

COST-BENEFIT OF PROBATION AND PAROLE'S APPLICATION OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES



September 2022

How Do We Know?

“How do we know that investing in evidence-based practices is a responsible, cost-efficient approach to justice?”

This is a fair question and one that grant funders and those responsible for government budgets often ask. This document explores the work that various organizations have conducted in an attempt to answer this question specifically for probation and parole.

The Challenges of Cost–Benefit Analyses

Cost–benefit analyses (also known as benefit–cost analyses) are difficult for probation and parole agencies; few have attempted to conduct them. There is a good reason for this. A cost–benefit analysis may appear to be an easy process: simply determine the financial benefits of an intervention and subtract the costs. However, in practice, it is much more complicated. For example, if an intervention results in fewer future offenses, how does one measure the financial benefit of decreased recidivism? Should one consider the financial impact on crime victims, people who are justice-involved and their families, justice system agencies, the community, and taxpayers? What costs should be included? How long should the analysis compute costs? One year? Ten years? When comparing the cost of implementing EBP, to what are you comparing it? Does the analysis consider if money is spent differently (e.g., on people at higher risk rather than lower risk)? Does it consider whether more or less money is spent? As an example of the challenges of determining which costs to include in a cost–benefit analysis, consider the financial impact of a crime on victims. That impact might include any and all of the following:

Costs

- Lost earnings
- Changes in earnings
- Changes in productivity
- Decreased quality of life
- Cost of security measures (e.g., burglar alarm)
- Medical care/ambulance services
- Mental health services
- Police and fire services
- Property damage
- Court processing costs
- Victim advocacy costs
- Costs of childcare
- Inability to make child support payments

Savings

- Decreased need for federal benefits as a result of contributions that the person who was justice-involved made to the victim
- Avoidance of other costs such as the cost of executing warrants



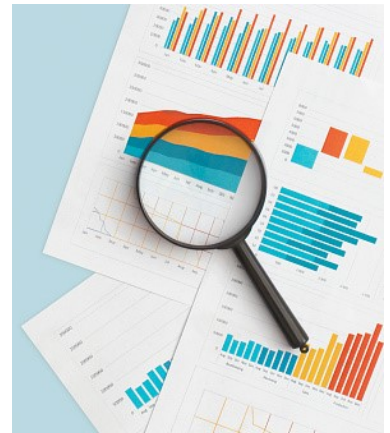
Expertise and Resources

Answering questions about cost–benefit analyses requires a great deal of expertise and time. Fortunately, many nonprofit agencies and foundations, universities, institutes, government agencies, and individuals have provided guidance through the development of manuals, websites, and on-the-ground analysis. They include the following:

- **Washington State Institute for Public Policy:** Some of the most extensive benefit–cost analyses have been conducted by WSIPP.¹ Their work examines the benefit to cost ratio of specific programmatic interventions (e.g., specialty courts, diversion programs, cognitive behavioral therapy, education and employment training, therapeutic communities, intensive supervision) rather than whether a probation agency that implements a comprehensive array of evidence-based practices will likely achieve a positive cost benefit. Their work set the stage for agencies that followed.
- **The Pew Charitable Trusts and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation:** The Pew–MacArthur Results First Initiative helps states and localities develop tools to identify effective programs that yield high returns on investment. It also produces cost–benefit reports based on WSIPP’s method. Justice system stakeholders can use this information to help make spending and policy decisions.²
- **Vera Institute of Justice:** Vera developed internal expertise on cost–benefit analyses. To help those seeking to conduct a cost–benefit analysis, it made available a cost–benefit toolkit, **podcasts**, and various publications.³
- **National Institute of Justice:** NIJ has produced several cost–benefit reports, including a cost–benefit analysis of adult drug courts.⁴

Programs Included in Cost–Benefit Analyses

Programs and services that are usually the focus of cost–benefit analyses range from low to high cost. Figure 1 shows a sampling of these programs.

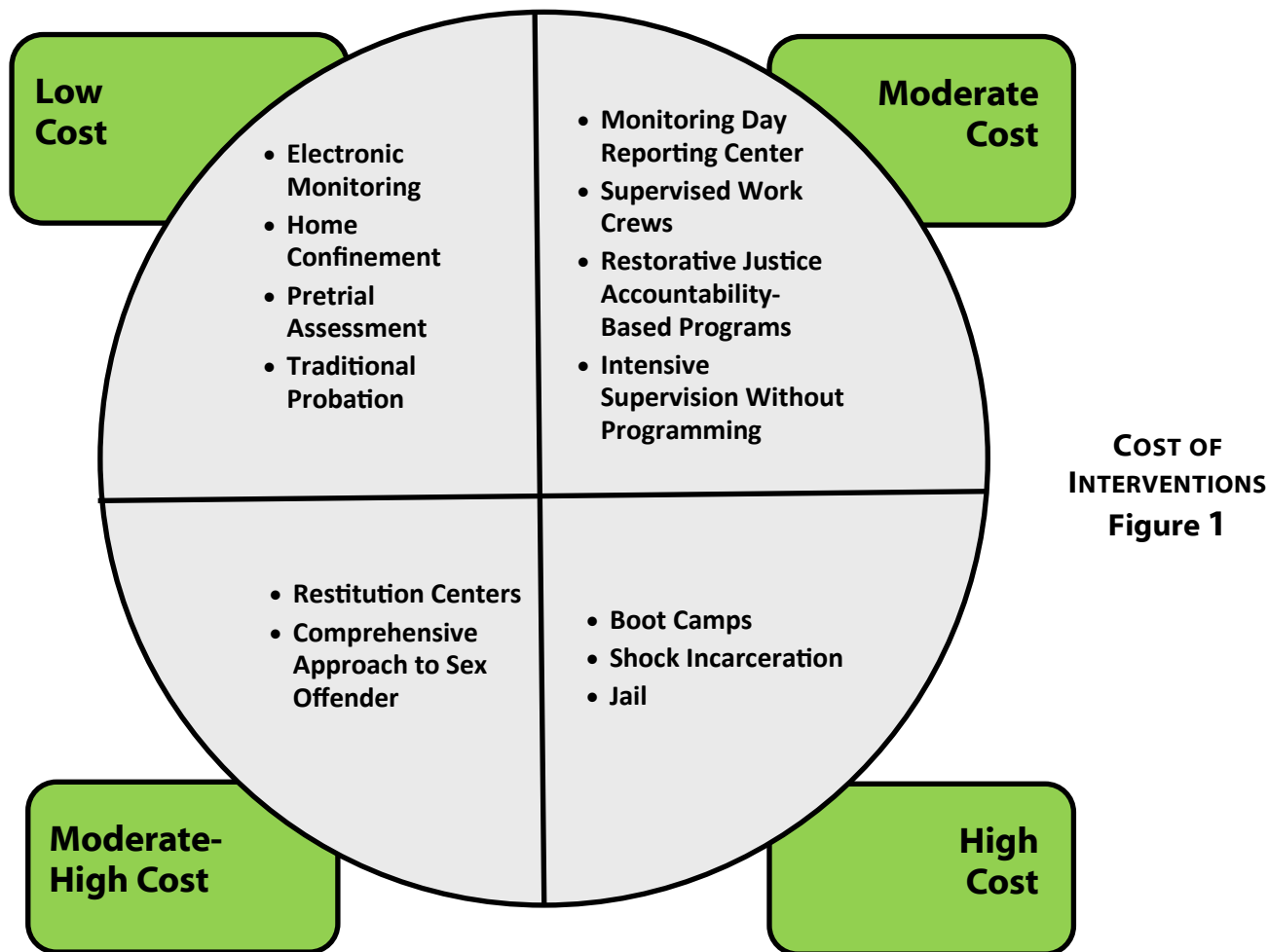


¹<https://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost>

²<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/projects/results-first-initiative> and <https://www.ncsl.org/documents/summit/summit2015/onlineresources/PewMacArthurResultsFirstInitiative2015.pdf>

³<https://www.vera.org/search?query=cost+benefit>

⁴<https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/cost-benefit-analysis-criminal-justice-reforms>



Missing from figure 1 is community corrections. Most of the cost-benefit efforts described above focus on specific interventions; they do not examine community corrections as a whole—including the myriad of activities that a probation or parole agency undertakes when implementing EBP.

EBPs in Probation Requiring Time and Financial Investment

- Motivational interviewing
- Professional alliance
- Role clarification
- Assessments
- Validation testing
- Case planning
- Dosage and intensity
- Core correctional practices
- Cognitive behavioral interventions
- Effective use of rewards
- Effective responses to noncompliance
- Gender-specific programming
- Differential supervision and right-sizing case-loads
- Precontemplative primers
- Continuous quality improvement (e.g., coaching, case audits, and interrater reliability processes)
- Conducting fidelity assessments of community-based services
- Communities of practice
- Booster sessions
- Policy revisions to align with research
- Exit surveys
- Analysis of outcome data
- Modification of personnel performance measures

Cost Savings Opportunities

The following are some of the most significant ways in which the justice system can reduce its costs—such as those associated with law enforcement, court administration, attorneys, courts, jail/prison, and probation or parole—as well as the financial and emotional costs incurred by victims and the community:

Teach skills to help reduce recidivism. Supervising officers can help reduce recidivism by teaching, demonstrating, practicing, and reinforcing the skills that people under supervision need to address their criminogenic needs and remain law-abiding.

Incentivize early discharge. Probation can incentivize early discharge by providing ways that people can earn their way off supervision through programming and by adopting policies that promote supervision terms of no more than 2 years for most felony placements.

Consider alternatives to incarceration. Jails and prisons are among the most expensive justice system tools. Nearly every alternative to incarceration—including electronic or GPS monitoring, day reporting, intensive supervision, drug courts, supervised work crews, restorative justice, and restitution centers—is less costly.

Manage those at lower risk. A significant percentage of those processed by the justice system are people at low risk of recidivism. These people can be held accountable and, if necessary, be provided services in a cost-effective way by employing practices such as diversion, deferred prosecution, court supervision, kiosk reporting, administrative supervision, or group supervision.

Use effective jail/prison programming. Research-informed programming offered in jail or prison can reduce recidivism, discipline reports, injuries to staff and inmates, and the associated costs.

Reduce the possibility of technical violations. One of the largest drivers of incarceration is violations of supervision. Probation and parole can reduce the likelihood of violations by decreasing the number and type of supervision conditions—focusing on only those conditions that address criminogenic needs and victim restoration—and by promoting policies that prevent revocation for technical violations.



What Do We Know?

Despite the challenges in conducting cost-benefit analyses, significant inroads have been made in recent years that demonstrate that evidence-based practices implemented with fidelity by probation and parole will generate significant cost savings. The following summarizes several reports developed by the Results First Initiative, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, and the Meadows Mental Health Policy Institute.

State



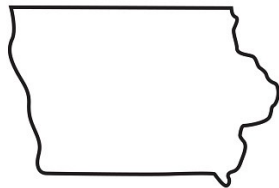
ALASKA

Key Cost-Benefit Findings

- The majority of state-funded justice programs projected benefit generally exceeding current costs.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2015/07/the-pew-macarthur-results-first-initiative-in-alaska>

State



IOWA

Key Cost-Benefit Findings

- Some programs for people in prison and on probation are better investments for Iowa than others.
- Drug treatment programs in prison and in the community yield a little over \$8 in benefits for every \$1 invested.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy returns about \$35 in benefits for every \$1 invested.
- Iowa loses about \$3 for every \$1 invested in domestic violence treatment programs.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2014/05/20/the-pewmacarthur-results-first-initiative-in-iowa>

State



MASSACHUSETTS

Key Cost-Benefit Findings

- Sixteen DOC, probation, and parole services achieved at least a 5:1 cost-benefit ratio.
- These programs also achieved crime reduction ranging from 5% to 23%.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2014/12/massachusetts-evidence-based-approach-to-reducing-recidivism>

State



MINNESOTA

Key Cost–Benefit Findings

- The majority of the Department of Corrections' rehabilitation programs produce benefits that exceed costs.

<https://mn.gov/mmb/results-first/adult-criminal-justice/supervision.jsp>

State



NEW YORK

Key Cost–Benefit Findings

- Several community-and jail-based programs that the New York State Division of Criminal Justice offers are likely to improve public safety and reduce spending, with some interventions expected to return more than \$4 for each \$1 invested.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2013/10/04/the-pewmacarthur-results-first-initiative-in-new-york>

State



PENNSYLVANIA

Key Cost–Benefit Findings

- An analysis of 12 juvenile justice programs identified as evidence-based showed a positive return on investment for most of the programs.

<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2017/04/the-pew-macarthur-results-first-initiative-in-pennsylvania>

State



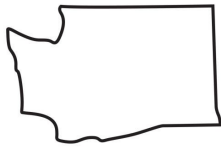
TEXAS

Key Cost–Benefit Findings

- People on probation who participated in the Dallas County Specialty Court program AIM (Achieve, Inspire, Motivate) achieved a 74% reduction in recidivism, and people who graduated from the program showed a 94% reduction in recidivism.
- For every \$1 invested in AIM, the justice system saves \$6.86.

<https://judgebirmingham.com/2021/12/09/study-aim-saves-society-28239-70-reduces-recidivism-by-95>

State



WASHINGTON

Key Cost-Benefit Findings

- Most adult justice system programs showed a positive benefit-to-cost ratio. That ratio was least 2:1, with several programs surpassing a ratio of 10:1.

www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost

The Impact of EBP in Pennsylvania's Adult Probation and Parole Departments

Even though the implementation of EBP in Pennsylvania's adult probation and parole departments has only recently begun, several counties have already started to see an impact and potential cost savings. Further analysis is needed, but the results are very promising, as seen in the examples below.

County



DAUPHIN

Key Outcomes

- Total number of active cases reduced from 7,100 to 6,200
- Average field officer's caseload reduced from 98 to 67 people per officer
- 25% reduction in technical violations
- 15% reduction in new arrests
- 20% decrease in prison population (mostly attributed to the reduction in technical violations)

[Dauphin County Probation Services](#)

County



YORK

Key Cost-Benefit Findings

- Overall caseload reduced from 12,600 (2015) to 8,620 (2021)
- Arrest by officer for violation of supervision reduced from 750 (2017) to 100 (2020)
- Total violations reduced from 5,412 (2015) to 1,377 (2019)
- Jail beds decreased an average of 200 per day (2015-2021)
- Total estimated savings of \$3,022,420 (2015-2021)

[York County Probation Department of Adult Services](#)

CONCLUSION



The cost-benefit analysis of evidence-based practices in community corrections is in its infancy in Pennsylvania. Early indications show potential significant positive outcomes, but it is clear that more work is needed in this area. Many jurisdictions are in a position to establish a framework for a more thorough cost-benefit analysis in the future. Until more rigorous, time-consuming, and costly analyses are conducted, Pennsylvania should consider using existing outcome data from a small number of counties that have implemented evidence-based practices for at least five years to analyze the cost benefit of EBP.

PPCJI Pennsylvania Partnership
for Criminal Justice
Improvement

PENNSYLVANIA

