

Q:

Is there an ideal size?

Caseload Size in Probation and Parole

A:

Yes, but only if valued results matter.

The professional debate regarding ideal caseload size has continued for the past three decades. Likely, this issue was also a professional “bone of contention” since the inception of probation and parole services in the United States. It is unfortunate that the caseload size problem has not been resolved. The failure to come to grips with standards for staff to offender ratios has resulted in nothing short of operational chaos, in some quarters, in the delivery of probation and parole services intended to enhance public safety and justice for all.

Most professionals can agree that a probation and parole officer (PO) to offender caseload ratio of 1:500 is absurd. In fact, their similar sentiments and consensus would be obvious at ratios of 1:300; 1:200; and 1:100. These PO to offender caseload ratios are, unfortunately, all too common. How is it that this startling situation is permitted to exist? Do these unwieldy staff to offender caseload ratios result in more crime victims than would be the case if the ratios were smaller? These are some of the questions that we will attempt to shed light on below.

Some years ago, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) tackled the matter of an ideal caseload size. The effort was excellent, the result mediocre. Moreover, the final position adopted by the APPA did not affirmatively link caseload size to recidivism and/or justice outcomes. In the end, the professional door remained open to approach policies regarding caseload size from an optional rather than a compelling perspective.

The American Probation and Parole Association’s current leadership has asked its Positions and Evidence-Based Offender Program Committees to work together for the purpose of developing a set of policy recommendations for caseload size. In addition, the committees are charged with assuring that the policy recommendations are congruous with the valued outcomes expected from probation and parole services, specifically public safety and justice.

We believe that the best way to respond to the APPA call for action is to work backwards from the desired end-result towards strategies that can produce it. The notion of beginning with the end in mind is certainly not new, and it is a paradigm that is used by successful individuals (see Stephen Covey’s book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*), government organizations (NASA in its efforts to land an astronaut on the moon), and private corporations (Lee Iacocca’s and Henry Ford’s visions for Chrysler and Ford, respectively).

If public safety and justice are unaffected by caseload size, then the profession needs to know that and forevermore stop debating it. If the opposite is the case, as virtually every professional knows it is, then the profession must speak forcefully with a unified voice through organizations like the APPA. The simple message of this article is that publicly valued outcomes will not be achieved if caseload size exceeds a certain staff to client ratio. Ultimately, the focus should be on making a compelling case for adoption of the state-of-the-art when it comes to saving lives, reducing harm, and fostering the administration of justice for all – especially current and prospective crime victims.

Caseload Size and the “What Works” Evidence

If research has taught us anything over the past 20 years it is that it is indeed possible to reduce individual offender recidivism (Andrews & Bonta, 2003). This possibility, however, turns on extent to which

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probation and parole organizations effectively make use of certain principles for effective intervention (for a detailed presentation of these principles see Gendreau, 1996). The reduction of individual offender recidivism results in increased public safety. In fact, the research in this regard tells us that we can expect reductions in the range of 10-30 percent.

The general professional sentiment regarding “what works” versus “nothing works” seems to be overwhelmingly in favor of the former over the latter. Nevertheless, when one scans the professional landscape of actual practice, it becomes readily apparent that there are policies, programs, and practices in place that are antithetical to individual offender recidivism reduction, and therefore to public safety and justice concerns as well. This disconnect is not surprising to practitioners. In fact, it is commonly and forcefully expressed at professional conferences, workshops, and training sessions that we have participated in across the continent and in Europe too!

Caseload size is perhaps one of the best examples of this troublesome state of the profession. Line staff, mid-level managers, administrators, judges and parole board members often frustratingly comment that it is not possible to effectively supervise offenders in community settings without sufficient staff resources. On the heels of such statements, professionals opine that the elected officials who fund “us” (probation and parole) either do not understand us, or do not want to pay the cost required for quality services.

We offer an alternative explanation for the soft funding support. That the profession has not tightly and obviously linked policies, practices, and programs to the outcomes that the funders want to procure. And, quite frankly, that probation and parole practitioners want to provide.

The question before us on this very important topic is whether or not probation and parole services can produce valued results at any staff to offender caseload ratio as opposed to some yet to be determined ideal ratio. Once this question is answered, then the profession must turn our attention to a formula or process for determining what the ratio should be. First however, and in keeping with the results-driven model set forth in the Introduction, it is necessary to examine which probation and parole supervision strategies/principles actually enhance public safety and justice.

The research on individual offender recidivism reduction tells us, among other things, that:

- It is essential to foster firm, fair, and constructively caring relationships between offenders and service providers (e.g. POs).
- Offender risk should be assessed using a valid dynamic risk assessment that targets criminogenic needs.
- Once criminogenic needs are identified, case management strategies should be developed that target these need deficits.
- Staff providing services to offenders should at all times serve as prosocial role models.
- Staff providing services to offenders should find ways to reward offenders when they exhibit desirable conduct (e.g. verbal affirmation by a PO, community acknowledgement, etc.).
- Staff providing services should quickly react to undesirable behavior in an effort to “steer” the offender towards the objectives of supervision.
- Offender progress in the context of a case management plan should be closely monitored and assessed.
- Attention should be paid to the quality of treatment services being provided.

This partial listing of the principles for effective offender intervention is likely familiar to virtually all probation and parole professionals. We think it is important, however, to again call attention to these kinds of principles as the matter of caseload size is revisited. The principles essentially represent workload tasks for probation and parole officers. Workload tasks that derive from “what works” principles can be complemented by other tasks associated with ameliorating the social correlates of crime. In this regard, we now turn to a brief summary of workload functions associated with broken windows probation and parole (Reinventing Probation Council, 1999).

Caseload Size and Broken Windows Theory – Adding Community Justice to the Agenda

Unlike the “what works” approach to recidivism reduction, the broken windows model does not yet have a body of empirical evidence to support it. Notwithstanding the paucity of empirical evidence, the principles set forth in the model are logical and they make intuitive sense to street-level probation and parole practitioners. The broken windows model, like the “what works” model seeks to enhance public safety and justice for all. To accomplish this, there are certain principles that drive staff activities. Some of the principles are:

- POs should regularly interact with community members and leaders.
- POs should develop and maintain meaningful collaborations with law enforcement, social service agencies, treatment providers, as well as civic and faith-based organizations.
- POs should vary their hours of work to include routine evening and weekend coverage.
- POs should strive to become well-known to individuals who reside in the communities where offenders live.
- POs should attend to the needs of current and prospective victims of crime.

The Inseparable Nature of Workload and Caseload

The amount of time that it will take to accomplish each task under the two approaches to probation and parole services will vary depending on such things as offender risk level, geography of a jurisdiction, staff competencies and numerous other factors. This workload variability is a critical component to understanding caseload size problems and solutions.

In addition to the actual offender supervision functions noted above, POs are also faced with a significant number of non-supervision, or administrative, tasks. The sum total of offender supervision and administrative tasks constitutes the work that must be performed by POs during a given work week. It is within the context of this workload dynamic that matter of an ideal caseload size must be understood analyzed and resolved.

The notion that the workload of POs forms the basis for caseload size is not new. In the mid-1970s, the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) spearheaded a professional movement to implement a model system for probation and parole. The model system was based on work done in Wisconsin at that time. It included the assignment of risk levels to offenders, case management, and workload measures to determine optimum resource allocation within probation and parole organizations.

The determination of workload measures was to be made, according to the NIC model, through something akin to time and motion methodologies well-known to profit making private enterprises. The

goal of this approach to PO workload was to establish a process that: a) accounted for variability in workload flowing from offender risk level (e.g. high risk requires more work than low risk); and that b) respected the differences across probation and parole jurisdictions. It was believed that through this process the integrity a PO's ability to deliver on short-term risk management and long-term behavioral reform of offenders under supervision would be maximized.

Policy Recommendations for the "Ideal Caseload"

We strongly endorse the notion that the determination of an ideal caseload size can only be accomplished in conjunction with a determination of ideal workload measures. Moreover, we support a results-driven approach to the delivery of probation and parole services that emphasizes public safety and justice for all.

Ultimately, the ideal caseload size will be somewhat unique to local jurisdictions; the process for making this determination, however, is universally applicable to all. With this in mind, we offer the following policy recommendations:

- Articulate principles for effective probation and parole supervision keeping the outcomes of short-term risk management, long-term behavioral reform of offenders, and justice for all (which includes restoration of victims) as the guideposts for the adoption or rejection of particular principles.
- Identify PO workload tasks that are required to deliver effective supervision services within the context of the articulated principles.
- Identify administrative and investigative tasks that are required of POs.
- Conduct a time study to determine the amount of time needed to accomplish required tasks – offender supervision and administrative.
- Establish workload units for all tasks performed by POs based on the findings of the time study.
- Assign tasks to POs that respect the realities of the established workload measures. This means rigorous honesty with internal and external stakeholders. Simply put more cannot always be done with less.
- Prioritize tasks/functions that the agency should perform.
- Allocate workload resources to the tasks/functions according to the prioritization.
- Present a rationale for the prioritization of tasks/functions.
- Identify tasks that cannot be adequately accomplished at current workload resource allocations.
- Articulate the deleterious effects of not performing the tasks for which there are insufficient resources to accomplish.
- Collect data that demonstrates that administering probation and parole services within realistic workload parameters reduces recidivism, and therefore victimization, more than if services are provided in an overburdened workload environment.
- Demonstrate, through agency management information systems, that administering probation and parole services within realistic workload parameters enhances the ability to hold offenders accountable and assure that justice is served, more than if services are provided in an overburdened workload environment.
- Collect data on the level of community and victim satisfaction with the services provided.

Conclusion

Caseload size is directly related to workload which is directly linked to probation and parole's success or failure with regard to enhancing public safety and assuring justice for crime victims as well as those under supervision. This bold but true statement moves the need to affirmatively move the resolution of this issue from the realm of the optional to that of the compelling.

It would be ludicrous to think of the medical profession, for example, stepping away from resolution of a policy issue that is linked to sickness and health, or life and death. The obvious nature of these outcomes forces resolution of critical policy issues. And, in the medical profession, as in all other professions, resolution of policy debates is grounded in empirical research whenever possible, and in its absence respected theories.

The time has come for the probation and parole profession to move to the next level of its professional development. In so doing, an affirmative statement will be made that the manner in which probation and parole services are administered is a matter of the most serious consequences. In no uncertain terms, it is a matter of our own well-being, and sometimes of life and death.

The strategies for determining an ideal caseload that are set forth herein will not be easy to undertake. However, with the will to do it, they can be implemented. In any case, the long-term payoff in terms of rational resource allocation and budgeting far outweighs the efforts involved. Certainly, the failure to make this professional change will ensure that the debate about caseload size; along with the professional complaints about inadequate resources, will remain with us for the next three decades as well. Worst of all, there will be more crime victims and injustices than would otherwise have been the case if the profession once and for all stood firm on the matter of workload and its very real consequences.

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