

Findings from a Doctoral Dissertation on Domestic Assault in Hennepin County

Deborah A. Eckberg, Ph.D.
Hennepin County District Court Research Division

Research Design

The original purpose of the project was to compare outcomes for defendants convicted of domestic assault and sentenced to supervised probation between July 1, 1996 and June 30, 1997 with those convicted and sentenced to probation three years earlier (July 1, 1993 to June 30 1994). I followed both groups for four full years. The 1996-97 group had the benefit of more intensive supervision, as the caseloads of probation officers were significantly lower than they had been in the past, meaning that probation officers could provide more specialized supervision and attention to each individual defendant. The primary research question, then, was concerned with finding out whether those subject to more intensive supervision had better long term outcomes than those with less supervision. I expected those with more supervision to desist from domestic assault more quickly, meaning that they would take longer to commit a new offense and/or have a technical probation violation than those with less supervision. Research has shown that for some types of crime, increased supervision predicts desistance, but this theory had not yet been tested on domestic assault probationers.

I was also interested in finding out if the same types of variables that have been shown in the research literature to predict desistance from other types of crime predict desistance from domestic assault. I looked at age of the defendant at the time of probation intake, and whether or not s/he was married, employed, educated, and/or had a stable residence. This last group of variables is often referred to in the literature as “stake in conformity” variables, implying that offenders with investments in society are expected to stop offending for fear of losing what they have (e.g., a marital relationship or a job). I provide a brief summary of my findings here.

*Finding #1: Those in the intensive supervision group **did not** desist any sooner from domestic assault than those who were on regular probation, although the difference was not statistically significant.*

*Finding #2: Those in the intensive supervision group **did** desist sooner from **new person crimes** in general (e.g., stranger assault, homicide, kidnapping, sexual assault). This was a strong and statistically significant difference. Those in the intensive supervision group were only 35% as likely as those in the regular group to have a new non-domestic person offense within four years.*

*Finding #3: Those in the intensive supervision group were **less likely** than the regular probation group to have technical violations while on probation.*

*Finding #4: In both groups, probationers involved in a domestic but non-romantic relationship with their victims (e.g., parent/child relationships, siblings, in-laws, etc.) **did** desist sooner from domestic assault than those who assaulted their intimate partners.*

An explanation of these first four findings may aid understanding. Lower caseloads clearly enable probation officers to spend more time on each case, including time with both the probationer and the victim. This increase in attention may result in probation officers hearing about new domestic assaults against the same victim. In effect, the intensive supervision group may have a higher number of new domestic crimes because they are being watched more closely and getting caught more frequently than they would have in the past. But because the intensive supervision group had far better outcomes for new person crimes in general, it may be that by catching new misdemeanor domestic assaults the system is preventing offenders from sexually assaulting, kidnapping, or murdering their intimate partners.

In addition, intensive supervision is clearly keeping these probationers from assaulting people other than their intimate partners as frequently as they would otherwise. The first new offense for the regular probation group was a stranger assault 35% of the time, and of those assaults, 57% were at the gross misdemeanor or felony level. By comparison, the first new offense for the intensive supervision group was a stranger assault only 26% of the time, and only 41% of those were gross misdemeanors or felonies.

Also important is the fact that the intensive supervision probationers have less technical violations. This suggests that probation officers with lower caseloads may be more effective at encouraging their clients to complete their court-ordered treatment and abide by their other conditions of probation.

*Finding #5: Domestic assault probationers do appear to “age-out” of battering, in that older probationers **did** desist sooner from domestic assault, as well as from crime in general.*

*Finding #6: Domestic assault probationers with a “stake in conformity” **did** desist sooner from domestic assault, as well as from crime in general. **Employment** was the strongest predictor of desistance, with education also having a statistically significant effect on desistance from domestic assault. Marital status predicted desistance from crime in general, but not from domestic assault. Residential stability had no effect on desistance from crime, but those probationers with a stable residence were slightly less likely to have a technical violation than those who were more transient.*

These last two groups of findings suggest that as domestic assault probationers age, and as they become attached to conventional norms such as holding down a permanent job, they are more likely to desist from offending in general, and from assaulting their intimate partners in particular. Employment was by far the strongest predictor of desistance from domestic assault, which supports the idea that by encouraging probationers to gain and/or maintain a permanent job, system players can help to reduce the risk of re-offense on domestic assault victims.

In sum, lower caseloads do appear to make a difference; the increased hand-holding and surveillance that can be provided by probation officers with a reasonable amount of time to spend on each probationer is invaluable. Clearly, lower caseloads allow probation officers the time to encourage vocational training, to create a more complete picture of the dynamics of the relationship within which the probationer is involved, and to perhaps prevent more serious crimes from occurring. It may be that intensive supervision is just one piece of the puzzle, but it is a critically important piece nonetheless. Abuse that exists within the romantic relationship is apparently the toughest nut to crack. It seems clear that resources targeted to ending abuse in romantic relationships are well spent.