 29 individuals from community corrections, prison and jail administration, prosecution, academia, advocacy, philanthropy, elected officials and formerly incarcerated communities to examine the state of community corrections in America. This Executive Session on Community Corrections issued a [consensus paper](#) on the future of community corrections, describing five principles that should guide the future of probation and parole, including using the capacity to arrest, discipline, and incarcerate parsimoniously and recognizing the worth of justice-involved individuals.

Buoyed by examples such as these, [The Statement on the Future of Community Corrections](#), co-signed by over 30 leading probation and parole administrators, urge:

- o that probation and parole populations be significantly reduced
- o that revocations to incarceration be sharply curbed
- o that probation and parole fines be curtailed, and
- o that a portion of the savings from this downsizing be funneled into supports and programs for persons under supervision

It is now mainstream thought – endorsed by the field’s leading practitioners – that an important aspect of improving community corrections, increasing public safety, and restoring legitimacy will be to substantially downsize the grasp of community corrections by at least half and reduce violations to incarceration so that it can retool itself to focus on helping those most in need of community supports to become the kinds of citizens we all want them to become.