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National Institute of Justice

Research in Action

James K. Stewart, Director

Reprinted from NIJ Reports/No.212 January/ February 1989

Electronic monitoring of offenders increases

by Annesley K. Schmidt

NCJRS

OCT 24 1989

Officials in 33 States were using electronic monitoring devices to supervise nearly 2,300 offenders in 1988—about three times the number using this new approach a year earlier, according to a National Institute of Justice survey.

In 1988, most of those monitored were sentenced offenders on probation or parole, participating in a program of intensive supervision in the community. A small portion of those being monitored had been released either pretrial or while their cases were on appeal.

The first electronic monitoring program was in Palm Beach, Florida, in December 1984. Since then an increasing number of jurisdictions have adopted electronic monitoring to better control probationers, parolees, and others under the supervision of the criminal justice system.

To inform agencies considering monitoring programs, and to track the growing use of electronic monitoring, the National Institute has surveyed monitoring programs for the last 2 years. This article reports on the 1988 survey, compares the responses with those of the previous year, and sketches a contemporary picture of the use of electronic monitoring.

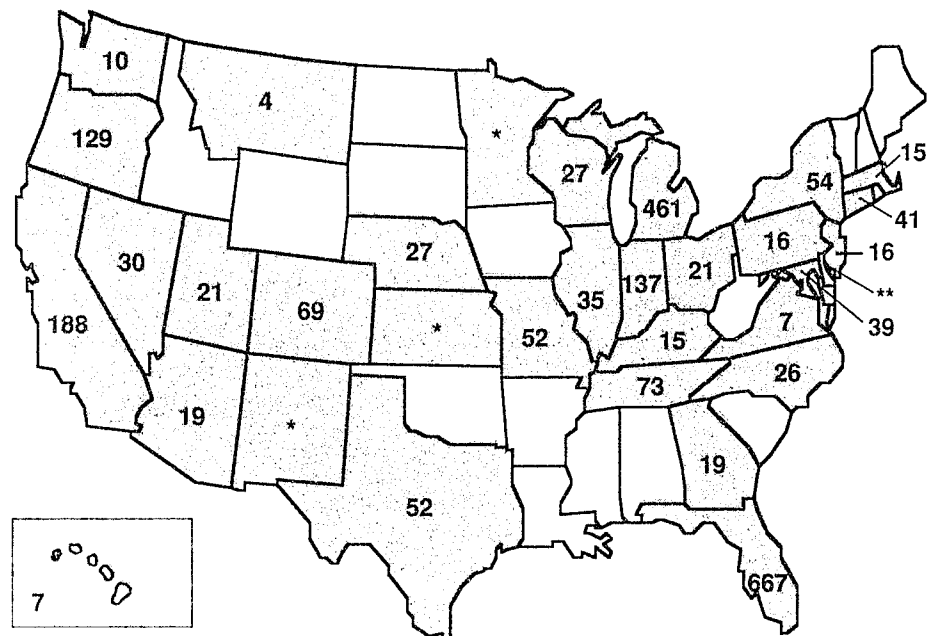
Where are the programs?

As shown in exhibit 1, 33 States in all regions had monitoring programs, a

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Exhibit 1.

Number of offenders being electronically monitored on February 14, 1988



* Programs exist, but no offenders were being monitored on this date.

** No response.

Note: There are no programs in Alaska.

Gathering the information

As part of research in this field, the National Institute of Justice has maintained a list of electronic monitoring equipment manufacturers. The survey first asked the manufacturers to voluntarily identify State and local programs that were using their equipment.

Next, we contacted directors of the monitoring programs and asked for information on offenders being moni-

tored on a specific day. A Sunday—February 14—was chosen because it is the day on which offenders are least likely to begin or end the program. The first NIJ survey counted offenders on Sunday, February 15, 1987. We asked about the program history, the kind of equipment used, and other information to assess the extent of electronic monitoring and how and for whom it was being used.

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substantial increase over the 21 States with programs in 1987.

The level of monitoring activities varies widely. Florida and Michigan, with 667 and 461 electronically monitored offenders, respectively, account for a large proportion of the offenders—49.5 percent.

Many monitoring programs involve limited numbers of offenders. Responses were received from more than one locality in almost every State with such programs. Yet as exhibit 1 shows, 7 States were monitoring between 25 and 49 offenders, and 12 were monitoring fewer than 25. Two States had established programs but were not monitoring any offenders on the date information was gathered. One State's program had not quite begun by February 14, 1988.

Monitoring programs have been developed by a broad range of State and local criminal justice agencies, from departments of corrections, probation, and parole, to court systems, sheriff's offices, and police departments. Some began a few days or weeks before the survey response date. About a quarter of the programs had been operating 4 months or less. Others, like the one in Palm Beach County, were more than 3 years old. Regardless of the length of time in operation, most programs were monitoring fewer than 30 offenders.

The two States with the largest number of electronically monitored offenders structure their programs differently. In Michigan, the State Department of Corrections monitors most offenders, and local courts, sheriffs, or private agencies monitor the rest.

In contrast, the Florida Department of Corrections monitors only a little over half the participating offenders. Another quarter are monitored by city or county agencies, including sheriff's offices, local departments of corrections, and police departments. Most of the rest are monitored by one of several private agencies that offer monitoring

services, and a very small number are monitored by a Federal demonstration project.

Florida is a microcosm of the country as a whole in that monitoring activities take place in all areas—large metropolitan areas, medium-sized cities, small towns, and rural areas—by all levels of government. The government may provide the service with its own staff or contract for it. These public agencies represent all elements of the criminal justice system, including police departments, sheriffs, courts, correctional systems, and probation and parole agencies.

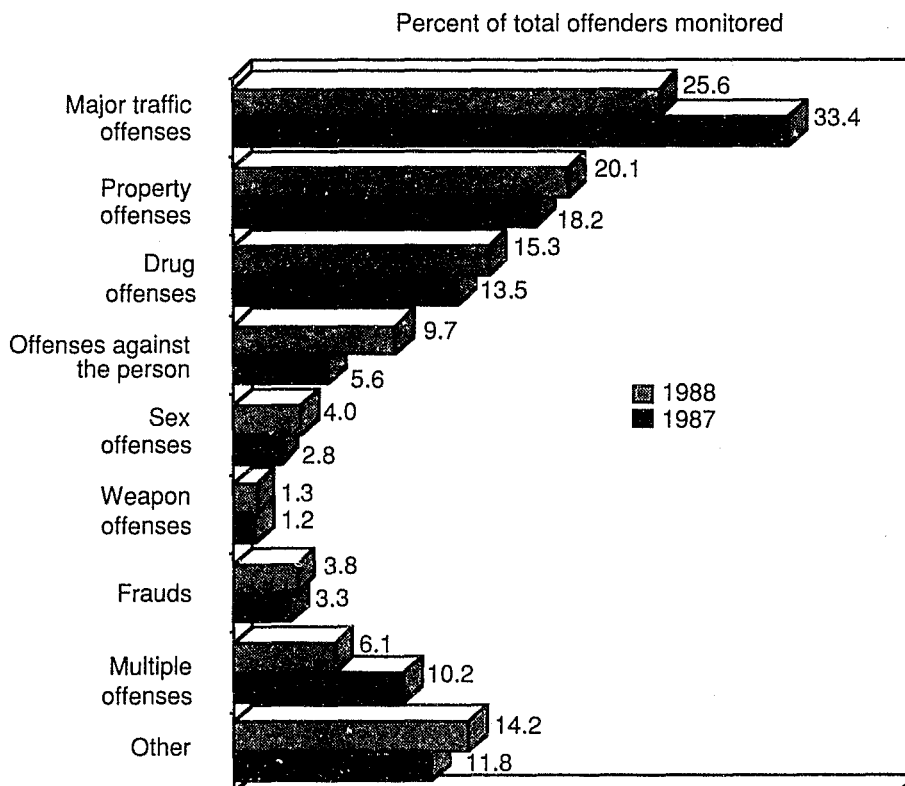
Who is being monitored and what kinds of offenses did they commit?

The characteristics of the 2,277 offenders monitored in 1988 do not differ much from those of the 826 who were monitored in 1987. Both years, the programs monitored mostly men, with women constituting 12.7 percent of monitored offenders in 1988 and only 10.2 percent in 1987.

Survey results show that offenders monitored in 1988 were convicted of a wide range of criminal violations (see exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2.

Electronically monitored offenders categorized by offense



How electronic monitoring equipment works

Electronic monitoring equipment receives information about monitored offenders and transmits the information over the telephone lines to a computer at the monitoring agency. There are two basic types: **continuously signaling devices** that constantly monitor the presence of an offender at a particular location, and **programmed contact devices** that contact the offender periodically to verify his or her presence.

Continuously signaling devices

A continuously signaling device has three major parts: a transmitter, a receiver-dialer, and a central computer.

The transmitter, which is attached to the offender, sends out a continuous signal. The receiver-dialer, which is located in the offender's home and is attached to the telephone, detects the signals sent by the transmitter. It reports to the central computer when it stops receiving the signal and again when the signal begins.

A central computer at the monitoring agency accepts reports from the receiver-dialer over the telephone lines, compares them with the offender's curfew schedule, and alerts correctional officials

about any unauthorized absences. The computer also stores information about each offender's routine entries and exits so that a report can be prepared.

Programmed contact devices

These devices use a computer programmed to telephone the offender during the monitored hours, either randomly or at specified times. The computer prepares a report on the results of the call.

Most but not all programs attempt to verify that the offender is indeed the person responding to the computer's call. Programmed contact devices can do this in several ways. One is to use voice verification technology. Another is to require the offender to wear a wristwatch device programmed to provide a unique number that appears when a special button on the watch device is pressed into a touchtone telephone in response to the computer's call.

A third system requires a black plastic module to be strapped to the offender's arm. When the computer calls, the module is inserted into a verifier box connected to the telephone. A fourth system uses visual verification at the telephone site.

tinuously signaling devices that constantly monitor the presence of an offender at a particular location, and programmed contact devices that contact the offender periodically to verify his or her presence (see box).

Survey results show that the continuously signaling equipment was used for 56 percent of offenders nationwide. Another 42 percent were monitored by programmed contact devices that mechanically verified that the telephone was being answered by the offender, and 2 percent were monitored by programmed contact devices without mechanical verification. Continuously signaling devices were used with roughly the same proportion of offenders in 1988 as 1987.

In 1988, however, many offenders had been monitored only a short time—54.1 percent for 6 weeks or less. Only 4.1 percent had been monitored for between 6 months and a year and 1.4 percent for more than a year.

Offenders belonged to all age groups, in proportions roughly corresponding to the general population. In 1988 they ranged in age from 10 to 79, with 54.9 percent under age 30.

Program features...

Programs surveyed in 1988 varied in the way they paid for the sanction, the intensity of supervision, and failure rates.

Who pays? The survey answers show that in most programs the offenders do, with the exception of the Florida Department of Corrections. Charges are based on a sliding scale, with a maximum fee of \$15 a day.

How often is the computer output reviewed? Some programs review it only during normal business hours (e.g., 9 to 5, Monday through Friday). Others provide continuous computer coverage and respond to the report of a violation at any time of the day or night, weekday or weekend.

A quarter (25.6 percent) of offenders were charged with major traffic offenses. Most of the offenders in this group (71 percent) were charged with driving under the influence or while intoxicated. The other offenses in this category reflect primarily current or previous drunk driving convictions such as driving on a revoked or suspended permit.

In 1988, however, a smaller proportion of major traffic offenders were monitored than in 1987. This change reflects the expanding number of programs run by State departments of corrections, such as Michigan and Florida. Offenders monitored by these two States generally had committed more serious offenses. These State programs included prison-bound offenders or

parolees and releasees from State institutions.

Property offenders were strongly represented. They committed a few closely related offenses—burglary (28 percent), thefts or larcenies (39.6 percent), and breaking and entering (16.6 percent).

Drug law violators constituted 15.3 percent of monitored offenders, with slightly over half of these charged with possession of drugs and the rest charged with distribution.

How are the offenders monitored?

The monitoring equipment used can be roughly divided into two kinds: con-

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How do offenders fare in these programs? Some programs reported that few participants had failed to complete the program successfully while others reported that almost half had not completed the program. Most of the failures resulted from infractions of program rules such as not abiding by curfew hours or using alcohol or drugs.

The precise reasons for the variations in program completion rates are unclear, but one factor seems to be the control of intake. Some programs can refuse to accept offenders that they deem inappropriate for the program but others cannot.

...and some problems

Survey respondents noted a variety of problems that they had for the most part resolved. Some programs, for instance, initially had difficulty gaining acceptance within their agencies for either the program or the equipment that would be used. After proper training and successful tests of the program, however, confidence grew.

Offenders had to learn to handle the equipment properly and understand what was expected of them. Their families also had to adapt to limiting their use of the telephone so the computer calls could be received.

Other problems were related to the equipment itself. In several jurisdictions, there was a "shakedown" period when operators learned to use the equipment correctly, interpret the printout, and deal with power surges and computer downtimes.

Poor telephone lines, poor wiring, and "call-waiting" features on the telephones caused other technical problems. Occasionally, an offender's home was located too close to an FM radio station or other strong radio wave broadcaster. Some difficulties were overcome by repairing lines or wires or by using radio-frequency filters.

A few program managers said they had encountered unanticipated costs—for extra telephone lines, special interconnections, underestimated long-distance charges, and supplies. Most of those surveyed, however, thought equipment manufacturers were responsive to their concerns.

The future of electronic monitoring

Electronic monitors have been available commercially for only a short time, but their use has grown rapidly. Recent discussions with manufacturers suggest the growth continues. Some existing monitoring programs have expanded,

and more programs have been launched since the 1988 survey was completed.

The National Institute of Justice is following use of the sanction and supporting ongoing research that will help policymakers decide if, when, and for whom the sanction is appropriate in their own jurisdictions. Institute research is assessing how well electronic monitoring of offenders protects the community.

The National Institute invites agencies implementing electronic monitoring to share ideas and information. Please write to John Spevacek, Director, Adjudication and Corrections Division, Office of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Research, 633 Indiana Avenue NW., Washington, DC 20531. State and local experience with electronic monitoring offers useful information to guide other jurisdictions as they search for effective ways to control increasing numbers of offenders while minimizing risks to the community.

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and Office for Victims of Crime.

NCJ 116750

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Office of Justice Programs
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