

Perceptions of Probation and Police Officer Home Visits During Intensive Probation Supervision¹

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PROBATION SUPERVISION OF youth and adults has evolved over time to respond differently to probationers based on the risk each person poses to the community and according to criminogenic needs that are related to criminal activity. Intensive probation supervision through more conditions and unannounced home visits has been used with probationers deemed at high risk to recidivate with new crimes. The initial purpose of home visits and intensive probation was to deter known offenders from involvement in criminal activity and to decrease the possibility that they would violate conditions of probation (e.g., by associating with criminal friends, violating curfew, or using drugs or alcohol). Deterrence theory assumes that swift and certain punishment is likely to keep people from violating the law. The assumption of home visits is that they help probation officers more readily detect probationers who are not following the conditions of their probation, so that they can act much faster to revoke probation in order to prevent a probation violator from future criminal conduct.

Home visits conducted during the evening hours posed a potentially volatile situation for

one officer to handle alone. To address this issue, partnerships between the city police and county probation departments were created throughout the 1990s to encourage both agencies to share information and to participate as a team in evening home visits (Alarid, Sims, & Ruiz, 2011a; Leitenberger, Semenyna, & Spelman, 2003). One such evening home visit partnership called Operation Night Light (ONL) began in Boston, where police and probation officers met to conduct evening home visits of designated probationers. The idea behind ONL was for a designated probation officer to visit probationers at a time when immediate family members were also present. The probation officer, who normally worked during the day, would rotate on ONL for one evening shift every week to conduct nighttime home visits of his or her own caseload. At least one police officer was present during the home visit to address security and safety issues if they arose. Some probation departments used probation officers who worked with police only at night. The evening probation officers did not supervise a caseload of clients; instead, they visited homes of probationers at the request of their probation officer (Condon, 2003; Matz & Kim, 2013). Other police-probation partnerships were created to reduce truancy in schools through communication with school resource officers (Alarid, Sims, & Ruiz, 2011b).

Related Literature

Home visits of probationers have certainly been an important part of probation supervision for nearly a century. However, having probation and police officers conduct home visits *together* has become more prevalent only

in the last 20 years. As a result, the academic literature lacks information about how the probation/police home visits are perceived by probationers, parents, and officers or how the home visit might alter probationer behavior (Ahlin, Antunes, & Tubman-Carbone, 2013). Instead, the available literature has focused on how the home visits broadened probation officer roles and responsibilities (Murphy, 2005). Previous research found that the “tone” of a home visit was largely determined by which officer did most of the talking and decision making. The ideal situation was when the probation officer took the lead and asserted the conversation, while the police officer stood by as a passive onlooker (Alarid et al., 2011a).

The home visit also broadened opportunities for police officers. Police were able to enter private homes without warrants, but they were instructed to serve only as backup rather than as interrogators (Byrne & Hummer, 2004; Mawby & Worrall, 2004). In other jurisdictions, police officers conducted random curfew checks of juveniles who were in violation of court-ordered probation. Apparently, these curfew checks were made without a probation officer present and could potentially be problematic if the balance of power shifted from being more rehabilitative to strictly law enforcement (Jones & Sigler, 2002). At times, police have overstepped their legal authority during home visits once probation or parole officers began to conduct searches and have even collected evidence in situations when probable cause or a warrant is required to conduct a home search (Murphy & Worrall, 2007).

Allowing the probation officer to maintain more leverage and having clear written roles and responsibilities was necessary for

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the home visit to remain related first and foremost to supervision (Murphy & Lutze, 2009; Murphy & Worrall, 2007). The degree to which the home visit achieves these goals, however, is unclear. Furthermore, with the exception of Piquero (2003), who examined home visits of adult probationers, most previous studies examined home visits of youth on probation. This study attempts to fill a gap in the literature by more closely examining both juvenile and adult probationer home visits in two ways: (1) to present viewpoints from police, probation officers, probationers, and parents of probationers who experienced probation/police home visits, and (2) to study probationer activity change as a result of home visits during supervision.

Methods

The ONL program under study was a partnership between the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department (KCKPD) and the Wyandotte County Adult and Juvenile Probation Departments. Research into how the Operation Night Light program worked was obtained through participant interviews, ride-alongs, and official agency data. The three research questions were:

- What experiences do participants of probation/police home visits have?
- Do probation/police home visits allow probation officers to detect probation violations sooner?
- Do these home visits change the behaviors of probationers?

Perceptual data was collected through interviews of 18 ONL officers (7 juvenile probation officers, 4 adult probation officers, and 7 police officers). I conducted individual interviews of a random sample of 49 probationers—27 adult and 22 juveniles. Ten parents of juvenile probationers were interviewed separately. I obtained human subjects' approval for this project, and parental permission for all juvenile interviews. All interviews took place at the juvenile and adult probation department in private rooms. The parents were interviewed separately from the children. Official agency data was also obtained for the number and dates of home visits.

I logged 40 observation hours during home visits and ride-alongs with ONL police and probation officers. Each ride-along lasted 4 hours, usually between 6:30–10:30 p.m. Two police officers accompanied one probation officer per vehicle. The ONL staff devoted approximately 20 hours total per week to ONL home visits. Probation officers in Kansas

did not carry firearms at the time of data collection. There were some differences noted between the adult and juvenile ONL visits. The adult ONL lists were generated randomly by the probation supervisor, while the juvenile ONL visits were chosen by each individual probation officer. Second, while the curfew was enforceable for the juveniles according to age, the adult curfew was reportedly difficult to enforce. Other than home visits at random, juveniles in the program had weekday curfew times of 7:00 p.m. for middle school and 8:00 p.m. for high school age. On Friday and Saturday nights, the curfew was 9:00 p.m. for middle school and 11:00 p.m. for high school. In both cases, the curfew did not apply if the youths were accompanied by their parents or an approved guardian.

Youth and adult probationers were selected for the ONL intensive supervision probation if they had one or more of the following risk factors:

- History of family violence, drug, and/or gang activity
- Prior violent offense(s)
- Suspected gang affiliation
- Friend/Family of recent homicide victim/perpetrator
- Suspected drug use/involvement in drug sales while on probation
- Current warrant/probation violation status

The first two risk factors were related only to past behavior that occurred before probation. The third and fourth risk factors were situations that occurred in the recent past or present time. If at least one of these first four factors was present, the probationer was identified as an ONL participant in the beginning. The fifth and sixth risk factors occurred while on regular probation and largely depended on the officer and supervisor's discretion, which might bring a probationer into the program at a later point in time. None of the probationers were on electronic monitoring or any kind of global positioning system at the time of data collection.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants. The average age of juveniles was 15 years of age, ranging between 12 and 18 years. For adults, the average age was 21 years, with a range between 18 and 25. What is perhaps most striking is how similar the juvenile and adult ONL participants were with respect to sex, felony conviction offense, and race/ethnicity. About 8 out of 10 ONL probationers were male, with about 45 percent having been convicted of a property crime, about 20 percent for a felony crime against a

person, and the remaining for drug or alcohol-related offenses. Slightly more of the adults than juveniles were African-American (63 percent compared to 53 percent respectively), while Caucasians comprised over 40 percent of juveniles and about 33 percent of adult probationers. Hispanic probationers made up around 5 percent for both groups, which was proportionate to the general population. However, African-Americans were disproportionately over-represented in the probationer population compared to their numbers in the community.

Findings

During my 40 hours of observations during the home visits, the probation officer initiated communication strategies with his or her client. The police officers stood near the front door of the house, but did not interact with the probationer. Characteristics of the home visits, including the number per person, the percentage of time spent on ONL, and the result of each visit, are shown in Table 2.

Characteristics of Home Visits

According to agency data, home visits for juveniles began on average, about 3.8 months (median of two months) after probation supervision started. Home visits for adults began later, at an average of 5.2 months. This was due primarily to the lag time between the initial risk and needs assessment and supervisory approval. The other explanation was the number of probationers who entered ONL as a result of certain types of technical violations that occurred midstream while on regular probation. Once a juvenile probationer was approved to be in the ONL program, the total number of ONL home visits ranged from 1–18, with a median of 3 visits and an average of 4.5 visits per probationer. The number of home visits for adult probationers was lower, with a range of 1–7 and an average of 2.5 visits per probationer.

The time period between the first home visit and the last home visit ranged from one week (33.5 percent of all ONL probationers) to a span of 18 months (0.3 percent). The average amount of time that lapsed between the first home visit and the last home visit was 3.7 months, with a median of 3.0 months. The time period during the ONL visits made up an average of 29 percent of the total time spent on probation (median time on ONL was 18.4 percent of the time). There were a total of 1,420 ONL visits recorded in the chronology notes for the juvenile sample and 520 visits for the adult sample. About 48 percent of the juvenile

TABLE 1.
DEMOGRAPHICS--Raw numbers (%)

Characteristics	Juvenile ONL (n = 314)	Adult ONL (n = 209)
Sex		
Male	247 (78.7)	173 (82.8)
Female	67 (21.3)	36 (17.2)
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian	126 (40.5)	66 (31.6)
African American	166 (53.4)	131 (62.7)
Hispanic	15 (4.8)	12 (5.7)
Bi-Racial	4 (1.3)	—
Age		
(average)	15 yrs.	21 yrs.
9–11 years	3 (1.0)	—
12–14 years	87 (27.9)	—
15–17 years	200 (64.1)	3 (1.4)
18–20 years	22 (7.1)	96 (45.9)
21–23 years	—	86 (41.1)
24–25 years	—	24 (11.5)
Conviction Offense		
Property	100 (45.5)	90 (43.1)
Person (Violence, Sex)	50 (22.7)	43 (20.6)
Drugs	33 (15.0)	40 (19.1)
Other (Alcohol)	37 (16.8)	36 (17.2)

visits yielded no response or no one was at home, whereas a much higher percentage of visits to adult probationers yielded no answer (73.5 percent). The juvenile probationer was at home over 28 percent of the time, while only 15 percent of adult probationers were at home. In 22.5 percent of juvenile visits and 8.5 percent of visits to adult probationers, collateral contact was made through a third party, such as a family member who resided with the probationer. In about 1 percent of juvenile and 2 percent of adult home visits, the address did not exist, the probationer never lived there, or the probationer no longer lived there.

Table 2 also shows that over half of all technical violations and/or new crimes discovered that led to juvenile probation termination resulted directly from the ONL home visit. Only 22.5 percent of adult probation technical violations and new crimes were detected through home visits. The other violations noted/crimes filed were discovered at some time other than during the home visit.

Interviews with Police

The ONL program paid the police officers overtime, and officers were chosen based on

availability and seniority. Both regular street police officers and community police officers were given the opportunity to sign up for specific evenings. The police who were interviewed were members of both groups and all had direct experience with the ONL program. They understood that their role was not to participate in decision making, but to act as security for probation officers, intervening only if necessary for safety reasons. Most of the police officers interviewed felt that probation officers were being too lenient and giving the probationers too many chances. One officer said: “ONL provides a community presence, but it needs harsher penalties.”

ONL served a vital public safety function. Should the need arise to remove a probationer from the community, ONL allowed warrants to be served immediately. Police officers mentioned that if they’ve been inside the house before, they are able to remember the layout. One police officer shared a story about how both agencies were able to work together:

“Frank” was suspected by some of our detectives of shooting [a loaded weapon] into vacant houses around 12th and Quindaro. A detective phoned one of

the probation officers to see if he knew anything about Frank. Due to previous probation contact with Frank, the probation officer shared enough information on where Frank lived, his friends, and even the car he drove. This was enough to assist detectives in finding and arresting Frank.

It was interesting to observe how two agencies, each with different training and emphases, were able to work together to achieve the same goals. The police were more likely to be oriented toward control and efficiency in singular events, while probation emphasized case management and repeated communication over a longer period of time. Thus, members of each respective agency are more likely to perceive a difference with the other.

Probation Officer Interactions with Police

Probation officers clearly recognized the importance of police officers to the safety of the home visit. However, probation officers had more positive experiences with community police officers than with regular street police officers. The street officers stayed in the car and used the time to finish their own paperwork, while the community police officers were more likely to accompany the probation officer inside the house. As a result, every probation officer preferred working with the community police officer unit. The street police officer seemed to emphasize quantity and efficiency, with the need to finish all the visits on the list. Probation officers were focused on the quality of each visit and also of gathering more information from collateral contacts by speaking with family members of probationers. One probation officer commented,

I would rather have fewer visits of higher quality rather than rush through to finish the list of scheduled visits. Many police don’t see the value in talking to the parent or another family member. They feel that if the youth is not home, we should just go on to the next house.

Another probation officer said:

Contact visits take longer. Sometimes I get the feeling that some of the senior [police] officers seem glad that we’ve had no response because that means that there is less paperwork and they can go home earlier.

The probation officers strongly believed that the success of ONL was largely determined by police familiarity with the area. However, assignment of ONL police officers for overtime was based on seniority, not on

TABLE 2.
HOME VISITS ON INTENSIVE SUPERVISION PROBATION

Time on ONL as a Percent of Total Time on Probation	Juveniles	Adults
1-10%	35.8%	40.5%
11-25%	20.2%	17.3%
26-50%	18.2%	20.5%
51-75%	19.3%	21.7%
Over 75%	6.5%	0%
AVG Time spent on ONL	29% of sentence	20.3% of sentence
AVG Start time	3.8 months	5.2 months
Number of Visits Per Person		
1 visit	19.0%	25.4%
2 visits	20.0%	32.8%
3 visits	13.0%	31.6%
4-5 visits	16.7%	5.2%
6-7 visits	11.0%	5.0%
8-9 visits	9.3%	—
10-11 visits	5.7%	—
12-18 visits	5.0%	—
AVG	4.5 visits	2.5 visits
Result of Home Visit		
	(n=1,420)	(n= 520)
Probationer Face-to-face	403 (28.4%)	82 (15.7%)
Collateral contact	320 (22.5%)	44 (8.5%)
Not at home/no response	681 (48.0%)	382 (73.5%)
Address Does not Exist	16 (1.1%)	12 (2.3%)
Technical Violations/New Crimes Discovered		
Exclusively during home visit	50.3%	22.5%
Time other than the home visit	49.7%	77.5%

knowledge of the area or of particular houses (e.g., a known crack house in the area). The probation officers were in favor of rotating more police officers into the program to expose them to a wider variety of officers from other districts or working exclusively with the community policing unit.

Probation Officer Experience with Home Visits

The probation officer interviews indicated that the home visits were an insightful tool for them to gain information and increase understanding about their client. The officers believe that ONL has assisted them to better tolerate cultures, income levels, and living situations that may differ from their own. A greater understanding of challenges that the probationers face may contribute to the probation officer being more likely to work with the client rather than be quick to file a violation. A home visit

also allowed the officer to establish relationships with family members and friends of the probationer that would prove useful if probation conditions were ever breached. Verifying that the probationer is living at the claimed address is equally important. In comparison to an office visit, clients tended to be more honest and open when they were at their own home.

Home visits also allowed probation officers to detect earlier probation conditions that were not being followed, and to investigate why the condition was not being followed. For example, a home visit may provide clues about the client's financial situation or the reason why restitution payments are not being made.

The following situation was described by a juvenile probation officer:

"Jessica" had once again not shown up for her scheduled appointment with me. I wanted to find out what the problem was before I filed a motion with the court. On

the next ONL visit night, I visited Jessica's house with police officers. As we pulled up to her house, one police officer said: "I know this address. We come here all the time. The mother is always drunk or high on something." I saw that Jessica was home and actually caring for her mother, who was too drunk to drive Jessica to her scheduled appointment. Jessica's UA [drug test] showed that she wasn't drinking or using [drugs]. The visit was productive and the mother has since been court-ordered to treatment. There has been less police calls for service and Jessica is better able to meet her probation terms.

Most probation officers indicated that the home visits increased their visibility in the community. Offenders on probation seemed to get the message that not showing up for office visits increased the chance of getting a surprise home visit. Thus, most officers believed that the home visits led to increases in the rate of in-office reporting. The probation officers expressed the concern that many of their clients who originally did not take probation seriously now had the option to reconsider the significance and meaning of this community sentence. All juvenile offenders with curfews who have home visits yielding no response were considered the equivalent of a "no show." After each "no show" a letter is mailed to the probationer's residence. After the third no show/letter, the probationer is considered in violation of their probation for "non-reporting" and a motion to revoke probation can be considered by the court.

All probation officers agreed that the home visit hours should be more flexible to accommodate work schedules of people on their caseload. They recommended starting later on weeknights (e.g., 7:00-11:00 p.m.) and/or visiting on weekend days. The adults on probation had curfews that were more difficult to enforce than juvenile curfews. There was no incentive for an adult probationer to be home during an ONL visit, nor was there leverage if adult probationers were not at home or refused to answer the door.

The juvenile probation officers were asked about parental support during home visits of youth probationers. The sentiment among all seven juvenile officers was that 90 percent of the parents embraced home visits for their child, while about 10 percent of parents were anti-authority and uncooperative. Most of the cooperative parents were reportedly "in disbelief," "hesitant," and "frightened" at first. A smaller number of parents were

“embarrassed, but cooperative.” The probation officers agreed that the home visits allowed them to gain increased support from the parents and to establish a more productive relationship. Many of the parents seemed to be frustrated and to be looking to others to help them manage their child. Good rapport between probation officers and parents seemed instrumental in encouraging consistent prosocial behavior among juvenile probationers and appeared to facilitate successful behavior while on probation.

Probationer Interviews

The juvenile probationers were asked how many hours they engaged in certain activities per week during a three-month time period before they were on probation supervision. They then were asked the number of hours they spent on these same activities during the period they received home visits. Table 3 shows that the most prevalent change for juveniles was that 41 percent spent less time with friends and fewer evenings out using drugs and alcohol. Most of this time seemed to be replaced by quality time spent with family, planned evenings out under parent/adult supervision, and an increase in household responsibilities and/or chores.

The interviews of adult offenders on probation also focused on how the ONL home visits have changed their behavior. Many adult probationers regularly returned home between 10 p.m. and midnight prior to ONL. Since they have been on probation, respondents reported coming home between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Over half of the adults reported that quality time spent with family has remained the same since they have been on probation supervision, while the other half reported that quality time has increased. Not one person said that family quality time had deteriorated. Reported use of alcohol and drugs has generally remained the same or decreased while on ONL. Perhaps the most significant difference with adult probationers were the 43 percent who spent less time at home because of the ONL home visits.

Parents of Juvenile Probationers

Ten parents (eight mothers and one couple where mom/dad came together), all who had a son on probation, agreed to be interviewed about the ONL home visits. The interviewed parents liked the idea of the probation officer coming to their home, but did *not* like the police presence. While the parents understood the need for the police, they reported that they were not as open and candid with the

TABLE 3.

Probationer Activity Change During ONL (% of probationer sample)

JUVENILE Probationer Activity	No Change	Increase	Decrease
Evenings out—drugs/alcohol	50%	7%	43%
Time spent with friends	41%	19%	40%
Quality time spent with family	61%	39%	0%
Evenings out planned in advance	67%	33%	0%
Household responsibilities/chores	71%	18%	11%
Time spent at home	64%	11%	25%
Hours under parent/adult supervision	71%	29%	0%
ADULT Probation Activity	No Change	Increase	Decrease
Evenings out—drugs/alcohol	70%	16%	14%
Time spent with friends	81%	9%	10%
Quality time spent with family	55%	45%	0%
Evenings out planned in advance	55%	40%	5%
Household responsibilities/chores	69%	26%	5%
Time spent at home	45%	12%	43%

* Each row totals to 100%

probation officer when the police were inside the home listening to the conversation.

Four out of ten parents reported that there was no change when asked how ONL home visits helped or hindered their role as parents. Another four parents reported that parenting has become easier for them due to the close working relationship they have with the probation officer. These parents felt that the home visits were a great opportunity for the probation officer to reinforce behavioral expectations as a “secondary parent.” The parents have been able to voice additional concerns about their child to the probation officer while their child is present. One parent stated: “I have seen a complete turnaround in my child following the home meetings.”

On the other hand, two parents said that home visits did not seem to be helping. One parent reported that their child has become more defiant and more difficult to handle, and a second parent said their child has become “more secretive” while on probation. These two parents felt that the home visits more easily exposed problems, but one parent still felt hopeful that the visits would “shock my child into realizing the consequences of not doing what he’s supposed to.” Both parents expressed concern that their child will ultimately be removed from the home if he continued to disobey. One parent stated: “If my boy screws up, he could be taken away from me. I worry because it’s out of my control.” Parents were asked what program or service would help the most in keeping their child out of trouble

or out of the criminal justice system. Big Brothers was the program most often mentioned because it provided positive male role models for their sons in homes where no male role model existed.

Discussion

Home visits remain an important component of probation supervision for high-risk probationers, yet surprisingly little is known about the effects that the visits have on others (Ahlin et al., 2013). This study examined perceptions from individual police and probation officers, probationers, and parents of probationers who experienced home visits during intensive probation supervision. The research also considered probationer behavioral change as a result of home visits. The findings in this study pertain to probation/police officer home visits only, and may not be generalizable to other types of probationer home visits, such as those conducted without police officers, or home visits conducted for family therapy sessions.

The ONL program in this study enjoyed a high level of probation officer and police officer enthusiasm and support. Employee support for an initiative is very important to a genuine interest in its success and future continuation. The police-probation partnership allowed personnel from both departments to broaden their roles in understanding their client’s home life and situations different from their own upbringing, which is consistent with previous research (Alarid et al., 2011a; Mawby & Worrall, 2004).

The ONL program allowed probation and police personnel to network and share information which was beneficial for both agencies. Shared information resulted in the added benefit for police officers of locating high-risk individuals who had outstanding warrants. Information sharing is consistent with research in other jurisdictions (Alarid et al., 2011a).

Probation officers generally want to feel that they have explored every angle and done everything they can to help their client, especially if they must recommend revocation. Our findings showed that home visits were a more valuable tool for juvenile probation officers to detect probation violations than they were for adult probation officers, who seemed to detect more violations in ways other than the home visit. Home visits also provided a tool for probation officers to better understand individual probationers. They provide increased visibility in the community and allow officers to verify probationer residences. The evening home visits added more responsibilities for probation officers (Murphy, 2005), particularly when they resulted in increased paperwork resulting from the increased number of violations and new crimes that were detected during juvenile home visits.

In comparison to the juveniles, the home visits for the adults on probation started later, and they received half as many visits on average. This may have been because the adult probation department did not have the resources to devote to the program that the juvenile probation department, which was more organized and goal driven, could command. Nearly half of adults in the intensive probation program spent less time at home than they did before the home visits. Spending less time at home defeated the program purpose and the probationer's absence was likely to avoid seeing their probation officer. Without penalties for not being at home, there was no reason for adult probationers to be at home, and the purpose of the home visits for adults was diminished.

This exploratory study is one of the first that has interviewed probationers about the probation/police home visit component. When comparing juvenile and adult probationers on intensive probation, the findings suggested that home visits did little to change behaviors of adult probationers. The situation was different for juveniles, who spent more time at home, more quality time with their family, and less time out drinking and using drugs with friends.

In conclusion, the policy implications of the research are that the ONL home visits in this jurisdiction had more perceived benefits with high-risk youth than with adults (Matz & Kim, 2013). This was because home visits during intensive supervision probation may be more likely to interrupt youths engaged in a more criminally active lifestyle than they were to disrupt further criminality of adults on probation. One suggestion is experimenting with other times and days of the week to determine when juvenile crimes and/or violations are likely taking place (Matz & Kim, 2013). For example, starting later in the evening (e.g., after 7:00 p.m.), after school hours for juveniles (3:00–6:00 p.m.), and weekend mornings are three options to consider. There was some benefit for adults on ONL, but the officer and probationer perceptions suggested that the magnitude of the change was less for adults than for juveniles. Taken together, the overall characteristics and ideology of ONL such as curfew, parental involvement, and judicial support of the program seemed more conducive to using ONL in juvenile probation than with adult probation departments.

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