

U.S. Department of Justice
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Topics in Corrections

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Electronic Monitoring

Introduction

Expanding prison populations have stimulated the development of alternative sanctioning options. One option is the use of electronic monitoring devices (EMD) in lieu of incarceration or in combination with shorter sentences. An electronic monitoring program combines intensive supervision in the community with a device that verifies that offenders are at designated locations during specified time periods. These programs are relatively new and in use under both probation and parole conditions. The following are three general types of electronic monitoring devices.

Continuously signaling devices. The offender wears a "transmitter" that emits a signal over a range of 100 to 200 feet. That signal is received by a receiver dialer, a unit installed at the monitored location. The dialer notifies the central computer of a change in the offender's status; i.e., when the offender enters and exits the range of the unit. The central computer contains the offender's schedule and, on notification of a change in the offender's status, compares the time of the change to the schedule and determines if the action is in violation.

Programmed contact devices. A computer contacts the offender to ensure that he/she is at the monitored location and verifies that the person responding is, in fact, the offender being monitored.

"Hybrid" equipment. This equipment combines the two types described above, functioning similarly to continuous signaling devices, yet performing like a programmed contact device when the equipment notes the offender has departed at an unauthorized time. The offender will be contacted by telephone to verify his/her presence. If verification does not occur, notification is made of the violation.

Public Safety Issues

One major concern with the electronic monitoring program is the possibility of the offender committing further crimes despite the presence of the monitoring device. Another key concern is the public's view of such a program — whether it is perceived as sufficiently punitive. For example, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD) has actively lobbied against programs such as electronic monitoring for drunk drivers in place of mandatory incarceration.

National Use

Nationwide, EMD programs are currently at an exploratory stage. In February 1987, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) conducted a survey of 53 electronic monitoring programs in 21 States, indicating that 800 offenders were being monitored. The typical offender was a sentenced male under the age of 30; in fact, nearly 90 percent of the offenders were male, between age 14 and 78. About one-third were convicted for major traffic law violations — particularly drunk driving. In February 1988, NIJ's "1-day count" found that monitors were being used in 32 States on approximately 2,500 offenders.

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Research Results

Research results of electronic monitoring are sparse. The National Institute of Justice is sponsoring research in several jurisdictions. For example, in Indianapolis, offenders sentenced to community corrections are being randomly assigned to a variety of sanctioning options including electronic monitoring to determine the relative efficacy of this new approach. (Note: The Bureau of Prisons, in cooperation with the U.S. Probation Office and the U.S. Parole Commission, currently is supporting an electronic monitoring pilot program in the Los Angeles and Miami areas, which began early in 1988. A description of the pilot results will be available through the Office of Research in the future.)

Costs

Costs of electronic monitoring programs vary considerably. Most program managers agree that there are several types of costs to consider, including both monetary costs (e.g., equipment and staffing) and various types of social costs. Program costs depend largely on equipment type, program policy, program management and program size. One particularly cost-effective program operates in Palm Beach County, Florida, where voluntary program participants must pay a fee of \$9 per day to be in the program. In that case, the program's investment in equipment had been returned by offender fees within the first 14 months of program operation. The Rand Corporation estimated the yearly costs for various supervision options to be:

Routine probation	\$ 300 - 2,000
Intensive probation	\$ 2,000 - 7,000
House arrest (w/o EMD)	\$ 2,000 - 7,000
Electronic monitoring	\$ 4,500 - 8,500
Local jail	\$ 8,000 - 12,000
Local detention center	\$ 5,000 - 15,000
State prison	\$ 9,000 - 20,000

Most commentators seem to agree that electronic monitoring is "socially cost effective" — the offender can keep his/her job, families can stay together, and the offender can support his/her family. Additionally, "criminogenic effects" of imprisonment could be avoided.

Technical Problems

Technical problems often arise with the electronic monitoring devices. The equipment is developing and needs to be viewed as an evolving technology rather than as a final product.

Policy Issues

Community concerns for safety and retribution play a part in the choice of equipment and the participation criteria. The phenomenon of "net-widening" is a concern in that persons ordinarily not considered for confinement programs may become involved in the monitoring programs. Policy and technical decisions related to electronic monitoring are now made without the help of supporting data. Educated guesses are determining what types of inmates should be selected for the program.

BOP Subject Matter Experts:

Marshall Haimen, Barbara Owen
Research Analysts, FTS: 724-3118

BOP Specialists:

Dick Clark, Anne Schmidt
Community Programs, FTS: 724-3171