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# The Importance of a Low Span of Control in Effective Implementation of Evidence Based Probation and Parole Practices

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## **The Importance of a Low Span of Control in Effective Implementation of Evidence Based Probation and Parole Practices**

### **Executive Summary**

Public safety, through positive offender behavior change, and offender accountability are key priorities of the Community Based Correctional System in Iowa. In response to budgetary constraints, recent legislative discussions have ensued regarding the reduction of funding allocated for the supervisory staff in the System. The suggested reduction would significantly decrease the span of control ratio of probation supervisors to probation officers within the System. While recognizing ongoing fiscal demands, the current 7 probation officers to 1 supervisor ratio (7:1 span of control) should not be increased to a higher ratio, as it would be in contrast to suggested principles of organization and management, as well as challenge the continued implementation and sustainability of effective, evidence based practices within the System.

“Span of control” has commonly been utilized to describe the number of individuals, or resources, that a person can effectively supervise within a structured organizational, business or military setting. The foundation of this principle is to increase administrative efficiency (Souryal, 1977)<sup>1</sup>, while retaining effectiveness within the organization. In examining the span of control in probation jurisdictions across the country, two different studies have found significant variation in this ratio. Cushman and Sechrest (1992)<sup>2</sup> argued as part of their study, which included span of control ratios that a prevailing assumption existed such that probation agencies, clients on probation, and programs used to supervise probationers were similar across jurisdiction. Their results indicated, however that nothing could be further from the truth. Cushman and Sechrest noted “there are truly important differences on all three of these dimensions” between probation organizations; consequently, policy from one jurisdiction may not necessarily be a good model for adaptation to other jurisdictions. Moreover, significant variation found to exist in supervision ratios across jurisdictions, as well as supervision models, was unexplained. To date, evidence documenting the roles and responsibility of the supervising officers, as well as the supervisory structure, that may explain some of the variation in span of control ratios is absent in contextualizing these numbers.

Concurrent with the consideration of appropriate span of control ratios, knowledge of recent changes to Iowa’s approach to offender management inclusive of evidence based practices must also be understood. The general principle of evidence based practices (EBP) relies on scientific knowledge and/or empirical studies that demonstrate effectiveness of programs, methods or techniques within the contextual setting to accomplish a pre-defined goal of recidivism reduction. As a result of the System’s implementation of evidence based practices in probation and parole, the implementation of EBP has

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<sup>1</sup> Souryal, Sam S. (1977). *Police Administration and Management*. St. Paul, MN: West Publishing.

The Probation Experiment (2009, no author noted). *County Magazine*. Retrieved on December 11, 2009 at [http://www.county.org/resources/library/county\\_mag/county/213/toc.html](http://www.county.org/resources/library/county_mag/county/213/toc.html).

<sup>2</sup> Cushman, Robert C. & Sechrest, Dale (1992). Variations in the administration of probation supervision. *Federal Probation*, 56(3), 19-30.

been credited with a significant reduction in the Iowa prison population. This is a trend that could be reversed if the span of control was increased. Supervisors play a pivotal role in any organization's attempt to improve efficiency and effectiveness through the application of evidence-based knowledge to the process of work. In order to be successful in this role, supervisors must master a set of skills that even ten years ago were not considered to be part of their competences. These skills include, among others, transformational leadership, strategic thinking, change management, communication, collaboration, coaching and mentoring, motivating staff, and relationship building. Each of these skills takes time to master and apply. Supervision is no longer just telling people what to do and then monitoring whether they do it; it has become the art and science of human and behavioral encouragement, support, and feedback. Moreover, the role of the probation officers themselves has significantly evolved with the implementation of evidence based practices. Probation and parole officers must be engaged with clients in a manner that requires a higher level of direct interaction to implement supervision techniques such as engaging in relationship building, motivational interviewing, and adhering to risk, needs and responsivity principles of treatment. This shift in officer roles aligns with added oversight by the supervisory staff to ensure fidelity of evidence based practices such as those mentioned above.

Engaging in evidence-based practices in probation and parole also requires supervisors who have the time to exercise these skills. If agencies expect to achieve significant modifications of criminal behavior and to reduce recidivism, they must allow supervisors the ability to devote the majority of their work day to collaborating with their staff in the actual conduct of their daily business. Supervisors must be able to tutor their staff in the skills of case planning, building meaningful relationships with the offender, engaging offenders in accomplishing treatment plans, using rewards and sanctions, and reducing risk by addressing criminogenic needs.

In addition to ineffective implementation of evidence based practices, when supervision staff is lacking, it is also possible for programs and practices that are initially well-implemented to erode in quality over time. As one director we spoke with stated, "...EBP takes active supervision and some accountability or it slips." McManus (2007)<sup>3</sup> also discussed a number of other global issues that may result including skill erosion, customer confidence erosion, and morale erosion or bad morale if employees are not supported with effective and adequate levels of supervision. Moreover, probation organizations are in a unique position such that both individual officers and their organizations may be subject to civil liability suits if it can be demonstrated that the organization failed to adequately train, direct, supervise, entrust, discipline and assign employees.

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<sup>3</sup> McManus, K. (September, 2007). Losing our span of control. *Industrial Engineer*, (np).

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## The Importance of a Low Span of Control in Effective Implementation of Evidence Based Probation and Parole Practices

Public safety, through positive offender behavior change, and offender accountability are key priorities of the Community Based Correctional System in Iowa. In response to budgetary constraints, recent legislative discussions have ensued regarding the reduction of funding allocated for the supervisory staff within the Community Based Correctional System. The suggested reduction would significantly decrease the span of control ratio of probation and parole supervisors to probation and parole officers within the System. While recognizing ongoing fiscal demands faced within the state, we argue that the current 7 officers to 1 supervisor ratio (7:1) should not be increased to a higher ratio, as it would be in contrast to suggested principles of organization and management, as well as challenge the continued implementation and sustainability of effective, evidence based practices within the System.

The primary purpose of this paper is to brief stakeholders and relevant discussants on: (1) the principles underlying the span of control concept; (2) factors related to determining an appropriate span of control; (3) the role of span of control in evidence based practices; (4) the potential consequences associated with increasing the span of control ratio; and (5) findings based on focus groups held in Iowa, and nationally, related to the primary and Evidence Based Practices (EBP) functions of supervisors within EBP jurisdictions.

### Defining Span of Control

The origin of the span of control terminology is attributed to British General Sir Ian Standish Monteith Hamilton (1853-1947) when he used it in reference to military application (Hamilton, 1921). Since that time, the term “span of control” has become a relatively common term utilized to describe the number of individuals, or resources, that a person can effectively supervise within a structured organizational, business or military setting (Eastman & Eastman, 1971; Hanna & Gentel, 1971)<sup>4,5</sup>. When applied within a critical incident scenario, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has applied the span of control terminology more specifically to indicate the number of individuals that a supervisor can effectively manage in a crisis or emergency situation (Lane, 2006)<sup>6</sup>. The foundation of this principle is to increase administrative efficiency (Souryal, 1977), while retaining effectiveness within the organization.

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<sup>4</sup> Eastman, George D., & Eastman, Esther C. (1971). *Municipal Police Administration*. Washington, DC: International City Management Association.

<sup>5</sup> Hanna, Donald G., & Gentel, William D. (1971). *A Guide to Primary Police Management Concepts*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.

<sup>6</sup> Lane (November 2006). Span of Control for Law Enforcement Agencies. *Police Chief*.

Ever since the terminology has become accepted nomenclature, the ongoing challenge has been the identification of the appropriate span of control within various organizations. In 1937, Graicunas attempted to identify the mathematical complexities associated with the span of control concept by developing a statistical formula which argued with an increasing number of subordinates, a geometric increase in the number of other relationships that need to be managed also occurs – it is not a one to one increase. Specifically, Graicunas argued that supervisors not only manage their direct subordinates, but also the relationship among the individual subordinates. For example, when a supervisor has four subordinates, eleven relationships exist (one direct/single relationship, three cross relationships and seven direct groups). Thus, with each additional subordinate added an exponential number of new relationships that require supervisor response also develop.

## Factors related to Determination of Appropriate Span of Control

Extant literature within the area of police organizations as well as other human services fields and industries has existed for decades; however, literature specifically addressing span of control within correctional organizations remains wanting. Consequently, this lack of evidence creates difficulty for developing or adapting information based public policy. As a general guideline, Hatstrup (1993)<sup>7</sup> suggested that “if workers are involved in work of a trivial or routine nature, the supervisor will tend to require less application of control than if they perform work of greater significance or complexity. In addition, spans may be limited by where people are, and by the problems of control and communication over distance. Also, a supervisor can exercise more effective control over a broader span in a stable situation than under dynamic conditions.”

Specific to community corrections departments in the United States, challenges also result from the significant levels of existing inter-jurisdiction variation in the span of control ratio across the country, the supervisory structure, and the associated responsibilities of supervisors. These varying ratios, to our knowledge, is not directly supported by prior or ongoing research, and only loosely guided by prior policing literature, theoretical reasoning and conjecture. As Cushman and Sechrest (1992) noted, it is not uncommon to find that a lack of evidence guiding policies and decision-making exists, thus, an understanding of that connection is also oftentimes difficult. Moreover, they state that “each source of variation in probation is shaped by values and a guiding philosophy which gives rise to justice system policies. A legal culture is characterized by its own unique values and norms. The notion that values drive the process is an important one.”

The lack of direct evidence for span of control ratios within probation specifically requires reference to related literature including policing. Perhaps the most relevant statement on span of control was made by O.W. Wilson and Roy Clinton McLaren during the period that McLaren was the director of the Field

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<sup>7</sup> Hatstrup, George P. (November 1, 1993). How to establish the proper span of control for managers. *Industrial Management*.

Operations Division of the International Association of Chiefs of Police. In their book *Police Administration*, they wrote:

*There is no standard optimum ratio between the span of control and the length of the chain of command applicable at each level of authority in every situation. The height and width of each pyramid will be determined by conditions that prevail in particular situations, such as time available for administrative tasks, the competence and reliability of subordinates, and the ability of the head to delegate authority (p.68).*

In various other labor fields, much of the discussion on the topic of span of control point to the early theoretical work of Henri Fayol and others who described a classical model of span of control. As part of the literature in earlier eras, classical perspectives on span of control pointed to a finite number of factors to consider in making a determination of appropriate ratios. Many of these same factors remain relevant in the contemporary workforce as noted by numerous authors (Hanna & Gentel, 1971; Lane, 2006; McManus, 2007; Schroeder, Lombardo, & Strollo, 1995)<sup>8</sup>, though slightly updated terminology has been applied. Recently, McManus as well as Hanna and Gentel outlined the following as key factors in determining an appropriate span of control, some of which are more pertinent to the field of probation than others:

- **Work force skill level**, including the ability of the subordinates and the ability of the supervisor;
- **Work environment**, including the geographical area involved and the harmony of the subordinates;
- **Process (task) complexity**, including the nature of the task, the nature of instructions provided, the time involved, and the amount of authority delegated;
- **Mission clarity**; and,
- **Support system integrity.**

Concurrent to the sustained relevance of the abovementioned factors, as a result of the dynamic evolution of the global, modern day workforce, additional contemporary factors have been acknowledged. Yet, despite the increase in various progressive practices such as evidence based practices within probation and parole among other strategies, the relevance of these contemporary concepts related to appropriate ratios of span of control have yet to be explored within the community corrections context. Discussion of how contemporary factors pertain to police organizations has ensued. As adapted from a recent article in *Police Chief*, Lane (2006) described the following contemporary factors to consider (reproduced directly from Lane, 2006):

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<sup>8</sup> Schroeder, Donald J., Lombardo, Frank, and Strollo, Jerry (1995). *Management and Supervision of Law Enforcement Personnel*. Binghamton, New York: JBL Publications.



## Factors Enabling an Increased Span of Control

### *Factor 1: The Simplicity of the work*

The simpler the task, the less need there is for supervision. The more diversified, complex tasks require more supervision. Traditionally, the patrol function has a larger span of control since the work is similar on each beat, and one supervisor can oversee the work conducted on several beats.

### *Factor 2: Efficient use of information technology*

Readily available information technologies can obtain needed information to do the job as well as receive direction from supervisor increases the span of control. In-car computers, cameras, and individual communication systems enable officers to be in constant touch with supervisors.

### *Factor 3: The quality, skills, and capabilities of subordinates*

Recruiting quality employees having the necessary education, training, and experience to be able to learn and do the assigned work requires providing less supervision by the department. In contrast, hiring the less educated and unskilled subordinates will require extensive coaching by the supervisors to teach these employees the job.

### *Factor 4: The skills and capabilities of the supervisor*

Departments that invest in developing supervisors and managers find that the more knowledgeable and skillful the supervisor—along with the ability to clearly communicate the work the more people he or she can supervise.

### *Factor 5: The quality of the department's training program*

Subordinates fully knowledgeable of the laws, procedures, and administrative processes require less supervision.

### *Factor 6: The harmony of the workforce*

When the subordinates are of like minds and working towards the same objectives in harmony, fewer incidents require supervision intervention.

## Existing Span of Control Ratios in Probation and Parole Jurisdictions

As part of a study supported by the National Association of Criminal Justice Practitioners, Cunniff and Shilton (1991)<sup>9</sup> ascertained the supervisor to probation officer ratio in 25 jurisdictions across the United States. The ratios were calculated in a straight forward manner by dividing the total number of officers by the total number of supervisors. Calculating a ratio in this manner overlooks variation in specialized versus general caseloads, as well as other factors that would directly impact span of control ratios; however, the resulting data do provide a crude snapshot of span of control as it existed circa 1991 in these agencies. It shows the actual ratio ranged from a low of 5:1 in Dallas County, Denver County, Nassau County, and New York City, to a high of 14:1 in Jefferson County (KY). The average ratio within the 25 jurisdictions was 7:1.

<sup>9</sup> Cunniff, Mark A., & Shilton, Mary K. (March) 1991. Variations on Felony Probation: Persons Under Supervision in 32 Urban and Suburban Counties. Washington, DC: National Association of Criminal Justice Planners.

Table 1. *Ratios of Probation Officers to Supervisors* (adapted from Cunniff & Shilton, 1991).

	Actual Ratio
Baltimore City MD	8:1
Baltimore County MD	8:1
Bexar County MD	7:1
Cook County IL	7:1
Dade County FL	10:1
Dallas County TX	5:1
Denver CO	5:1
Erie County NY	7:1
Franklin County OH	5:1
Harris County TX	9:1
Hennepin County MN	9:1
Honolulu HI	6:1
Jefferson County KY	14:1
King County WA	10:1
Los Angeles County CA	7:1
Maricopa County AZ	9:1
Milwaukee County WI	7:1
Monroe County NY	8:1
Nassau County NY	5:1
New York City <sup>a</sup> NY	5:1
Oklahoma County OK	10:1
Orange County CA	6:1
Philadelphia PA	7:1
San Bernardino County CA	9:1
San Diego County CA	6:1
San Francisco CA	9:1
Santa Clara County CA	6:1
St. Louis <sup>b</sup> MO Suffolk	6:1
County NY	8:1
Ventura County CA	6:1

While this study is somewhat dated, having been published in 1991, an updated informal data collection on the same topic by the American Probation and Parole Association occurred in 2006. See Table 2 for a summary of results.

Table 2. Ratio of supervisor to line staff, as reported to American Probation and Parole Association in January 2006.

		<b>Officer to Supervisor Ratio</b>
Arizona	Maricopa County	10-12:1
	Tucson	5-6:1
Arkansas		10:1 as per ACA standard
California	Alameda County	12:1
	San Diego County	10-12:1
	San Bernardino County	5-6:1
	Santa Clara County	7-10:1
	Trinity County	10:1
Georgia	DeKalb County Probation	11:1
	DeKalb County Parole	7:1
Hawaii	Hawaii Paroling Authority, Oahu	12:1
Idaho		14:1 with parole officers assisting
Illinois		13-16:1
Kansas		8-9:1 with senior parole officers
Minnesota	Hennepin County	7.5-17:1 (avg. 13:1)
	Washington County	12-14:1
Missouri		9:1
New York	Albany County	7:1
	Chautauqua County	8:1
Ohio	Painesville	5:1
North Carolina		10:1
	Medina County	8:1
Oregon	Washington County	6:1 + 35 caseload
Tennessee		10:1
Texas	Brazoria County	5-7:1
Pennsylvania	Erie County	10:1
Wisconsin		11-12:1
Canada	Federal – Ontario Region	4-7:1

Additionally, a quote from a Chief in a mixed population jurisdiction from our own preliminary research reflected the ratios in both Tables 1 and 2 noting:

*“Last year we did a study of county management and found that county wide the rate was 1-8.2 overall. Our operation was at 1-7.3. This is the average and includes those management with very little span up to those few who have a 1-23 span.”*

The challenges with making generalizations based on the ratios of other jurisdictions are highlighted by the authors of Table 1. Cushman and Sechrest (1992) argued that they found a prevailing assumption existed in their analysis of probation organizations such that probation agencies were assumed to be “pretty much the same”; it was assumed that “in the aggregate, the people on probation in these different agencies [were] pretty much the same”; and, it was assumed that “the people and programs involved in supervising the probationers [were] pretty much the same”. However, the authors found that despite these overall assumptions, results indicated “nothing could be further from the truth. There are truly important differences on all three of these dimensions” between probation organizations (Cushman & Sechrest, 1992). Thus, even within similarly situated organizations, additional factors should be accounted for when determining the appropriate span of control to gain efficiency that is relevant for a particular group or organization. Some of these factors were noted by another Chief Probation Officer of an urban jurisdiction who stated in reference to determining an appropriate span of control:

*“I think anything more than 10 is extremely difficult. Ultimately, how many probationers would your supervisor be responsible for – with medium and high caseloads, it should have a workable supervisory ratio. I would be very concern[ed] for any specialized caseloads especially sex offenders, serious mentally ill, domestic violence or problem solving courts with a 1:16 ratio.”*

## Policy and Management Positions on Span of Control

While some probation and parole organizations do have specific recommended policy related to the span of control, in some jurisdictions such a policy is absent or is meant only as a guideline. One example of such a policy in the State of Texas is as follows:

*A full-time supervisor should not supervise more than 10 community supervision officers.*

**INTENT:** *The span of control of a supervisor in the CSCD should be large enough to provide economical supervision, but not so large as to prevent effective management. Exceptions should be justified based on the experience of the field officers supervised. Ideally, all personnel supervised should be located in the same office as the supervisor. For a supervisory span of 10, all personnel supervised should be experienced in their specific functions; a smaller ratio of supervision should be used with a high proportion of inexperienced field staff. In small or remote field offices where the supervisor has other duties, adequate supervisory time should be allotted.*

Retrieved from: [http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/publications/cjad/PAC\\_Guidelines\\_2003.pdf](http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/publications/cjad/PAC_Guidelines_2003.pdf)

To reiterate from an earlier point, policy from some jurisdictions are not necessarily good models for direct adaptation to other jurisdictions. Moreover, significant unexplained variation in supervision ratios

as well as supervision models remains. Evidence that documents the roles and responsibility of the supervising officers, as well as the supervisory structure, that may explain some of the variation in span of control ratios is absent in contextualizing these numbers. As Cushman and Sechrest (1992) best explain:

*“This presents a “trap” for probation administrators. It is common practice to compare one probation agency with other probation agencies of similar size and circumstance. Where the diversity among probation agencies is not fully appreciated, this can lead to errors in interpretation which find their way into the development of probation policy. This can be a special problem when the comparison is being made by budget analysts or other officials who do not have extensive knowledge about probation, and who cannot be expected to fully understand the diversity of the probation profession.”*

In our preliminary discussions with a select number of administrators, one participant contextualized their relatively high span of control (18:1) by explaining that their jurisdiction

*...does use “senior” officers (they are paid at a higher level) to perform some supervisory activities especially with case management, so from one perspective we could potentially break down a unit along these lines: 16 officers, 2 seniors and one supervisor which (if we count the [seniors] as supervisors) represents almost a 1:5 ratio.*

Currently, the model in Iowa does not allow for senior line positions to absorb additional administrative oversight duties. Recently, a number of senior line positions were converted to supervisory positions without a significant change in pay because the individuals in the former senior line positions did not have sufficient decision making authority to effectively accomplish their tasks. As a result, many of those senior officers chose to apply for the supervisory positions, despite a lack of significant pay increase, simply so that they could perform their former duties in a more effective manner. The current “flat structure” at the lower levels then, represents a relatively high level of responsibility that would dramatically increase if the numbers of supervisors would be reduced.

## **Evidence Based Practices and the Role of Span of Control**

Concurrent with the consideration of appropriate span of control ratios, knowledge of the recent changes in the System’s overall approach to offender management must also be understood. With the onset of the recent paradigm shift within corrections to an evidence-based practices approach (MacKenzie, 2006)<sup>10</sup>, many probation departments have also adapted their practices to include an evidence based approach. The general principle of evidence based practices relies on scientific knowledge and/or empirical studies that demonstrate effectiveness of programs, methods or techniques within the contextual setting to accomplish a pre-defined goal of recidivism reduction.

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<sup>10</sup> MacKenzie, Doris (2006). *What Works in Corrections? Reducing the Criminal Activities of Offenders and Delinquents*. Cambridge University Press: New York, NY.

Within community corrections, Clawson, Bogue and Joplin (2005, p. 5)<sup>11</sup> note that evidence based research “indicates that certain programs and intervention strategies, when applied to a variety of offender populations, reliably produce sustained reductions in recidivism. Unfortunately, few criminal justice agencies are using these effective interventions and their related concepts/principles.” Evidence based practices have also been generally described as “those that have been researched and validated by departments across the country and have successfully been linked to solving a problem. In adult probation, that means utilizing tools such as a diagnostic risk assessment form, progressive sanctions and motivational interviewing techniques” (The Probation Experiment, 2009).

Arguably, a key component of evidence based practices within a probation jurisdiction is effective implementation of those practices. Results from an examination of the role of span of control within public schools by Meier and Bohte (2006)<sup>12</sup> revealed that span of control relationships among organizational personnel significantly shaped student performance. There is no reason to anticipate that a similar relationship would not be found among other types of human service organizations as well. Based on criminal justice research, we anticipate that at minimum, effective implementation of evidence based practices includes identification of effective practices, training of staff with respect to its implementation and “booster” training sessions, ongoing mentoring of staff, and evaluation of practices (by both external and internal sources). As Cushman and Sechrest (1992) note “the ratio of supervisors to probation officers can serve as a “proxy” measure of the quality of the probation service in a jurisdiction. The smaller ratios imply more supervision, more training, more deliberation, and, hopefully, better probation supervision.” In Iowa, we have found this to be true. As a result of the System’s implementation of evidence based practices in probation, it has been credited with a significant reduction in the Iowa prison population. This is a trend that could be reversed if the span of control was increased.

Organizations in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors are becoming more and more concerned with producing quality outcomes, whether to enhance competitiveness and profit, to reduce error and harm, or to accomplish good and added value for consumers of their “product.” In order to do this, a great deal of attention has been paid to the role of front-line supervisors. It has been shown that supervisors play a pivotal role in any organization’s attempt to improve efficiency and effectiveness through the application of evidence-based knowledge to the process of work. In order to be successful in this role, supervisors must master a set of skills that even ten years ago were not considered a part of their competences. These skills include, among others, transformational leadership, strategic thinking, change management, communication, collaboration, coaching and mentoring, motivating staff, and relationship building. Each of these skills takes time to master and to apply. Supervision is no longer just telling people what to do and then monitoring whether or not they do it; supervision has become the art and science of human and behavioral encouragement, support, and feedback.

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<sup>11</sup> Clawson, Elyse, Bogue, Brad and Joplin, Lore (2005). *Implementing Evidence Based Practice in Corrections*. Crime and Justice Institute: Boston, MA.

<sup>12</sup> Meier, Kenneth J. & Bohte, John (2006). *Ode to Luther Gulick: Span of Control and Organizational Performance*. College Station, Texas: Department of Political Science, Texas A & M University, August 11, 2006.

Engaging in Evidence-Based Practices in probation and parole requires supervisors who have the time to exercise these skills. If agencies expect to achieve significant modifications of criminal behavior and to reduce recidivism, they must allow supervisors to devote the majority of their work day to collaborating with their staff in the actual conduct of their daily business. Supervisors must be able to tutor their staff in the skills of case planning, building meaningful relationships with the offender, engaging offenders in accomplishing treatment plan goals, using rewards and sanctions, and reducing risk by addressing criminogenic needs.

Working with human beings, especially offenders, to change their behavior is always a time-consuming process. Supervisors who cannot model such techniques with their staff because they are "stretched too thin" cannot in turn expect their officers to model such behavior with their correctional clients. In the process, the potential of Evidence-Based Practices will be squandered. The short term financial gains reaped by expanding supervisory spans of control will inevitably result in medium and long term increases in recidivism, victimization, and the rate of crime, with all the increased costs that follow in their wake.

While jurisdictions may differ on their specific evidence based practices that are emphasized during the initial period of organizational change, it is clear that the role of staffing within the organization is critical. Among other aspects, Chapman and Hough (2000) note the importance of valuing staff as its main resource stating, "An effective service will promote ownership, commitment and increased competence amongst its staff and create a culture of curiosity, innovation and trust which promotes effective practice." In specific reference to the implementation and retention of effective practice, Chapman and Hough note that it depends upon the availability of effective managers to:

- provide clear leadership and strategic direction, motivate their teams and lift morale,
- model and support in their own management style the characteristics of effective practice,
- support and enable an evaluative culture which encourages monitoring, feedback and organizational learning,
- negotiate effective partnerships with other agencies and organizations,
- introduce new working practices and forms of organization, which are flexible enough to respond to change,
- effectively manage the assessment and management of risk in order to minimize potential for harm,
- find better ways to utilize the skills and potential of their staff, and help their people develop new skills and knowledge,
- manage performance actively, set measurable and achievable objectives and appraise the ability of staff to achieve these,
- deal effectively with performance that is not up to standard,
- review and continuously develop their own competence as managers so that new challenges can be met head on,

- organize their own work effectively, and cope with the personal stress that comes with new demands and ways of working,
- utilize information and data effectively.

Moreover, the role of the probation and parole officers themselves has significantly evolved with the implementation of evidence based practices. Probation officers must be more engaged with clients in a manner that requires a higher level of direct interaction to implement supervision techniques such as engaging in relationship building, motivational interviewing, and adhering to risk, needs and responsivity principles of treatment. This shift in probation officer roles aligns with added oversight by the probation officer supervisory staff to ensure fidelity of evidence based practices such as those mentioned above.

One director adamantly claimed that the success of the jurisdiction’s probation department was *dependent* upon their first-line supervisors. In efforts to re-organize probation in this urban county, the director invested large amounts of resources towards leadership development of their mid-managers (first line supervisors). Not only are these supervisors responsible for traditional supervision responsibilities of the probation officers within their “team”, they are also responsible for the different committees focused on performance evaluation processes, probation officer training, PSI processes, etc. The first line supervisors chair the different committees, form committee membership and are responsible for some implementation activities.

Within an EBP organization, supervisors are also actively involved in leadership activities including strategic planning, data evaluation, making decisions from a big picture perspective as well as enhanced supervision activities to include coaching and staffing cases with their probation officers (i.e., case discussion and decision making through a team process). Strong, developed leadership provides much of the critical infrastructure from which evidence based practices can become a part of the organization. A number of experts commented that training, organizational processes, and decision making using data (evidence based decision making) should be the more critical focus as compared to a specific number of supervisory ratios.

## Risks Associated with an Inappropriately Wide Span of Control

Recognizing that devising an ideal span of control must be tempered with economic feasibility, long term as well as short term costs must be considered in this formulation. Significant risks have been identified in other non-criminal justice field regarding inappropriate spans of control. For example, in recently reviewing the span of control literature with their focus on the medical field, Lucas and colleagues (2008:967)<sup>13</sup> wrote:

*“ A few researchers have reported negative effects of wide spans of control. Gittel’s (2001) study in the airline industry found that small supervisory spans of control improved performance through the manager’s positive effect on work group processes.*

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<sup>13</sup> Lucas, V., Spence Laschinger, H.K., & Wong, C. (2008). The impact of emotional intelligent leadership on staff nurse empowerment: The moderating effect of span of control. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 16, 964-973.



*Qualitative data suggested that managers with smaller spans achieved these results by working with and providing intensive coaching and feedback to their direct reports. Groups with wide spans of control had significantly lower performance than groups with narrow span of control. Cathcart et al. (2004) found a direct negative relationship between nurse engagement and span of control. A study of employees in a chemical plant showed that wide span of control groups had significantly higher rates of unsafe behaviours and work safety accidents (Hechanova-Alampay & Beehr 2001). McCutcheon et al.'s (2004) study conducted in seven hospitals (n= 717 nurses, 51 patient care units, 41 nurse managers) found that span of control moderated the relationship between leadership style and patient satisfaction. The positive effect of transformational leadership style on nurses' job satisfaction was significantly reduced in units with wide spans of control. These managers are less able to develop close relationships with staff, provide support and individual consideration."*

When considering the realm of probation and parole, in addition to ineffective implementation of evidence based practices, when appropriate supervision staff is lacking it is possible for programs and practices that are initially well-implemented to erode in quality over time. As one director we spoke with stated, "...EBP takes active supervision and some accountability or it slips." McManus (2007) also discussed a number of other global issues that may result including skill erosion, customer confidence erosion, and morale erosion or bad morale if employees are not supported with effective and adequate levels of supervision. Moreover, probation organizations are in a unique position in that individual officers may also be subject to civil liability suits against them as well as their organizations. For example, one expert we communicated with conveyed that they were aware of two cases

*...where the probation officer was sued for being negligent. In both cases, the attorneys hired an expert witness...and they wanted to know whether they knew or should have known what the evidence says they should have done.*

This concern was reiterated by a Chief Probation Officer who commented in reference to determining appropriate span of control:

*Perhaps another way of looking at this is liability that your jurisdiction may incur – failure to train, direct, supervise, entrust, discipline and assignment to name but a few."*

## Next Steps

Significant complexities are associated with determining an appropriate span of supervisory control during a time that jurisdictions are concurrently implementing and advancing their evidence based practices strategies, and experiencing economic challenges. Inquiries regarding workforce related issues with jurisdictions across the country have demonstrated an ongoing challenge for all departments is to "do more with less."

The specific issue of staffing an organization within an evidence based practices environment has drawn significant interest from the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) as well as the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA). While the NIC seeks to support jurisdictions in their EBP missions in reducing recidivism, APPA aims to provide organizational assistance in policy development. To further advance knowledge in this general area, NIC has funded consultants from Sam Houston State University's College of Criminal Justice and Correctional Management Institute of Texas to explore issues related to workforce staffing issues to determine primarily how the roles of supervisors and line staff have changed with the implementation of EBP, and the impacts of these changes for span of control ratios. Results of that exploration are presented herein. The American Probation and Parole Association's Issues, Positions, and Resolutions Committee will be writing a resolution on this topic in the near future, which may also provide some guidance on this matter. The resolution remains in development.

## Current Study

Consultants from the College of Criminal Justice and Correctional Management Institute of Texas from Sam Houston State University conducted a series of focus groups with key stakeholders from within two Districts in the State of Iowa as well as with a cross section of nationally representative probation and parole administrators and supervisors. A semi-structured interview process was guided by questions developed based on the review of literature and knowledge presented earlier. The duration of focus group sessions were between one and two hours in length. Stakeholders at all levels were included in the focus groups, ranging from line staff (including residential officers, probation officers, and parole officers) to upper level administrators (including chief probation officers or similarly situated executive level positions).

## Findings on the Impact of Span of Control on Probation and Parole Practices within an Evidence Based Practices Environment

Literature within the managerial sciences has noted a movement away from span of control terminology toward a conceptualization of work force supervision or oversight in terms of a “*span of support*.” Existing literature notes that this evolution in terminology is especially relevant when considering work force issues that exist in a dynamic work place or work environment<sup>14</sup>. Based on interviews and focus group discussions with probation and parole stakeholders, our findings indicate that this evolution of perspective on work force oversight issues (and the associated terminology) is particularly appropriate within corrections given the advancement of the evidence based practices movement. Moreover, the current role of workforce oversight has significant organizational implications beyond the previously devised administrative oversight responsibilities. Significant evolution of the roles and responsibilities of staff members has occurred at all levels of probation and parole organizations that have adopted evidence based practices. This change appears to be most pronounced for supervisory staff and staff who have direct contact with clients.

Heretofore, span of control terminology was utilized with the understanding of a relatively dictatorial stance on supervisor-subordinate relationships. Supervisors were generally tasked with ensuring that a group of specific line staff were “doing their job”, providing authoritative decisions, and reviewing discretionary decisions of staff on an as needed basis. With a shift towards evidence based practices, modern day managerial roles allow (and perhaps even encourage) supervisors and “subordinates” to work together as colleagues with an understanding of varying levels of decision making/ delegation authority, yet with each team member playing a critical part in an overall collaborative process that focuses primarily on community safety through offender behavioral change and offender accountability.

Within the probation and parole environment, the concept of “span of support” as distinct from “span of control” is increasingly evident with jurisdictional movement toward an evidence based practices (EBP) model. EBP in its most effective form requires ongoing coaching, mentoring and directed assistance from supervisory staff who work together with line staff in the best interests of community safety and improving client behavior. No longer is *supervision and monitoring* of officers’ assignments and completion of tasks the singular or primary role of supervisors. The supervisor’s hands-on involvement, including significant individualized mentoring with each of the members of their team, is a necessity in an evidence based practices environment. In other words, the nature of the supervisory positions in probation and parole jurisdictions has significantly evolved since the recent implementation of evidence based practices. This shift in roles and responsibilities within an evidence based practices work environment should be considered when determining the staffing of EBP oriented probation and parole jurisdictions including span of control/span of support.

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<sup>14</sup> Herman & Gioia (2009). Span of control vs. span of support. *The Journal of Quality and Participation*.

In the sections that follow, this report provides with an overview of the modern day role of probation and parole supervisors. This section is followed by a summary of the various competencies that some counties within the U.S. have advanced as ideal qualities of a probation/parole officer within an EBP environment combined with perceptions of qualities of an “ideal” supervisor. Next, we review some of the key issues that have been theoretically advanced as factors to consider in determining a span of control (as discussed earlier in this report) as they apply to probation and parole environments. This section specifically accounts for the qualitative data gathered during the focus groups within Iowa and with nationally representative groups of probation and parole stakeholders. Finally, we conclude with a summary of important considerations pertaining to staffing of probation and parole jurisdictions that have implemented an EBP environment.

## Primary Supervisory Functions

Distinct from a written job description and/or responsibilities document, the primary supervisory functions described herein are taken from interviews with a variety of supervisors, while also incorporating information gleaned from line staff regarding the daily functioning of supervisory positions. Oftentimes individuals engage in tasks not directly included in their job responsibilities; as such, sole reliance on document analysis of existing job descriptions may prove inaccurate in framing those supervisory responsibilities. Moreover, multiple dimensions should be considered in reviewing this section: first, a degree of between-supervisor variation is likely to exist, though core functions presented should be relatively consistent; second, variation within these supervisory functions may occur over time, especially as “special projects” or “committee work” is added or removed; and third, the focus here is on describing responsibilities under the direct authority of the supervisors; however, general authority of supervisors may result in intermittent responsibilities or tasks not included herein.

Numerous responses were received when querying the tasks that comprised the “primary responsibilities” of supervisors. These responses are discussed in terms of the most typical and/or time consuming aspects of a typical day and were subsequently classified into the following categories: reactive supervisory responsibilities, administrative duties, direct contact and support of line staff/team members, quality assurance, direct contact with clients, and other intermittent responsibilities.

**Reactive Supervisory Responsibilities.** When supervisors were asked where they spend most of their time, many supervisors spontaneously responded that “putting out fires” consumed much of their time. “Fires” included their staff demanding their time and assistance in solving problems or concerns, along with unplanned activities or disruptions to the normal work day. When pressed for examples, supervisors responded that crises varied from “true” emergencies involving clients and/or line officers such as new arrests, to pressing issues presented by staff members related to client situations or their own personal situations (i.e., human resource concerns). Supervisors noted that handling the “two-second notices” and dealing with constant fires took away from their planned proactive strategies in working with staff and other ongoing duties as assigned. Supervisors recognized that this aspect of the job was obviously critical; however, they also emphasized that engagement in such a reactionary mode challenged progress toward proactive actions with the staff regarding implementation and assistance

with evidence based practices and completion of other time consuming tasks such as quality assurance reports.

**Administrative Duties.** Administrative duties were also noted as a key component in the day to day activities of supervisors. A wide range of tasks were consumed under this classification including overseeing the movement of clients in and out of caseloads, scheduling intakes and releases, administrative and unit meetings (including committee meetings), field related paperwork, data production and analysis, and human resources related work. Regarding human resources work, supervisors noted their involvement in disciplinary processes, and responsibilities for responding to grievances including offender-officer and officer-officer grievances. These administrative tasks varied depending on the individual supervisor, the type of unit supervised, and individual committees with which they were involved. The important consideration here is the understanding that a supervisor, even within the EBP environment, is engaged in the fundamental operational level of a probation and parole organization with duties that are neither client directed, nor directly related to interactions with their direct report line staff and that this job component requires a significant portion of their time.

**Direct Contact and Support of Line Staff.** As noted elsewhere, within an EBP environment a key role of a supervisor is expected to be their roles and responsibilities with direct contact and support of line staff who are direct reports. Supervisors noted their specific involvement with their direct report line staff in addition to providing formal authoritative decision making responsibilities included consulting on cases through case planning and caseload management, training of staff, and informal contact with unit/team members. EBP drives aspects such as caseload management through appropriate risk/needs assessments, appropriate community resource and service linkages, and matching treatment responsivity with client needs among other aspects of client assistance.

In this dimension of the supervisory position, an interesting factor came to light regarding jurisdictional variation. Specifically, depending upon the geographical nature of a supervisor's area - urban versus rural jurisdictions – distinct issues were evident. Supervisors in jurisdictions that encompassed a large rural area experienced significant “windshield time” traveling between probation/parole officer and client locations that detracted from other supervisory duties and interactions. As evident in other states, some supervisors were responsible for subordinates spread out in different locations/counties affecting the amount, type and quality of contact with their unit. Several supervisors stated that their strongest, most positive relationships were with staff members that were co-located in the same building. Thus, location seemed to be a critical factor in supervisor-staff relationships and could present negative challenges to supervisory positions.

**Quality Assurance.** With the onset of EBP in Iowa, significant efforts were made to ensure quality of client supervision was in practice. The primary method of ensuring quality client supervision currently implemented is referred to as quality assurance processes. In addition to traditional oversight of line officer activities, supervisors are responsible for ensuring that officers are engaged in quality client supervision through quality assurance audits of officer files. Supervisors noted that not only was

completion of these “QAs” time consuming, but carving out dedicated time for completing these audits was often difficult. Two audits per officer per month was cited as an expectation for the supervisors. An important component of the quality assurance process is the coaching and debriefs that are meant to follow the audits as an active feedback mechanism. Unfortunately, while the supervisors struggle to find time to complete the written quality assurance reports, they did not feel as if they had sufficient time to engage in the level of follow up that they wanted to have with the line staff after completing the QAs.

**Direct Contact with Clients and Community Stakeholder.** Supervisors varied with the typical amount of direct contact time with clients and community stakeholders. Residential supervisors were afforded more time with clients due to their physical proximity with clients, whereas traditional probation/parole supervisors had more contact with external community stakeholders. All supervisors felt that client and community stakeholder contact was a critical component of their role. Supervisors also emphasized that some of their critical involvement with clients was not necessarily direct (face to face) but indirect through their review of reports, provision of case assistance, and assistance in explaining policies and procedures to clients.

Direct contact with community stakeholders included: [1] external collaborations; [2] fielding calls or contacts from lawyers, community members or clients; and, [3] external advocacy and information sharing with the broader community. Related to an earlier point on geographical issues impacting the supervisory role, interviews with supervisors indicated a significant difference in the types of contacts that supervisors have with community stakeholders, as well as the relative importance in these contacts. In jurisdictions that were relatively rural in nature, it appeared that the supervisors were significantly more involved in rallying for community support and proactively making contact with community stakeholders. These supervisors were often viewed as an integral part in a community. In contrast, supervisors in urban jurisdictions appeared to have a qualitatively different relationship with external stakeholders. While important, this relationship seemed to be less related to cultivating opportunities with local employers, treatment providers and the like and more related to informational sessions with the community or other types of activities.

**Intermittent or Varying Tasks.** A final dimension in our classification includes intermittent, or tasks that varied significantly between supervisors. One of the least recognized roles of supervisors appeared to be the supervisor responsibility for unit coverage. In other words, filling in for absent officers. When officers were unable to come into the office as a result of illness, weather or other personal emergencies, supervisors are the “go to” people to cover the work of line staff including client meetings that have been pre-set for that day. Recognition should be made that the challenge associated with this specific task is not limited to the actual engagement of coverage itself, but that other work required by the supervisors is simply displaced as a result. Since those original supervisor responsibilities are not “covered” by another person, leeway or task flexibility should acknowledge this variable in the supervisor work load. With line staff and supervisors alike citing that there simply are “not enough bodies to handle direct service,” the added workload when even one line staff is out for the day in

addition to a traditional work load is only exponentially impacted by multiple line staff out sick, on prolonged leave, or on vacation.

An additional component of supervisor responsibility was program oversight. Several of the supervisors were responsible for holding weekly groups with clients. Some of the groups included batterer intervention groups and/or sex offender groups. Most supervisors felt that while it was important that they engaged in running these groups, it seemed as if this was in addition to other responsibilities that were not receiving appropriate attention.

**The Need for an Increased Focus on EBP Related Tasks.** In summary, supervisors described their job functions as often consumed by administrative duties, logistical issues and crisis situations. By way of follow-up, supervisors were queried about the areas that they felt required an increased focus of their time, or that they perceived was receiving an insufficient amount of their attention. Consistently supervisors noted a desire to be spending more one on one time with their staff members. This response from focus group participants took numerous descriptive forms that were more specific responses to supervisory approaches employed to engage in this individualized attention.

Many supervisors noted that staff development was a key component that required more of their time. Staff development was defined in many ways, each of which adhered to EBP approaches including providing additional training, increased one on one coaching, engaging in interactive role play, coaching/mentoring, and staffing cases as a group among their team members. Other supervisors noted wanting to have time for more “genuine” quality assurance processes and feedback. Noting that Quality Assurance (QA) is different in an EBP environment as compared to prior audits, some supervisors felt they weren’t sufficiently engaged in the “new” QA; instead, they were doing a lot of data and process auditing.

Interestingly, the comments of supervisory desires for increased individualized attention with staff closely reflected the desires of line staff. When line staff were queried about their desires for change or improvement with their supervisors, while no one wanted to be “micro managed”, many line staff wanted more one on one time with supervisors and an increased “availability” of their supervisor. Common to both groups was a desire to engage in more in-depth quality assurance which would include direct observation of client meetings, more direct contact with clients, and more specific feedback on supervision skills. Surprisingly, the line staff frequently voiced their desire to have supervisors directly observe the client interactions and welcomed the supervisors meeting with the clients as well. This desire was tempered by a recognition of the large amount of time that such individualized attention and feedback would require beyond the extensive time required by existing quality assurance processes.

Finally, one distinct area that some supervisors noted was that they had limited time to “keep up with research” and “keep up with technical skills” both of which are expected by a well implemented EBP model. In a jurisdiction that emphasizes an EBP model, it is critical to stay abreast of new developments documented in research literature. A second distinct area noted by some groups was that they have had



to make some collaborative groups a lower priority as a result of insufficient time to participate in group meetings and projects.

### **Conclusion of Primary Supervisor Functions and Deficits in EBP Task Attention.**

In reviewing the primary functions of the supervisors within an EBP environment and from the qualitative data resulting from the focus groups held, it became very evident that many of the tasks associated with EBP were an added layer to the existing, primary functions of a supervisor. This is not to indicate that these responsibilities are unnecessary, quite the contrary is true. The vast majority of the tasks within the supervisory position that are expected as a result of EBP are appropriate and support an EBP mission with integrity. At the same time, resources of supervisors were perceived to be relatively maximized at the time of these observations. The resulting concern with an impending increase in span of control/support is that when systems or organizations begin to struggle with the constraints imposed upon them, oftentimes they will revert to the basic survival mode with completing only basic tasks. In the instance of probation and parole, the most basic requirements or primary functions of a supervisor are to act in a pure “supervisory” or monitoring capacity, which is not congruent to an evidence based practices model.

Correctional systems in stress and/or crisis mode often revert to a “back to basics” mentality, solely focusing on their basic and core activities. Implementing evidence based practices within a community corrections jurisdiction, as we heard from many of our focus group participants, creates stress as the system moves through and embraces organizational change. The ability to continually implement and establish a sustainable architecture with EBP as its focus, would be hampered with an increased span of control. Such an increase would be expected to cause the organizational structure to falter and potentially fail. Hatstrup (1993) delineates insight into what could be expected if supervisory ratios are increased beyond a level in which supervisors are no longer capable of providing appropriate and effective guidance and oversight. He suggests that supervisors will tend to provide less supervision “if workers are involved in work of a trivial or routine nature” and subsequently as indicated in our focus group interviews, probation and parole officers will also be likely to revert to basic and core activities of supervision, reporting, surveillance, record keeping, basic case management, and report writing without the critical support of their first line supervisors.

As we begin to better understand the complex and dynamic responsibilities, skills and knowledge that a probation or parole officer must become proficient in to effectively supervise his or her caseload, appropriate span of control ratios of supervisors are also critical. John Maxwell<sup>15</sup>, who has written extensively on leadership, states that “leaders understand that activity is not necessarily accomplishment” and “that the greatest success comes only when you focus people on what really matters.” Thus to reiterate the above point, when probation or parole officers are not able to rely on their supervisors to provide them with the necessary level of guidance, support, and oversight, it

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<sup>15</sup> Maxwell, J. (1998). *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*. Thomas Nelson Inc.: Nashville, TN.



follows that the “focus” of probation and parole officers are likely to revert to the more simple and routine activities required with their responsibilities.

## Probation Officer Competencies

Supervisors can range in their ability to manage officers, but good community supervision work begins with effective supervision. Although supervision may seem like a daunting task to some while a relatively menial task to others, there are common competencies that all supervisors should have in order to be valuable and efficient. As probation and parole organizations have advanced their EBP practices, work force considerations have also become a preeminent concern. Specifically, some jurisdictions have engaged working groups to define the characteristics or *competencies* that would be evident by effective staff within an EBP environment. For example, the Carey Group has developed a list of competencies for the Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole that direct line supervisors are expected to possess in order to be considered effective within their roles (See Appendix for the full document). These competencies are designed to address the skills and challenges that are innate to direct line supervisory positions within an agency that uses a evidence based practices model.

These four areas of competency for supervisors amassed by the Carey Group include: skill development, case planning, rewards and sanctions/role modeling, and relationships. Skill development involves developing the skills of officers to recognize the criminogenic needs of clients, teaching skills to clients, and engaging in practice sessions to learn how to handle certain types of officers. Supervisors can support and monitor their officers with regards to case planning by developing a case plan checklist, filling out a case consultation meetings audit form, and/or providing direct observation feedback. The third competency, rewards and sanctions/role modeling, includes consistent use of rewards, structured sanctions, expressions of approval/disapproval, and prosocial role modeling with their staff. Officers must use these skills with their clients, and it is therefore imperative that direct line supervisors also have a firm proficiency with these skills. Finally, relationships involve being open, warm, genuine, and displaying enthusiastic communication, being empathetic, and having mutual respect and liking for fellow staff. It is necessary for direct line supervisors to develop and build professional relationships with the officers so that these relationships can be modeled and duplicated between the officer and the client.

Maricopa County, Arizona is recognized as a County that has made significant advancements with implementing EBP. They have also worked with consultants to develop an index of competencies that probation officer supervisors must have in order to perform their job successfully. These competencies include:

- building trust,
- collaboration,
- communication,
- conflict management,
- continuous learning and professional development,
- cultural competence,
- decision making/problem solving,
- managing change,

- guiding and developing staff,
- influence,
- initiative,
- managing work,
- team leadership.

The first competency, building trust, is based on supervisors keeping commitments, being direct and truthful, earning the loyalty of others, and valuing others. Collaboration involves valuing the goals of others and working toward shared goals by evenly distributing responsibility, accountability, and authority, while also developing internal and external relationships. In addition to keeping others informed as appropriate, being a good communicator requires supervisors to demonstrate good verbal, written, and listening skills, as well as maintaining sensitivity to others. Next, conflict management includes reducing tension between people, facilitating resolution, and having mediation and negotiation skills. The continuous learning and professional development of supervisors requires direct line supervisors to commit to developing professionally, incorporating evidence based practices into day-to-day work, and informing others of newly gained knowledge. Furthermore, cultural competence is based on being aware of, and relating well to, diverse backgrounds and perspectives, as well as challenging bias and intolerance. Decision making/problem solving involves using a variety of resources to make well informed decisions, involving others in the decision making process, and also assuming responsibility for decisions even when they turn out to be the wrong choice.

The next competency that Maricopa County requires direct line supervisors to possess is the ability to manage change. Facilitating, adapting, and managing the impact of change are all important characteristics of effective supervisors. Guiding and developing the staff is another skill in which supervisors should be proficient. For example, supervisors must set performance expectations and goals, monitor and evaluate the performance of staff, and at the same time coach and counsel officers. Influence involves persuading rather than forcing regulations on others and encouraging others in support of organizational expectations. Next, initiative includes being proactive, taking action without being asked to do so, taking on more responsibility, and encouraging innovation in their staff. Managing work consists of having good time management skills, the ability to organize, prioritize, and plan effectively, while also being able to schedule and direct work for self and others. Finally, team leadership includes engaging team members in decisions, maintaining focus on major goals, encouraging mutual support, providing resources to promote success, and sharing information.

The Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole and Maricopa County, Arizona are two jurisdictions which have foundations rooted in evidence based practice. The four competencies from Pennsylvania and thirteen from Maricopa County have been designed to represent the skills and abilities that direct line supervisors should possess to run an effective community supervision department. In addition to these more formalized competencies, qualitative data were obtained from focus group participants regarding their perceptions of ideal supervisor characteristics. These data were garnered from the perspective of both individuals subject to supervision as well as those within or previously within

supervisory positions. Interestingly, there was significant overlap in the responses between the multiple groups.

For the sake of brevity, the numerous characteristics are classified into the five following dimensions: basic management skills, organizational skills, positive personality traits including a strong ability to work with people, experience and investment in the position, and acting as a problem solver/visionary. Basic management skills includes how to resolve conflicts, recognizing staff diversity, maintaining a professional relationship amongst officers, conducting professional investigations, and remembering the fact that they were not always supervisors. Organizational skills requires supervisors to have good time management skills, be able to make decisions promptly, provide feedback in a timely manner, and be available to officers. Supervisors must also have a positive personality, which involves being energetic and personable, compassionate and supportive, and consistent and even tempered. Also, supervisors must have the ability to work with people, have good verbal and written communication, be honest, objective, and fair, while also possessing coaching and mentoring skills. By being experienced and showing an investment in the position, supervisors will advocate on behalf of the staff and show officers that they care about their job. Finally, being a problem solver/visionary involves thinking outside of the box, asking for help when needed, but also being hands on and helping others with everyday duties. When supervisors possess this wide range of skills, officers will begin to have confidence that the supervisors are not only effective managers but also effective leaders.

## **Application of Theoretical Span of Control Factors to an EBP Probation and Parole Environment**

While the nature of the supervisory positions has evolved to include new approaches and a deeper level of supervisor interaction with their unit, the very nature of the probation and parole environment itself continues to be extremely complex and dynamic. Referring back to the existing literature presented on important factors to consider in determining appropriate span of control ratios at the outset of this brief, we now turn to outlining the application of these factors within an EBP probation and parole environment. Recall that key factors in determining an appropriate span of control, some of which are more pertinent to the field of probation than others, have been cited as:

- **Work force skill level**
- **Work environment**
- **Process (task) complexity, including time investment**
- **Mission clarity**
- **Support system integrity**

The importance of workforce skill level can not be under emphasized and is clearly interrelated to the primary functions of both supervisors and their staff. With the implementation of EBP, the skill level is expected to be significantly higher and ongoing feedback is critical. As noted earlier, the work environment within probation and parole is dynamic and complex. Distinct from a work environment in which you know what to expect each day, supervisors stated that much of their focus is driven by crisis

management and “no day is ever the same.” The complexity of the process or more specifically the complexity of the “task” assigned to probation and parole officers and their supervisors has increased significantly with the implementation of EBP and the associated expectations. Arguably, the mission clarity of a probation and parole organization is clearly defined with public safety at the forefront of that mission. EBP significantly enables a community supervision organization towards this mission. Finally, the support system integrity could be considered directly related to the span of control, or span of support as alluded to in an earlier section. In the remainder of this section, the brief turns to highlighting the applicability of these key factors within a probation and parole environment that has EBP in place. Qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews guide this discussion.

## Work Force Skill Level and Capabilities of Staff

Organizational transition is difficult in the most supportive environment, even with highly skilled staff. The dynamics of entering into an EBP model within probation and parole means that a complete shift in a staff member’s approach to their job must be employed. During earlier decades, the consensus of staff attitudes tended toward “trail ‘em, nail ‘em, and jail ‘em” in which client supervision and monitoring were emphasized in their work environment. Many current staff members were hired with this perspective in mind, which may have instilled these values in them or aligned with their own personal values. With a paradigmatic shift in thinking and behavioral expectations toward EBP, probation and parole supervision has become much more than mere “supervision” of offenders.

The role of a supervisor begins with a responsibility in working with staff to develop and insure staff buy-in with EBP ideals. Subgroups of staff exist in which some members refuse to align with an ideological shift in primary position functions, while other staff embrace new approaches. Within those staff who buy-in to EBP, there is a significant range of officer ability to effectively perform within an EBP environment resulting in some staff who are now ill suited for their positions. The varying perspectives on the role of probation/parole officers with clients that is possessed by staff, which may not be aligned with current EBP ideals, results in discord in the workplace and thus added challenges for supervisors. Referring to the earlier work of Lane (2006), a key factor enabling an *increase* in span of control was termed “the harmony of the workforce.” Lane described this factor as an instance in which the subordinates are of like minds and working towards the same objectives in harmony, requiring less intense supervision in some cases. Given that many supervisors are still dealing with EBP buy-in and capability issues, the need for retaining the current span of control ratios is underscored.

In addition to buy-in the implications for staff capabilities with the shift toward EBP are numerous. A key change in job functioning of probation/parole offices in an EBP environment is an expansion in required versatility of an officer to an unprecedented level. Officers must now have both the knowledge and skill set to serve in multiple capacities including a law enforcement officer, a social worker, and an educator. They must possess critical in-depth knowledge of mental health and substance abuse treatment issues, as well as understand and be able to address work force development issues and housing needs of their clients. In turn, a supervisor’s role is additionally impacted by these staffing complexities both in their own skills and their supervisory responsibilities. Within their own skill set, the supervisor must possess

an even higher level of competency in all the areas noted above than their officers. One of the fundamental responsibilities as a supervisor is to guide and mentor staff. To supervise effectively, a supervisor must possess the knowledge and skills that they want their officers to demonstrate.

Certainly, the new expectations of officers are supported by some level of training. Focus group participants noted that the amount of training has substantially increased for both the supervisor and the probation officer. Moreover, the expectation that the supervisor will be actively involved in training – coaching and mentoring their staff is significant. Some supervisors emphasized that that new probation officers only received a week of formal training and that most training occurred on the job and as such much of the training responsibility rested upon supervisors. It is critical to recognize that as organizational changes in practice occur, much of the critical components in developing a skilled work force is impacted by supervisory capabilities. It follows that supervisors themselves have to continually go through training to develop their EBP knowledge and skills, so that they can be effective in modeling, teaching and leading their staff.

Work force development is not a static process. Unfortunately, as administrators are all too well aware, turnover can and does happen. This added dynamic influence on the existing function of the supervisory positions should not be undervalued or underestimated. As change does occur, supervisors also need to have time to effectively learn their probation officer personalities, strengths and weaknesses. It was in this regard that some supervisors noted the importance of being able to “walk the halls” and “work the desk.”

Supervisors highlighted that they spend a significant amount of time with staff mentoring, building relationships, reviewing reports to assist with case management (lots of report reviews) to promote consistency among staff and efficacy of EBP, yet more time is still needed. As a probation officer’s role grows in complexity (knowledge and skills) there is a direct correlation to the capability of the supervisor and their competence in providing the appropriate and necessary level of guidance, direction and oversight. At the same time as indicated earlier, both supervisors and staff do not perceive the time spent in this component of the job is insufficient. It is important that supervisors themselves model EBP especially motivation interviewing (MI) in their interactions with their staff. Yet, with limited time and the potential for increasing the number of staff under their purview, it would appear that this deficiency will persist or worsen.

## **Work Environment – The Dynamic Role of Probation Officers and Supervisors**

Existing organizational literature points to the nature of the work as a prime factor to consider when assessing appropriate span of control, specifically, the dynamic versus static nature of the job that is being performed as well as the job that is being supervised. Supervisors within work environments that are relatively static, such as factory or assembly line production, are typically able to handle a broader span of control with fidelity whereas supervisors within dynamic work environments should have a lesser span of control due to the lack of consistency in daily activities and unanticipated events that may occur. Some examples in the existing literature of such dynamic environments include medicine (i.e., head nurse to nurses), military settings (i.e., rule of three), and policing.

The full dynamics in a probation and parole environment has not been explored in this manner to date. Based on interviews with staff, it became evident very quickly that probation and parole departments are a very dynamic environment. Specifically, many supervisors described their district as a “very dynamic organization that is seemingly in constant change”. As a result, the role of supervisors especially in an EBP environment is also a very dynamic position as is the organization which should perhaps be viewed as a “learning organization” in which dynamism is the norm. In addition to an increase in the breadth of responsibility, supervisors are also required to have a significantly greater depth of involvement as discussed in the previous section.

As noted in the primary functions of a supervisor discussed above, a number of responsibilities have remained consistent from earlier decades when EBP was not in place. Consistent with earlier eras, administrative tasks such as maintaining current knowledge on changes occurring in laws and policies is important. Certainly, with evidence based practices knowledge of these and research based practices has become critical. While administrative responsibilities have not subsided, supervisors have experienced notable increases in administrative tasks more directly related to EBP. The majority of the time consumed with administrative tasks was perceived to be related to activities that focused on ensuring that quality EBP is in place, and improving line staff skills sets as it relates to the officer level responsibilities through the provision of feedback. Specifically, EBP places an emphasis on quality report writing directly related to effective offender case management, as well as a strong focus on individual probation officer case reviews. Despite the time consumed by quality assurance related tasks, supervisors agreed that quality assurance auditing was a critical function.

Another aspect of the supervisory role that can not be underestimated is the dynamic aspect of the day to day roles of supervisors. The message was consistently expressed by supervisors who highlighted “no day is the same” and that they were constantly “putting out fires.” Staff discussed that they felt they were dealing with moving targets with respect to case staffing issues, working with officers on intermediate sanctions, and emergencies, while simultaneously assisting with case plan reviews, auditing files (check list audit) and in-depth audits – a comprehensive review to insure that the officer is targeting the right needs of their clients, making appropriate referrals, using motivational interviewing techniques and so forth. What became very evident throughout these discussions was that supervisors, due to their existing workload, spend much of their day in a reactive mode. While supervisors are relatively successful in this role, it does not allow for a significant level the proactive activities associated with effective implementation and sustainment of an EBP model.

## Task Complexity

When questioned about their responsibilities, supervisors cited that evidence based practices has added significant roles, tasks, and expectations to their work load. EBP expects staff to develop a much more in depth relationship with clients/offenders, which requires more training and more supervisor interaction with the officers discussing case management options. Beyond this aspect, audits and staff evaluations were two other specific functions that were highlighted as new complexities to their

positions. Supervisors are responsible for tracking programs through data collection, a new responsibility for supervisors in an EBP environment, and quality assurance responsibilities. EBP places a tremendous need for data analysis, which is critical for effective feedback, consequently, supervisors are responsible for doing monthly reports on data/performance measurements and writing reports directly related to effective offender case management. This responsibility places a stronger focus on individual officer case reviews and feedback with officers.

Personnel evaluations were significantly expanded as a result of EBP and several supervisors mentioned that this responsibility increased the need for their ability to coach and mentor, and has resulted in a need for supervisors to have a heightened level of “responsivity” to their staff. Even tasks that were previously simplistic, such as basic interaction between a supervisor and their staff, have increased in complexity. As noted earlier, supervisors themselves must model EBP, especially motivation interviewing (MI) in their interactions with their staff.

Some supervisors expressed that EBP jurisdictions tended to engage in many new programs with the onset of EBP thereby creating more involvement for supervisors and staff and a higher need for coaching and mentoring as these programs come on line. Focus group participants pointed out that supervisors are responsible for supervising both probation and parole officers. Such an organization, in which probation and parole officers responsible for both levels of supervision, adds an additional level of complexity given that probation and parole have different rules, laws, and processes governing each offender and potentially a different focuses from a case management perspective. For example, one supervisor indicated that with an active focus on least restrictive sanctions especially within probation, each unit deals with a different level of offender, which is very different from past years, thereby involving a higher level of knowledge and skills and much more training for both officers and supervisors.

These distinct positions have some similarity but also numerous varying responsibilities to that even the supervisors have difficulty keep up with the activities with which the officers are engaged. This range of activities carries with it an expectation that the supervisors must be experts in many different areas. This is a strong point to consider in an EBP organization which is inherently a learning organization. As noted earlier, as a probation officer’s role grows in complexity (knowledge and skills), there is a direct correlation to the capability of the supervisor and their competence in providing the appropriate and necessary level of guidance, direction and oversight.

## **Time Investment**

EBP requires significant collaboration which in itself is a terrific consumer of time and should be considered in developing a staffing structure. Supervisors as well as line staff indicated that a significant amount of supervisor time was enveloped in meetings with a variety of different partners and stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization. Internally, EBP expectations are that staff develop a much more in depth relationship with clients/offenders, which requires more training and more supervisor interaction with officers discussing case management options. Administratively, EBP places a tremendous need on data entry and analysis which is critical for effective assessment. Data and



related performance assessment take many forms such as quality assurance, observation among other methods. Specifically, EBP model of supervision places an emphasis on strong report writing directly related to effective offender case management. It also places a stronger focus on individual probation officer case reviews. In line with this approach, Iowa supervisors are responsible for completing monthly reports on data/performance measurements.

As noted a number of times throughout this document, qualitative interview data indicated that many supervisors consistently cited their desire to provide more individual /one on one attention to their line staff team members especially on coaching and mentoring, but found they were consumed with tasks that were primarily administrative in nature. As a result of limited individualized contact, some supervisors found they were relatively unable to hold their staff accountable to quality EBP and voiced their frustration over an inability to conduct (because of a lack of time) and/or follow through with some of the MI principals that they themselves should be practicing. Moreover, they felt they did not have enough time to handle critical human resource issues with their staff such as grievances and investigations. Lastly, the nature of the organizational shift work and extended hours increased supervisors' sense of responsibility leaving them feeling as if they were always on duty.

## Perceived Impact of EBP

The positive impact of the implementation of an Evidence Based Practices model is already evident in the improved public safety within the state of Iowa as demonstrated through the declining recidivism rate in recent years. It is important to highlight other positive aspects accompanying the ongoing organizational change from the perspective of the Iowa focus group participants to underscore that while the challenges of EBP are immense, the benefits are evident and significant.

An important perspective of some staff was that "EBP has made us more professional". The majority of staff felt that an EBP model of supervision was in line with what the focus of their efforts should be, and many of the staff were able to convey anecdotal evidence of its effectiveness with clients or coworkers. In addition to client and workplace benefits, some staff noted that EBP has caused supervisors to become much more active within the community as indicated by comments such as "EBP has drawn us out of the office" and "we have become much more collaborative and connected to neighborhoods." Also, because an EBP model expects staff to develop a much more in depth relationship with clients/offenders, which requires more training and more supervisor interaction with officers including discussing case management options, staff perceived supervisory relationships and the organizational as a whole to be less "top down." Moreover, the EBP approach causes staff to think and employ the knowledge in discretionary decisions and engage in a more balanced approach between enforcement and treatment.

While appreciative of the many positive aspects of EBP, we would be remiss if we did not emphasize that staff perceived that with all the organizational change and added job functions beyond primary job functions associated with EBP, they were maximized in the job responsibilities. Overwhelmingly, supervisors felt that at current span of control ratios, they already have workload issues with current responsibilities and workload driven by administrative and HR issues (employee disciplinary, grievances, investigations). They voiced a passionate belief that a larger span of control would absolutely have

negative ramifications because of less supervisory support, oversight and accountability. This sentiment was shared with other focus group participants beyond Iowa as well.

## Conclusions and Considerations regarding the Impact of Span of Control on Probation and Parole Practices within an Evidence Based Practices Environment

The level of task complexity and dynamic nature of probation and parole workforce positions within an EBP environment is evident from the findings presented in the prior sections. Jurisdictions are already expecting both supervisors and line staff to do more with less during a period of significant change in practice, which has coincided with an economic downturn. Many staff demonstrated clear signs of concern, stress and initial signs of job burnout as a result of their workload and level of organizational change. On the positive side, the impact of EBP implementation within the State of Iowa has already resulted in reductions in recidivism with an anticipation of long term sustainable effects at the current level. Additional reductions in recidivism may also be obtainable as EBP becomes more ingrained in the jurisdictions; however, a significant change in staffing patterns or organizational structure that places the efficacy of evidence based practices at risk threatens these current advancements.

In examining the roles and responsibilities of current supervisory positions, the key components related to EBP appear to be overwhelmed by the traditional monitoring activities and other associated administrative tasks. Interviews indicated that line staff desired a higher level of direct involvement with their supervisors, but without “micro management.” Similarly, supervisors desired high levels of contact with their staff that went beyond “putting out fires.” In consideration of the multitude of variables, to increase the number of staff for whom a supervisor had direct supervision responsibilities would serve to exacerbate the gap between ideal EBP implementation and sustainable architecture and that which is achieved under such conditions. Even within the current organizational structure, consideration should be given to further evolving the supervisory role such that it would allow for an increased focus on support rather than minimal oversight and control. Specifically, an organization structure would allow for:

1. Retention of (and ideally increasing) the supervisory “hands on” role and amount of supervisory contact with his or her team members. Increased contact would promote necessary mentoring, coaching and training components required by effective implementation of evidence based practices.

As Lucas and colleagues (2008) concluded, “even managers with strong emotional intelligence may not be able to empower their staff if their span of control is large....every effort must be made to ensure that managers have reasonable spans of control that allow them to develop and use the leadership skills necessary for empowering their staff to practice to the full scope of their professional role” (p. 964).

2. Reduction of the administrative complexities of supervisory positions, specifically the performance evaluations (quality assurance audits) of line staff and investigative responsibilities. In turn, such a reduction would allow for greater concentration on case management activities with line staff and client contact activities.

A key aspect to reducing client recidivism is effective implementation of evidence based practices that are related to a reduction in recidivism such as appropriate risk/needs assessments, effective client interviewing and client interactions, identification of appropriate resources for clients and so forth. Supervisory assistance with the line staff-client relationship, such as mentoring activities with staff and monitoring of techniques implemented, are critical components to ensuring effective EBP implementation; yet, this position responsibility is insufficiently fulfilled due to other mandated administrative activities. Priority must be given to the supervisor's ability to be hands on with their team.

Possible alternatives to accomplishing an increased focus on hands-on activities with a reduction in monitoring-style activities would be to reorganize staffing structures such that a position or positions outside of the supervisor realm existed to focus on officer/file quality assurance audits and performance review. A position similar to the Executive officer position might be a good model. The focus of this position would be to act in a quality assurance manner advising line staff of gaps in EBP activities, advise supervisors of EBP inconsistencies within their units as well as provide jurisdictional (in the case of Iowa District level) review and support of efficacy to EBP principles. This position could also be utilized for specifically assessing, or providing oversight of coding of motivational interviewing tapes that were based on client-officer interactions which would be completed by external sources. In other words, the goal of this position is to assist with measuring adherence to EBP principles and bolstering efforts within the jurisdiction through ongoing feedback, trainings or other appropriate mechanisms. The intent of this position would be a support role for assisting line staff in EBP efforts through feedback provision in a positive manner. An investment in upholding and advancing the EBP mission would have significant long term benefit through both the reduction in client recidivism as well as retention of a skilled workforce. A similar case could be made for removing investigative responsibilities from supervisors and solidify that responsibility in a singular position.

3. Consideration of variability with positions that requires differing spans of control/support.

A key task complexity for the line officer results from the variable clientele on their caseload. While some officers hold larger general probation caseloads, others held moderate sized, specialized caseloads (i.e., sex offenders or domestic batterers). Still others had a mixed caseload. In examining the supervisors of these units, they also had variability in staff they supervised. Some supervisors only had officers with a specialized caseload, but many supervised officers with a variety of caseloads (i.e., some with specialized caseloads, others with general probation caseloads). Parallel to variability in the size of line staff caseloads, administration and legislators should remain open to the recognition that the span of control/support should also be tempered with similar variability. In other words, supervisor

responsibilities may become more complex when they are supporting officers with specialized caseloads and/or a greater number of officers who each have different types of caseloads.

#### 4. Recognition of generalized and direct supervision responsibilities

The legislative discussion heretofore has focused on a reduction of supervisory staff positions through a modification of the supervisory to line staff ratio. An important consideration is that two types of supervision occurs and ratio modification would greatly impact both types of supervision. Formally, supervisors are responsible for the direct supervision of a specified group of probation and/or parole officers. As noted in the literature and in practice, span of control refers only to “direct reports.”<sup>16</sup> This research found a number of instances in which line staff suggested that if their own supervisor was out sick or otherwise unavailable, they would simply contact another supervisor. This scenario is a prime example of generalized authority or generalized supervision responsibilities. Thus, it is important to recognize that as the direct supervision ratio increases, the generalized supervision responsibility grows exponentially as well.

5. An unsuitable span of control could significantly impact client recidivism rates, officer job satisfaction, officer job turnover, supervisor job satisfaction, supervisor job turnover and efficiency of departmental operations.

Research within probation and parole regarding psychosocial – workplace functioning variables heretofore has not considered the predictive ability of span of control. In other employment realms such as nursing, preliminary studies such as Lee and Cummings (2008)<sup>17</sup> found “job satisfaction of front line managers may be improved by addressing span of control and workload, increasing organizational support from supervisors and empowering managers to participate in decision making.” Within substance abuse treatment counselors, Knudsen and colleagues (2008) found that the quality of supervision the counselors received significantly affected their perceptions of job autonomy, procedural justice, and distributive justice, which in turn are associated with emotional exhaustion and turnover intention. While this research is not within the field of corrections, it is not unreasonable to assume that similar effects would exist. Thus, the importance of providing a span of control that is manageable to maintain support and high quality supervision of line staff can not be underestimated.

#### **Conclusion.**

Evidence based practices demand a high level of collaborative decision making and leadership, focusing on effective caseload management based on quality risk and needs assessments followed by supervision and treatment plans that will lead to better public safety outcomes. Probation officers today require significant knowledge, skills and abilities for them to be successful, but they also demand and require

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<sup>16</sup> Murray, K. (2009). Optimizing span of control; implementing adjunct care programs. *Nursing Management*, 40(7), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Lee, H., & Cummings, G.G. (2008). Factors influencing job satisfaction of front line nurse managers: A systematic review. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 16, 768-783.

direct interaction with their supervisors to provide them with the support, coaching, mentoring, level of communication, and collaboration necessary to lead them to successful decision-making. If systems or organizations have undue constraints imposed upon them, they will begin to struggle and oftentimes revert to basic survival modes. Within community corrections, the most basic requirement for the probation officer and the supervisor are merely to focus on simple surveillance and reporting activities which we know can lead to limited changes in offender behavior, higher recidivism rates, and a decrease in public safety.

To reiterate, working with human beings, especially offenders, to change their behavior is always a time-consuming process. Supervisors who cannot model such techniques with their staff because they are “stretched too thin” cannot in turn expect their officers to model such behavior with their correctional clients. In the process, the potential of Evidence-Based Practices will be squandered. The short term financial gains reaped by expanding supervisory spans of control will inevitably result in medium and long term increases in recidivism, victimization, and the rate of crime, with all the increased costs that follow in their wake.