

A Review of Probation Home Visits: What Do We Know?

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HOME VISITS ARE an important yet understudied component of probation. Historically a cornerstone of probation (Lindner, 1992a), home visits provide an opportunity for probation officers to have quality contact with a client in his or her personal environment. This type of less formal interaction between offenders and their assigned officers serves not only to monitor behavior and compliance with the case plan but also to provide often-needed direction towards treatment and social services. Furthermore, though time consuming (see DeMichele, 2007), these visits allow the probation officer additional opportunities to act as a positive role model (see Braswell, 1989). Although home visits are seen as a critical tool employed by probation officers, recent evidence demonstrates that home visits are rarely conducted (see Jalbert, Rhodes, Flygare, & Kane, 2010), even for high-risk offenders who might benefit from them the most. Research on current home visit practices and policies is lacking. Knowledge about current goals of home visits, best practices, and anticipated outcomes associated with home visits is not well documented. Further, information on the qualitative nature of the home visit (Taxman, 2002) and whether these interactions have any effect on offender recidivism is scarce and out of date. Because there are costs (such as probation officer time and safety risks) associated with conducting field work, we need to understand the role of home visits in modern probation agencies and determine

best practices of how they should be implemented to meet intended goals.

This article highlights the historical importance of home visits as a key element of probation and suggests future avenues to inform the field about their full potential and utility. First, we provide a brief overview of the history of probation in the criminal justice system. Second, we outline how probation has evolved over the last century to encompass not only low-risk offenders, but also those at higher risk of recidivating and violating public safety, discussing how home visits are applicable to this population. We conclude with a discussion of gaps in our knowledge on home visits and how the field can move forward by addressing these voids in the literature and research.

A Brief History of Probation: From Rehabilitation to Crime Control and Back Again?

The use of probation can be traced to religious rites of ancient times. Such practices as right to sanctuary (Bianchi, 1994) and benefit of clergy (Levinson, 2002) were precursors to judicial reprieve (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2012), a widespread practice in nineteenth century England. Under English common law, convicted offenders could request suspended sentences; at the judges' discretion, their sentences would be put on hold for a specified length of time during which they had to exhibit good behavior. At the expiration of the

term, those who behaved appropriately were eligible to apply to the Crown for a pardon (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2012).

Rather than specifying a period of time during which offenders should remain crime free, American judges retained discretion to suspend sentences indefinitely. As long as offenders behaved in accordance with the law, they would not be punished; however, offenders who committed new crimes were subject to punishment for both the original and new offenses (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2012). The Supreme Court put an end to the practice of judicial reprieve in 1916 with *Ex parte United States*, 242 U.S. 27, ruling that indefinite suspension of punishment encroached on the powers of the government to enforce the rule of law and was, therefore, unconstitutional. However, the need for probationary sentences remained and the practice of recognizance emerged as less controversial.

Recognizance allowed judges to develop informal ways of exercising discretion and mitigate the harshness of common sentences by exacting more individualized punishments. Rather than holding all offenders in custody until a future court date, judges allowed some offenders to reside in their communities after extracting a promise that they perform a particular act, such as keep the peace, pay a debt, or return to court at an appointed time (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2012). Massachusetts was the first state to formalize this practice in 1837 by making recognizance with money sureties

into law. Under the new law, offenders who were granted recognizance would post a sum of money as surety that they would fulfill their promise to the court (e.g., pay a debt, return to court). If they complied, the money was returned, like modern-day bail (Clear, Cole, & Reisig, 2012).

The practices of judicial reprieve and recognizance, as well as their forerunners, paved the way for modern probation. Each of the practices reviewed above moved closer to a more flexible sentencing mechanism than the one before it, so that the next logical step was to formalize individualized punishment of offenders, including opportunities to visit with offenders in less formal settings such as the home. A boot maker from Massachusetts was the first person to take that step in 1841.

John Augustus, a religious man of financial means, believed that offenders could be rehabilitated and that offenders' time was better spent on activities that promoted positive change rather than in prison or jail (MacKenzie, 2011). Augustus had some experience working with alcoholics, and through his philanthropic activities he was an observer of the Boston Police Court when a man charged with being a common drunk appeared before the judge (Petersilia, 1998). Augustus asked the judge to defer sentencing and release the man into his custody for three weeks. He took the man into his home, made him sign a pledge to stop drinking, and helped him obtain employment (MacKenzie, 2011). Once the three weeks had elapsed, Augustus convinced the judge that the man was reformed and no longer deserving of punishment; the man received a nominal fine and the case was closed (MacKenzie, 2011).

Over the next 15 years, using his own money and donations from other Boston residents, Augustus posted bail for and supervised more than 1,800 people processed in the Boston courts, including 30 children (Binder, Geis, & Bruce, 1997). Augustus also offered support in multiple life domains, such as housing, employment, and education (Petersilia, 1998). Law enforcement was initially resistant to Augustus' ideas about helping offenders (Klein, 1997). At the time, some police and court officers were only paid when offenders were incarcerated; for them, Augustus' activities translated to lost wages. Over time, however, judges accepted that not all offenders needed to be incarcerated and that some offenders could actually benefit from Augustus' personalized, close-contact work with them (Klein, 1997).

Augustus carefully selected his candidates. He tended towards first-time offenders that he believed could be rehabilitated, people "whose hearts," he wrote in his autobiography, "were not wholly depraved but gave promise of better things" (Petersilia, 1998: 32). Thus were born the concepts of risk assessment and classification (MacKenzie, 2011). Augustus' selection criteria and comprehensive approach were successful: Only one of his first 1,100 charges forfeited bond (Petersilia, 1998).

Augustus' work served as the model for modern probation; however, just as probation changed over time, so did the role of the probation officer. The nature of probation and probation officers themselves has vacillated between law enforcement and social work perspectives. Early probation officers were, like John Augustus, volunteers. They were often recruited from churches or other religious groups and leaned towards the social-work end of the spectrum. Though probation officers had the power to be coercive, they rarely used it. Instead, officers viewed their role as a therapeutic one designed to help probationers live law-abiding lives by providing counseling and connections to relevant community services and treatment programs (MacKenzie, 2011), often in the context of the home. This social-work perspective of probation aligned with the philosophy of the Progressive era. However, as the use of probation increased and with it officer caseloads, the law-enforcement perspective of probation began to overtake the social-work perspective.

Jurisdictions began to create paid probation officer positions, and the first paid probation officers tended to be ex-law enforcement officers such as sheriffs and policemen who worked directly for judges (Petersilia, 1998). As a result, probation officers became the "eyes and ears of the local court" and adopted a decidedly law-enforcement approach to supervising probationers (Rothman, 1980: 244). They focused on the offense rather than on the offender, stressing the role of authority and strict adherence to the law (MacKenzie, 2011) rather than rehabilitative endeavors that helped the client. Regardless, the social-work emphasis of probation prevailed and remained largely unchallenged until the 1970s.

Despite receiving a ringing endorsement from President Johnson in the late 1960s, the rehabilitative goals of corrections in general and probation in particular came under fire in the 1970s leading to system-wide change in the 1980s (President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of

Justice, 1967; MacKenzie, 2011). Discouraging research findings, growing probation populations without a corresponding increase in probation budgets, and a call to get tough on crime shifted the focus of probation from rehabilitation to control and surveillance (Byrne, Lurigio, & Petersilia, 1992; Tonry, 1990). Amid growing caseloads, officers devoted less time to counseling and service provision. Instead, supervision activities were designed to keep the offenders in check, carefully monitoring new offenses and violations of the terms of supervision (Tonry, 1990; MacKenzie, 2011). Home visits continued, but began to support surveillance and crime control goals over rehabilitative ones. However, in recent years, and as is the cyclical nature of corrections philosophy, the focus of probation has once again turned toward rehabilitation in this era of evidence-based practice.

In fact, a growing body of research suggests that correctional paradigms focused on control and punishment are far from effective. Rather, successful programs that have demonstrated effectiveness incorporate human service elements, much like the social-work perspective on probation (MacKenzie, 2011). As a result we have witnessed a surge in research and investigations focused on determining "what works" in corrections. However, we still do not know much about the field work practice of home visits, leading to the question: *In the modern era, is the practice of home visits by probation officers important to the goals of public safety and offender rehabilitation?*

The Role of Home Visits in Supporting Probation Goals

Probation serves the dual purpose of seeking to ensure public safety and the rehabilitation of the offender (Lindner, 1992a). Home visits are one component of probation that may help achieve both purposes, since such visits can provide rehabilitation opportunities that can increase the effectiveness of community supervision (see Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005). Under a crime control model and consistent with the goals of supervision, home visits are frequently regarded as an additional tool for monitoring probationers. However, as noted earlier, modern probation originated as a means for law-abiding citizens to develop personal relationships with offenders and provide social services using a casework management model (see Burnett & McNeill, 2005; Lindner, 1992a). Home visits are ideal for this goal of probation, because they provide probation

officers with insight into offenders' personal lives and needs (e.g., housing, social support).

In the early 1900s, personal contacts with clients were considered a fundamental component of probation (Lindner, 1992a). Over time, and particularly in the late 1970s when Martinson (1974) proclaimed that nothing worked in corrections, the criminal justice system lost its footing in social services and embraced a crime-control model focused on supervision. However, personal contacts such as home visits remain the primary way for a probation officer to monitor offender behavior through supervision (Sieh, 2003); they also offer certain advantages over office visits as a means to provide mentoring and direction to appropriate services (Lindner, 1992a). Unlike face-to-face contacts held in the probation office, home visits provide a more relaxed environment that may foster personal relationships between offender and probation officer (Braswell, 1989; Wood, 2007).

Expansion of Probation to Higher-Risk Offenders: Retaining a Role for Home Visits

While visiting with offenders in a home setting began with Augustus as a way to encourage rehabilitative efforts, home visits are currently reserved for offenders with the highest risk of recidivating, who may also have the greatest rehabilitation needs. Furthermore, these interactions are frequently a component of probation for offenders assigned to intensive supervision probation (ISP). ISP programs were created as one way to reduce skyrocketing incarceration rates in the 1980s, decrease spending on prisons, and (most relevant to home visits) control criminal offending (see Petersilia & Turner, 1993b). With incarceration rates rapidly increasing over the past few decades (Blumstein & Beck, 1999; Carson & Sabol, 2012), intermediate sanctions such as ISP were heralded as a cost-effective solution aimed at curbing the prison population while meting out proportional punishment (Tonry, 1990). Rather than incarcerate high-risk offenders, ISP retains offenders in the community under more stringent supervision than traditional probation. ISP programs typically consist of reduced caseloads for probation officers to allow them time for increased supervision using in-person contacts, including home visits, and enforcement of probation conditions.

Researchers have noted that ISP can result in an increased number of violations, particularly technical violations, over traditional

probation because of the intensive supervision component (Petersilia & Turner, 1993a). This is particularly true in the case of home visits, which are often unannounced and can serve to "catch" probationers in violation of conditions of community supervision. However, in accordance with the traditional purposes of probation, ISP does not, and should not, be reserved to increased surveillance. In 2004, Petersilia noted that ISPs "must deliver high 'doses' of both treatment and surveillance to assure public safety and reduce recidivism" (p. 497; emphasis in original). Indeed, research by Gendreau, Goggin, and Fulton (2000) demonstrates that ISP programs that combine surveillance with treatment have increased reductions in recidivism. Therefore, a balanced approach would better serve probationers and protect public safety in the long run. As such, the probation field could view home visits and other in-person contacts as a means to broker social services and promote rehabilitation efforts while also conducting law enforcement-oriented field work. Moreover, home visits offer a rare opportunity for probation officers to observe offenders in their intimate environments and how they interact with family members and other persons in their support system. These observations can also provide insight into offender needs that could be met with social services or treatment. Participation in such programs could reduce the likelihood of recidivism but also foster positive relationships and support in the lives of offenders who need them the most.

Addressing Gaps in Our Knowledge about Home Visits

As reviewed in the previous section, we know that home visits are more likely to be used for higher-risk offenders. However, much about home visits with probationers is not well documented. A review of the literature and research suggests several avenues for future inquiry and debate. In the early 1990s, Lindner (1992b) provided an in-depth overview of home visitation while cautioning that shifts in policies from rehabilitation to punishment over recent decades might eventually lead to the demise of this long-standing practice. Although his prediction has yet to come true, and rehabilitation is not dead (Cullen, 2005), there remains a paucity of research focusing on the utility of home visits and whether they serve offenders and probation officers well. It is possible that the lack of research on home

visits is due, in part, to the dearth of studies examining the role of case management in both addressing offender service needs and reducing recidivism (Taxman, 2002; Taxman, Shepardson, & Bello, 2003). Furthermore, as Bonta and colleagues (2008) submit, efforts in community supervision are more likely turned towards monitoring and surveillance rather than treatment and less focused on the quality or type of in-person contact than the quantity of that interaction. Drakeford's (1992) work on home visits underscores what was then a fairly recent shift towards control by depicting what he saw as the demise of the home visit and the slow decline of probation's social work function. Home visits, however, should not be discounted until they have been subject to rigorous scientific inquiry to determine their value to the core functions of probation: supervision and rehabilitation. In this section, we address areas for future research that, based on our review of the literature and research, could improve our understanding of home visits and whether they meet the needs and goals of probationers and probation officers.

Officer and Offender Goals for Home Visits

Researchers and practitioners would both benefit from an understanding of officers' and offenders' goals for home visits (DeMichele & Payne, 2007) and how best to gain probation officer buy-in if the probation agency promotes home visits (see Petersilia, 1990). These are the first critical steps in unpacking the importance of home visits in probation. Additionally, understanding the relationship aspect of home visits and the development of informal social bonds between offender and probation officer would greatly inform the field (see Braswell, 1989).

When examining the dynamics of probation, the focus often rests on whether probationers recidivate and what covariates predict recidivism (e.g., offense history) or on probation officers' caseload, fatigue, stress, and monitoring efforts in detecting technical violations or rearrest. All of these are primarily probation officer goals. However, from a client-centered perspective, the question of what home visits do for offenders must also be answered. Evidence suggests that offenders understand how crucial contact with their officer can be to the successful completion of their probation terms. Partridge (2004) discusses how beneficial these contacts are to offenders, especially during the first few

months on community supervision. These contacts, the author argues, help to bolster the officer-client relationship by increasing the offender's trust in his or her probation officer and opening the channels of communication that promote a healthier approach to the probation sentence. Contact between the officer and probationers can be improved through quality home visits, yet as Rothman (1980) indicates, home visitation policies are often not followed or are cursory (e.g., a drive-by verification of home address), thus hindering the rehabilitative effects of such visits on the offender. How home visits can simultaneously achieve goals relevant to probationers and probation officers is understudied, but such research could inform home visit practices.

Opening the "Black Box" of Home Visits

Anecdotal evidence suggests that home visits are ineffective and waste valuable resources (see Lindner, 1992a for a review). However, much remains to be learned about the nature of in-person contacts between probation officers and their clients (Seiter & West, 2003). Taxman (2002: 14) states that "the nature and activities of supervision are often considered inconsequential to effectiveness." The same may be said of casework and social services brokered by probation officers. However, these sentiments are unfounded without proper evaluation and an understanding of how probation officers conceive of and implement both supervision and social services in the field. Further, we have failed to uncover the "black box" of home visits or other elements of intensive supervision probation in general (see Byrne, 1990). We know that the use of home visits varies on multiple dimensions, but we do not have empirical evidence documenting these differences.

One clear conclusion that emerges from the extant research efforts is that contact between the offender and probation officer must be meaningful and not only a means of check-in or exchange of information concerning the offender's employment or housing status (Taxman, 2002). But reliable and consistent data are needed in order to move beyond the mechanical supervision context of visits. Data are needed on the length and frequency (e.g., dosage) of home visits, the qualitative nature of what occurs during a home visit, probationers' and probation officers' goals for these encounters, and whether they are accomplishing the overarching goals of probation.

Effectiveness of Home Visits

After determining what practices constitute a home visit, we need to examine whether home visits are effective, and, if so, what makes them effective. MacKenzie and colleagues (1999) echo this sentiment by cautioning that probation may reduce recidivism; however, we lack the evidence to determine what precisely about probation makes it effective. We know so little about home visits that it is difficult to assess their value without in-depth inquiry and investigation. Foremost, it is essential to determine whether home visits are directly linked to recidivism. If home visits do not have any appreciable effect on recidivism, public safety, or offender rehabilitation, their use, like that of any defunct condition of probation (see Byrne, 1990), should be revamped, reduced, or perhaps discontinued. Taxman (2002) proposes that in order to truly understand the effects of community supervision researchers must also focus on the theoretical basis for home visits. Establishing the theoretical underpinnings of home visits can assist in establishing their effectiveness.

Advocates of the surveillance/public safety role of probation see home visits as an opportunity to catch clients behaving badly, whereas those in favor of a more rehabilitative approach focus on the social-service function of the home visit and the opportunity to connect not only with the offender but with family and community members. An argument could be made for the validity of both viewpoints. In truth, as Bahn and Davis (1991) suggest, more often than not, probationers seek support from their officers in relation to educational attainment, employment, and adjustment to community supervision, while probation officers categorize home visits as related to supervision (Clear & Latessa, 1993). The question of whether home visits can serve to foster the support probationers seek or whether home visits increase public safety by reducing recidivism have yet to be demonstrated by the relevant literature. In theory, the types of support services probationers are in need of should aid desistance efforts and brokerage of services should be feasibly facilitated through home visits, while also serving supervision and surveillance goals.

Impact of Home Visits on Family and Communities

Similarly, Lindner (1992a) believes that the impact of home visits extends beyond the offender to families and communities and thus the latter should be included in any

research effort targeting home visitation. It is not clear how home visits or probation in general impacts the family of an offender beyond his or her participation as collateral contacts. Research indicates that probation can stigmatize an offender (Bahn & Davis, 1991), but scant research is available on the potential pains (e.g., increased burden on family members to support probationer's supervision requirements) or benefits (e.g., having the offender at home instead of incarcerated) of probation on the probationer's family and community. Scholars have detailed the impact that incarceration has on these contexts (e.g., Clear, 2007), while less is known about any impacts that probation, the most commonly used correctional option, has on offenders' support systems.

Dosage—How Often and How Many Home Visits Are Needed?

After research determines whether home visits are effective in meeting probation goals, it will be necessary to determine the appropriate dosage of home visits (frequency of home visits and average length of each visit) to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., reduced recidivism, increased rehabilitation). Among the 14 ISP programs evaluated by Petersilia and Turner (1993b) using a randomized experimental design, the number of monthly face-to-face contacts did not impact recidivism. Unfortunately, their data do not indicate whether the type of in-person contact matters. One hurdle to overcome is to disaggregate data and determine how many in-person contacts are home visits as opposed to office meetings, collateral contacts, employment visits, drug tests, or other face-to-face encounters and then to assess the effectiveness of each.

However, studies like that by Jalbert et al. (2010) show that the number of contacts, especially home visits, can in some instances be as rare as one time a year, which does not lend itself to successfully evaluating their effect on offender outcomes. Lindner and Bonn (1996) note the wide variation in the number of face-to-face field visits between ISP clients and those who are low-risk, but just as in Petersilia and Turner's study, whether these are home or other types of field visits is not captured. Further complicating matters, probation programs with protocols for frequent in-person contacts, either at the probation office or the offender's home, often reduce contact visits to a minimal number after a period of time (see Petersilia, 1999) or once residency is established. With such minimal in-person contact and even fewer home

contacts depicted throughout the literature, it becomes evident why it is so difficult to discern the possible value of home visits.

Desistance among High-Risk Offenders

While probation has a long history within the criminal justice system, its value within the realm of intermediate sanctions such as ISP became more salient as researchers began to further investigate the effects of probation on offender recidivism. It is critical when examining probation to keep in mind its multi-faceted goal of punishment, prison population reduction, and, to an extent, offender desistance from crime. Home visits as a component of ISPs are rarely discussed in any depth, with more focus typically placed on other options offered by the menu of sanctions, such as electronic monitoring, fines, house arrest, and community service. However, home visits attend to the original intent of probation much more than any other aspect of a probation sentence, even though home visits are often categorized by probation officers as supervision or surveillance-related tasks (see Clear & Latessa, 1993; West & Seiter, 2004). While the potential of home visits for promoting desistance can be great, it is still largely unknown.

Conclusion

Twenty years ago Petersilia and Turner (1993b) advocated for researchers to uncover the effects of the various elements of ISPs; This question remains unanswered today (see also Byrne, 1990), particularly as it relates to home visits among probationers. Lindner (1992b) suggested that home visits were no longer a prevalent part of probation work and identified increased workload, higher-risk probationers, and safety concerns as the main reasons for their decline (see also Lindner & Bonn, 1996). Sadly, it is these higher-risk probationers who would likely benefit the most from home visits. In order to best serve an increasing population of probationers, it is vital for the criminal justice community to formally investigate the effects home visits have on all parties involved and to balance the focus on supervision and surveillance with treatment and rehabilitation (Petersilia, 2004; Sieh, 2003), specifically treatment and rehabilitation that focus on criminogenic needs highly predictive of recidivism (see Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996).

Based on the sparse literature and research on home visits among probationers that is available and on probation research in general,

we have identified 12 areas of inquiry that could provide much-needed information to give context and depth to modern home visits as a function of probation. They are:

1. Investigate how case management relates to offender rehabilitation.
2. Determine the underlying function of modern supervision: supervision or casework.
3. Develop a theoretical basis for home visits.
4. Examine the impact of home visits on the family and community of probationers.
5. Uncover why officers spend a small proportion of time on the delivery of interventions that adhere to the risk-need-responsivity model.
6. Determine the appropriate dosage of home visits (frequency and length of home visits) necessary to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., reduced recidivism, increased rehabilitation).
7. Understand probation officers' and probationers' goals for home visits.
8. Investigate how a trusting and collaborative officer-offender relationship is developed.
9. Document promising practices in home visits.
10. Uncover the relationship between home visits and offender outcomes, not limited to recidivism.
11. Assess effectiveness of home visits for low- and high-risk offenders.
12. Assess costs associated with conducting home visits and evaluate cost-effectiveness of current practices.

At present it is not clear if we can answer the question posed by this article: Are home visits a practice best left in the past, or do they provide a mechanism for meeting the varied goals of probation? Addressing these voids in the probation literature would improve researchers' and practitioners' understanding of home visits. A recent National Institute of Justice solicitation seeks to address the gaps regarding the role of home visits in modern probation and move the field forward.

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