

An Assessment of District Reviews: Implications for Pretrial Services Policy Development and Practice

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THE PRETRIAL SERVICES ACT OF 1982 ([18 U.S.C. § 3152 thru 18 U.S.C. § 3156](#)) codified the existence and function of U.S. Pretrial Services within each of the 94 judicial districts that comprise the federal district court system. *The Bail Reform Act of 1984* ([18 U.S.C. § 3141 through 18 U.S.C. § 3151](#)) expanded a judicial officer's authority to include the factor of preventative detention when considering a defendant's suitability for pretrial release, significantly impacting the pretrial services function in the federal system. Together, these statutes and the legal principles upon which they are based constitute the foundation of the pretrial services system ([VanNostrand 2007](#)). The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts has established the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services (OPPS), that office that performs the national administrative oversight of the agencies charged with the pretrial services functions of investigation and supervision of federal defendants. Additionally, federal court policy employs local administrative oversight of these offices by the judicial officers of those districts in order to meet the individual needs of each district.

In keeping with 18 U.S.C. § 3672, OPPS, sometimes at the request of a district's chief pretrial services/probation officer or judicial officers and sometimes as part of the regular cycle of district reviews, regularly appoints ad hoc review groups. These groups consist of administrative personnel, officers, specialist officers (such as mental health, drug and alcohol abuse, location monitoring, contracting), supervisors, and deputy chief officers from other districts throughout the judiciary. These groups are charged with the tasks of monitoring compliance with policy and legal mandates and identifying superior practices by individual district offices. Generally, each officer selected represents a different district and is considered an expert in his or her assigned area of review. Additionally, reviewers must have at least five years experience in the area they

are chosen to review and must obtain approval from the chief pretrial services/probation officer in their own district.

Through peer review of managerial practices; investigation, supervision office contracting, officer safety, location monitoring and treatment programs, and court documents, the review team assesses an office's compliance with the national policy manuals, statutes, and case law to determine whether offices diverge from nationally recognized policy. Although divergence often can be classified as negative, it is sometimes the result of direct judicial mandate issued to meet the local needs of a specific court. Additionally, reviewers interview office staff and judicial officers to gain a clearer understanding of the functioning of each district. When requested, outside agencies (e.g. the U.S. attorney's office, the federal public defender's office, the U.S. marshals service) can also be interviewed.

Once the necessary information is compiled, the review team generates a comprehensive report that identifies positive and negative aspects of office functioning in light of national standards and local judicial mandates. The review team leader presents this information to the chief district judge and then to the chief pretrial services/probation officer and deputy chief officers of the office. Positive aspects of investigation and supervision are noted and recommendations are accompanied by policy manual citations.

As we embrace evidence-based practices (EBP) and call for further examination of the pretrial services system, the information contained in these review reports may provide a better understanding of the status of pretrial services functions. An analysis of this information can provide policymakers, administrators, and practitioners with baseline data to assess the quality of pretrial services offices with regard to national standards, to identify positive and negative investigation and supervision issues, and to ground future research. Thus, the goal of this article is to analyze the district review reports in order to gauge the current status of the pretrial services system in relation to the established standards of the system. The ultimate goal is to enhance the level of service that pretrial services offices provide to the judiciary, to the public, and to federal criminal defendants.

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Methodology

Data were collected from 44 district review reports generated between 2000 and 2008 ([Figure 1](#)) at the AO in Washington, D.C. (The district review process was altered during 2005 and no reports were available from that year.) Also, following 2005, district reviews no longer addressed information technology, human resources, and budgeting. These factors are now reviewed by an alternate review team further trained in these matters.

By coincidence, exactly half (22) of these reports reviewed combined probation and pretrial services offices and the remaining half reviewed individual pretrial services offices. These reports represented the total population of available district reviews that were conducted during the specified time frame ([Figure 1](#)). In all, 894 recommendations were cataloged for analysis.

These recommendations were organized by the subsections of each of the reports (management, supervision, investigation and report writing, office contracting, human resources, information technology, location monitoring, office safety, and budget). Additionally, a limited content analysis was performed on the contextual information in each report to determine if offices were diverging from national standards due to local judicial rule. The following variables were also cataloged to uncover if they contributed to the findings: year of review, satisfaction of judicial officers, the number of officers in each district, the presence of satellite offices, the length of the current chief pretrial services/probation officer's term, approved work units (AWU), style of management, and the presence of problematic interactions with outside agencies. Data validity was ensured through the use of predetermined categories.

These data were coded by frequency of occurrence and subjected to analysis involving descriptive statistics. Whether a recommendation was affirmatory or critical was determined by whether the practice was encouraged to continue or encouraged to be changed to conform with national standards (as set forth in the *Guide to Judiciary Policies and Procedures*, Pretrial Services Manual, Volume 12 (*Guide*); the *Pretrial Services Investigation and Report — Monograph 112*; the *Supervision of Federal Defendants—Monograph 111*; *The Judicial Officers Reference on Alternatives to Detention—Monograph 110*; and *The Federal Home Confinement Program—Monograph 113*; Volume 1; and Chapters 7 and 10 of the *Guide*). Also, these standards are influenced by case law and statutory law. These data were then examined for trends throughout the judicial districts reviewed.

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Findings

Findings from this study can be broken into numerous categories, based on the various sections of the district review report (management, supervision, investigation and report writing, office contracting, human resources, information technology, location monitoring, and officer safety) as well as on identified background characteristics that could impact the findings of this study.

The variety of reviewers led to significant variation throughout the data. Therefore, the data presented below have been organized by frequency of occurrence. In all categories, data that did not meet standards of statistical significance were compiled into an “other” classification.

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Office Managerial

As summarized in [Table 1](#), the managerial practice findings indicate that the area most in need of improvement in the reviewed offices is enhancing communication. The need for improved communication was evident not only among office staff, but also among outside agencies and the judicial officers for the district. Also, all levels of management and office staff reported the need for improved communication.

Additionally, the need for longitudinal office planning and evaluation can be logically concluded from the findings that indicate that reviewed offices were deficient in long-term strategic planning, developing and maintaining accurate local policy, and conducting internal reviews regularly.

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Investigation and Report Writing

In an examination of pretrial services investigations and report writing, there was evidence that the areas of pretrial service report content and pretrial diversion were most problematic for the reviewed districts. However, due to the relatively limited number of pretrial diversions that most districts conduct, the pretrial services reports seemed worthy of more attention.

The results indicate that errors in the written report (appropriate summary of the pretrial services interview, risk assessment, and recommendation) were cited in approximately 21 percent of all reviews. Errors included failing to complete required sections of the report, including extraneous information, and excluding pertinent information. However, despite this high incidence of erroneous report content, only 13.5 percent of all recommendations to the court were critical of the office’s practice. Similarly, a relatively low rate of erroneous risk assessment was uncovered when compared to the higher rate of report content issues.

Of particular note within this section is that despite the highest levels of total recommendations, a greater concentration of these recommendations was found. Thus, the “other” category is lower in this section than in any other. ([Table 2](#))

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Supervision

Compared to other recommendation groups within this category, the timely submission and review of Individual Case Supervision Plans (ICSPs) was lacking in 22.5 percent of all reports reviewed ([Table 3](#)). Given such a high incidence, there may be cause for concern over the appropriate use of this document. Although it is meant to be a guide to proactive and dynamic supervision, these data suggest that almost one-quarter of all districts reviewed are not correctly implementing this tool.

Despite this fact, reviewers reported that risk was properly addressed in over 90 percent of the districts reviewed. In fact, the relatively routine tasks comprising pretrial supervision (ensuring that record checks are performed every 90 days, conducting routine home visits, and documenting case activity in a chronological record) seem to be more problematic than implementing strategies to mitigate the risks of nonappearance and/or danger that federal defendants pose while under community supervision.

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Location Monitoring

Location monitoring was identified as having the highest level of policy non-compliance when examining routinized tasks. In many of the cases reviewed, location monitoring officers regularly failed to address all electronic location alerts and/or failed to document the course of action taken to address the risk posed. Additionally, file maintenance and conducting monthly home visits ranked equally low in policy compliance among the districts reviewed.

Location monitoring also had the highest proportion of “other” variables. Perhaps this is because these programs are often administered by relatively few individuals in each office with significant technical expertise. This limited administration may sometimes disallow managerial personnel and other officers from fully comprehending the scope and requirements of the program. Many issues, such as ensuring the appropriate use of location monitoring, policy development, and program implementation, might be resolved through a wider understanding of the nature of location monitoring supervision. ([Table 4](#))

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Officer Safety

The development and/or maintenance of local officer safety policy in accordance with national standards is the highest proportional value in any category. In the majority of districts reviewed, offices had failed to establish a formal policy or update their existing policy to fully incorporate important standards, such as the Director’s Regulations governing the use of Oleoresin Capsicum or Firearms.

As has been noted elsewhere in this article, adequate record keeping also comprises a relatively high proportion of the recommendations. Most common in the area of officer safety was the office’s failure to document the type and frequency of firearms and safety training that officers had undertaken. Another common inadequacy was the absence from the records of the exact scores for each officer during firearms training.

Many of the recommendations were related to general office safety rather than officer safety. These recommendations included the installment of duress alarms, providing limited defensive tactics training to clerical staff, and offering first aid and CPR training to all staff. ([Table 5](#))

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Contract Administration

The trend of reviewer recommendations on proper documentation extends to contract administration as well. Here, recommendations mainly addressed deficiencies relating to documenting “piggy-backing” upon contracts of the U.S. probation office and appropriately completing and distributing all forms required by national standard. Additionally, reviewers in some cases focused on budgetary records to ensure that contracts were adequately fulfilled.

Although they do not constitute the highest proportion of recommendations, the related tasks of ensuring the proper management and oversight of the solicitation, contract, and service are cause for concern in this category. Together, approximately one-third of all recommendations fit within these managerial duties of the contracting officer(s).

Similar to district practice with location monitoring, contract administration is typically performed by a few highly specialized and trained individuals. Therefore, it is not surprising to see a high proportion of unconcentrated recommendations related to contracts. ([Table 6](#))

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Identified Variables

Approximately 66 percent of reports indicated that the judiciary in the reviewed district was satisfied with the level of service provided by the pretrial services office. The remaining one-third of reviews did not characterize the judicial officers’ contentedness with the work performed by the offices. Nearly all recommendations cataloged were considered critical of the office’s performance. Although many districts attempted to justify their failure to meet national standards by claiming that deficiencies resulted from local judicial rule, no formal rule had been established in almost all cases. Instead, offices and judicial officers were relying on traditional practices within the district.

There was no identifiable correlation between the size of an office’s staff (or AWUs) and the number of recommendations it received from reviewers. However, combined offices and separate offices received approximately an equivalent level of scrutiny from the review teams after the discard of probation-related recommendations. Also, in 37 of the offices reviewed, the management structure was described as traditional hierarchical.

A median analysis revealed that the chief pretrial services/probation officer of the reviewed offices had been in place for 18 months. This suggests that offices are most likely to be reviewed during times of transition to a new chief pretrial services/probation officer. It is worth noting, however, that the length of the current chief pretrial services/probation officer’s term could be obtained from only 14 of the 44 reports.

The reports identified outside agencies as non-cooperative in achieving the mission of pretrial services in five of the reviewed districts. In all cases, the federal public defender’s office was identified as inhibiting access to defendants by requiring the presence of defense counsel at the initial pretrial services interview. This presence was required to ensure that the legal rights of the defendant were protected during this interview and to ensure that the defendant did not implicate himself or herself in the instant offense behavior. Although permitted by local judicial rule in all cases, this practice was identified by the review teams as limiting the defendant’s potential for admission to bond.

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Implications for Practice and Future Policy Development

Overall, the findings of this study are encouraging and are generally consistent with the Strategic Assessment of Federal Probation and Pretrial Services System conducted in 2004. Results suggest that reviewers perceive that offices are performing the key functions of supervision and investigation with high proficiency in approximately 75 to 80 percent of the districts reviewed. Additionally, these data indicate that the judiciary in two-thirds of the districts examined were satisfied with the level of service provided by the pretrial services office. Thus, it can be logically concluded that national policy is being faithfully executed in these districts.

In an attempt to enhance service to the court and to accomplish the field's mission of "assisting in the fair administration of justice, protecting the community and bringing about long-term positive change" (www.uscourts.gov), the findings of this study should be incorporated into policy development and field practice. Although this incorporation could take numerous forms, the following recommendations are meant to guide administrators, managers, and officers in addressing areas most in need of attention. A synthesis of the findings of this study reveals four focal areas for enhancement: 1) managerial practice, 2) development of a systemic perspective, 3) oversight and assessment, and 4) incorporation of evidence-based practice.

Thematic evidence in these data reveal the need for enhanced managerial practice to advance the mission of the pretrial services system. Primarily, greater efforts should be made to develop local policy and to communicate this policy and other expectations to all staff and outside agencies. Coordination and inclusive management practices are necessary among all pretrial services personnel as well as all investigative and court personnel to achieve the fair administration of justice and to protect the rights of criminal defendants. A more comprehensive understanding of the tasks to be accomplished and the legal requirements (or basis) of those tasks would help to assure that the spirit of the Pretrial Services Act and the Bail Reform Act of 1984 remain intact.

A second factor that should be addressed is the strategic planning that is inherently linked to policy development and communication. Districts cannot develop and implement policy without a purposeful and widely distributed organizational plan ([Fung 2006](#)). Further, communicating with office staff and seeking input from all organizational levels is necessary for staff to invest more in the office's product and direction as well as to ensure that pertinent issues are taken into consideration during the planning stage. All levels of the organization will benefit from this planning, which should be undertaken to ensure the future stability of each locally administered office.

The second focal area is the need to develop a systemic perspective that is best defined as a method of viewing organizational behavior in which all pieces of that organization maintain interconnectedness ([Senge 1990](#)). Although the development of a systemic perspective is closely linked to policy development and strategic planning, this second focal area requires additional education and training of administrators, managers, officers, and support staff. This advanced training is required so that legislators, policy makers, and office staff have a clear understanding of the implications of their actions upon the environments and actions of others in the organization.

Without this clear understanding, disconnectedness develops among pretrial services staff, outside agencies, the judiciary, and administrators. This disconnectedness prohibits the meaningful achievement of any agency's goal, or else permits the achievement of one agency's goals at the expense of another agency. The resulting inefficiency and ineffectiveness often creates unproductive tension among agencies that further inhibits goal attainment ([Vince & Saleem 2004](#)).

Additional training at the national and local levels can help combat these destructive elements. Such training should encourage open and honest communication among multiple agencies and highlight the interconnectedness of the system. Specifically, the training should explicitly

demonstrate how each facet (e.g., investigation, supervision, location monitoring, contracting, data quality) of the pretrial services system can greatly affect outcomes and organizational function. This training should be offered to all officers and office staff on a continuous basis. Similarly, in the spirit of the development of a systemic perspective and enhancing communication, this training should incorporate numerous agencies in order to educate their personnel on the unique challenges and requirements of the pretrial services function.

Third, despite the importance of maintaining local court autonomy, our system needs to better instill national standards to ensure the fair administration of justice. However, a lack of standardization among the review reports clearly limits the ability of this study to make confident cross-district comparisons. This obfuscation significantly limits the usefulness of the district reviews as a system-wide assessment tool, as all results are localized to the district reviewed.

A more formal review policy at the national level would help address these concerns. This policy should clearly delineate the required sections of an office's functions to be reviewed and should firmly establish valid and reliable review report structure. Additionally, annual publication of the results of these reviews, with identifying characteristics removed, would enable the entire pretrial services system to benefit from the review of each district.

At the district level, offices would benefit from developing locally-appropriate assessment policies and performing regular internal audits that ensure policy compliance and the meeting of basic standards. Expanded self-assessment processes would help in all areas examined in this study.

The final area of focus, the incorporation of evidence-based practices, stems from the proposed direction of the field as well as from the intended purpose of the program reviews. Although the overwhelming majority of the recommendations reviewed for this study were critical in nature, the intended purpose of the review is to identify and affirm positive practices as well. Clearly, the review teams are in a unique position to encounter and publicize results-based, innovative programming that addresses the goals of the pretrial services system.

Once these programs are identified, they may be subjected to academic review for formal validation. Such academic study would help develop a better understanding of the causal factors that contribute to each program's success. When synthesized, these factors would form the basic programmatic foundations for the correct and thorough development, implementation, and evaluation of EBP. Such study might also enlighten our understanding of all that is yet to be examined in the field of pretrial services.

To be sure, the correct administration and evaluation of innovative programming depends upon the district's expert performance of basic functions. Thus, effective and inclusive management practices, an enhanced appreciation for the systemic perspective, and further oversight and assessment are key to instituting such programs. Therefore, the importance of the district reviews as both critical and affirmatory tools cannot be overstated. To take full advantage of these reviews, however, further study should be undertaken to better identify which process factors most impact the pretrial services phase of the criminal justice system.

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Limitations

Limitations in this study were many. First, the manner in which the reports were organized as well as the substance of these reports varied widely among review teams. Also, these review teams consisted of many different members, with no clear pattern of selection and only some overlap. Similarly, the involvement of many AO staff members caused extensive variety on the reports.

This lack of standardization obviously diminishes the credibility of cross-district comparison. Although the use of standardized instruments during the reviews enhanced the validity of data gathered, the variance created by the incorporation of numerous reviewers and team leaders should be minimized in future review and research.

Second, developments in the past decade have impacted the nature of the field of federal pretrial services. Examples of such changes include the development and implementation of the National Training Academy for federal probation and pretrial services officers, enhanced emphasis on strategic planning, multiple modifications to the uses and parameters of the PACTS database, and technological innovations. As the reviews examined spanned all of these significant alterations, the impact of each new factor could not be determined. Thus, future study should examine the relationship between these significant changes and their impact upon the field.

A final limitation can be attributed to the nature of the pretrial services system. As each court is individually administered, varying offices differ in their practices. Although this variance was controlled to some degree in this study through the use of a limited content analysis, the generalizability of the findings of this study remain somewhat suspect. As such, attributing these findings to offices that were not reviewed should be performed with caution.

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Conclusions

The findings of this study provide a current assessment of the quality of pretrial services administration based on district reviews. The results suggest that planning, local policy development, and enhanced documentation and record keeping are the areas most in need of attention. As combined and separate offices were examined, many of these findings would apply to combined probation offices as well. With regard to the core pretrial services functions of investigation and supervision of federal defendants, the field would benefit from enhancing the quality of officers' written reports' content and structuring supervision in a dynamic and proactive manner.

Undoubtedly, if the pretrial services field plans to continue embracing evidence-based practices, substantial research will be necessary to identify problematic areas, develop innovative programming, assess the quality of program implementation, and evaluate the effectiveness of these programs. Similarly, the role of organizational dynamics in pretrial services should be thoroughly assessed. This research, combined with many further studies, should allow for more comprehensive understanding and clearer direction for policy makers, practitioners, and researchers.

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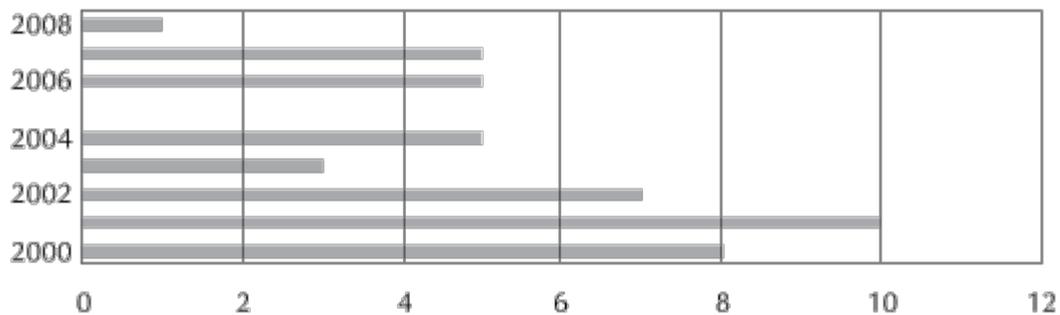
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Table 1.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
	96	100.0%
Enhancing of Communication	33	34.3%
Developing and Maintenance of Local Policy	19	19.5%
Incorporating/Formalizing Strategic Planning	14	14.5%
Ensuring Training Needs are Met	7	7.3%
Performing Internal Reviews Regularly	6	6.3%
Other	17	17.7%

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Table 2.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
	215	100.0%
Pretrial Services Report Content	46	21.4%
Pretrial Diversion Policy and Investigation	46	21.4%
Verification of Reported Information	36	16.7%
Completion of Interview in Accordance with Standard	34	15.8%

Submission of Appropriate Recommendations	29	13.5%
Clinical and Actuarial Risk Assessment	16	7.4%
Other	8	3.7%

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Table 3.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
	173	100.0%
Timely and Correct Completion and Submission of Individual Case Supervision Plan	39	22.5%
Properly Conducting and Documenting the Post Release Intake Interview	23	13%
Appropriate Documentation of Case Activity	18	10.4%
Performance of Home Visits and Assessments	18	10.4%
Routine Check of Criminal History	18	10.4%
Notification of Court Personnel (judicial officer, U.S. attorney, defense counsel) of Case Activity	16	9.2%
Individualized Clinical and Actuarial Assessment	16	9.2%
Other	25	14.5%

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Table 4.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
	64	100.0%
Verification of All Location Alerts and Documentation of Action Taken to Ensure Defendant Compliance	17	26.6%
Ensuring a Monthly Home Visit is Conducted	13	20.3%
Maintaining All File Material According to Standard	13	20.3%
Development of a Co-Pay Policy	4	6.3%
Other	17	26.6%

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Table 5.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
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	55	100.0%
Formulation and/or Maintenance of Local Office Safety Policy	26	47.3%
Documentation of Officer Firearm Training and Safety Training	15	27.3%
Provide Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and First-Aid Training Regularly	6	10.9%
Installation of Duress Alarms in the Office	5	9.1%
Other	3	5.5%

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Table 6.

Focus of Recommendation	Total Recommendations	Percentage
	97	100.0%
Ensuring Proper Documentation of Contract Requirements Per National Standards	24	24.7%
Enhancing Oversight of the Vendors	15	15.5%
Assuring Individualized Treatment Plans are Submitted to Vendors	14	14.4%
Managing the Contractual Process	13	13.4%
Developing a Co-Pay Policy	9	9.3%
Ensuring that the Chain of Custody of Maintained	5	5.2%
Other	17	17.5%

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