

# Using GPS Technology To Monitor High-Risk Sex Offenders: California's Experience with Implementation

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## GPS Transforms Electronic Monitoring

From its earliest days, electronic monitoring has, by turns, captured the imagination of justice system professionals, and fallen short of expectations. Advocates claimed that by automating supervision, EM would allow probation and parole officers to extend their reach almost without limit, provide greater security and reliability, reduce crowding in prisons and jails, and bring down costs. Yet for twenty years after the introduction of radio frequency (RF) monitoring in the 1980s, few of these benefits materialized. Indeed, EM too often was an unreliable “partner” that energetically dispatched false alarms and bogged down supervising officers, even as it proved vulnerable to tampering and defects. Inflexible and unforgiving, it seemed to add to the expense of supervision as much as reducing it. The bulky equipment was time-consuming and tricky to install, costly to maintain, and a burden on offenders trying to return to a normal life. Gradually, the hype began to ring hollow, and adoption of EM stalled in the 1990s at about 80,000 offenders, where it stayed for a decade. EM was looking more and more like a dead end, until two technologies arrived that would make it possible, at last, for electronic monitoring to do what its early supporters

had always envisioned. The breakthroughs were cellular telephone networks, which untethered EM from dependence on land-line telephone access, and the Global Positioning System (GPS), which made accurate location monitoring a reality for the first time. Almost overnight, it was possible to produce a single lightweight unit that could be worn as a wrist watch or ankle band, function wherever the wearer traveled, and track and report the exact whereabouts of the wearer continuously. The promise of round-the-clock supervision using GPS raised the profile of electronic monitoring to the point where it began to find wide use as both a pre- and post-adjudication tool with a variety of different offenders, including gang members, drunk drivers and substance users, domestic violence abusers, mentally ill offenders, and above all, sex offenders. In a development few foresaw in the 1990s, passage of registration and notification laws in all 50 states coupled with the new capabilities of GPS monitoring equipment led to widespread adoption of EM for enforcing “Megan’s Law” restrictions on sex offenders. By 2007 an Interstate Commission on Adult Offender Supervision GSP Survey (ICAOS 2007) found that 36 states used some form of GPS monitoring for those convicted of sex crimes. Some states (such as California, Colorado, Florida, and Missouri) enacted legislation requiring the lifetime monitoring of sex offenders (IACP 2008).

California adopted one of the most extensive GPS monitoring programs in the country, implementing a regime for high risk sex offenders (HRSOs). In addition to its unprecedented scope, the California program has been among the most thoroughly documented and studied of its kind. This article examines California’s experience in monitoring sex

offenders, a program the authors have followed and investigated from its inception. We will examine the program’s design and analyze the performance of California’s GPS program in terms of staffing, caseloads, and costs.

This is a process evaluation, not an outcome study. While outcome studies provide researchers and practitioners with evidence about the impact of an intervention and its success in achieving its intended goals, documenting the processes used to implement the intervention—often called a process evaluation—is just as essential. Process evaluations serve as blueprints for practitioners seeking to replicate a proven program. Our research offers a detailed assessment of the degree to which CDCR administrators were successful in implementing GPS monitoring of sex offenders. Specifically, this article examines the implementation of the program’s “core components,” measures the extent to which parolees were actually monitored (compared with the degree of monitoring called for in the program plan), and assesses the attitude and preparedness of staff. Finally, we conclude with policy recommendations for fine-tuning the implementation of GPS monitoring based on what we’ve learned from its use in California.

## Electronic Monitoring with GPS: The Basics

EM with GPS consists of three major segments: 1) the space segment, 2) the control segment, and 3) the user segment. These three segments work in concert to produce an accurate fix on the time and position of a tracked subject. The accuracy of a position determined using GPS depends on the type of GPS receiver. Most handheld GPS units are accurate, on

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average, to within 15 meters. Other types of receivers use enhancement methods such as Differential GPS (DGPS) to obtain even greater accuracy.

There are, of course, limitations. GPS receivers require an unobstructed view of the sky and often do not perform well because of interference from buildings, terrain, electronics, and sometimes even dense foliage. These obstructions can cause position errors and occasionally no position reading at all. GPS units typically do not work well indoors, underwater, or underground.

### **GPS as a Supervision Tool**

GPS supervision systems require the offender to wear a tamper-resistant bracelet that receives transmissions from satel-

day, which can be reviewed by a supervising officer and used in providing feedback and enforcing conditions of release.

With these powerful capabilities, GPS monitoring is winning converts in the courts, corrections, and law enforcement. In its assessment of the technology, for example, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) highlighted four benefits of GPS that are frequently cited by its proponents. IACP notes that GPS offers “a less expensive approach than incarceration;” “promot[es] compliance with conditions of supervision and treatment;” “structures an offender’s life and increases accountability;” and “increases the ability to investigate current and past behaviors to understand where an offender is in the relapse/offense cycle.” At the same time, IACP acknowledges some of the shortcomings of GPS technology: “limited research exists regarding the effectiveness of GPS monitoring for

serious limitations, and matched studies of EM in moderate- to high-risk populations are of very low quality.” More recent research, however, offers a more optimistic view for the potential of EM. Padgett, Bales, and Blomberg (2006: 61) analyzed data from 75,661 serious offenders in Florida who had been placed on home confinement, and found that both radio-frequency and GPS monitoring “significantly reduce the likelihood of technical violations, reoffending, and absconding for this population of offenders.” In another study, Bales and colleagues (2010) offer further evidence for the effectiveness of EM. They analyzed data on 5,034 medium- and high-risk offenders on EM and 266,991 offenders not placed on EM over a 6-year period. They found that the group under EM (including both RF and GPS monitoring) experienced a 31% lower rate of reoffending than offenders who were not monitored. (The 2010 study also found that GPS typically produced lower failure rates than older RF technology.)

In another study, this author and colleagues (Gies, 2012) examined 516 high risk sex offenders equally divided between treatment and control groups. Employing a nonequivalent-group quasi-experimental design with a multilevel survival model, the authors found that the use of GPS monitoring integrated into a traditional parole supervision regime and combined with treatment is associated with lower recidivism and fewer compliance problems. Compared with traditional supervision, subjects under GPS monitoring supervision demonstrated significantly better outcomes on arrests, convictions, and return to custody.

### **California Targets Sex Offenders**

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) began using GPS to monitor sex offenders (and some gang members) in 2005. In November 2006, California voters approved Proposition 83, known as “Jessica’s Law,” one of the most restrictive sex offender laws in the country. Among

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lites and calculates the offender’s location. Offenders can be placed on a passive or active system. In a passive GPS system, the location information is tracked, stored, and transmitted at appointed times (usually once a day) to a monitoring station, typically using a land line phone connection. With active GPS, the monitored subject’s location is transmitted in near “real time” (about every 10 minutes or sooner if the equipment detects a potential problem or violation). Both active and passive systems allow the administrator to define “exclusion zones” where the offender is prohibited from entering (schools and playgrounds are commonly excluded sites). Supervisors can also define “inclusion” zones, such as work places or counseling centers, where the offender’s presence is required during specific periods of the day. As the offender is monitored, the system accumulates a record of his whereabouts throughout the

sex offenders;” lifetime GPS for sex offenders will inevitably lead to “increased workload for law enforcement and community corrections officers;” the public may have a “false sense of security” in relying on GPS monitoring to keep it safe; and there remains some legal uncertainty arising from the widespread use of new technology which “may not have significant court precedent.”

### **Research on Effectiveness**

The justice system and the public have been quicker to embrace GPS than have many researchers. Research on the effectiveness of EM in reducing recidivism has been, at best, mixed. A 2005 meta-analysis of 119 studies on the use of EM with moderate- to high-risk offenders (Renzema and Mayo-Wilson 2005: 233) concluded that “all studies [of EM] in moderate- to high-risk populations have

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its most significant provisions, the law:

- Prohibited a convicted sex offender from residing within 2,000 feet of any school or park where children may be present
- Mandated that all sex offenders be placed on GPS supervision for life
- Increased sentences for many sex crimes, including life terms for certain offenses that victimized children
- Modified the criteria for defining “Sexually Violent Predators,” increasing the number of sex offenders subject to civil commitment to the California Department of Mental Health for treatment in place of parole
- Made CDCR parole agents responsible for enforcing the terms and conditions of Jessica’s Law for as long as a parolee is under the state’s jurisdiction

### Monitoring Sex Offenders in California

High risk sex offenders in California are subject to a regime of intensive supervision and mandated treatment. California monitors paroled sex offenders using an active monitoring system that combines cellular and GPS technology with data integration and geo-mapping software. Parole Agents (PAs) have access to a range of tools and capabilities, including the ability to create inclusion and exclusion zones; “tracked location mapping” tools that display the monitored subject’s movements on a map; and “crime scene correlation” capabilities that integrate incident data with the subject’s known GPS footprint to rule in or rule out the parolee as a crime suspect or witness.

For parolees, such as sex offenders, for whom GPS monitoring has been added as a condition of parole, participation is mandatory. On the first working day after release, a PA sits down face-to-face with the offender and explains how the GPS unit functions, the parolee’s responsibilities for caring for the unit, the conditions of compliance, and the consequences for noncompliance.

The treatment component requires that HRSO parolees attend sex offender treat-

ment classes weekly through the Parole Outpatient Clinic, where clinicians provide psychological evaluations, assessments, and individual and group therapy.

### CDCR’s “Core Components”

During the period we worked with the CDCR, parole staff followed protocols set forth in an interim departmental policy and procedures manual. The manual identified five core components deemed essential to the success of the state’s GPS monitoring program:

1. Staff qualifications and competency
2. Caseload restrictions
3. HRSO screening
4. Parolee enrollment and orientation
5. Supervision specifications for GPS monitoring and field contacts

Meeting the standards set forth for each core component were considered prerequisite for successful implementation. In order to measure how and whether these core components were met, the research team emailed a survey instrument to every participating parole agent in the state. Responses were compiled and tabulated in order to gauge adherence to each program component.

**Staffing.** The GPS program staffing protocol restricts eligible personnel to those with the following qualifications:

- GPS parole agents must be at the level of a journeyman who has completed an apprenticeship.
- GPS parole agents must receive 16 hours of training on sex offender management.
- GPS parole agents must complete GPS training.

Table 1 displays the results of the survey questions regarding the background and training of GPS agents. From the responses, we can conclude that the parole agents working in the GPS program generally met the training and competency standards set forth in the core component protocols. Most of the parole agents are male (78 %) and many have a college degree (42%) and some even have

Sex	N	Percent
Male	120	78.4
Female	30	19.6
Missing	3	2.0
<b>Level of Education</b>		
Some college	33	21.6
Two-year college degree	33	21.6
Four-year college degree	63	41.2
Graduate degree	22	14.4
Missing	2	1.3
<b>Selection for GPS Unit</b>		
Assigned	63	41.2
Volunteered	86	56.2
Not applicable	1	0.7
Don't Know	3	2.0
<b>Caseload Composition</b>		
Active	21	13.7
Passive	9	5.9
Mixed	120	78.4
Not applicable	1	0.7
Don't know	2	1.3
<b>Experience</b>		
	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
How long as a parole agent (years)?	150	6.24
Time with GPS caseload (months)?	153	10.95
Time with a sex offender caseload (months)?	153	17.29

graduate degrees (14%). While a majority (56%) of agents volunteered for a GPS caseload, a sizable portion (41%) were assigned by the department. Mixed caseloads are the rule: 78% of agents have caseloads that include both sex offenders and non-sex offenders. As one would expect with a relatively new program, few agents had a great deal of experience. In addition, the data suggest this type of technology-driven program attracts a younger (and therefore less experienced) agent. Overall among GPS agents, the average length of service was six years. However, data not presented in Table 1

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suggest that agents who were assigned were slightly older (mean age 43 years) than those who volunteered (mean age 42 years) and less experienced (six years' experience, compared with seven years). Finally, on average, agents had about 1½ years' experience with a sex offender caseload (17 months) and less than a year of experience with a GPS caseload (11 months). A composite profile drawn from our survey data suggests that the average GPS agent with a sex offender caseload was about 46 years old, with some college, but with somewhat less experience than the average parole agent.

In terms of the protocol, the majority of agents who responded had completed their apprenticeship (88%), and the GPS training provided by CDCR (82%). Interestingly, only about two-thirds (68%) of the agents reported completing sex offender management training.

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***Caseload Restrictions.*** It is generally believed that giving probation and parole officers smaller caseloads provides agents with more time to dedicate to each offender's needs, and the extra attention results in lower recidivism rates (Burrell 2006). With this in mind, the CDCR GPS supervision protocol restricted caseloads in the following manner:

- GPS agents' caseloads were not to exceed 20 active cases.
- GPS parole agents supervise only GPS-monitored parolees.

Again, the survey results indicate that core component protocols for caseloads were met: agents reported a maximum caseload of 21 cases, and 89% of GPS program agents were assigned to supervise only GPS-monitored parolees.

***HRSO Screening.*** At the time of our study, the GPS supervision program

protocol called for all paroled sex offenders to be tested prior to release using the STATIC-99, one of the most widely accepted assessments used to measure the probability of recidivism among adult male sex offenders. Our survey confirmed a reasonably high compliance rate of 93% of parolees undergoing the assessment. (STATIC-99 measures "static" or unchangeable factors known to predict risk of re-offense, such as age of the offender, prior arrests and convictions for sex offenses and violent offenses, and type of victim, and correctly identifies sex offenders likely to re-offend 70-75% of the time. In 2012, California's "Chelsea's Law" added a new requirement that sex offenders be assessed for dynamic risk factors; the state currently uses the SRA-FV to measure dynamic risk.) While the majority of parole agents reported using the STATIC-99 as the protocols required, nearly half of those responding to the survey expressed reservations about the test.

The chief complaint was essentially that the STATIC-99 defines "risk" as the likelihood of committing a new offense, but does little to predict how serious the offense is likely to be.

***Enrollment and Orientation.*** Parole agents are required to present general information to parolees on the laws and policies regarding parole release. The survey responses indicated that the vast majority of agents report that they always or frequently (about 90%) explain that GPS supervision is a condition of parole, how to charge the unit, how to care for the unit, and the consequences for noncompliance. Puzzlingly, only about 60% of the agents always or frequently discuss inclusion zone restrictions, and even fewer (about 50%) discuss exclusion zone restrictions: these rates suggest that parole agents may not be using inclusion and exclusion zones to the extent they could be.

***Parole Supervision Specifications.***

Although early advocates believed EM would make it possible for agents to handle bigger caseloads by automating many routine supervisory tasks, experience with the technology suggests the opposite may be true. Workloads tend to increase for agents using EM due to a variety of factors, including the frequent need for officers to view tracks and other reports, respond to alerts (many of which are "false" or trivial), instruct offenders on using the monitoring equipment and complying with schedules, and see the equipment is maintained.

Three main supervision tasks were specified as core components. The first requirement is for parole agents to review the Daily Notification Report (DNR) at regular intervals for each offender on their caseload. Ninety-one percent of PAs reported that they review the DNR daily, but only 68% felt that the DNR was very helpful in supervising parolees. A second requirement is that parole agents review the "tracks", that is, an accelerated playback of the offender's locations as they move throughout the community, for each offender on their caseload. Eighty percent of agents review tracks at least once a day, although a small group (5%) reported they review tracks just once a week or less. The number of agents who reported that tracking was very helpful (79%) corresponded closely with the number who check it daily. A third requirement is that PAs must respond to all GPS alert notifications. A substantial majority of PAs reported responding to most alerts within 30 minutes, and nearly half reported responding within 15 minutes. As expected, responses vary by event, consistent with program protocol: 91% of agents respond within 30 minutes to exclusion zone alerts, 77% respond within 30 minutes to inclusion alerts, 82% to strap tampers, and 57% to cell communication gap alerts.

Because the CDCR core components require the use of traditional parole supervision techniques, our survey also gathered data on face-to-face time, treatment sessions, and other conventional supervision methods; survey responses were

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corroborated with written documentation, reports, logs, and other supervision records. Eighty-one percent of PAs reported that they generally meet face to face with the parolees on the first working day after release; 86% reported that they meet at the parolee’s residence within 7 working days of release. Parole agents must also monitor parolees’ attendance in sex offender treatment: about 75% indicated that their parolees attend sex offender treatment at least once a week.

**Exposure.** Exposure (or dosage) refers to the measured quantity of a program. No other form of community-based supervision offers the level of exposure provided by GPS monitoring—traditional probation and parole, even halfway house placements, simply cannot maintain the continuous contact and monitoring that GPS can. Moreover, as we found in the CDCR study, exposure is relatively easy to measure using the data generated by GPS monitoring. In California, HRSO parolees are required to be supervised with GPS technology continuously during their parole period, and in practical terms they are—there is no “break” or vacation for parolees from wearing the GPS unit. However, in the real-world, totally “uninterrupted” GPS supervision is impossible. CDCR GPS tracking data revealed that offenders were actually placed on and removed from GPS supervision on average four or five times during the course of the yearlong study period (M=4.84; SD=2.66). The average time between interruptions was 79.7 days (SD=86.19). Events data (see below) confirmed that very few interruptions were the result of tampering or other violations. Most gaps in supervision were the result of replacing GPS equipment, usually completed within minutes in the presence of the PA.)

**Staff Attitude and Preparedness.** Enthusiastic and well-trained staff are more likely to properly implement a program. Our survey sought to assess these crucial elements, too. The data indicated very strong support for GPS technology. More than 80% of agents agreed or strongly agreed that GPS monitoring is reliable, and more than 90% felt that GPS

**Table 2. Parolees With GPS Events and Duration of Event by Event Type.**

GPS Event Type	Parolees	Number of Events <sup>a</sup>		Duration of Events	
	Percent	Mean	Median	Mean <sup>b</sup>	Median
Inclusion	66.9	69.90	26	65.1	2.98
Exclusion	10.1	1.13	0	12.31	4.13
Battery	61.5	9.19	1	170.43	44.83
Strap/Device	83.7	15.35	3	28.45	2.02
Cell Communication Gap	74.7	6.01	1	707.5	583.63
No GPS Communication	91.1	15.69	4	636.64	572.4
Any Event	100	117.28	77	177.51	6.18

*Note:* GPS data for the study period were available for all but one treatment group parolee (N=257). <sup>a</sup>This is the number of events per parolee, with the mean being the average number of events and the median being the middle value in the distribution. <sup>b</sup>The mean durations are Winsorized for the top and bottom 2.5 percent of values (95 percent Winsorization). All durations are reported in minutes.

enhanced traditional parole supervision. More than 75% felt that GPS supervision provided more public safety than traditional parole supervision by itself. Equipping agents with GPS also seemed to enhance the officers’ own feelings of competence: more than 70% of the agents polled considered themselves excellent or above average in using GPS effectively.

**GPS Events.** GPS supervision of offenders can generate a rich source of valuable information as the monitoring center continuously records events and transmits any possible rule violations to the supervising parole agent. The data indicate that there were 30,136 GPS-related events recorded for the GPS sample (N=257) over the one-year study period. The most frequent events were inclusion zone events (n=17,961, 59.6%). The rarest events were exclusion violations (1%).

Table 2 displays the GPS data per parolee. All parolees had at least one event recorded by the GPS software, and although it was impossible to drill down into the data to examine any one single event, the vast majority appear to have been innocuous. The mean number of GPS events per parolee was 117.3, with a median of 77 events. The most prevalent type of event recorded by the software for each offender was a no-GPS-communication event (91.1%),

usually indicating that an offender had entered a location where no GPS service was available. Least common were exclusion zone violations, where an offender has entered a prohibited area: only 10.1% of parolees had exclusion violations.

The duration of GPS events varied widely. Overall, the mean length of all events was just under 3 hours (calculated using a “Winsorized” or smoothed mean that eliminated extreme events). The median length of recorded events was only 6.18 minutes—that is, half of all events lasted 6.18 minutes or less. Cell communication gaps\* had the longest median duration, 583 minutes or roughly 10 hours, which corresponds to a typical work day (time spent indoors or in a remote area) or at home during the night. Conversely, a strap/device event (which can often be caused by accidentally striking the device) was the shortest type, with a median duration of roughly 2 minutes. Finally, the mean number of devices placed on GPS subjects during the study period was 2.89 (SD=1.46).

**GPS Program Costs**

An effective and well implemented intervention has little value if it cannot be employed in a cost effective manner.

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A program like CDCR's GPS monitoring incurs four types of costs: personnel; facilities; equipment and materials; and training and contracted services. In order to evaluate program costs, we worked with CDCR staff to document the program elements associated with both the GPS program and traditional supervision. Follow-up discussions refined the program elements and associated costs, and the State of California Legislative Analyst's Office analysis of the 2007–08 budget bill (LAO 2007) was used to estimate cost elements that were not readily available to CDCR staff.

We found that the personnel costs of the CDCR GPS monitoring program amounted to around \$25.4 million including salaries, fringe benefits, and overtime. We determined facilities costs to be \$4.5 million, which include the annual lease, maintenance, and operating cost of the building that houses the parole units.

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***No implementation is ever 100% perfect, but the California program achieves 80% to 90% adherence on all of the “core” benchmarks established for it.***

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Equipment and supplies totaled \$13.9 million, most of this for the GPS monitoring equipment. Together, personnel, facilities, and equipment amounted to about half the total cost of the GPS monitoring program. The fourth expense category, training and contracted clinical services, accounted for the remaining 50% of expenditures—\$44.7 million (of which \$42 million was spent on the costs of sex offender treatment). Overall, the cost of California's GPS supervision program was estimated to be about \$88.5 million. Treating 6,744 parolees in the study year, the average annual cost per parolee was \$13,126, or about \$36 per parolee per day. By comparison, the average daily cost of traditional supervision per parolee in the California system is \$27.45. In purely financial terms, the GPS sex offender supervision program costs about \$8.50 per day more than traditional supervision.

Both of these figures are much less than the cost of prison. The LAO (2007) recently concluded that in 2008–09 it cost an average of about \$47,000 per year to incarcerate an inmate in California (\$129.00 per day). To assess the cost of GPS, and taking into account the number of days spent in prison because of a return-to-custody event, we calculated 1) the total number of days each parolee spent in the community (i.e., street days) and 2) the total number of days each group spent in prison. We then multiplied the number of street days by the daily cost of either GPS supervision or traditional parole supervision, depending on the group to which the subject was assigned, to calculate the cost of community supervision for each offender. We multiplied the number of days spent in prison by the cost of a single day in prison to calculate the cost of prison for each offender. Finally, we summed these two figures to estimate the total cost for each parolee. On average, during the year study period,

a treatment group parolee cost \$5.09 dollars more per day in supervision and custody than a control parolee (\$61.60, compared with \$56.50).

### **Policy Implications**

In California, the legislature and voters have decided that sex offenders deemed to be “high risk” must be placed in a program of mandatory treatment and GPS monitoring for life. Whether this is sound policy—whether it addresses real risks with a proportional response, whether the benefits in reduced victimization justify the costs of the program, and whether this is the most effective strategy for achieving the desired level of public safety—is beyond the scope of this study. Our remit was to evaluate the process used to put this policy into force. From our review, implementation of the CDCR GPS monitoring program has proceeded along the

lines set forth in the department's policy manual. No implementation is ever 100% perfect, but the California program achieves 80% to 90% adherence on all of the “core” benchmarks established for it. Staffing met program standards for experience and training. Caseloads settled at expected levels. Screening was performed as required, although parole agents believe the assessment instruments used need improvement. Parole agents accept the program and have confidence in it. We found that GPS monitoring costs somewhat more than traditional parole supervision, but that some of that additional cost is recovered because GPS monitored offenders commit fewer violations resulting in re-imprisonment than do non-monitored parolees. Both GPS monitoring and conventional parole supervision cost taxpayers far less per offender than prison. Our evaluation suggests several policy changes that might improve the effectiveness or reduce the costs of the program.

***Use Graduated Sanctions for Technical Violations.*** One of the more important findings from this study is that HRSOs on GPS monitoring are returned to custody less often than HRSOs on traditional parole supervision. However, when parolees do “fail,” they are usually returned to directly to custody. While the threat of returning to prison may serve as a deterrent, imprisonment adds significantly to the public expense. Implementation of a graduated sanctions system in which the response to a violation is proportional to the gravity of the offense will save the taxpayer money without compromising public safety. A natural and easily implemented restriction might be to begin by imposing a home curfew on the offender for certain violations rather than issuing blanket parole revocations as is the practice now.

***Make Greater Use of Inclusion and Exclusion Zones.*** Another major finding was that parole agents may be using inclusion and exclusion zones in only 50–60% of cases. Setting up inclusion and exclusion zones requires some programming, and once established they inevitably trigger more “events” that require the

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agent's attention. Nevertheless, it is not clear whether the current rate of usage of this feature is optimal—greater use of inclusion and exclusion zones may better help focus offenders on goals and objectives and alert parole agents to early signs of relapse.

#### **Convert to Monitoring Center System.**

Our study found that the large majority of agents report GPS monitoring to be more time intensive than traditional supervision. GPS parole agents must analyze and respond to alert notifications and document their response by entering notes in the vendor software. GPS supervision generates an overwhelming amount of information, not all of it equally useful. In response to this issue, the CDCR recently converted to a monitoring center approach that screens the thousands of GPS events that might otherwise inundate parole agents. The most serious events are identified and forwarded to parole agents, while weeding out alerts that signal more mundane problems such as a low battery or lost cell phone signal. Responses to our survey questions about workload support this shift to monitoring centers, and the practice will do much to alleviate undue demands on agents to respond to “technical alerts.” Agents must be able to concentrate more closely on direct supervision and respond to alerts that pose real threats to community safety.

#### **Maintain Small Caseload Size.**

Community expectations compel PAs to spend substantial time in the direct supervision of sex offenders. Perhaps the single factor exerting the greatest influence on the time available for direct supervision contact is caseload size. The best way to ensure that parole agents have sufficient time to meet the increased demands of GPS monitoring is by limiting the size of HRSO caseloads. We recommend that parole agent caseloads continue to be set at an agent-to-offender ratio of no greater than 20:1, as called for in the CDCR manual.

**Set Realistic Goals for GPS Monitoring.** The final lesson to be learned from the CDCR program is to keep expectations realistic and to set goals that are meaningful. GPS monitoring is powerful

and useful, but its value is realized only in the larger context of effective parole practice. GPS technology should be viewed as a specialized tool with a specific purpose—tracking an offender's movement and location. It is an important part of an overall approach to sex offender re-entry, but just a part. It is not a panacea for all things criminal. Whatever inflated expectations for GPS may have contributed to enactment of California's mandated sex offender monitoring laws, the CDCR's implementation, which balances the use of technology with a commitment to specialized caseloads, direct contact supervision, and evidence-based therapeutic interventions, appears to be on the right track. ■

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## **An important lesson to be learned from the CDCR program is to keep expectations realistic and set goals that are meaningful.**

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## CALIFORNIA, from page 29

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**Endnote**

\*A cell communication gap indicates an interruption in the communication signal between the cell towers and the device. It is typically caused by the distance of the receiver from a tower or interference from obstructions such as hills, mountains, trees, and various building materials (metal siding, concrete, and wire mesh). It should be noted however that while the GPS receiver cannot connect with a cell tower to transfer the GPS location data to the monitoring center, the receiver does collect the data and it will be transmitted once the receiver is within range of a tower.



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