

GPS monitoring of Arizona sex offenders

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The use of GPS technology to monitor sex offenders should be viewed as a tool rather than a control mechanism, a team of researchers at Sam Houston State University found in a recent study.

In "Examining GPS Monitoring Alerts Triggered by Sex Offenders: The Divergence of Legislative Goals and Practical Applications in Community Corrections," Dr. Gaylene Armstrong and Beth Freeman examined the affects of a state law in Arizona that required the lifelong GPS monitoring of adult sex offenders convicted of dangerous crimes against children and placed on community supervision. The study monitored [sex offenders](#) in Maricopa County, AZ over a two-year period.

"A divergence between legislative goals and practical application of mandated GPS monitoring programs exists," said Dr. Armstrong, Research Director of the Correctional Management Institute of Texas at the College of [Criminal Justice](#). "GPS technology is far more limited than anticipated and should be viewed as a tool rather than depended upon as a [control mechanism](#)."

The study found that a significant number of equipment-related alerts were triggered by a loss of a [satellite signal](#), rather than offender violations. Those alerts resulted in a significant increase in the workload of probation officers.

"While it is expected that GPS technology provides the capability for near real-time tracking of an offender's location and movement in the

community and that alerts would primarily indicate non-compliance with geographical and temporal restrictions, findings demonstrated that the responses to non-violation alerts consumed an inordinate amount of an agency's resources – resources that could be better directed to other case management activities," the study found.

A secondary impact is the possibility of complacency by probation officers because of an overload of non-violation alerts, which may result in a failure to act and liability for offender actions, the report concluded.

The cost effectiveness of GPS monitoring should be considered when setting budget for technology and vendors, especially considering the workload required to implement and maintain the system. If lifelong monitoring is mandated, the number of cases will continue to grow, the study said.

Community corrections supervisors estimate that 70 percent of alerts are false alarms and are usually related to technology issues. Steps should be taken to reduce the likelihood of unintentional alarms. Probation officers also should be trained on the use of the GPS system, and written rules and policies should be implemented, the report said.

"Results demonstrated a clear difference between legislative perceptions of the level of technological advancement of GPS equipment and its actual readiness for broad based roll out in community corrections settings at this time," said the study. "Moreover, it appears from these results that GPS technology is currently too underdeveloped to recommend continued swift enactment of legislation mandating implementation and utilization of [GPS](#) in a cost-effective manner."

Provided by Sam Houston State University

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