

Strategies for Effective Parole Supervision:

Ohio's Graduated Sanction Guidelines

By Ariel Whitworth

Author's Note: *Points of view expressed in this article do not represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.*

A recent study by researchers at the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (ODRC) examined the effectiveness of Ohio's four-year-old sanctioning guidelines. The study was designed to determine whether the guidelines helped improve the sanctioning process and offender outcomes. Results suggest that the violation grid significantly reduced reliance on revocation hearings and sanctions, and kept offenders out of local jails.

Prior to 2005, offenders in Ohio who recidivated were given random sanctions, ranging from just a reprimand to a return to confinement. In 2005, Ohio created policies, such as progressive sanctions, to better manage supervised offenders so that offenders who repeatedly violated their supervision conditions could receive increasingly harsh penalties. The Ohio Adult Parole Authority guidelines use a violation response grid that assesses risk and number of violations and indicates how supervision staff should respond.

The Grid

Ohio's guidelines stem in part from a 1996 truth-in-sentencing law that established sentencing guidelines, abolished parole and imposed flat sentences for most felonies. Many offenders not previously subject to parole were now being supervised after mandatory release under a system called post-release control. Both non-violent and violent offenders could be placed on post-release control.

Initially, violations by offenders on post-release control were handled inconsistently, which led to reincarceration for many offenders. In 2001, Ohio began developing a system for handling violations more effectively. The resulting new sanction guidelines and grid system went into effect July 2005.

Ohio's violation grid determines sanctions by assessing the offender's history, risk level and number of previous violations. It provides for a more structured system that dictates specific responses to offenders' behaviors; limits the use of temporary jail detention; and increases the proportionality of sanction responses.

Testing the Effect of the Grid and Guidelines

Researchers at ODRC examined whether Ohio's sanction grid reduced recidivism and achieved Ohio's policy objectives. Policy objectives included increasing the use of risk-based decision-making and creating consistent, fair and effective sanctioning.

The study compared offender outcomes across two groups of post-prison offenders placed on supervision before and after the guidelines and grid system went into effect during October-December 2003 (1,040 offenders), and August-December 2005 (1,012 offenders), respectively. The researchers followed both groups of offenders for the first year of their supervision, or until supervision was terminated.

The researchers collected information from case files, field officer notes and electronic documents. They noted the following information about offenders:

- Residential history;
- Employment history;
- Program and treatment interventions;
- Codes that indicated a change in status; and
- Other descriptive information.

The study also relied on focus group interviews and a statewide survey of parole officers conducted separately by University of Cincinnati researchers. Based on these data sources, the analysis sought to answer the following questions:

- Did offenders given sanctions based on the violation grid experience fewer revocation and violation hearings?
- Did use of the grid reduce recidivism?
- Did officers understand the new guidelines?
- Had the new policy been implemented smoothly and effectively?
- Did the use of the sanction grid have specific effects on offenders' behavior?

Do Post-Prison Populations Benefit?

Results from the study suggest that use of the violation grid significantly reduced reliance on revocation hearings and sanctions, and kept offenders out of local jails. Additionally, offenders were less likely to return to prison for technical violations under the new guidelines.

Offenders who were younger, less violent, unemployed and medium-to-high risk were most likely to commit new crimes. But despite higher rates of violation behavior overall, the

sanction grid by itself was not the source of that behavior after controlling for other factors.

Most important, the researchers found variation in the effectiveness of different types of sanctions before and after implementation of the guidelines. They found community-based referrals and treatment interventions helped offenders more than punitive sanctions. Additionally, the use of these program sanctions and referrals worked to reduce reoffending when used in coordination with the violation grid, especially when managing high-risk offenders.

Results from the focus groups and officer surveys show that officers felt they were adequately trained to use the grid, but did not think their opinions and skills had been sufficiently considered in the design. Those who perceived more agency responsiveness thought that the guidelines intended to better structure and increase the consistency of sanctioning and reduce disparity across regions. However, some officers felt that the new guidelines undermined their authority, and did not favor the use of the sanctioning grid.

Overall, the study's results suggest that the use of a violation grid can be effective and cost-efficient, at least when used with high-risk parolees. The grid ensures that officers consider offenders' risks and needs, which can lead to better assessment and alignment with services when a violation occurs. Offenders still receive harsher penalties for more severe or chronic violations.

The researchers recommend the use of additional sanctioning reforms in post-prison populations. These reforms would further establish formal systems that provide consistent, proportional and progressive responses to violations.

The final report on the study, *Examining the Impact of Ohio's Progressive Sanction Grid*, grant no. 2005-IJ-CX-0038, is available online at www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/224317.pdf.

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— *Albert R. Murray, Commissioner, Georgia Department of Juvenile Justice, Decatur, Ga.*

“Juvenile correctional administrators, managers, and future leaders in the field will love this book, which effectively outlines how to balance safety and security with developing programs, services, and management strategies that meet the many diverse and challenging needs of youth from a humane, culturally specific, individualized, and youth empowerment perspective rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.”

— *Lonnie Jackson, Administrator, Office of Minority Services, Oregon Youth Authority; and Author, Gangbusters: Strategies for Prevention and Intervention*

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