



REDUCING PROBATION REVOCATIONS CHALLENGE (2021)

Strategies to reduce revocations in Monroe County, Indiana

BACKGROUND

Indiana University and the Monroe Circuit Court Probation Department served as one site for the Reducing Revocations Challenge from Arnold Ventures and City University of New York's Institute for State and Local Governance.¹ Monroe County's approach involved a review of probation policy and procedure, analysis of administrative records of all clients ordered to supervision across a six-year period, collection and analysis of client case files, and the collection and analysis of surveys and interviews with justice system professionals to identify factors and behaviors contributing to probation revocations.

This brief proposes bold and ambitious recommendations that hold promise to reduce revocations and enhance supervision success, while protecting public safety. These recommendations are informed by the core factors shaping Monroe County's probation violation and revocation trends seen [in a previous brief](#). These strategies are reported here to aid jurisdictions across Indiana and nation that are working to reimagine their probation supervision systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ADOPT NEEDS-BASED SUPERVISION

Manage needs to reduce future system contact

Clients with repeated failures to appear, who remain in failure-to-appear (FTA) status for a large portion of their supervision term, and who alternate between substance use violations and FTAs drive violation and revocation rates. One mechanism to prevent early and isolated instances of noncompliance from becoming a recurrent pattern is to adopt a needs-based supervision focus.

- Create an organizational culture in which noncompliance—particularly drug test violations—is interpreted as a signal that the person needs

treatment or social services rather than viewing their noncompliance as a technical violation in need of a graduated sanction.

- Foster an environment in which probation officers are coaches who support opportunities to redirect client pathways, teach and practice skills, broker access to service providers and peer supports, and celebrate victories.
- Design and launch a training program to teach probation best practices for justice system partners to support system-wide organizational change. Training will help to stimulate dialogue on risk, risk assessments, and appropriate placements to probation. It will also help promote public safety and mutual respect, where assigning blame is minimized and system improvement becomes the focus.
- Review standard conditions of probation and insert language changes that are positive, goal-focused, and individualistic rather than a statement of rules.
- Update the administrative sanctions matrix to become more needs- or strengths-based and less risk-focused. Design decision matrices to reduce the likelihood of disparate sanctioning and minimize the varying tolerance among probation officers. Integrate stages of change and positive supervision progress in the matrix.
- If and when petitions to revoke supervision are needed, present petitions to the court with a combination of information on needs (e.g., referral to placement, placement to admission, etc.), accomplishments (e.g., strengths, progress, etc.), and setbacks (e.g., violations, barriers, etc.) in standard filing templates. Integrate clients' stage of change regarding willingness to advance positive progress when resolving a petition to revoke.

TABLE 1. Summary of recommendations and anticipated benefit, cost, and time

	IMPACT	ALLOCATIONS	
	Benefit	Cost	Time
Adopt needs-based supervision			
Embed licensed social work staff into probation operations	++++	\$\$\$\$	🕒🕒
Organizational culture where noncompliance is evidence of need	++++	\$\$	🕒🕒🕒🕒
Training for justice system partners to support systems change	+++	\$	🕒🕒🕒
Present petitions with needs, accomplishments, and setbacks	+++	\$	🕒🕒
Complete workload recalculations to restructure caseload sizes	+++	\$	🕒🕒
Organizational culture where probation officers are coaches	++	\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Review standard conditions, insert positive, goal-focused language	++	\$	🕒
Update administrative sanctions matrix	+	\$	🕒🕒
Interrupt cycles of noncompliance			
Create Technical Rule Violation Specialty Court	+++	\$\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒🕒
Create alternatives for low-risk clients	+++	\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Create a non-punitive warrant service	+++	\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Increase use and fidelity to motivational interviewing techniques	+++	\$\$	🕒🕒
Amend policy to limit petitions to revoke to new offenses	+++	\$	🕒
Remove payment of fines and fees as standard condition	++	\$\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒🕒
Pilot use of mobile phone applications or other forms of technology	++	\$\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Complete assessments before sentencing to individualize conditions	++	\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Reassign clients to new probation officers after limited progress	++	\$	🕒🕒
Review and revise text message and voice call reminder content	+	\$\$	🕒🕒
Calibrate responses to new offenses			
Complete assessments for clients arrested on new offense	++	\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Report recommendation for jail stay to court	++	\$	🕒🕒
Incentivize success			
Increase use of incentives	+++	\$\$	🕒
Increase commendations and positive reports to court	++	\$	🕒🕒
Implement early discharge option for all clients	++	\$	🕒🕒🕒
Report success rates in performance reports	+	\$	🕒🕒
Monitor and respond to disparities			
Conduct local validation of IRAS-CST	+++	\$\$\$	🕒🕒🕒
Review sanction and incentive policy and procedure with equity lens	+++	\$	🕒🕒
Provide periodic training in racial equity and implicit bias	++	\$\$	🕒🕒
Pilot committee or supervisor reviews of petitions to revoke	++	\$	🕒🕒

KEY:

+ = Low impact

\$ = Low cost

🕒 = Short/quick

++++ = High impact

\$\$\$\$ = High cost

🕒🕒🕒🕒 = Long

Focus on high-risk client needs

Clients assessed at higher risk levels with the Indiana Risk Assessment System-Community Supervision Tool (IRAS-CST) and those ordered to probation for more severe offenses were the most likely to receive a formal petition to revoke their probation and to ultimately have their probation revoked. To work toward reducing the risk of future system contact among clients classified as high risk, focus on those clients' specific needs.

- Develop innovative partnerships with licensed social work staff to deliver clinical assessments of need, develop a working relationship between probation officers and direct service providers, and support probation officers who have exhausted traditional administrative sanction option responses to noncompliant behaviors.
- Reduce caseload sizes for probation officers managing high-intensity caseloads. This will give officers more time to work with clients at risk for future contact with the justice system. Complete workload recalculations on a regular basis to distinguish between high-, moderate-, and low-intensity caseloads.

INTERRUPT CYCLES OF NONCOMPLIANCE

Revise and reduce supervision conditions

A second mechanism to prevent early and isolated instances of noncompliance from becoming failures to appear and sustained patterns is to reconsider supervision conditions and their management.

- Complete risk, need, and profile assessments before sentencing. Use assessment information to individualize supervision conditions and reduce the number of clients ordered to contact-based supervision. By reducing the number of supervision conditions and tailoring those conditions, the number of noncompliant events will decrease.
- Create probation alternatives for low-risk clients. In place of contact-based supervision, manage low-risk clients with self-directed mobile phone applications or modules related to clients' conviction offense and cognitive behavioral skill training and reinforcement.
- Remove payment of fines and fees as a standard condition. Identify long-term plans for removing user fees from the operating expenses of a department and broader justice system.

- Amend policy to limit petitions to revoke to new offenses. Do not allow petitions to revoke for any other form of noncompliance.

Create behavioral tools to reengage clients

A small number of clients with recurrent patterns of substance use violations and FTAs drove the overall revocation rate in Monroe County. Innovative behavioral solutions are necessary to reestablish contact with clients and redirect pathways.

- Increase the use of and improve fidelity to motivational interviewing techniques. Add or dedicate a full-time probation officer position to training and boosting motivational interviewing and effective case planning.
- Review the use of text message and voice call reminders to promote engagement. Reminders can provide detailed information on travel for scheduled appointments and court hearings. They also can be sequenced to improve comprehension and reduce FTAs.
- Pilot the use of mobile phone applications (e.g., Uptrust) or other electronic forms of engagement to improve cognitive behavioral skills and to improve connection to available social services.
- Create a specialty court or docket for technical rule violations (TRV) modeled after problem-solving courts. TRV courts respond to formal petitions to revoke quickly, revise client objectives and conditions as progress is made, as well as promote positive interactions between clients, probation officers, the court, and other justice system professionals.
- Reassign clients to new probation officers after a sustained period of limited progress or difficulty managing barriers to successful supervision. This provides clients with an opportunity to start fresh and connect with an officer who may have a different job orientation. It also provides officers with an opportunity to continue to work with clients when other officers believe they have exhausted all administrative and formal supervision options.
- Create a nonpunitive warrant service that allows clients to resolve active warrants without arrest or being placed in jail. Warrant service staff should work to connect clients back to their probation officer.

CALIBRATE RESPONSES TO NEW OFFENSES

Allow discretion to file petitions for new arrests

Case file review findings indicate that 17% of clients became noncompliant due to a new offense. Of those with a new offense, we found that almost half had their arrest charges dropped. As a matter of policy or practice, clients with a new offense have a formal petition to revoke filed. Many of these clients are held in jail while their new case is pending.

- Conduct a brief assessment to inform system decision-making for clients arrested for a new offense. Use the information to inform release options. This may reduce the consumption of jail beds by clients held on a detainer. Should the detainer remain in place, connect recommendation for jail stay to specific public safety concern.

INCENTIVIZE SUCCESS

Increase frequency and opportunity of reinforcement

Incentives consistently reduced the likelihood of a revocation filing and revocation approval regardless of how long or how often clients were noncompliant or the type of noncompliance that occurred.

- Increase the frequency of incentives and positive reinforcements as well as commendations and positive reports to the court.
- Use early discharge as an incentive for those who are low risk as well as for those who are moderate or high risk but show positive progress to lower their risk of future justice system contact. Pilot the inclusion of this early discharge policy on sentencing orders.
- Report success rates rather than violation or revocation rates in formal documents and reports monitoring the performance of the probation department and the broader justice system.

MONITOR AND RESPOND TO DISPARITIES

Measure to promote an equitable justice system

Black males were twice as likely to have a formal petition to revoke filed than white males. These patterns held after accounting for additional client demographic factors, case characteristics, client noncompliance, officer response to noncompliance, and officer characteristics. Females were less likely to have a formal revocation petition filed or to

have their probation revoked when compared to males. These results are due, in part, to the mindful measurement of disparate contact and outcomes.

- Provide periodic training in racial equity and implicit bias to line and supervisory probation officers.
- Review sanction and incentive policy and procedure through a diversity and equity lens and implement reforms to reduce adverse impact on nonwhite clients.
- Pilot committee or supervisor reviews of petitions to revoke supervision to reduce bias.
- Examine the performance of the IRAS-CST tool and its ability to reduce, reinforce, or amplify racial, ethnic, and gender disparities.

CONCLUSION

Indiana University and Monroe Circuit Court Probation Department are currently developing an intervention strategy based on a combination of these recommendations. We encourage other jurisdictions to develop specific policy and practice interventions to reduce revocations, enhance success on probation, and confront inequities that are based on our recommendations.

The development and implementation of innovative interventions require leaders and staff who champion specific opportunities that demonstrate commitment to organizational mission and values, staff training and support, a change-oriented organizational culture, and data-informed decision making.^{2,3} Further, to continue to build and refine evidence-informed policy and practice, any initiative's launch must be connected to evaluation research that will assess both the implementation fidelity of the intervention and its practical effects/impact on key probation outcomes.

To request a copy of the full report, please contact Dr. Miriam Northcutt Bohmert at mirnorth@indiana.edu or (812) 855-4285.

REFERENCES

1. [City University of New York's Institute for State and Local Governance](#).
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3. Saunders, J., Hipple, N. K., Allison, K., & Peterson, J. (2020). Estimating the impact of researcher practitioner partnerships on evidence-based program implementation. *Justice Quarterly*, 37(7), 1322-1342.



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