

The Justice System Journal

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ACQUISITIONS

New Strategies to Improve Probation Officers' Fee Collection Rates: A Field Study in Performance Feedback*

Gerald R. Wheeler**
Amy S. Rudolph***

Strategies that facilitate client compliance with economic sanctions are of great concern to jurisdictions dependent on fees. In an effort to study this issue, the Harris County Adult Probation Department undertook a one year field study of the effects of computer-generated performance feedback on fee collections. Consistent with the hypothesis, enhanced feedback procedures led to improved supervision fee collections. There was limited evidence, however, that the training given to probation officers increased the benefits of performance feedback. The policy implications for computer-generated feedback on economic sanctions collection are discussed.

Introduction

The imposition of economic sanctions such as fines, court costs, and restitution payments has become a widely used practice in the United States (Mullaney, 1988; Hillsman, 1988; Hillsman and Mahoney, 1988; Green, 1988; Hillsman, et al., 1984). In the last 25 years, nearly half the states have mandated probation service fees (Baird et al., 1986), or significantly increased the rate of fees charged for supervision (Wheeler et al., 1989). Since many jurisdictions are dependent on a variety of fees to support local programs, the development of fair and effective strategies to assess and collect fees from clients is of great interest to the criminal justice community.

Of equal importance, however, is the organizational need to identify those strategies that facilitate client compliance with economic sanctions. This

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challenge seems to have two aspects: procedures concerning the interaction between the system as a whole and the client, and those concerning the interaction between the individual probation officer and his or her client. System wide policies such as revised and flexible payment plans and modified enforcement procedures would have a direct effect on the client population. Performance feedback for the probation officer and training in enforcement procedures and financial counseling are several strategies that might serve to facilitate client compliance.

The Harris County Adult Probation Department, with the assistance of a grant from the National Institute of Corrections, undertook a one year field experiment in performance feedback, examining the use of computer-generated reports containing feedback about probation officers' fee collections. The study investigated the effects of presenting individual probation officers with written and oral feedback regarding their probationers' payments, their total fee collections, and their client delinquency rates. Performance was measured in terms of supervision fee collections, recovery rates, and delinquency rates. The policy implications for such computer-generated feedback are discussed herein.

Performance Feedback in Criminal Justice

Performance feedback is an important requirement of many organizations. It is one means by which worker performance is monitored and employees gain information regarding their performance. Although there are various concepts and definitions of feedback, in its simplest form feedback is "information return related to an output" (Murrell, 1975). Typically, feedback is used to maintain or enhance worker performance by relaying information relative to a specific worker's role (Ford, 1980). Peterson (1982:102) states that although feedback seems to be an effective means of changing, improving, and/or modifying human performance, "why it works is not at all clear in many cases."

The use of information systems within criminal justice has prompted at least one article describing a relationship between feedback and performance in the area of law enforcement (Jensen and Foote, 1983). In this study, a statistical recording system was introduced to increase police officer productivity. The officers used a digital information form to record their daily activities, which were then entered into a computer system. The officers were given monthly activity and productivity summaries made up of performance and productivity information grouped by team, watch, and individual. Results showed increases in individual and team productivity. The system was highly accepted by officers and seemed to increase employee motivation and reduce the number of hours spent recording activities.

In the administration and enforcement of criminal economic sanctions the use of computer-generated information has also produced significant results. Specifically, feedback regarding the status of court ordered fee and fine payments was provided to offenders by phone or mail (Wick, 1988; Tait, 1988). For example, in a recent study comparing three computer-generated notification strategies for collecting delinquent traffic fines, Wick (1988:70) reported that "the collection agency method--two sequential notification letters followed by a personal follow-up call--was the most effective method of collecting potential revenue." This method resulted in a 20.6 percent collection rate, compared to a rate of 14.3 percent for third-party billing services, and a 5.7 percent collection rate for providing clients with a single computer-generated notification letter from the court. A similar analysis of the Las Vegas Municipal Court (Tait, 1988) found that following the introduction of a computerized system, which notified traffic defendants of pending court dates and fines due, fine collections, conformity with installment payment agreements, and as-scheduled court appearances improved significantly.

The Vera Institute project, FACES (Fine Accounting, Collections, and Enforcement System), has illustrated yet another innovative use of computer technology. Cummings (1988) described the detailed procedures employed in developing an automated management information system for providing judges and administration personnel with information regarding fine accounting, collection, and enforcement activities.

In an age in which performance and collection information is available on demand, the influence of that information on employee behavior merits attention. The influx of information may have a negative influence, creating confusion as people attempt to adjust to the rapidly changing environment which these advances in technology have brought (Boyd, 1989). Although many criminal justice agencies employ computer systems, there are few practical examinations of how these systems may affect actual performance and behavior. The feedback, human performance, and criminal justice literatures suggest several predictions; however, this brief review indicates that a few topics have yet to be adequately explored in field settings. Several questions remain.

First, the vast amount of data that becomes available with the advent of computer processing is staggering. People are limited in their capacity to process information. Situations in which a large amount of information is presented create conditions of cognitive overload (Norman and Bobrow, 1975). Although training may decrease this overload (Kerr, 1987), attention division and attention withdrawal may result. Additionally, previous research suggests that more specific information results in improved performance (Earley, 1988).

However, is there a point at which information is too specific, again resulting in cognitive overload? This possibility warrants investigation.

Second, the social impact of computer monitoring systems is unknown. One phenomenon often cited in the computer feedback literature is rigid bureaucratic behavior. Employees perform in ways that are appropriate to the computer accounting system, but which may not be beneficial to organizational goals. An example of this is the computer operator who tries to answer as many calls as possible, but who actually solves the problem of very few callers. It has been suggested that an integration of training and feedback is necessary for optimal effect (Kerr, 1987). By "utilizing feedback and scientific approaches, the technologist can lay the basis for improved productivity by providing information that points to solutions and reduces measured performance deficiencies" (Kerr, 1987:18).

In the present study we proposed that an enhanced feedback procedure providing greater and more specific information to probation officers (termed revenue enhancement procedure) would lead to improved performance. Additionally, we proposed that a training program such as that alluded to by Kerr (1987) would magnify the benefits of the enhanced feedback system. Therefore, two hypothesis guided this research:

1. *Regions subjected to the revenue enhancement procedure will outperform those regions not subjected to the procedure.*
2. *The revenue enhancement procedure combined with training will lead to performance improvements over and above the revenue enhancement procedure alone.*

Method

Setting. The Harris County Adult Probation Department is the largest probation department in Texas. Located in Houston, the agency is responsible for the supervision of 27,000 felony and misdemeanor offenders. Probation supervision fees are appropriated to the local county probation departments responsible for collecting the fees. The courts also order the payment of fines, restitution for victims, and court costs, and probationers make monthly installment payments directly to the probation department. Probation officers are responsible for notifying clients in arrears by mail, telephone, and direct contact. During fiscal 1988, the probationers paid \$6.8 million in supervision fees, \$3.5 million in restitution fees, \$4.6 million in fines, and \$358,000 in court costs and attorney fees.

Subjects. One hundred and fifty-two probation officers served as subjects. The Harris County Adult Probation Department is divided into five regions: North, South, East, West, and Central. All probation officers within each region participated in the study, and information was included from all probationers about whom information was available. Regional demographic information is provided in Appendix A. This table shows that all regions were similar with regard to sex and probationer age, and to a lesser degree, percentage of total probationer population and percentage of total "driving while intoxicated" cases. Regions differ considerably, however, with regard to race and case type compositions. The East and West regions tended to be composed of white, misdemeanor offenders, whereas the North, South, and Central regions had a higher percentage of blacks, Hispanics, and felony offenders.

Independent Variable. Feedback type was the independent variable. Manipulation of this variable resulted in three conditions: standard feedback, enhanced feedback (revenue enhancement procedure), and enhanced feedback plus training.

Probation officers in the standard feedback condition received reports listing their ranking in collection of supervision fees and all clients delinquent in fees (see Appendix B).

Probation officers in the enhanced feedback condition received the standard feedback reports as well as two additional reports designed to increase the amount and specificity of feedback information (see Appendix C and Appendix D). These contained data on total collections for each officer by type of economic sanction and a monthly breakdown of supervision fee recovery rates by level of supervision of all cases assigned to an officer's region.

Probation officers in the enhanced feedback plus training condition received all reports described above. They also received monthly training in the form of group and individual meetings with the project director. The director was not in a supervisory position in any regions. Probation officers were told that the purpose of this training was to provide additional information and aid in interpretation. They were encouraged to ask questions regarding the feedback they were given.

Measures of Dependant Variable. Three measures of performance were used: mean supervision fee payments, revenue recovery rates, and client delinquency rates. The mean supervision fee payment made by probationers who paid fees is related directly to the dollar amount available for the agency's operating budget. The revenue recovery rate represents the average supervision fee collected per case divided by the average fee set per case. This measure is crucial when evaluating the relationship between fees set and actual fees

collected for specific categories of probationers (e.g., misdemeanors vs. felonies). Previous research has shown evidence of diminishing returns when fee schedules are increased (Wheeler, et al., 1989). For example, a client whose supervision fee is increased from \$25 to \$40 may pay only \$30, representing a 75 percent recovery rate. A client whose supervision fee remains \$25, however, may pay \$22, representing a recovery rate of 88 percent. Although the dollar amount collected increases, the recovery rate decreases. Client delinquency rate refers to the percentage of probationers who had not made any type of fee payment within a 90 day period. This is a relatively objective indicator of particular interest for budgetary planning projections. In that each of these measures directly impacts the functioning of the agency, they are considered valuable measures of probation officer performance.

Procedure. Three regions of the department, East, West, and North were assigned to the standard feedback condition, the Central region was assigned to the enhanced feedback condition, and the South region was assigned to the enhanced feedback plus training condition. The criteria for assigning regions to conditions were geographic location and history of offenders' compliance with economic sanctions. Those regions with the greatest compliance and collection problems were assigned to the enhanced feedback conditions.

Probation officers received monthly feedback from January to December of 1988. It is important to note that all regions had been receiving the standard feedback for approximately one year before the study period (January to December of 1987). Therefore, any effects resulting from the enhanced feedback can be attributed with more certainty to the additional and more specific information (and training), rather than the introduction of a feedback process alone.

Results

In each region performance for the year preceding the implementation of the enhanced feedback procedures (1987) was compared to performance for the year the procedures were introduced (1988). Only descriptive statistics are used, due to the differences among regions on demographic variables, race and case type.

Performance and Enhanced Feedback. Performance changes in the East, West and North regions (standard feedback) were compared to changes in the South and Central regions (enhanced feedback) on the three measures of performance described earlier. Each measure was analyzed separately.

Supervision fee payment. The average monthly supervision fee payment made by probationers in 1987 was compared to the average monthly payment in 1988. These comparisons are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Average Supervision Fee Payments Per Client*
1987 vs. 1988 by Region

Region	1987 (N=16051)	1988 (N=14987)	% Change
Experimental			
South	\$27.20	\$32.99	19.0%
Central	\$27.01	\$31.77	18.0%
Control			
East	\$28.81	\$33.19	15.0%
West	\$28.67	\$33.58	17.0%
North	\$28.52	\$32.50	13.0%

*Includes only clients who paid supervision fees.

Although all regions experienced increases in the mean supervision fee payment, the greatest percentage increases were found in the Central and South regions, as shown in Table 1. The South region showed the greatest increase in average monthly supervision payments (19%). The smallest increase was observed in the North region (13%).

Revenue Recovery Rate. The average monthly percentage of supervision fees paid of the amount set for felony and misdemeanor cases was calculated for all regions. The value for the quarter preceding implementation (October to December, 1987) was compared to the year the implementation was introduced (January to December, 1988). These data appear in Table 2.

The misdemeanor and felony cases represent two distinct populations, and the study groups differed with regard to the percentage of each case type present in their regions (interstate compact cases were not considered). Therefore, recovery rates for the two offense types were examined separately. Table 2 shows that little change was found in any of the regions, and the regions receiving enhanced feedback did not outperform those receiving standard feedback.

Table 2.
Supervision Fee Average Monthly Recovery Rate
October 1987 through December 1988 (by quarter)

Misdemeanor Cases (N=11816)						
Region	Quarter Average (%)					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Total
Experimental						
South	84.0	87.7	87.0	87.7	85.7	86.4
Central	85.3	87.3	86.3	82.7	82.3	4.8
Control						
East	90.7	92.3	91.0	88.3	86.7	89.8
West	89.4	89.6	91.7	88.2	87.7	89.3
North	87.6	85.1	87.4	86.4	81.8	85.7

Felony Cases (N=12154)						
Region	Quarter Average (%)					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	Total
Experimental						
South	66.2	70.5	70.4	71.5	68.3	69.4
Central	64.3	65.8	65.8	63.9	60.9	64.2
Control						
East	78.1	82.2	82.1	79.5	74.7	79.3
West	76.4	80.9	82.5	79.9	76.2	79.2
North	70.0	69.8	71.5	67.4	65.8	68.9

Table 3.
Ninety Day or More Average Monthly Delinquency Rate
1987 vs. 1988 by Region

Region	1987 (N=27198)	1988 (N=25154)	Difference
Experimental			
South	24.8%	28.3%	3.5%
Central	28.4%	29.8%	1.4%
Control			
East	17.1%	19.0%	1.9%
West	16.7%	19.9%	3.2%
North	24.5%	27.7%	3.2%

Client delinquency rate. The average monthly number of persons behind in one or more types of payment for 90 days or longer was calculated for all regions as the third measure of performance. Results showed that client delinquency rates rose in all regions (see Table 3). The lowest increase appeared in the region receiving enhanced feedback, Central (1.9%). The greatest increase, however, was found in the region receiving enhanced feedback plus training, South (3.5%).

In summary, enhanced feedback may have positively affected performance in terms of supervision fee payments, but revenue recovery rates and client delinquency rates were not affected by the enhanced feedback in the hypothesized manner.

Performance and Enhanced Feedback Plus Training. Supervision fee payments, revenue recovery rates, and client delinquency rates of the region in the enhanced feedback condition (Central) were compared to the region in the enhanced feedback plus training condition (South). Data referenced in the discussion of these comparisons are drawn from Tables 1, 2 and 3.

Supervision fee payment. The Central and South regions were very similar with regard to average supervision fee payments made during the study period. The training did not seem to magnify the effects of the enhanced feedback procedure.

Revenue recovery rate. Again, little difference was observed between the

enhanced feedback and enhanced feedback plus training conditions, but an interesting pattern was found in the South region. This region had consistently higher recovery rates after the first quarter for both misdemeanor and felony cases. This is not true of any other region.

Client delinquency rate. As was mentioned earlier, client delinquency rates increased in all regions during the study period. The highest delinquency rate was found in the South region, whereas the lowest was found in the Central region.

It appears, then, that the second hypothesis was not supported. Although the South region advanced in regional ranking of supervision fee payments and recovery rates, the additional training given to probation officers in this region did not seem to magnify the benefits of enhanced feedback as expected.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that the enhanced feedback procedure would result in higher levels of performance and that the benefits of the enhancement would be magnified by additional training. While the results offer support for a feedback procedure, there is limited support for the specific hypothesis proposed at the outset of this study.

Did Enhanced Feedback Improve the Performance of Probation Officers? The regions subjected to enhanced feedback showed a higher increase in average monthly supervision fee payments than the control regions. However, revenue recovery rates and delinquency rates were not affected by the enhanced feedback as hypothesized. A dollar benefit was gained in terms of increase in mean supervision fee payment collected, but recovery rates and client delinquency rates were not positively affected. Previous research (Wheeler et al., 1989) suggests that this may be evidence of diminishing returns. Although the mean supervision fee payment made increased, the recovery rate for higher fees may be lower than that for lower fees, resulting in a significant decrease in overall recovery rate and higher delinquency rates. Therefore, when measuring a probation officer's success, it is important to note that although absolute dollar amount of supervision fee payments made may increase, this may not represent a corresponding increase in recovery rate or decrease in client delinquency rate.

Previous research also suggests that more specific information leads to improved performance. It is possible that the information provided to probation officers in the enhanced condition was too specific, and officers were unable to adequately utilize all the information. Therefore, only the information most directly relevant to their fee collections received their attention. This is, however, speculation. Officers were not asked which information they used.

Training did not affect the performance of probation officers as expected. Although the training was designed to provide solutions to the specific problems encountered by individual probation officers, it did not seem to magnify the effects of the feedback system. The feedback provided to probation officers was strictly in monetary terms and may have been incongruent with the particular problems probation officers often encounter, such as the financial dilemma of a particular probationer.

The feedback procedure did, however, have a subtle effect on probation officers' performance. Several interesting patterns emerged. The South region, which underwent a combination of enhanced feedback and training, showed the highest increase in average monthly supervision fee payments, rising from \$27.20 to \$32.99 (19%). A similar pattern emerged in the recovery rate. The South region showed an increase of 2.4 percent among misdemeanor cases and an increase of 3.2 percent among felony cases. These results are also of interest because the South region, demographically, had the highest percentage of minority probationers (42.5%) and nearly the highest percentage of felony probationers (50.3%). This is the population which had a history of difficulty in complying with economic sanctions due to employment problems. While this difference was not statistically significant, it does represent hundreds of dollars in the affected regions.

Other Considerations. There are several variables within the study and within the study organization itself which may account for some of the results presented here. Appendix A shows the regional differences in variables such as age, sex, race, and case type. The study groups were markedly different in terms of race and case type composition. Not only did this limit the statistical conclusions that could be drawn, these differences may have confounded the feedback manipulation. Also, Tables 2 and 3 showed that the regions subjected to enhanced feedback had the lowest average monthly supervision fees and recovery rates among the regions before the study.

Performance was defined in monetary terms: supervision fee payments, revenue recovery rates, and client delinquency rates. While this is certainly an important aspect of probation officer performance, these measures might have been inadequate reflections of the performance of probation officers. The enhanced information may have encouraged probation officers to become more involved in financial counseling and sensitive to the financial status of disadvantaged clients. This awareness and involvement may lead to even lower revenue recovery rates. However, this dimension of performance was not examined in the present study.

In that this study took place in a field setting, a larger context ought to be

considered. Given the rise in set fees and the sluggish Houston economy, it might be that more probationers were unable to meet their court ordered financial obligations within the expected time frame, independent of probation officers' interventions. This may be particularly applicable to felony probationers, a group generally less apt to comply with economic sanctions than their misdemeanor counterparts due to differences in socio economic status.

Conclusions

Today, computer technology can generate information instantaneously on nearly every aspect of services or client behavior to all levels of decision makers involved in the administration of justice. The style, content, method, and frequency of delivery of information to such actors as judges, probation officers, and administrators will continue to affect the achievement of the goals of retribution and rehabilitation. Unfortunately, many criminal justice jurisdictions have not taken advantage of automation or fail to fully understand its application when they make the investment. In order to understand the potential impact of computer-generated feedback on work efficiency and accountability, studies examining such factors as work environment and organizational atmosphere, user experience, and workflow should be done. It may well be that information which is accessible on a computer terminal on an officer's or judge's desk will be retrieved more often than similar data contained in computer-generated printout reports. The way individuals interact with technology and feedback also depends on their training and orientation. These and other issues must be addressed in jurisdictions confronting the information age and the need for developing accountable, intermediate sentences for criminal offenders in a period of rapid technological change.

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Appendix A

Demographic Summary of Active Probationers: July, 1988

Variable	Region				
	North	South	East	West	Central
Population	7041 (22.7%)	6452 (20.8%)	4565 (14.7%)	6574 (21.2%)	6373 (20.6%)
D.W.I. cases	1591 (22.6%)	1503 (23.3%)	1230 (26.9%)	2011 (30.6%)	1747 (27.4%)
Case type					
Felony	3441 (48.9%)	3245 (50.3%)	1775 (38.9%)	2553 (38.8%)	3299 (51.8%)
Misdemeanor	2657 (37.7%)	2353 (36.5%)	2065 (45.2%)	3058 (46.5%)	2342 (36.7%)
Interstate	943 (13.4%)	854 (13.2%)	725 (15.9%)	963 (14.6%)	732 (11.5%)
Sex					
Male	5532 (78.6%)	4981 (77.2%)	3635 (79.6%)	5082 (77.3%)	5126 (80.4%)
Female	1437 (20.4%)	1411 (21.9%)	892 (19.5%)	1422 (21.6%)	1187 (18.6%)
Race					
White	3877 (55.1%)	2948 (45.7%)	3582 (78.5%)	5069 (77.1%)	2854 (44.8%)
Black	2366 (33.6%)	2744 (42.5%)	352 (7.7%)	795 (12.1%)	2106 (33.0%)
Hispanic	676 (9.6%)	621 (9.6%)	571 (12.5%)	535 (8.1%)	1272 (20.0%)
Other/Not reported	122 (1.7%)	139 (2.2%)	60 (1.3%)	175 (2.6%)	141 (2.2%)
Age					
Mean	32.0	31.5	31.6	31.5	32.8
Std Dev	10.6	10.2	10.0	9.6	10.9

Appendix B

Standard Report

Regional Supervision Fee Collection Statistics

Officer Fee	Total Clients	Paying Clients	Fraction Paid	Total Sup. Collected
Smith, Ron	170	119	0.70	\$3,477.97
Taylor, Harriet	138	96	0.70	\$3,266.00
Doe, Harry	178	116	0.65	\$4,005.00
Carter, June	166	88	0.53	\$2,515.00
Fisher, Bob	172	70	0.41	\$2,070.00

Client Delinquency List

Region=Central, Officer=Smith, Ron

Probationer Delinquencies	Case Number	Last Date Paid	T o t a l
Carter, Harry	4778150101	05/31/88	\$ 445.00
Doe, June	3965560101	08/09/88	\$1,200.00
Smith, Harriet	4961490101	08/27/88	\$ 480.00
Taylor, Bob	4402650101	06/06/88	\$ 75.00
Fisher, Ron	9568870101	07/28/88	\$ 242.00

Appendix C

Experimental Report 1

NIC Regional Economic Sanctions Summary

Total Collections - October 31, 1988 by Officer
Unit=Central, Officer=Smith, Ron

Fee Type	Probationers Supervised This Fee Type	Probationers Assessed This Fee Type	Probationers Not Assessed	Collections
Restitution	186	41	145	\$680.00
Dependent support	186	0	186	
Pay- treatment	186	0	186	
Supervision fee	186	185	1	\$3258.00
Attorney fee	186	33	153	\$ 75.00
Fines	186	62	124	\$1418.00
Other	186	0	186	

Appendix D

Experimental Report 2

Supervision Fee Collection Rates
September 1987-December 1988, Central Region

Month	Level of Supervision							
	Maximum				Minimum			
	N	Mean Coll (\$)	Mean Set (\$)	%Coll	N	Mean Coll (\$)	Mean Set (\$)	%Coll
Sep 1987	158	30.51	16.46	53.9	1007	26.80	12.80	47.9
Oct 1987	150	29.77	17.09	57.4	1028	27.27	15.55	57.0
Nov 1987	141	30.35	15.82	52.1	1016	27.38	14.90	54.4
Dec 1987	134	29.66	18.78	63.3	1011	28.01	13.97	49.9
Jan 1988	133	29.44	17.58	59.7	986	28.26	13.84	49.0
Feb 1988	134	29.33	13.87	47.3	958	28.58	15.72	55.0
Mar 1988	117	30.30	22.89	75.5	968	28.71	15.35	53.5
Apr 1988	118	30.42	14.75	48.5	970	28.81	15.02	52.1
May 1988	129	29.84	16.71	56.0	974	29.22	14.40	49.3
Jun 1988	139	31.08	19.03	61.2	961	29.39	13.75	46.8
Jul 1988	139	31.12	15.27	49.1	958	29.48	13.19	44.7
Aug 1988	148	31.45	16.06	51.1	968	29.36	14.31	48.7
Sep 1988	162	30.71	16.57	54.0	940	29.43	13.36	45.4
Oct 1988	157	30.83	18.76	60.8	923	29.54	14.96	50.6
Nov 1988	157	30.76	15.89	51.7	914	29.54	12.38	41.9
Dec 1988	148	30.81	18.41	59.8	941	29.58	11.64	39.3
