


# Building accountability and client–officer relationships through videoconferencing: Exploring best practices for community corrections

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced community corrections agencies worldwide to use remote technologies to prevent the spread of the virus. A growing body of the literature suggests that video-conferencing is poised to be a core practice within community correctional settings. However, little is known about the best practice strategies for incorporating videoconferencing into routine supervision. We address this gap by interviewing and conducting focus groups with a sample of community correction officers from the US ( $N = 16$ ). We identified the presence of the law enforcement—social work dichotomy in remote settings, reflected in challenges and opportunities when holding clients accountable and establishing client–officer relationships. Our findings show that officers relying on evidence-based practices (EBPs) were able to use videoconferencing tools to overcome remote challenges. We suggest that establishing in-person relationships, adapting EBP, and taking care of logistics are critical steps to strengthen remote accountability and client–officer relationships. We conclude by discussing future research areas.

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## Keywords

Accountability, rapport, community corrections, remote supervision, client/officer relationships, videoconferencing

## Introduction

The occurrence of COVID-19 in 2020 forced criminal justice institutions to take measures to prevent the spread of the virus between criminal justice practitioners and justice-involved individuals. These measures include an array of strategies such as releasing individuals from prisons and jails, establishing health care protocols, and implementing remote technologies to conduct court hearings or allow videoconferencing contact for people under community supervision. To date, most of the research has focused on the measures adopted by the criminal justice system and the impact of the pandemic on crime rates (e.g., [Lockwood et al., 2021](#); [Nivette et al., 2021](#); [Novisky et al., 2020](#); [Piquero et al., 2021](#)).

The implementation of remote technologies to conduct videoconferencing contact provides a unique opportunity to explore how probation and parole officers interact with their clients and employ evidence-based practices (EBPs) in online settings. The implementation of remote supervision in community setting differs from other contingency strategies such as the release of incarcerated individuals or the application of health care protocols that target specific problems like overcrowding or the lack of social distance in prisons and courts. As [Schwalbe and Koetzle \(2021\)](#) espouse, the use of videoconferencing could go beyond the pandemic and be integrated as a strategy into a comprehensive community correction reform.

In this article, we explore the challenges and opportunities remote supervision poses for community correction officers who seek to hold individuals accountable and build meaningful relationships with their clients in online settings. Our main goal is to develop a set of best practices based on the experiences of community correction officers working with clients in online settings. In the next section, we begin by reviewing the existing research focused on the impact of the pandemic on community correction settings. Next, we will describe the goal of this study along with our methods and sample. Then, we will describe our findings including the challenges, opportunities, and recommendations provided by community correction officers to successfully implement remote supervision as a core practice. We conclude by discussing the limitations of the study and future research areas.

## COVID-19: Triggering the use of remote contact and videoconferencing

An emergent body of the literature has examined the use of videoconferencing and remote technologies in community correctional settings. A common finding among these studies is that COVID-19 led to an increased use of videoconferencing and remote technologies by community correction agencies. The use of videoconferencing and remote supervision

has increased across the US (Koetzle and Schwalbe, 2020; Powell et al., 2022), Latin America (Galleguillos et al., 2022), Asia (Nunphong et al., 2022), and Europe (Stempkowski and Grafl, 2021; Sturm et al., 2021) with findings consistently indicating a shift in the use of remote technologies compared to pre-pandemic contacts which largely relied on in-person contact.

Despite the consistent findings regarding the use of remote technologies, the methods and ways that agencies used these technologies varied across jurisdictions worldwide. For instance, the use of videoconferencing, including via Skype or Zoom, was banned for community correction agencies in France and Scotland based on security concerns (Herzog-Evans and Sturgeon, 2022b). Though the increased use of remote supervision appears ubiquitous, regulations vary across jurisdictions indicating the need to address the specific agency context when exploring the use of remote contact and community supervision.

Importantly, there is evidence to suggest that the use of remote technologies for remote supervision is likely to endure. Community corrections officers view videoconferencing as a useful tool to help clients to succeed (Martin and Zettler, 2022) with indications they would like to continue using remote supervision following the pandemic (Powell et al., 2022). As many jurisdictions relax COVID-19 restrictions, advocates call for the permanent inclusion of remote technologies as a core community corrections practice with a focus on combining in-person with remote contact. Sturm et al. (2021) advance a “blended approach” including in-person contact and remote contact for administrative issues and late stages of the supervision. However, the continued use of remote technologies should consider geographical and socioeconomic contexts when setting policy and distributing the agency resources (Galleguillos et al., 2022). Maintaining the use of remote supervision demands a full comprehension of the benefits and challenges posed by this form of contact to community correction agencies, officers, and clients.

### *Remote supervision: Benefits and challenges in community correction settings*

One of the most common advantages of remote technology identified by community corrections officers is flexibility. This flexibility includes benefits such as shorter commuting times (Stempkowski and Grafl, 2021; Sturm et al., 2021) and fewer interruptions to the clients’ daily routines (Dominey et al., 2021; Lockwood et al., 2021; Sturm et al., 2021). This advantage is considered especially beneficial for clients living distant from community correction agencies (Lockwood et al., 2021; Galleguillos et al., 2022). Additionally, community correction officers highlight that remote contacts create a more relaxed environment to talk without having the formalities of in-person interactions (Casey et al., 2021).

However, community correction officers also identify several challenges when implementing and using remote technologies to interact with their clients, including the lack of direct contact, challenges in establishing rapport, and difficulties in holding people accountable. For instance, community corrections officers report that the lack of personal contact is one of the main concerns when interacting with their clients. After surveying

probation officers on how remote supervision changed their daily work, [Stempkowski and Grafi \(2021\)](#) concluded:

“The lack of personal contact both with clients and colleagues was mentioned most often as a negative experience. Without these important elements, an essential part of their job as a social worker was missing” (p. 454).

The lack of personal contact may also reflect a sense of isolation, particularly felt during the early stages of the pandemic. [Herzog-Evans and Sturgeon \(2022a\)](#) found that community corrections officers particularly valued managers who employed communication skills to help to navigate the isolation provoked in the early stages of the pandemic. Likewise, research exploring the use of telephone contacts found that officers missed sensorial elements of communication such as their sense of smell while talking to clients ([Dominey et al., 2021](#)).

Community corrections officers also have noted difficulties when building relationships with their clients in remote settings. Community corrections officers consider remote interaction less effective compared to in-person contact ([Powell et al., 2022](#)), especially when supervising complex clients ([Sturm et al., 2021](#)). At the same time, community correction agencies highlight that the main challenge is holding clients accountable for their actions in remote settings ([Viglione et al., 2020](#)). In a qualitative study interviewing juvenile probation directors, [Lockwood et al. \(2021\)](#) found that the most salient problem was “the inability to hold youth accountable and respond to behavior and noncompliance” (p. 13). Reasons for the lack of accountability were reported to be myriad, including a rise in behavioral problems and delayed/limited court sanctions toward violations ([Lockwood et al., 2021](#); [Viglione et al., 2020](#)).

Finally, community correction officers highlight problems related to logistics and the necessary equipment to conduct remote contacts, particularly as it relates to videoconferencing. Studies reveal that the lack of adequate equipment is a challenge experienced by both clients and agencies that do not have the resources to conduct videoconferencing ([Martin and Zettler, 2022](#); [Lockwood et al., 2021](#)). This may be particularly problematic for older clients or those living in more remote areas with limited or poor internet access ([Galleguillos et al., 2022](#); [Lockwood et al., 2021](#)).

## Current study

The existing research makes clear that despite the challenges with remote supervision, the use of videoconferencing is poised to be a core practice within community correctional settings. Research is needed to establish best practice strategies for incorporating videoconferencing into routine supervision. The aim of this qualitative study is to develop a set of best practice guidelines for the use of videoconferencing in community supervision settings. The study leverages the experience of officers who were forced to adopt this technology as an adaptive response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We expected that the experience of officers would highlight both challenges associated with this technology, as

well as lessons learned about how videoconferencing can sustain, and potentially enhance, the experience of people who are supervised in community corrections programs.

## Data and methods

### Context

The context for this study was the system of community corrections in the United States, inclusive of officers who provided probation supervision as well as those who provided post-release parole supervision to either adults or to adolescents. Although mass incarceration in the U.S. receives a justifiable level of attention in media and scholarship, the majority of people under correctional control in the U.S. are under the supervision of probation and parole programs (4 million vs 1.2 million people in 2020; [Kaeble, 2021](#); [Carson, 2021](#)). Probation and parole supervision in the U.S. is decentralized and characterized most strongly by cross-jurisdictional diversity. In some states, probation and parole officers have arrest powers and carry weapons as a routine part of their jobs ([Small and Torres, 2001](#)). Some community corrections agencies emphasize rehabilitation and behavior change through the use of psychosocial interventions in their routine practices, in addition to their surveillance and sanctioning functions ([Smith et al., 2012](#)). Specialized supervision programs have been developed to address specific problems or challenges (e.g., intensive supervision for high-risk or serious offenders, mental health caseloads for people with serious mental illnesses; [Brooker et al., 2020](#); [Hyatt and Barnes, 2017](#)), whereas the majority of people on probation and parole are monitored and served in general caseloads. The common thread running throughout these diverse agencies and jurisdictions is reporting, that is, the person on probation or parole is obligated to present themselves to the probation or parole agent on some defined frequency.

### Sample

The sample for this study was drawn from a national pool of probation and parole officers who earlier completed a survey of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on community corrections in the US (see [Schwalbe and Koetzle, 2021](#)). Of 1054 survey participants, 520 agreed to be recontacted and provided their email addresses. We limited the eligibility of this study to officers who had an active caseload of either adolescents or adults on probation or parole and who indicated that they used videoconferencing to meet with clients either before or during the pandemic. We sent email invitations in three batches of 100–150 randomly selected officers from this pool for a total of 400 invitations. A total of 35 emails bounced back as “undeliverable.” Invitations included a link to an online screening survey. A total of 64 officers entered the screening survey; 45 completed the survey to the end indicating that they were eligible for the study. At that point, prospective participants who passed through screening were directed to an automated scheduler to select from among a list of possible focus group dates. Twenty-six officers scheduled an appointment; a total of sixteen officers participated in either one of four focus groups ( $n = 12$ ) or in an individual interview ( $n = 4$ ). Participants included ten female-identified

officers (62%) and twelve white-identified officers (75%). Fourteen participants supervised probationers and reported having either probation-only caseloads ( $n = 9$ ) or mixed probation–parole caseloads ( $n = 5$ ).<sup>1</sup> Sixty-two percent of the participants had more than 9 years of experience ( $n = 10$ ). Using demographic data contained in the subject pool, we compared the characteristics of participants and non-participants; no significant differences were indicated. Participants received a nominal gift card (US\$10) to a large US online retailer as compensation for their participation.

### *Procedures*

Focus groups and interviews were conducted on Zoom between January 2021 and April 2021, approximately 9–12 months after initial pandemic-related lockdowns. We developed a semi-structured interview guide to conduct this study that was previously approved by John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Columbia University IRB procedures. After a warm-up conversation about remote supervision, we presented participants with a list of seven “immediate objectives of supervision” that officers seek to achieve when meeting with clients: (1) establish strong officer–client relationships; (2) motivate clients; (3) enhance social support; (4) hold clients accountable; (5) assess needs, refer, monitor programs, and services; (6) teach problem solving and pro-social skills; (7) challenge criminogenic attitudes and beliefs. By consensus, participants selected one as the topic of discussion. Then, participants were asked to: “think about a time when you were working with a client to [insert chosen immediate objective] during a video conference call. What were the specific strategies you used?” We solicited details about the client and about the sequence of events that were described in the client vignettes. Participants were invited to discuss the ways in which the videoconference format was helpful or unhelpful, and then to compare and contrast their stories with those of fellow focus group participants. We closed the interviews with a discussion of recommendations for using videoconferencing in community corrections. Focus groups lasted for approximately 90 min; individual interviews lasted approximately 60 min. Focus groups and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate data analysis.

During the course of data analysis, it became clear that there were unanswered questions involving three emergent themes, including the potential dehumanizing effect of videoconferencing, challenges with the use of videoconferencing for intake interviews, and that videoconferencing may not be for everyone. To address these questions, we invited all participants to join follow-up focus groups for the purpose of elaborating on these themes and affirming the study’s preliminary findings. Five officers participated in four follow-up focus groups and interviews. To promote the participation at this stage, we raised the original incentive from \$10 to \$20 with the aim of recruiting as many participants as possible.

### *Analysis*

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we adopted a grounded theory approach relying on the data provided by the participants (Creswell, 2007). We coded the transcripts

through two steps. First, two authors coded separately the transcripts through open and axial coding using NVivo software. After discussing the coding schemes, we elaborated a codebook defining the main themes identified and discussing the stories shared by our participants that reflect the nuances and complexities of building accountability and establishing strong client–officer relationships.

### *Reflexivity*

The researchers are two university-based professors and one doctoral student. None have direct experience in probation or parole. The first author has a background in criminal law and criminal justice studies. The second author has a background in social work, including positions in child welfare and child protection. The third author has a background in criminal justice and criminology. Individually and collectively, the research team studies evidence-based approaches to supervision, decision making, and correctional programming. Our perspective on evidence-based practices for community corrections is heavily influenced by the risk-need-responsivity framework (RNR), positing that rehabilitation and behavior change are promoted most effectively when legal decision-makers employ risk/need assessment, target higher risk individuals for service, focus their case planning efforts to address specific criminogenic needs, and use cognitive behavioral strategies and interventions matched to the learning styles of their justice-involved clients.

Most pertinent to this study, the team acknowledges a bias toward behavior change and evidence-based rehabilitative approaches to community corrections rather than approaches that emphasize surveillance, monitoring, and sanctioning. During the interviews, we mitigated this bias through a non-judgmental approach and by encouraging participants to share stories that featured punitive approaches, in addition to evidence-based approaches. In all phases of the study, we refrained from editorializing or making judgments. We do, however, return to this issue and reclaim our position in the discussion section of this manuscript.

### *Rigor*

In addition to reflexivity, the study incorporates three rigor strategies. Throughout the interview process, we used planned probes to solicit alternative or non-conforming stories and perspectives (negative case analysis). We employed investigator triangulation (Ravitch and Carl, 2019) in the data analysis process through the use of two independent coders (authors 1 and 2). Finally, we incorporated member checking into the follow-up focus groups as described above.

## **Results: Building accountability and client–officer relationships**

Table 1 presents a summary of the 17 client vignettes shared by participants. The majority, nine, address accountability as the priority theme reflecting the primary mandate of the community corrections officer role:

Well, there's a reason that we have our jobs and that we're supervising people that are on probation. And usually, it's because they failed to hold themselves accountable. And so it's fairly common for us to then have to hold our own clients accountable and to point out to them the ways that their behavior needs to change and to hopefully, help them learn how to make better choices, learn how to recognize that there are consequences to every action, which can be positive or negative (Participant 1).

These vignettes emphasize the importance of acknowledging rule violations, imposition of sanctions or consequence, and adoption of rule-conforming behaviors. In addition, the second most common priority theme was building relationship and rapport. These vignettes emphasized emotional connectedness

To me, it's [video conferencing] made it more intimate [...] It's brought a different dimension into what I'm looking at as far as my clients and their needs (Participant 14).

There's just something different and people sometimes I think might be willing to open up a little bit more because they're in their own comfort zone. They're in their home. They're not in their office. They're not hearing people walk by, clicking of handcuffs, all of those types of things so maybe they end up opening up more (Participant 16).

Importantly, accountability and relationship were not mutually exclusive categories. For example, it was not uncommon for accountability-focused vignettes to include elements of empathic listening and emotional connectedness:

I know where the things the triggers are and that important relationship building that kind of comes at the beginning of probation. When you don't have the opportunity to do that, this is the exact problem you have is you don't then get to hold them accountable (Participant 1).

Similarly, Participant 1 argues that trusting relationships helps to build accountability and vice versa:

I don't think that accountability factor can be without the relationship building (Participant 1).

At the end of the focus groups, we invited our participants to discuss the future of videoconferencing in a post-pandemic context. All participants expressed some measure of support despite frequently expressing a preference for in-person supervision:

I think that as we move back right into having more face to face visits and everything like that, I think that it's still a tool that we should and can use (Participant 11).

As far as the video conference being helpful, just nothing beats in-person (Participant 12).

The videoconferencing environment imposed specific challenges to officers in their efforts to hold clients accountable while establishing strong relationships with them. Nevertheless, client vignettes were rich with solutions and opportunities revealing that



**Table 1.** Participants and vignette themes.

Focus group/ interview	Group theme	#	Gender	Caseload	State	Vignette identifying information	Vignette problem	Vignette theme
1	Accountability	1	Female	Adult probation	IL	Adult, male, meth	Missed appointments, refuse urine drops, hang up call	Accountability
1	Accountability	1	Female	Adult probation	IL	Female, single mom, first felony	Struggling with employment, frustrated about conditions	Relationship
1	Accountability	2	Female	Adult probation	AZ	Adult, male, ISP	In unauthorized places	Accountability
1	Accountability	2	Female	Adult probation	AZ	2nd time on probation, DUI	Disagree with probation	Accountability
2	Accountability	3	Kenneth	Adult probation	KS	Male	Lying about employment	Accountability
2	Accountability	4	Male	Adolescent probation	VA	Adolescent, prior violations, violent felonies	Refused to sign forms	Accountability
2	Accountability	5	Female	Mixed probation, mostly adolescents	NY	Adolescent, eighth grade, male, ADHD	Skipping school	Accountability
3	Establish relationship	6	Male	Adolescent probation	IA	Adolescent, pick-up order, out of jurisdiction	Risk assessment and pre- disposition report	Relationship
3	Establish relationship	7	Male	Adult probation	TX	Female, drug court	Drug court session in which she felt "jumped"	Relationship
3	Establish relationship	8	Female	Adult probation and parole	MD	Male; adult; parole	Re-entry	Relationships
3	Establish relationship	9	Female	Adult probation and parole	MD	Adult, male, first time	Establishing comfort and rapport over video conferencing	Relationship

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Focus group/ interview	Group theme	#	Gender	Caseload	State	Vignette identifying information	Vignette problem	Vignette theme
3	Establish relationship	10	Female	—	MO	Adult, male, re-entry	Requesting a remote court hearing	Other
4	Establish relationship	11	Female	Adult probation and parole	OR	Parole, adult, male	Making arrangements for re-entry	Relationship
4	Establish relationship	12	Male	Mixed adult	PA	Male, long terms	Child in placement, probationer not attending counselling	Accountability
4	—	13 <sup>a</sup>	Male	—	VA	—	—	—
5	Establish relationship	14	Female	Adult probation	NY	Male	Upset about reporting	Relationship
6	Challenge criminogenic attitudes	15	Female	Juvenile probation	VA	Female, adolescent	Removal of electronic monitoring ankle bracelet	Accountability
7	Assessing needs	16	Female	Adult probation	OH	Male, drug court	Reluctant to engage services	Accountability

<sup>a</sup>This participant arrived late to the session, and he was an officer supervisor rather than a frontline officer with an active caseload. Therefore, we could not identify his main themes throughout the session. However, he shared his thoughts and participated in the focus group.

accountability and strong working relationships were possible even in the videoconferencing environment. In the next section, we will discuss the challenges and solutions elaborated by community correction officers to hold individuals accountable and establish strong client–officer relationships.

### *Accountability*

The videoconferencing environment created unique challenges to the objective of holding clients accountable. For example, several officers related stories about power struggles that can play out when meeting clients via videoconferencing. Some clients were reluctant to show themselves on camera, others acted out aggressively, while still others simply discontinued their calls.

And he [the probationer] said “Well, I still disagree. I shouldn’t be on probation.” And I reminded him that he had signed a plea agreement, which stipulated to probation, that he didn’t have to agree to be on probation. And at this point in the call, he moved his camera, or his phone, so it was facing the ceiling. And I told him that that was unacceptable, that he needed to have his phone so that it was facing him, because this is just like an office visit. And so he moved his phone back, at which time, he proceeded to pull vigorously on a vape and blow into the camera. And I told him that was also unacceptable, because he wouldn’t be permitted to vape in the office ... And he was not wanting to react well. I mean, he wasn’t wanting to engage. He didn’t want to accept any accountability and to the point where he got verbally very, very upset. And he ended up ending the call. And at that point, all I could do was write a violation report and let the State’s Attorney take it from there (Participant 2).

Holding individuals accountable can be a challenging task when officers have limited control of the environment in which they are meeting. These challenges are exacerbated because two tools ordinarily associated with the context of office visits were unavailable, including the opportunity to “talk down” agitated clients who were captive in the office and the direct threat of coercive sanctions and placements that is present in face-to-face interactions.

... because when he’s not there in front of me, to kind of calm him down, to kind of take that energy that he’s giving me and then reassure and tone down the situation, he’s just there by himself, getting worked up, getting upset. And that energy has nowhere to really go. There’s nothing there to help kind of tamp it down, so that you can get him to think straight (Participant 2).

If we were still meeting in person, that would mean that options such as detention were real options. My point in the story was to illustrate working virtually. In a video, this kid has exhausted all escalated forms of supervision that I would normally use and found that there’s no punishment at the end of it, so why bother listening to me? (Participant 4)

Despite these challenges, officers also shared examples in which they successfully promoted behavior change, led clients to acknowledge their rule violations, and imposed

consequences. In some instances, officers' interventions were facilitated by relying on evidence-based practices, whereas in other scenarios accountability was facilitated through the creative use of increased surveillance made possible by the virtual environment.

To illustrate, one participant described an encounter with an adolescent client on probation that involved the use of family-based interventions, risk and needs assessment, and graduated sanctions, to respond to on-going truancy. In this story, the officer confronted the adolescent, who was asleep, with the help of the child's step-father. The step-father took the smart phone on which he was communicating with the probation officer into the adolescent's bedroom so that the officer could directly respond to the adolescent's truant behavior. After waking the adolescent, the officer utilized the tools of the agency's risk and needs assessment to address his truancy:

What originally started out as him being somewhat scared about the fact that I caught him sleeping when he should have been in school turned into a little bit of a nonchalant attitude, because then he realized he was in trouble, to then turning it into a little bit more of a teaching moment for him, of okay, this is why, and asking him to be honest with me. I don't care if I'm not going to like the reason, why it is that you're doing it, but I need to have a reason why you're doing what you're doing. Then being able to utilize that YASI assessment [agency risk assessment] for him to see the wheel, see what his needs happened to be, talk about his protective factors and really get into, "Your step-dad cares enough about you that he wants you to do well in school" (Participant 5).

Participant 5 agreed with her client to write an apology letter to his stepdad for wasting his time while trying to get him to school. At the same time, Participant 5 also planned a family meeting where her client apologized to his entire family. This officer explained her remote response was successful because it combined family support and graduated responses:

Utilizing that support in the house, and then being able to... we have graduated grid responses as well in our department, and so when we talk about low-level responses, moderate responses, or high-level responses. For him it was a little bit more of a moderate response because it was something that was ongoing on a regular basis. It was something that happened over a period of time, so we were able to go through and look at that and say to him, "Okay, you had been doing really well. Here's the positive parts of the stuff that you're doing, but here's how we're going to try to keep holding you accountable." Then sitting down and having the step-dad write things out with me, on how it was that he was going to have to be able to change some things in the household and also try to get Mom on board, because I feel like Mom was kind of the stabilizer for him of why it was okay for him to continue doing what he was doing (Participant 5).

This story reveals how the use of graduated responses and interpersonal strategies to communicate can help to hold a client accountable, especially to make him understand why he engaged in a wrong behavior. At the same time, this story reveals that

accountability can be achieved through both surveillance expansion—observing that the client is sleeping behind the camera—and the use of evidenced-best practices in response to incidents.

In this story and others, the possibility of increased surveillance became central to the task of holding clients accountable. Whereas many referred to the use of evidence-based practices such as the proceeding, others described how they used increased surveillance to expand the potency of their interrogations to reveal client lies, as in the following example:

I have a gentleman who, from the very get-go, has been lying to me. Lied to me, his parole officer, his other probation officer, and the courts. While talking to him via Zoom, back when I first got him, he kept trying to avoid my question about where he worked. Because he was claiming that he was employed, which was why [he] had a downward departure from prison to probation. He kept trying to deny the fact that he wasn't working when I was asking him about where he was working. He kept telling me, "I'm working at such-and-such, still working at such and-such." "How long have you worked there?" And of course, that's more the law enforcement part of me, asking questions that I already know the answer to, just to give them more rope. He kept trying to avoid, and be like, "What?" That was his reaction, was "Huh? I can't hear you (Participant 3).

This case shows a lack of the clients' accountability by lying to community correction officers and making up excuses. Likewise, this story reveals the presence of the power struggles described in the prior section when the client tried to avoid the conversation saying he/she could not hear well. Next, Participant 3 explains how he ended up holding this client accountable using videoconferencing resources:

He kept wanting to do it over and over again until I was willing to video conference in the employer. I had already talked to the [alleged] employer beforehand. They were ready and waiting if needed, and then he finally admitted that he's been lying to all of us (Participant 3).

Thus, this officer used videoconferencing resources to facilitate the acknowledgment of a lie and overcome the excuses made up by the client.

## *Relationships*

Many focus group and interview participants lamented the lack of in-person interactions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and its apparent impact on client–officer relationships. The idea that online relationships were “dehumanizing” was a common theme endorsed by many officers:

Yeah, I think it's almost dehumanizing in a sense, doing it through a screen. It's not like you're face to face with a real person. So I think that that human interaction plays a significant role in, especially like you all are talking about, that first visit, setting the tone and being able to feel a personal connection. It feels very disconnected when it's through a screen (Participant 7).

At the same time, other participants felt that “something was missing,” as in:

[Referring to another officer’s name] raised a good point. Yeah. It’s a lot easier to build a relationship when you’re sitting with each other, sharing in a personal conversation, and not through the media. I would say, for me, the problem solving, prosocial skills in my meetings over Zoom and even FaceTime, it just doesn’t ... How do I put ... It feels not inhuman, but it’s just so vanilla. Yeah. I almost feel rushed to be done with it, where it’s been a lot easier when I can have them at my desk. They can see that I’m a human being. So, I mean, just it feels robotic (Participant 12).

Interestingly, although widely endorsing the limitations on emotional connectedness arising from the videoconferencing context, officers struggled to specify what it was in their experience that interfered with the relationship-building process. We specifically probed participants in the member checking focus groups and interviews for the ways in which the videoconferencing environment can be “dehumanizing,” yet they were unable to identify the specific contours of how videoconferencing had its negative effect on officer–client relationship quality.

On the other hand, several officers described instances in which intimate, revealing exchanges took place while meeting clients via video. Three themes run through these stories. The first theme is talking about feelings and expressing emotions:

That’s what I have found, that it’s deepened my relationship with my probationers. They’ve told me more, they’ve expressed more feelings (Participant 14).

So as we talked, it really softened her mood a little bit to the point of where we were able to have better dialogue and more fully address the situation. What ended up resulting was she was feeling very unheard in the court, and so by me asking some of the questions and her being able to explain her view point gave her that opportunity to feel more heard with what was going on (Participant 7).

A second theme is the visual information that is available during videoconferencing, a theme that we termed the “window of intimacy.” In a way, the videoconferencing format enabled officers to observe aspects of the private lives of their clients that were not typically available for an office-based reporting structure. The window of intimacy made possible through videoconferencing became an opportunity for officers to build rapport and deepen relationships with their clients. For example, a participant narrated the struggles she faced while communicating with a client. However, she was able to connect and empathize with her client’s situation after observing her struggling with her kids through the camera:

She was just really struggling with a lot of things that were going on in her life. And she got really angry on the phone, just because she was so frustrated. And she kept coming back with, “Well, it’s not fair that I have to do this. And it’s not fair that I can’t do that.” She was just really getting tired of having so many things thrown at her because of this mistake that she

made. And when we were talking, her kids are running around in the back, and I think that was agitating her, because she was trying to just have this appointment with her PO. And her kids are wanting stuff. And it's single mom stuff. And I've been there, so I could really emphasize with it" (Participant 1).

This story shows how the information contained in the clients' background provided a window for the officer to shift an interaction marked by frustration and complaints to a conversation based on understanding and empathy. Most importantly, Participant 1 engaged in a deeper connection with her client using her own experience as a single mom:

I said, "But why are you doing it? Why do you still keep going to that part-time job that you hate? Why do you still accept help from your mom? Why do you still keep in contact with me? Because the fact that you're getting on the phone with me and that you're talking to me, and yeah, I can see the kids running around your house, and I can see that you're frazzled, but you called. You joined the call. You're here." I said, "Yes, you made a bad choice, but now, you're making good ones. Now, you're taking steps forward." I said, "Why do you do all that?" And she just said, "I love my kids." I said, "Okay." I said, "And I've been there. I've been in that single mom spot, where you don't have any help, where you're trying to put kids through school, where you're trying to just get to your job and do what you need to do, so you can get home and help them with homework and cook dinner and try to get a little time for yourself around 11:00 p.m., to get up at 5:00 to do it all over again. I've been there. But you know you're doing it for the right reason. You're doing it for your kids" (Participant 1).

A third theme emerging from the focus group and interview participants is the comfort that clients felt meeting with officers from their personal environments. Officers surmised that clients felt more comfortable with them, and perhaps were more willing to share revealing information, because the imminent threat of arrest or other coercive sanction associated with the formality of office-based reporting was not immediately apparent in the videoconferencing environment. The result was to shift the power balance between officers and clients away from a focus on officers' coercive power and toward the interpersonal processes that underlie relationship building. For instance, one participant mentioned:

Um, we, we are definitely having the opportunity to get, um, insight into our clients' environments, where, where they're living. Um, when we do it, we do ask, they don't put a fake background up. We wanna see what's going on in the house. We wanna see your apartment wherever they're they're at. Um, we also, they are more comfortable. They are definitely freer with some of the information that they provide to us because they're in their normal, they don't feel, um, as, as threatened. Um, I also agree with, we're able to do that in a safer manner (Participant 1).

By removing the thread of arrest or detention, some clients seemed freer and more open in their conversations with officers.

And some of them like the more impersonal setting where they're not in the adversarial setting in your office sitting right in front of you. It's more like a conversation this way. Especially since we're working from home and they can see a background of either a wall or a window or a sheet or something back in the back. They don't see the office setting and all of the people (Participant 10).

Similarly, our participants highlighted that their clients are more open because they are interacting in their comfort zone. In this vein, some participants noted that some clients, especially youth, are more familiar with the video calls:

The video call [is] similar to them getting on Snapchat with their friends (Participant 4).

### *Strengthening remote accountability and client–officer relationships: Key steps*

In addition to the lessons taken from the client vignettes, we invited officers to share their thoughts and advice for the use of videoconferencing in community corrections. Three themes emerged from these discussions: taking care of logistics, setting minimum decorum standards, and relying on prior relationships.

*Taking care of logistics.* The videoconferencing platform creates mundane technical challenges that can interfere with accountability-related tasks and relational tasks. Our participants described the challenge of maintaining connectivity with some of their clients:

I'm in a rural community so our connections aren't always great. Their connections aren't always great. Some people have to walk two or three blocks to be able to get a connection or they have to wait until they're at Wifi because they don't have enough data on their phones. There's just a lot of technical issues that have to be dealt with (Participant 16).

We were doing it over FaceTime and we started to have a lot of connection issues, which was very frustrating because he would start to open up and he would give me some information and we'd get through some things, and then it would start breaking up and we'd have to hang up and call back and try again (Participant 6).

Likewise, community corrections officers also described their efforts to prepare clients and educate them about how to engage using videoconferencing.

Well, I made several phone calls to him on the days leading up to it to make sure he remembered the [court] hearing, that he had talked to the place where he was at to make sure they would have the computer access for him to get on. We also did a practice run the day before to make sure that he had the connection, I had the connection, and that we could see and hear each other okay (Participant 10).

Yeah, I did set up... One of the moms was real nervous because she had not used a video conferencing before. So she was really nervous about the court hearing and that she wasn't



going to make it or it wasn't going to work. So we did set up the day before just between us. We were on there [for only] two minutes, but it made her feel more comfortable (Participant 6).

Thus, preparing clients and addressing logistical issues help to create a more comfortable atmosphere to communicate and build stronger bonds.

*Setting minimum standards: Decorum.* Given the comfort experienced by clients when interacting in their own settings, formality became a negotiated issue. Officers learned that they needed to address several issues with clients such as decorum. For example:

we had one guy get up one time in the middle of the thing, holding his phone in his hand, gets up, grabs a sandwich and is just walking around the house eating a sandwich while we're in the middle of a court session! (Participant 7).

Similarly, decorum problems come up when clients connect from public spaces where their own privacy could be affected

Because sometimes I've met with kids and he was walking around the mall with his friends. So we had to have a conversation about, "This is still a probation meeting. It's private. I'm going to talk about your private stuff. You need to be in a secluded area" (Participant 6).

Finally, officers provide guidance regarding the use of clothing and the relevance of establishing visual contact.

[the clients]... have to wear clothes, have to wear shirts and pants, have to have appropriate backgrounds (Participant 10).

I think best practice principles is from time to time making them show their faces. That's important to test their engagement I think, make sure that they are participating (Participant 15).

Generally, officers not only addressed matters of decorum on the spot when they emerged but also endorsed setting out guidelines at the beginning of the relationship so that there were fewer surprises.

*Establishing in-person relationships.* Our participants agreed that having a prior client-officer relationship is a key element to conduct successful remote contacts. The existence of a prior officer-client relationship facilitates further remote interaction because the previous face-to-face interactions helped to build a minimum degree of accountability

I think that you know, be able to, to sit with somebody you sign paperwork, ask specific questions ask follow up questions. It's just a more organic conversation. I think that there's also a different level of accountability. Like when you meet with somebody and, you know, you're, you're signing the conditions of super supervision. I just, it, it is a little bit different, (Participant 11)

and to establish rapport:

there is certainly a different interaction with those people [i.e., people who only experienced remote supervision] than the people who say I've had on my caseload for quite a while, who prior to the video supervision, I was able to spend time with them and get that kind of vibe in the room (Participant 1).

In general, officers agreed that videoconferencing was best used after developing rapport through an in-person intake process. For instance, Participant 9 shared the need to get to know the client before starting to use videoconferencing:

My thing is that, for the video conferencing for me, I think the initial is very unhelpful.

Because I think to really get to know the person and to really get to get him to really open up, you need to be face to face. Even if there is a plexiglass between you two (Participant 9).

This quote suggests that building rapport in-person is a crucial step to perform remote interactions later on.

## Discussion

This study was conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, where prior research indicated that a dramatic expansion of videoconferencing was a critical adaptation to routine practice in community corrections settings. The purpose of this study was to explore what probation and parole officers learned about the use of videoconferencing during this period with the aim of establishing a set of best practice principles for remote meetings with clients.

Perhaps the most significant finding is the durability of the law enforcement—social work dichotomy that characterizes community corrections practice (e.g., [Klockars, 1972](#); [Skeem and Manchak, 2008](#)) here represented in the themes of accountability and relationship. While individual officers may vary to the extent that they emphasize one or the other, it is clear that many officers sought innovative strategies to blend both client accountability and close relationships over the video context despite pandemic-related barriers and challenges. This was no easy feat. Officers frequently lamented the lack of coercive tools available to hold clients accountable and the effects of computer-filtered communication that shifted power dynamics in the officer–client relationship and conspired to make relationship building more difficult. Nevertheless, planning and serendipity led some officers to discover that videoconferencing had impacts that led to novel, and occasionally more effective, approaches to sustaining accountability and building officer–client relationships.

Our results show that videoconferencing enabled officers to integrate their accountability-based and relational interventions more directly into clients' typical environments. In some instances, officers were able to directly observe and respond to client rule-breaking, taking advantage of the surveillance expansion provided by the camera. In

the absence of more readily available coercive interventions such as arrest and detention, several officers offered elegant examples of the use of behavioral strategies based in evidence-based practices. Moreover, the combination of visual contact with the reduced threat of immediate negative sanctions appeared to contribute to surprising levels of intimacy in the client–officer relationship, at least in the stories told by some officers reflected in our theme *window of intimacy*. The evidence suggests that for community corrections, like in medicine and mental health, many of the routine functions of client supervision and management can be feasibly conducted through videoconferencing.

The opportunities to build accountability and strong relationships do not eliminate the very real relational and practical challenges that officers described in our themes about logistic problems and power struggles. Sharing legal documents and obtaining client signatures was a common difficulty. Officers also described the video-specific ways that clients resist and sometimes act out aggressively over video. Connectivity was a common issue raised, along with the challenge of maintaining a sense of professionalism and formality. Officers often met these novel challenges through the use of interpersonal tactics and problem solving.

The promise and challenge of supervising clients via video point to a set of practice recommendations for a post-pandemic use of videoconferencing that should enable officers to retain the advantages of videoconferencing while minimizing its challenges. We identified three practical suggestions based on the officers' experiences including both successful and unsuccessful videoconferencing contacts.

First and foremost, where feasible, officers should establish rapport through face-to-face contact before initiating videoconferencing contact. Our participants reaffirmed this statement suggesting that intake activities should be completed in-person. This enables officers to complete mundane activities like sharing documents more efficiently along with establishing relationships with their clients, avoiding the dehumanization raised as a concern by many officers. Following initial contacts, video conferencing can be a selective choice for increasing the convenience of reporting for clients and more efficiently managing the dosage intensity of supervision, either to increase the dosage through supplemental contacts or to decrease the dosage by replacing in-person meetings with remote check-ins.

Second, it appears that most relational evidence-based strategies for behavior change can be adapted for video conferences. There do not appear to be any inherent obstacles to skill training, empathy, cognitive-behavioral interventions, nor the planning and imposition of graduated sanctions, when delivered over videoconferencing. Officers relying on best practices were able to develop strategies to hold clients accountable remotely. In contrast, officers relying on more punitive approaches understood accountability only as an additional challenge in their daily routines, without experimenting with new remote tools to exercise accountability. We argue that these intervention strategies may have greater ecological validity in some instances where video conferencing provides officers with a more detailed and nuanced window into the clients' lives.

Third, addressing logistical issues and setting minimum decorum standards for the use of videoconferencing at the outset are critical steps. This includes mundane issues such as ensuring that clients have internet connectivity and that they know how to use the videoconferencing tools favored by the agency. Taking care of logistics also includes

preparing clients to manage privacy concerns and to understand standards of formality in dress and behavior to which they expected to conform. Finally, minimum decorum standards refer to the need to negotiate formalities including talking in private spaces, wearing clothes, showing the face on the camera, and avoiding daily activities such as eating through the screen.

## **Limitations and future research**

This study presents two main limitations. The first limitation derives from our sampling plan described in our methods section. We strove to overcome this and other limitations through a diligent use of rigor strategies. Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine how our results would have been altered with the inclusion of other probation and parole officers. We sampled people who were specifically interested in the use of videoconferencing. Thus, most people were supporters (though many said that they did not start that way).

Given the exploratory nature of this study and limited number of participants, our study does not present a picture of the average practice using videoconferencing in the United States. Considering our goal was to advance the literature toward best practices using videoconferencing, we do not pretend to generalize the findings presented or measure the effectiveness of videoconferencing as a community correction tool.

Future research should focus on three areas. First, future studies should test our results, measuring the effectiveness of the best practices we propose in this study. Second, future research should address the impact of videoconferencing on key measures of corrections success, including effects on traditional outcomes like VOP, rearrest, as well as process outcomes like client/officer rapport. Finally, future studies should explore the experiences of clients under community supervision, including both struggles and benefits perceived from video supervision.

## **Conclusion**

As of this writing, anecdotal evidence indicates that many service systems have returned to in-person service delivery, eschewing the rigid public health controls that characterized the earliest phases of the pandemic. The lessons learned through forced adaptations during the initial phases of the pandemic emphasize that videoconferencing can be a useful correctional strategy for building relationship and holding clients accountable. Further, it calls into question traditional notions of power and hierarchy, the dose of supervision, and forces creative use of evidence-based interventions and other video-friendly strategies to overcome the limitations of accountability in remote settings. At the end of the day, the results of this study invite correctional scholars and policy-makers to explore more fully the potential utility and promise of videoconferencing for routine use in community corrections.

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## Note

1. Probation officers supervise individuals sentenced to community supervision, in lieu of prison. Parole officers supervise individuals who were sentenced to prison and were later released to the community to serve the remaining time in the community. Both people on probation and parole are often subject to a number of conditions including employment, treatment, reporting to probation or parole, and drug-testing, among others.

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