

# Study shows in-home probation for juvenile offenders lowers recidivism

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(Phys.org) —First-time violent juvenile offenders sentenced to probation camps are more than twice as likely to be involved in future criminal behavior than youths sentenced to in-home probation, according to a new study co-authored by Laura Abrams professor of social welfare in the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs.

The paper's results, which were published in the March 2014 issue of *Social Work Research*, come at a time when bills on sentencing reform are making their way through Congress. Abrams said the study could have far-reaching implications on policy as lawmakers, judges, prosecutors and public defenders examine the value of harsh sentencing

for adults and juveniles.

"There's more common knowledge now that sending youth out of home isn't good for kids," said Abrams, a one-time group home worker. "But there's always been a question mark around youth with convictions for violent crimes. There's some argument that at least you have to protect the public from harm."

That's where Abrams, Hui Huang, assistant professor in the school of social work at Florida International University, and the study's lead researcher, Joseph P. Ryan, associate professor of [social work](#) at the University of Michigan, began to investigate.

Using data from the Los Angeles County Probation Department and the county Department of Children and Family Services, the researchers pulled out records of first-time violent offenders 16-years-old and younger who were arrested from 2003 to 2005 and were given one of three judicial dispositions: in-home probation, group-home placement, or probation camp. They then followed the records of those youth through February 2009 to see if they had been arrested again.

According to the study, 1,822 (73 percent) youths were assigned to in-home probation, 349 (14 percent) were placed in a group home, and 333 (13 percent) were assigned to probation camp.

Approximately one year after the initial violent offense, 13 percent of in-home probation cases were associated with a new offense, 17 percent of group-home cases were associated with a new offense, and 26 percent of camp cases were associated with a new offense.

In addition, the differences among the three groups were more pronounced as time progressed, the researchers found. After five years, 39 percent of in-home probation cases, 47 percent of group-home

placements, and 65 percent of probation camp placements were associated with a new offense.

Overall, the likelihood of recidivism was slightly more than twice as great for youths assigned to probation camps and more than 1.25 times greater for youths assigned to group homes, the results showed. These outcomes can be useful when thinking about how to keep youth from re-offending, Abrams said.

"We don't know the reason behind the initial sentencing decisions, but what we were able to see was that at each successive level of sentence, the probability of being rearrested went up significantly," she said.

"Some of the theory behind that is that a youth at home on probation is closer connected, doesn't have his or her life disrupted, and is closer to the school that they know which creates social bonds that are protective."

What makes Abrams' and her co-authors' study unique is that unlike other studies it is able to distinguish offenders that re-offend based solely on the type of court-mandated placement. Using a statistical analysis tool called propensity score matching, they were able to control for static risks like gender, race and age.

"This is a study with a lot of statistical power because we used a big data set," Abrams added. Their data contained hundreds of thousands of records of youth who'd been either in child welfare or the juvenile justice system or both, which they narrowed down.

Abrams, Ryan, and Huang are currently running analyses on additional findings and hope to publish another paper this year.

Other results that need more investigation include that males and African American youths are at an increased risk of recidivism, and youths with an open case in the child welfare system are at significantly greater risk

of repeat offending and involvement in the juvenile justice system.

**More information:** Joseph P. Ryan, Laura S. Abrams, and Hui Huang, "First-Time Violent Juvenile Offenders: Probation, Placement, and Recidivism." *Social Work Research* first published online March 20, 2014 [DOI: 10.1093/swr/svu004](https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svu004)

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