

Who Cares What Offenders Think? New Insight from Offender Surveys

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AS COMMUNITY CORRECTIONS professionals, should we care about how offenders perceive us? The research demonstrates that focusing simply on the officer/offender relationship generally does not reduce offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2003; Trotter, 1996). However, in one critical study, officers who made use of open and warm communication skills and demonstrated mutual respect with offenders had greatly improved recidivism outcomes—the offenders they supervised were half as likely to return to prison as those offenders who were supervised by officers who did not use those skills (Trotter, 1996). The importance of the officer/offender relationship was first identified as part of a larger set of skills called core correctional practices (Andrews and Kiessling, 1980; Andrews and Carvell, 1998). Core correctional practices include: 1) the effective use of authority, 2) anti-criminal modeling and reinforcement, 3) problem solving, 4) use of community resources, and 5) the quality of interpersonal relationship between staff and client. Andrews and Kiessling argued that a positive relationship between the officer and offender is necessary for other core correctional practices to be effective; however, a relationship alone does not reduce recidivism. According to Dr. Faye Taxman, "the glue of this [change] process is deportment or the manner of being between the offender and officer" (Taxman, 2002). This positive relationship is "necessary but not sufficient to bring about behavioral change" (Spiegler and Guevremont, 1998).

How are we to gauge our relationships with offenders and determine whether the relationships support the behavioral change process? One easy approach is through offender surveys that directly inquire about the offenders' experiences. Client "satisfaction surveys" have long been associated with effective correctional programs (Gendreau and Andrews, 1994 & 2002; Lowenkamp, 2004; Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2005). Given the importance of administering client satisfaction surveys, the Office of Probation and Pretrial Services (OPPS), Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts developed a short survey to be completed by offenders on post-conviction supervision (Whetzel, 2010).

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Survey Administration

In 2009 two districts, New York Western (NYW) and Kentucky Western (KYW), piloted an offender survey developed by OPPS. The OPPS survey was based in part on input from various districts that had previously surveyed their offenders. In the OPPS survey, offenders were asked

to respond to each of the following statements:

1. My probation officer is firm but fair
2. My probation officer is a positive role model
3. My probation officer helps me to learn how to solve my problems
4. My probation officer helps to arrange various services for me
5. My probation officer assists me in securing employment
6. My probation officer communicates with me openly and respectfully
7. My probation officer helps to motivate me
8. My probation officer includes my family in my supervision
9. Being on supervision has had a positive effect on my life
10. My probation officer frequently meets me in my community
11. My probation officer is involved in my substance abuse or mental health treatment
12. When I do the right thing, my probation officer acknowledges it

Offenders had to answer using a five-point Likert scale with the following choices: Strongly Agree, Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Offenders could also provide commentary. To conduct the survey, Kentucky Western mailed the questions to 300 randomly selected offenders; the response rate was 30 percent. In New York Western, offenders were asked to complete the surveys while in the waiting room. Officers were not involved in the completion of the surveys. In January 2011 the Northern District of Texas also conducted the survey using Survey Monkey, sending the survey link to 445 offenders who submit their monthly reports electronically. In all, 372 offenders completed the survey: 97 from KYW, 146 from NYW, and 129 from TXN.

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Results

All three districts were pleasantly surprised by their results. Taken together, the survey data showed that 96 percent of the offenders strongly agreed or agreed that their officers were "firm but fair," a term coined by Andrews and Kiessling that summarized the effective use of authority. The qualitative data, i.e., offenders' commentary, was also overwhelmingly positive. While some offenders used the survey as an opportunity to criticize their officers, the vast majority expressed appreciation for the support their officers were providing.

TX-N has made use of the information in several different ways, including sharing it with judges and preparing PowerPoint slideshows of the outcomes to show on television screens in the offender waiting area. Where an offender provided specific positive comments and identified the officer, their comments were sent to the officer and the officer's supervisors. According to Northern District of Texas Deputy Chief Jerry Ritchie, that was "quite a positive shot in the arm for many officers." The survey data will also be used in the district's external website and in the district annual report.

The [aggregate data](#) from all three districts (KYW, NYW, TXN) is presented below.

An impressive 96 percent of offenders indicated that their officer was firm but fair. Consider the following offender comments: "my PO is very good at what he does and has seen me go through a lot during this time. He has been proud of me when I've done well and, when I've messed up, he was stern but didn't treat me poorly or make me feel bad about myself"; and "I just want to say that my PO is by the book, takes no crap, but he truly cares." In the research literature, offenders on supervision are considered a type of "involuntary client," that is, they are

receiving assistance and direction from the probation officer, but not of their own volition (Trotter, 1996). In order to establish a productive "therapeutic alliance" between the offender and the probation officer, officers must be authoritative (but not authoritarian) and clearly define their own and the offenders' roles (Skeem et al., 2007). The effective use of authority requires officers to "explicate the formal rules associated within the correctional setting such that they are made more visible, understandable, and unambiguous" (Dowden and Andrews 2004).

Eighty-nine percent of offenders "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that their probation officers were positive role models, i.e., offering what Andrews and Kiessling would call "anti-criminal modeling." The concept of "PO as offender role model" has not been traditionally discussed or integrated into new officer training, where officer behavior is typically discussed in relation to professional conduct as officers of the court, not as models for anti-criminal behavior. Consider these comments: "My experience with the probation officers has been very positive. Good people with a level head and common sense. The interaction that I have experienced has been a very positive one. They have been courteous, friendly and responsive"; and "My PO sets an example that all probation officers should follow: returns phone calls promptly, shows concern, pleasant voice. She is a good example...." This is critical, as Trotter (1996) notes the impact that prosocial modeling has on involuntary clients.

Offenders are indeed *involuntary* clients and are frequently advised that failure to participate in the supervision process will lead to negative consequences. In such a relationship, it is all too easy for officers to assert their authority excessively and to fail to treat offenders with respect. Consistent with core correctional practices, officers must "avoid interpersonal domination or abuse" (Dowden and Andrews, 2004). Fortunately, over 95 percent of offenders in these surveys reported that their officers communicate with them openly and respectfully. What we may fail to realize, however, is that such a rapport with an offender is a necessary precondition for enhancing an offender's intrinsic motivation to change. The following offender quote reflects this effectively.

I have had several officers throughout the years and I must say that personally, it makes a huge difference in my attitude and behavior, when I am treated like an equal, or at least not talked down to... When I am treated like a productive and equal member of society, it makes me want to act like one, and make my PO proud.

The data show that offenders strongly agree or agree that officers assist with problem solving (81 percent), motivate them (83 percent), and acknowledge their successes (85 percent). "My PO has helped me learn how to solve problems, motivates me and always acknowledges when I do the right thing." All three of these behaviors reflect the use of core correctional practices.

The use of offender surveys marks a new level of engagement in the supervision process. Understanding that offenders' probability of success is enhanced through the use of evidence-based core correctional practices compels us to integrate them into our everyday involvement. The new STARR program (Supervision Techniques Aimed at Reducing Re-Arrest) is built on the same core correctional practices highlighted in the offender survey. To become an evidence-based system, perhaps the first lesson we must learn is that our effectiveness as change agents depends, to some degree, upon us, on who we are and how we treat offenders. The offender survey is a good place to start.

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Tables

Table 1.

Responses to Survey Questions

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Median
My PO is firm but fair	61%	35%	3%	1%	1%	1
My PO is a positive role model	46%	43%	7%	3%	1%	2
My PO helps me learn how to solve problems	33%	48%	13%	5%	1%	2
My PO helps to arrange various services for me	31%	49%	15%	3%	2%	2
My PO assists me in securing employment	22%	47%	22%	7%	2%	2
My PO communicated with me openly and respectfully	59%	36%	2%	2%	1%	1
My PO helps to motivate me	35%	48%	13%	3%	2%	2
My PO includes my family in my supervision	32%	43%	15%	8%	2%	2
Being on supervision has had a positive effect on my life	35%	39%	15%	6%	5%	2
My PO frequently meets me in my community	31%	56%	7%	5%	1%	2
MY PO is involved in my SA or MH treatment	27%	46%	18%	6%	4%	2
When I do the right thing my PO acknowledges it	48%	37%	10%	4%	1%	2

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