

Caseload Standards for Probation and Parole (September 2006)

Introduction

The American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) has struggled for some time with the question of the ideal caseload size for probation and parole officers (PPO). That struggle was first documented in an issue paper developed by APPA in the early 1990s¹. In brief, the issue paper did not recommend specific caseload standards, but recommended that probation and parole agencies adopt a workload strategy² to determine staffing needs and caseload size on an individual agency basis.

The issue remains a contentious one, difficult to resolve and critically important to the field of community corrections. The APPA headquarters office regularly receives queries from legislative staffers and the media as to the recommended caseload size. The question of “what is the ideal caseload size?” has critical implications for the staffing levels of probation and parole agencies across the country. Absent any definitive national professional standards, ideally backed up by empirical research, policy-makers and funding bodies are left to muddle through the decisions about resource levels. Some probation and parole agencies have had success with the development and deployment of workload models and weighted caseload formulae, but for the most part staffing decisions for community corrections agencies are made in a relative vacuum of reliable direction as to the right or appropriate level of staffing. As a result, average caseloads in many jurisdictions are larger, often much larger than experienced professionals would recommend. Absent recommendations or guidance from the professional organization representing probation and parole practitioners, decisions about the allocation of resources to community corrections are left to the vagaries of the political and budget processes at the local, county, state and tribal levels.

What is the Right Caseload Size? Why is this Question So Hard to Answer?

As the earlier issue paper noted, this seems like this question should be easy to answer. “Why can’t the professionals in a well-established field, assisted by capable researchers, provide a definitive answer to the question of how many offenders a caseload officer should carry?³” The answer, like the landscape of community corrections, is complex. The diversity of size, structure, geographical area covered, organization and clientele that characterizes probation and parole in the United States and Canada makes it very difficult to make definitive statements or recommendations that will apply to all, or even to a majority of the agencies. While probation and parole agencies use the same basic terminology and general practices, there are key differences that produce significant variations. These differences include:

Not All Offenders Are Alike - they vary in their age, gender, offense seriousness, risk factors and service needs.

Not All Court/Parole Orders Are the Same - Judges and releasing authorities vary widely in terms of the conditions they place on offenders, in terms of the number, complexity and workload demands the conditions place on the supervising officer.

Not All Jurisdictions Are the Same -- The statutory, political and policy environments of the hundreds of jurisdictions that provide probation and parole services vary greatly. The impact of these jurisdictional variations can have significant impact on the work of the PPO.

Based on all of the above factors, the case plan and supervision strategy for a given offender can vary significantly from one department to the next. As a result, it is difficult to prescribe an ideal caseload size that will apply broadly across the field of community corrections. However, the difficulty of this challenge should not deter APPA from addressing it.

The Importance of Caseload Size

The importance of caseload size to the effectiveness of probation and parole supervision cannot be overstated. Offender supervision is a human capital intensive activity. There is no technological or automated solution to this problem. While technological innovations have certainly transformed the work of the PPO, they primarily have improved the monitoring capability of the officers and their access to information, but have done little to change the core correctional practices that comprise case management. People, in the form of PPOs are the core correctional resource.

The challenge faced by education can help to illustrate this issue. The optimal class size has been a hot topic in education for years. In much the same way that probation and parole have struggled, the educational establishment has struggled to define the "right" or optimal class size.

Generally speaking, smaller classes are better than larger ones. Teachers have fewer students to monitor, and so can devote more time to each. They can deliver quality educational services and better monitor student progress. When problems develop, teachers can detect them sooner and take remedial action. Having adequate time is critical to the question of teacher effectiveness.

This rather short and perhaps simplistic description of education leaves out one critical factor. Small classes alone are not enough. They are necessary, but not sufficient. What teachers teach and how they teach it are critical variables in the effectiveness of education. Teachers must use proven educational strategies and techniques to transmit knowledge, and they must have sufficient

time to work with each student to the extent necessary to achieve the educational objectives.

Returning to probation and parole, officer caseloads are the equivalent of teacher class size. Those caseloads must be of a size that provides officers with enough time to devote to each offender to achieve supervision objectives. Just as teachers with overly large classes will be reduced to just maintaining order and sending misbehaving students to the principal's office, PPOs with overly large caseloads can do little more than monitor the offenders and return the non-compliant ones to court. Appropriate class/caseload size is the necessary precondition to effectiveness in these two systems. Without adequate time for supervision (or teaching), effectiveness is just a pipe dream.

A Failed Experiment with Smaller Caseloads

The field of probation and parole has a substantial body of experience to draw upon when looking at the questions of caseload size and effectiveness. In the 1980s, almost every jurisdiction in the U.S. experimented with some form of intensive supervision probation or parole (ISP). While these programs varied significantly in their programmatic details and strategies, they all featured caseloads that were smaller than the norm and supervision that was more intensive (frequent) than the norm. Since many of the ISPs were started in response to prison and jail crowding, the ISPs were aggressive in their surveillance and punitive in their sanctioning. With a small number of exceptions, the ISPs did not emphasize or even provide services or treatment for the offenders⁴.

The results of these ISPs were uniformly dismal⁵. While the caseloads were small, and the officers had much more time to devote to supervision, the ISPs did not reduce recidivism or jail/prison crowding. In many instances, the aggressive and rigid enforcement policies exacerbated jail crowding. This massive policy experiment in community corrections has definitively shown that reducing caseloads alone will not produce better results. The promise of that smaller caseload approach was erased by the pursuit of a punitive, 'get tough' approach to community supervision, an approach that had no grounding in or support from empirical research.

Doing What Works

Within the generally dismal results of the ISP experiment lie several positive exceptions. A small number of jurisdictions took a different approach to their programs, and implemented a more balanced, evidence-based approach to supervision which included an emphasis on working with offenders on their criminogenic problems through counseling, services and treatment⁶. These ISPs showed positive results in terms of reducing criminal activity and technical violations, and increasing pro-social behaviors like working, avoiding substance

abuse, performing community service and paying court-ordered obligations, such as restitution and child support.

These programs demonstrate that small caseloads, combined with effective strategies can produce improved results. It is in the area of effective strategies that the most progress has been made since APPA last addressed the issue of caseload size. The emergence in the 1990s of the body of research on correctional treatment effectiveness known as 'What Works' (now referred to as Evidence-Based Practices) has transformed the knowledge base of the field of corrections. This growing assemblage of empirically based strategies, practices and programs designed to facilitate offender behavior change has developed into a robust set of principles of effective correctional treatment. The question of what to do (effective strategies) when caseloads are reduced has now been answered definitively.

Successful Examples from Recent Practice

Two recent evaluations of probation and parole supervision provide powerful support for the combination of reduced caseloads and supervision strategies based on the principles of evidence-based practices⁷. The evaluations examine the supervision of offenders in two different jurisdictions. In Maryland's Proactive Community Supervision (PCS) program, moderate and high risk probationers and parolees were supervised in reduced caseloads of 55 (compared with the normal 100), according to an evidence-based model of intervention. The evaluation included 274 randomly selected cases for PCS, matched with 274 cases supervised under the traditional model (non-PCS). The results reveal that the PCS cases had significantly lower rearrest rates (32.1% for PCS vs. 40.9% for non-PCS) and significantly lower technical violation rates (20.1% for PCS vs. 29.2% for non-PCS). The PCS offenders have a 38% lower chance of being rearrested or being charged with a technical violation, as compared with the non-PCS offenders⁸.

In Connecticut, probationers at risk of violation and offenders being released from prison were supervised in caseloads of 25, also according to an evidence-based model of intervention. The evaluation results showed that both programs were able to reduce the rate of technical violations among the probationers, most dramatically among those who were failing under regular supervision and were referred to a special unit for supervision⁹.

An older (1992) study of a drug offender ISP in Colorado shows similar positive results¹⁰. While this program preceded the most recent developments in EBP, it was based on the core elements of effective correctional treatment. Drug addicted offenders were randomly assigned to one of three options: intensive supervision (caseloads of 40) alone, intensive supervision with cognitive skills development and traditional probation (caseloads of 160). The combination of intensive supervision and cognitive skills programming produced significantly

better results than ISP alone, and much better results than traditional supervision. The improvements were even more pronounced with higher risk offenders and those with greater drug and alcohol needs.

These results are clear - caseload size is important in probation and parole. Manageable size caseloads are necessary for effective supervision, but they are not sufficient. Officers must provide supervision using the principles of evidence-based practice. Only with this potent combination can the potential of probation and parole supervision be achieved.

Can We Agree on the Right Caseload Size?

Despite the fact that it is very difficult to define an optimal caseload size for all the reasons listed above, a general consensus seems to be emerging from the research, practice and dialogue in the field. While not definitive, the consensus supports the development and promulgation of caseload standards for the field by APPA. The work of a professional organization in an allied field provides a supportive example of how to approach this challenge.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) has published caseload standards for each of the eleven program areas of child welfare services. Just as APPA represents a broad and diverse collection of community corrections agencies, the CWLA represents a similarly broad and diverse set of agencies engaged in child welfare and protective services. The CWLA standards are designed to promote best practices and to guide decision-makers as they seek to build and strengthen services to children, youth and families¹¹. In much the same way as this paper has discussed the importance of the substance of supervision as well as the caseload size, the CWLA standards include "those practices considered to be most desirable in providing services"¹². This is an important point to consider. Caseload standards are typically thought of as means for driving staffing decisions, and not much else. In the CWLA, they start with number of cases and then go well beyond that to recommending best practices for each child welfare case type. APPA should consider adopting the same approach, making these caseload standards the first step towards broader adoption of evidence-based practice.

Using Caseload Standards in Probation and Parole

The caseload standards for probation and parole should be viewed as the first step in a process that involves a thorough review and analysis of each agency's individual workload, resources and policies. The terms workload and caseload are often used interchangeably, and incorrectly. A caseload is the number of individual offenders¹³ assigned to an officer or team for supervision or monitoring. Workload is the total amount of time that the required tasks and activities in a particular caseload generate for the individual PPO or team. The discussion of workload only begins with the caseload, or number of cases

assigned. It must proceed to a review of agency policy, which determines what will be required for an individual case. Other factors such as statutes, standards and administrative regulations will also affect the workload dimensions of a case. Only when such a thorough analysis is done can the true workload impact of a given caseload number be ascertained. As the CWLA notes although the standards recommend “caseload ratios for each area of child welfare practice, workloads are best determined through careful time studies conducted within the individual agency.”¹⁴

Workload studies have been common in probation and parole for more than two decades. They were a component of the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) Model Systems Project for probation and parole case management. A thorough and helpful manual on the subject is available from the NIC Information Center¹⁵. An excellent example of a recent workload study is one done by the Utah Juvenile Court¹⁶.

Determining Caseload Standards

As the history of APPA’s efforts in this area suggests, determining the “right” caseload size is a challenge in such a large, complex and diverse field as contemporary probation and parole. Nonetheless, this is a critical task that needs to be addressed and resolved by APPA. Agency specific workload studies will drive the details, but the field needs national caseload standards to provide direction for practitioners and policy-makers.

The critical question is how to determine the standards. The best method for this task in this environment is to tap into the best thinking of experienced and thoughtful practitioners in probation and parole. A consensus model for developing and refining caseload standards is the best, and perhaps the only feasible method for this task¹⁷. This paper provides a starting point for those discussions by presenting the following suggested caseload standards.

Suggested Caseload Standards for Probation and Parole Supervision

Similar to the CWLA caseload standards, the following caseload standards are designed to drive effective practices and guide decision-makers. To make these standards flexible and useful, they are stated in terms of ratios of cases to officers, and are framed as numbers not to be exceeded. The ratios allow agencies where teams are utilized to use the standards. Framing the standards as numbers not to be exceeded helps to reduce the chance that better staffed agencies will not be forced to allow caseloads to increase because of the standards.

Cases are grouped or classified into several broad categories, based on key criteria such as risk of re-offending, offense type and criminogenic needs. This

differentiation of cases on relevant criteria is critical. It ensures that offenders are matched with the appropriate level of supervision and services.

Adult Caseload Standards

Case Type	Cases to Staff Ratio
Intensive	20:1
Moderate to High Risk	50:1
Low Risk	200:1
Administrative	No limit? 1,000?

Juvenile Caseload Standards

Case Type	Cases to Staff Ratio
Intensive	15:1
Moderate to High Risk	30:1
Low Risk	100:1
Administrative	Not recommended

Case Assessment

One of the principles of effective correctional treatment is accurate case assessment at intake and at regular intervals during supervision¹⁸. It is essential that valid and reliable instruments be used to assess risk and needs and guide decisions about case assignment. Accurate classification of cases will allow the allocation of resources and the scaling of caseloads in the most effective fashion. The evidence suggests that staff resources and services should be targeted at intensive and moderate to high risk cases, for this is where the greatest effect will be had. Minimal contacts and services should be provided to low risk cases.

At first glance, the reaction to the caseload standards will be that many more staff will be needed to put them into practice. In reality, reallocation of staff and cases in a comprehensive way will allow staff to be shifted to the supervision of higher risk cases and away from lower risk. Supervision resources should be concentrated where they can do the most good (moderate and high risk) and be shifted away from areas where they are not needed as much, if at all (low risk). Community corrections agencies need to stop wasting time on what does not work or what may even do "harm" and focus their resources on what does work and does do "good" in terms of public safety.

Implications for Future Efforts

If APPA is to avoid the pitfalls of previous efforts to lower caseloads, it is clear that caseload standards must be accompanied by a concerted effort to define effective practices across the board. In the same way that the CWLA calls their caseload standards “Child Welfare Standards of Excellence”, APPA should use this effort of defining caseload standards as a springboard for a larger initiative to codify best practices for community corrections. This would provide individual agencies and jurisdictions with the blueprints they need to implement these practices. Having done that, they can conduct the requisite time studies and develop their own specific staffing patterns, sufficient to support quality services and produce successful outcomes.

¹ The American Probation and Parole Association (1991) “Issue Paper on Caseload Standards” Available at: <http://www.appa-net.org/about%20appa/caseload.htm>.

² The workload approach will be described later in this paper.

³ APPA (1991)

⁴ Petersilia, Joan and Susan Turner. (1993) “Intensive Probation and Parole” *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*. Vol. 17. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Pp. 281-335.

⁵ Aos, Steve, Mama Miller and Elizabeth Drake (2006) *Evidence-Based Adult Corrections Programs: What Works and What Does Not*. Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy. Petersilia & Turner (1993).

⁶ Aos, et al. (2006) Petersilia & Turner (1993), Papanozzi, Mario and Paul Gendreau. (2005) “An Intensive Supervision Program that Worked: Service Delivery, Professional Orientation and Organizational Supportiveness.” *The Prison Journal*. v. 85, n. 4. Pearson, Frank S. (1987) *Research on New Jersey’s Intensive Supervision Program*. New Brunswick, NJ: Institute for Criminological Research. Johnson, Grant and Robert M. Hunter. (1992) “Evaluation of the Specialized Drug Offender Program for the Colorado Judicial Department. Boulder, CO: Center for Action Research. Mimeo.

⁷ Bogue, Brad, et al. (2005) *Implementing Evidence-Based Practice in Community Corrections: The Principles of Effective Intervention*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.

⁸ Taxman, Faye S., Christina Yancey and Jeanne E. Bilanin. (2006) *Proactive Community Supervision: Changing Offender Outcomes*. Baltimore, MD: Division of Parole and Probation.

⁹ Cox, Stephen M., Kathleen Bantley and Thomas Roscoe. (2005) *Evaluation of the Court Support Services Division’s Probation Transition Program and Technical Violation Unit: Final Report*. Central Connecticut State University. p. 6.

¹⁰ Fogg, Vern. (1992) “A Probation Model of Drug Offender Intervention in Colorado: Implementation of a Cognitive Skills Development Program” *Perspectives*. vol. 16, n. 1 pp. 24-26. Johnson & Hunter (1992).

¹¹ Office of Child Welfare Standards. FAQs. CWLA website

¹² CWLA “Standards of Excellence for Child Welfare Services.” <http://www.cwla.org/programs/standards/cwsstandards.htm>

¹³ The term offender is used to incorporate all individuals under the supervision of a community corrections agency. This can include adult defendants in pretrial services, juveniles in both pre and post-adjudication status, probationers, parolees and all other individuals placed under the supervision of these agencies.

¹⁴ CWLA “Guidelines for Computing Caseload Standards” p. 2.

¹⁵ Bemus, Brian, Gary Arling and Peter Quigley. (1983) *Workload Measures for Probation and Parole* Washington, DC: National Institute of Corrections.

¹⁶ Utah State Juvenile Court (2005) “Probation Officer Workload Study” mimeo.

¹⁷ Hurst, Hunter III. (1999) *Workload Measurement for Juvenile Justice System Personnel: Practices and Needs*. Washington, DC: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

¹⁸ Bogue, et al. (2005)