COVID-19’s Impact on Probation Professionals’ Views About Their Roles and the Future of Probation

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Abstract
In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced probation departments to change their practices overnight. The phenomenon presented many challenges for probation departments but also opened avenues for innovation and changes in attitudes toward supervision practices. We surveyed adult and juvenile probation departments in the entire state of Texas, specifically targeting management and supervisory personnel, officers with caseloads, including court officers, and information technology personnel (N = 1,353). Our goals of this research included not only obtaining information about operational changes made because of the pandemic but also gauging attitudes toward these changes and the future of probation. We understood operational changes were inevitable, thus findings of significant operational changes were not surprising. We found that probation personnel were open to changes in operational procedures and that the pandemic spurred innovation and widespread acceptance in the use of technology for a variety of activities going forward that may not have been accepted prior to the pandemic.

Keywords
COVID-19, probation, community supervision, future of probation

Introduction
Since its inception, probation has faced the conflicting goals of public safety and rehabilitation (Ellsworth, 1990). Much research has assessed how probation has evolved to include more hybrid approaches, balancing surveillance, law enforcement, and rehabilitation (Cullen & Jonson, 2012; Grattet et al., 2018). While the field of probation continues to grapple with its central purpose, in

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March 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic forced probation agencies to quickly change policies and practices, which has affected how probation workers view the role of community supervision. These changes include but are not limited to reducing the number of face-to-face contacts, changes in court proceedings, the utilization of technology for contacts as well as treatment services, budget and staff constraints, and the health and safety of those working in supervision agencies. As probation agencies have been forced to adopt substantive changes to their practices, it is important to assess how these changes have implications for the future of community supervision.

A plethora of literature exists across many disciplines regarding organizational change and resistance to such changes. Criminal justice agencies, including probation departments, are not immune to this problem. Considering the responsibilities to protect the community, affect change in individuals on probation, and comply with court orders probation departments have traditionally been resistant to change in part because of the nature of bureaucracy. Bureaucratic structures are generally not conducive to innovation (Thompson, 1965). They are characterized by rigid lines of communication, emphasis on efficiency and control, centralized authority and decision making, and specialized division of labor (Udy, 1959; Weber, 1921). Most criminal justice agencies are still hierarchical Weberian organizations with mechanistic and formalistic operations, with specialized tasks and division of labor that create a narrow range of duties (Dias & Vaughn, 2006; Hagan, 1977; McCleary, 1975). These rigid bureaucratic traits make it difficult for probation agencies to innovate, especially if both management and employees within these organizations are resistant to change.

Resistance to organizational change can be institutionalized due to a variety of factors such as their size, complexity or number of structural components, centralization or the locus of decision-making, formalization or use of rules in an organization, pressure, individual attitude, and departmental attitude (Allen, 2002; Erwin & Garman, 2010). Moreover, individual attitudes such as trust in management, communication, and considerations of threats and benefits of change can impact how well an organization adapts to change. Moreover, change may be slow due to managerial quality and its impact on organizational performance (Fayol, 1950; Furst & Cable, 2008). Probation administrators have not only been dealing with resistance to change within their organizations but also with trying to stay abreast of the ever-evolving research about “what works” in community supervision.

Over the last several decades, criminal justice agencies have been slowly adopting and implementing evidence-based practices, but they are still struggling to implement theory into daily practices (Taxman, 2018; Taxman & Smith, 2020). Taxman’s (2018) research reviewed how organizations adapt to change and the implementation of evidence-based practices. This study culminated in the development of a research agenda to build implementation knowledge. Moreover, because certain evidence-based practices are still evolving, such as the risk-needs-responsivity model (Taxman & Smith, 2020), this presents implementation issues for organizations to keep pace with progressing research. Not only do agencies have issues in translating theory into practice, but it also takes time for the practice to become widespread throughout the organization (Amodeo et al., 2011). However, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, changes were forced to occur swiftly.

One change that occurred across community supervision agencies was the increased reliance on technology to conduct virtual visits, treatment sessions, and other face-to-face programming. The use of technology in community corrections has expanded in recent years, as a response to increased caseload sizes with fewer resources (Russo et al., 2019). In their report on an expert workshop with community corrections stakeholders, Russo et al. (2019) found that participants expressed a common need to leverage technology to both train and support officers in their job duties. Most research on community corrections’ use of technology has focused on the use of risk assessments, electronic monitoring, and less frequently, automated reporting such as kiosk supervision. The use of electronic monitoring has increased in recent years, as both a way to alleviate overcrowded
jails and prisons, but also as a mechanism to increase the supervision of high-risk individuals in the community (Nellis, 2016).

Kiosk reporting is a form of electronic reporting that has been implemented in several jurisdictions to reduce the need for a low-risk individual to meet face-to-face with a probation officer. Kiosks identify the individual on supervision using biometric measures and collect information typically gained through a meeting with a probation officer (Ahlin et al., 2016). Few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of kiosk reporting, but overall research is supportive of its use. For example, Wilson et al. (2007) found a 3% recidivism reduction for low-risk individuals who were assigned to kiosk reporting. Similarly, a study by the Maryland Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (2002) found that only 2% of individuals reporting to kiosks recidivated as compared to the usual 10% recidivism rate of regular probation. In a multi-jurisdictional study of kiosk reporting, Crosse et al. (2015) found kiosk reporting is a potential way to reduce the cost and burden of burgeoning caseloads that are no less effective than traditional probation in terms of recidivism rates.

While there has been a tremendous amount of growth in the use of technology in community supervision, there are still several ways that technological innovations could be used to improve supervision outcomes. In a workshop of correctional administrators and academics, participants identified key challenges related to the use of technology in community supervision and the need to address these challenges. Russo et al. (2019) identified four areas where community supervision could better leverage the use of technology to improve supervision outcomes including managing human resources (e.g., training officers more effectively), facilitating positive behavioral change (e.g., delivering evidence-based interventions using automated tools), increasing accountability (e.g., the use of electronic monitoring), and improving operational effectiveness (e.g., victim notification, the use of modern communication tools such as text). This report highlights the importance of community supervision to embrace new technological innovations, something agencies were forced to implement in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research on COVID-19’s Impact on the Criminal Justice System and Community Corrections

Researchers have begun to study the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the criminal justice system. Several scholars noted how COVID-19 has not only affected crime rates (Boman & Gallupe, 2020; Stickle & Felson, 2020) but also day-to-day operations. Jennings and Perez (2020) highlight the immediate impact of the pandemic on how law enforcement officers are deployed and the use of citations instead of arrests for low-level crimes. The Vera Institute of Justice (2020) provided guidance for law enforcement officers including the use of citations/tickets/summons for individuals unless they had committed a felony or posed a risk to public safety. During state-mandated lockdowns, law enforcement also was responsible for issuing citations for violating social distancing and stay-at-home orders. Further, departments faced additional staffing and resources shortages (Stogner et al., 2020). Regarding court practices, Baldwin et al. (2020) found the primary response was to reduce or eliminate in-person practices either by halting all operations or closing physical locations to non-essential employees. As a result, courts adopted either completely virtual, limited in-person, or hybrid environments utilizing video conferencing technology to continue to hold meetings. The resulting reliance on technology has created some challenges surrounding logistical issues such as Internet access and reliability for defendants as well as security concerns (Baldwin et al., 2020). The pandemic dramatically impacted correctional facilities, as incarcerated individuals are at a higher risk of severe infection and social distancing is especially challenging in prisons and jails (Hawks et al., 2020). The pandemic has also greatly affected community supervision agencies. In March 2020, the Vera Institute of Justice (2020) published a list of recommendations for probation
and parole agencies including the use of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) screening tools for all persons on community supervision. Further, Vera provided guidance on how to respond to COVID-19 in community corrections, including creating care plans, training, and implementing practices to protect staff who become sick or are at high risk of contracting the virus. Community corrections agencies have adapted to the pandemic quickly in how they supervise and provide resources to persons under supervision. In a review of correctional policies and procedures enacted in response to the pandemic, Marcum (2020) noted the increased use of videoconferencing in place of face-to-face contacts and the potential barriers of “virtual” supervision including reliable technology and Internet connection, especially among persons with lower socioeconomic status. Additionally, the review highlights the evolution of the supervision officer’s role because of the pandemic including the inability to meet in person and to monitor living environments.

As both the Vera report and the review of policies demonstrate, there is a need to examine further how community corrections have been affected by the pandemic. One study recently published directly examines how community corrections agencies have had to adapt their policies and procedures. Viglione and colleagues (2020) distributed a survey to directors of community corrections agencies across the United States in June 2020 to identify how traditional supervision processes have been modified in response to COVID-19. Respondents to the survey were 213 agency directors from 37 states. The survey asked directors to report their agency responses regarding prevention measures, use of technology, responses to behavior, agency policies, containment strategies, response strategies, and their perceptions of the impact of COVID-19. Responses demonstrate how community corrections agencies have been directly affected by the pandemic. For instance, 59.1% of agencies reported they were still supervising individuals face-to-face in the office, whereas 15.9% reported they were not conducting any face-to-face visits. Additionally, among agencies still conducting face-to-face visits, only 25.7% of agencies reported they were still meeting with all individuals on their caseloads as they normally would (Viglione et al., 2020). Agencies reported the most used technology as phone calls (95.8%) but also utilized other forms such as texting (92%), email (91%), and video conferencing (90.6%) to maintain active supervision. Other changes to standard practices and procedures included the increased use of early termination of supervision (24% of agencies) and not issuing violations for late payments of fees. Agency directors also reported they were receiving fewer new admissions to community supervision during the pandemic. When asked what the most beneficial policy enacted as a response to COVID-19 was, directors identified the use of remote supervision and technology.

**Current Study**

While the survey by Viglione et al. (2020) provides an initial exploration into the changes and challenges community supervision faced as a response to the pandemic, respondents were limited to agency directors. The current study was designed to collect data on how the COVID-19 pandemic changed probation operations and the perceptions of staff, administrators, and other professional personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique set of circumstances for us to investigate changes in attitudes about probation work. The following research questions helped guide our investigation:

1. What operational changes were implemented due to COVID-19?
2. How has COVID-19 impacted probation professionals’ attitudes and perceptions about their work?
3. What are probation professionals’ attitudes about continuing use of virtual contacts with individuals on probation supervision and other technology even after the pandemic subsides?
Methods

In March 2020, a workgroup of twenty community supervision professionals from around the state of Texas was assembled, comprised of both adult and juvenile staff, to help develop questions for a survey to be administered to community supervision officers and supervisory/management staff of all probation agencies in Texas. Workgroup participants were selected from various areas of the state with a diverse population of individuals on probation and included those from urban and rural departments of varying sizes. Professionals were also chosen from differing levels within their respective agencies to provide insight into how the virus affected their specific work role and included juvenile probation officers, adult probation officers, court officers, specialized caseload officers, regular caseload officers, mid-level probation managers who supervise field units, directors and deputy directors, and information technology professionals.

The survey was designed to gather information regarding the impact the COVID-19 virus had on their jurisdictions and probation department work environments, specifically regarding changes in operations, as well as gauge changes in perceptions and attitudes about the future of probation. Residential facilities were excluded because survey questions for residential facilities would require another set of expertise and different issues to be explored than considered in this specific survey. Moreover, clerical and support staff were excluded as this project covered probation officer and management of agency operations and officer unit issues; however, these staff were critical to the continued operations of departments during the pandemic. Additionally, information technology personnel were included as they were essential to the transition from working in the office to working from home.

Constructs Measured

The survey was comprised of 99 questions, but respondents were not required to answer all the questions. The first 23 questions of the survey were designed for all respondents to answer. Question 23 asked respondents what their position was within their agency, and based on that response, they were then taken to a specific set of questions for their position. Questions 24 through 47 were designed for certified community supervision officers, including court officers, and specialized caseload officers. Various constructs measured in this section were officers’ stress and workload issues, perceptions about change in relationships with clients, changes in officer attitudes, work environments, and client issues. Questions 48 through 74 were designed for administrators, such as directors, deputy directors, and supervisors and gathered information about financial and budget concerns, telework issues, and attitudes about changes in operations. The next section, questions 75 through 86, were for Information Technology personnel and were designed to ascertain what technology issues agencies experienced during the crisis. Questions 87 through 92 were open-ended comment questions for all respondents, and questions 93 through 99 were demographic questions.

Survey Distribution and Response

The survey was created in SurveyMonkey. A link for the voluntary and anonymous survey was distributed via email to directors of all adult and juvenile probation agencies in the entire state of Texas in June 2020, along with instructions, a project overview, and information about confidentiality. Approximately 123 adult probation agencies (referred to as community supervision and corrections departments [CSCDs]) and 161 juvenile agencies were emailed the survey. Researchers then asked directors to distribute the survey to the targeted staff according to instructions. Two follow-up emails were sent between June and August 2020. There was a 77% response rate out of 123 adult probation
departments \((N=95)\). The response rate for juvenile probation departments was lower, 65 agencies out of 161, for a 40% response rate. A total of 1,353 respondents completed the survey \((N=1,353)\).

### Results

Sixty percent of survey respondents were female, 60% were probation officers, 74% were over the age of 35, and 70% worked for an agency with less than 150 employees. Twenty-five percent of survey respondents had less than 5 years of experience, while 34 percent had between 5 and 15 years of experience. Thirty percent of survey respondents had more than 20 years of experience (Table 1).

| Demographic \((N=1,040)\) | Agency Info \((N=1,353)\) |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| **Sex**                   |                             |
| Female                    | Adult                       |
| Male                      | Juvenile                    |
| Prefer not to answer      |                             |
| **Age**                   |                             |
| 18–24                     | Less than 30 employees      |
| 25–34                     | More than 30, less than 70  |
| 35–44                     | More than 70, less than 150 |
| 45–54                     | More than 150, less than 250|
| 55–64                     | More than 250, less than 350|
| 65+                       | More than 350 employees     |
| **Race**                  |                             |
| White/Caucasian           | Director                    |
| Black/African American    | Deputy Director             |
| Hispanic/Latino           | Operations Manager/Other Director |
| Asian                     | Unit Manager/Supervisor      |
| American Indian/Alaska    | Probation Officer           |
| Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | Technology Staff |
| Other                     | Other (Administrative, Counselor, etc.) |
| Prefer not to answer      |                             |
| **Ethnicity**             |                             |
| Non-Hispanic              |                             |
| Hispanic                  |                             |
| **Level of Education**    |                             |
| HS Diploma                |                             |
| Some college              |                             |
| Associate’s Degree        |                             |
| Bachelor’s Degree         |                             |
| Master’s Degree           |                             |
| Doctorate                 |                             |
| **Years of Service**      |                             |
| Less than 1 year          |                             |
| More than one year, but less than 3 years | |
| More than 3 years, but less than 5 years | |
| Between 5–10 years        |                             |
| More than 10 years, but less than 15 years | |
| More than 15 years, but less than 20 years | |
| 20 years or more          |                             |
Table 2 provides the results of questions about operational and procedural changes and were asked to check all situations that applied as this crisis continued to unfold over the months, thus percentages will not total to 100%. Over 50% of respondents indicated new probation placements were suspended.

Table 2. Operational Changes.

| Court Proceedings                                                                 | N   | %    | Drug Testing                                                                 | N   | %    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Temporarily suspended new probation placements                                    | 658 | 56.48| Temporarily suspended “in-person” testing                                    | 657 | 56.39|
| Experienced a significant decrease in new probation placements                    | 762 | 65.41| Still submit, but social distance                                           | 496 | 42.58|
| Continued “in-person” proceedings but followed social distancing                  | 231 | 19.83| Reviewed on a case-by-case basis                                            | 300 | 25.75|
| Used videoconferencing                                                           | 792 | 67.96| No observation of submitted drug tests                                     | 64  | 5.49 |
| Did not really change                                                             | 10  | 0.86 | Alternative testing (i.e., patch, SCRAM, hair)                               | 99  | 8.5  |
| Unsure                                                                           | 96  | 8.24 | Did not really change much                                                   | 80  | 6.87 |
| Other                                                                            | 44  | 3.78 | Unsure                                                                       | 113 | 9.7  |
| **Filing Motions to Revoke/Adjudicate**                                          |     |      |                                                                              |     |      |
| Temporarily suspended submitting all violation reports, filing or request         | 122 | 10.47| **Outpatient Treatment**                                                     |     |      |
| Only filed motions or requested on serious offenders                              | 513 | 44.03| Temporarily suspended all programming                                        | 715 | 61.37|
| Reviewed on a case-by-case basis                                                 | 502 | 43.09| Switched from in-person to telephone sessions                                | 679 | 58.28|
| Did not really change                                                             | 283 | 24.29| Switched from in-person to video sessions                                    | 716 | 61.46|
| Unsure                                                                           | 165 | 14.16| Provided other online options; webinars, assignments, etc.                   | 379 | 32.53|
| Other                                                                            | 53  | 4.55 | Reviewed on a case-by-case basis                                            | 129 | 11.07|
| **Community Service Restitution (CSR)**                                          |     |      |                                                                              |     |      |
| Temporarily suspended all CSR                                                    | 688 | 59.06| Did not really change much                                                   | 6   | 0.52 |
| Opportunities conducive to social distancing                                     | 200 | 17.17| Unsure                                                                       | 117 | 10.04|
| Reviewed on a case-by-case basis                                                 | 221 | 18.97| Other                                                                        | 27  | 2.32 |
| Waived remaining hours                                                            | 175 | 15.02| **Education Classes**                                                        |     |      |
| Allowed offenders to find their own opportunities                                 | 76  | 6.52 | Temporarily suspended all programming                                        | 631 | 54.16|
| Allowed money or goods to be donated                                             | 399 | 34.25| Switched from in-person to telephone sessions                                | 239 | 20.52|
| Did not really change                                                             | 35  | 3    | Switched from in-person to video sessions                                    | 446 | 38.28|
| Unsure                                                                           | 143 | 12.27| Provided other online options; webinars, assignments, etc.                   | 363 | 31.16|
| Other                                                                            | 70  | 6.01 | Reviewed on a case-by-case basis                                            | 95  | 8.15 |
|                                                                                  |     |      | Continued in-person but social distanced                                     | 97  | 8.33 |
|                                                                                  |     |      | Waived remaining hours left to complete                                      | 26  | 2.23 |
|                                                                                  |     |      | Did not really change much                                                   | 22  | 1.89 |
|                                                                                  |     |      | Unsure                                                                       | 42  | 3.61 |
|                                                                                  |     |      | Other                                                                        |     |      |
temporarily. Nearly 70% reported using videoconferencing for court proceedings. Motions to revoke/ adjudicate were generally only filed on high-risk individuals as well as being reviewed on a case-by-case basis. Sixty percent suspended outpatient treatment services, 58% used telephone treatment sessions, and 61% switched to videoconferencing for outpatient treatment services.

According to respondents, communication and operational changes occurred almost every day during the pandemic. Table 3 depicts the types of reporting procedures utilized during the pandemic. Telephone reporting was the most frequently used type of reporting procedure, with 99% of respondents indicating their agency used telephone reporting and only 50% used videoconferencing. Some examples of “other” measures people reported using included: reporting in the parking lot using social distancing, conducting visits through the glass door of the department, and field visits in yards using social distancing.

Perceptions Around Operational Changes

Respondents were asked how they felt about staff being allowed to continue to work from home as an option in the future, even after the COVID-19 crisis subsides, to help alleviate burnout among probation professionals. Nearly 65% of respondents agreed allowing staff to work from home periodically will help reduce burnout (N = 537). Approximately 80% of respondents indicated their agencies did a good job overall of implementing safety protocols for not only staff but also clients, as well as handling the crisis in general. Table 4 reports the safety protocols implemented.

Moreover, around 50% of survey respondents agreed other fields/disciplines (i.e., medical, education, financial, etc.) seem to be more progressive in the use of technology in serving their clients compared to the criminal justice system. Table 5 shows most respondents thought it would be a good idea to use various types of technology going forward – for the field to invest in more technology. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the need for probation to invest more in technology to use in supervision efforts. The majority of respondents indicated that they would like to use videoconferencing, close to 60% indicated a need for a paperless file system, and over 75% would like to have a docu-sign/electronic signature capability.

Community Supervision Officer Questions

There were 687 community supervision officers (adult and juvenile) who responded to the survey. Officers were asked a series of questions about their perceptions or reactions to the crisis. Questions were designed to measure work environment, workload issues and stress, attitudes, perceptions about their relationship with their clients, and issues their clients had throughout the crisis.

Work environment, workload, & stress. Around 30% of supervision officer respondents agreed they felt more productive working from home, with nearly 40% reporting fewer distractions at home.

Table 3. Offender Contact Reporting Alternatives.

| Answer Choices                                             | %   | N  |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|
| Telephone Reporting                                        | 99.4| 330|
| Videoconferencing                                          | 45.18| 150|
| Report by mail                                             | 48.8| 162|
| Web-report/web check-in                                    | 45.78| 152|
| Temporary reduction in reporting requirements for some offenders | 28.31| 94 |
| Drive through or drive-by reporting                        | 6.93| 23 |
allowing them to complete their work. Officers who reported working from home agreed communication with their supervisor was very good during that time. Eighty percent of respondents indicated they were worried about themselves or their families contracting the virus \((n = 551)\). Slightly less than one-third (32%) agreed with a source of stress for them during the crisis was technology issues related to their job \((n = 223)\). Thirty percent (30%) agreed they felt they were not as productive as usual because of the stress from frequent changes that occurred \((n = 345)\). Officers were asked if they were concerned about public safety due to individuals violating supervision (without the officers knowing because of changes in operational procedures—i.e., no drug testing, no field visits) and 62% agreed with this statement \((n = 430)\). Only 24% were worried about being “overwhelmed” with work when normal business operations resumed \((n = 166)\), and 30% reported feeling overwhelmed currently with their workload \((n = 206)\).

**Table 4. Safety Protocols Implemented.**

| Question: Procedures implemented in my agency to protect staff (check all that apply): | %   | N   |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Social distancing measures                     | 94.55 | 312 |
| Reduced staff/skeleton crew in the office      | 92.73 | 306 |
| Paid leave time/time off                       | 46.97 | 155 |
| Sent out information about coronavirus (symptoms, testing, treatment) | 82.12 | 271 |
| Work from home/telecommute                     | 77.88 | 257 |
| Implemented telephone or videoconferencing for clients in lieu of reporting in person | 87.88 | 290 |
| Provided hand sanitizer                        | 89.09 | 294 |
| Required all staff to check their temperatures before entering the building | 38.18 | 126 |
| Provided thermometers at the office for use if needed | 96.36 | 318 |
| Instructed all staff members to stay home if not feeling well | 84.24 | 278 |
| Suspended home/field visits, change in how home visits conducted | 87.27 | 288 |
| Provided personal protective equipment (e.g., masks, gloves, eye protection, etc.) | 2.73 | 9 |

**Table 5. Types of Technology Respondents Would Like to See in Community Supervision.**

| Question: I think the field of probation could benefit from using the following types of technology either with probationers or in other business operations (check all that apply): | %   | N   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Videoconferencing (with clients, colleagues, other counties, out of state transfers) | 86.83 | 1,002 |
| Tablets (for more mobility, i.e., to take to court, out in the field, offsite meetings) | 74.96 | 865 |
| Paperless offender file system                                               | 56.59 | 653 |
| Docu-sign/electronic signature technology (hardware and software)            | 76.69 | 885 |
| Voice-to-text capability for entering chronological records/case notes       | 51.99 | 600 |
| Kiosks (for electronic check-in for offenders, updating offender information on the report form, credit/debit card payments) | 64.3 | 742 |
| Wireless access inside the building                                          | 43.67 | 504 |
| Online offender portals for specific activities (i.e., upload verification of employment, 12-step meeting logs, other required documentation, update personal data, etc.) | 68.63 | 792 |
| More advanced website (downloadable forms, offender resources, FAQs, chatbot technology, etc.) | 55.11 | 636 |
**Officer attitudes about supervision.** Table 6 displays the results surrounding supervision during COVID-19. Around 26% of probation officer respondents found they were “less punitive” toward their clients during the pandemic. Nearly 40% of respondents agreed they were more helpful [than usual] to their clients during the pandemic \((n = 266)\). Approximately 50% agreed they helped their clients with things they normally do not discuss \((n = 326)\).

Nearly 30% of officers agreed the crisis changed the way they viewed their role as a probation officer. Researchers wanted to highlight both the positive and “not-so-positive” changes in perceptions about their roles and how COVID-19 has impacted these. It was important to give an equal representation of the commentary. Some respondents reported positive changes in their perceptions of their role as probation officers.

> “It also has made me feel as if the lower-grade crimes are not that bad and we should focus on the more serious crimes.”

> “This pandemic has taught me that my role as a probation officer has a far greater reach than simply enforcing conditions of probation and referring youth to services. Our department has made a shift, the focus has been geared towards ensuring the wellbeing of the family unit as a whole.”

> “Gave me more of a motivation to assist my clients with anything they need.”

> “During this time I feel as though I have been more compassionate and understanding. A lot of my defendants are losing their jobs, struggling financially, and becoming depressed due to everything that is going on, on top of having to worry about their families and probation.”

> “It has made me more patient and collaborative with clients.”

However, there were other staff with negative perceptions about their role. Some respondents felt because of the importance of the work they do and being viewed as “essential” workers, they should receive pay raises because they are not given these regularly.

> “I feel less effective in my role because there is no face-to-face time with our clients. I do feel that it has become more about supervising conditions.”

| Table 6. Additional Topics Discussed During Contact with Probation Officers. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| **Additional Topics Discussed During Contact with Probation Officers** |
| **Answer Choices**                             | **%** | **N** |
| Learning more about or applying for unemployment | 58.42 | 399   |
| Finding a food pantry or with help getting food  | 54.61 | 373   |
| Getting set up for teleconferencing             | 46.41 | 317   |
| Financial assistance for utilities, rent, other bills | 40.85 | 279   |
| Allaying their fears about the pandemic         | 57.1  | 390   |
| Medical or healthcare issues                    | 38.8  | 265   |
| Stress and/or anxiety levels                    | 67.35 | 460   |
| School issues/home schooling                    | 31.92 | 218   |
| Finding online 12-step support groups           | 48.61 | 332   |
“We are doing a lot of work to just check the box, and none of it seems to promote public safety. We should have also been allowed to work from home. Many of us are penalized because not everyone can be trusted to work from home. If we can’t work from home, why not tell us why? There’s no communication.”

“We are extremely underpaid as “essential workers.” Our CSCD does not give any type of raises or compensation.”

“As an essential worker, it was made apparent that what we do warrants a huge pay increase. Front line workers such as nurses, EMTs, jailers, and other essential workers got pay increases, bonuses and hazardous pay, but community corrections did not.”

**Relationships with probationers and clients.** Fifty percent of respondents reported their clients seemed to feel more relaxed and open during telephone/video “visits.” For example, one officer remarked he has been doing the job for so long he forgot about how “intimidating reporting in to see your PO can be.” Nearly 70% of probation officer respondents agreed video conferencing could help individuals be more successful on probation. In a national survey of probation and parole officers, Schwalbe and Koetzle (2021) found that access to electronic communication platforms, especially video conferencing, increased the frequency of contact between probation and parole officers and their clients during the pandemic. There is a significant number of individuals on probation with no driver’s license, unstable, or no transportation. In these instances, video reporting would help individuals on probation, but certainly, not replace face-to-face contacts. However, many agencies in our sample were not able to use videoconferencing either because they did not have the capability/technology in place to do so, or the persons on probation were not able to do it (53%). It is important to note the impact that budgetary limitations have on the expanded use of videoconferencing.

**Administrator Questions**

Questions for administrators ($n = 339$) focused on gathering information and understanding perceptions about various operational changes and the financial impact COVID-19 has had on their agencies. These questions were designed specifically for probation personnel holding a supervisory position such as Director, Deputy Director, or Unit Supervisor/Manager.

**Operational changes.** The first series of questions asked administrators about operational changes. One question asked: “Since the pandemic and the forced changes in operational areas, do you think the use of technology in more operational areas of the department was ideal?” with 82% of respondents agreeing ($n = 280$). When asked about support, administrative respondents agreed overwhelmingly their judiciary, local officials, and state oversight agencies were supportive of all the necessary operational changes.

A large majority of respondents indicated opportunities for positive changes in the field of probation due to the COVID-19 crisis, with many advocating for the continuing use of videoconferencing ($n = 294$). The vast majority of administrators (86%) felt the use of videoconferencing with some individuals in some situations might improve supervision outcomes. Respondents were asked what groups they thought might be opposed to the continued use of videoconferencing with individuals on probation, although nearly 40% indicated they did not think anyone would be opposed to video conferencing believed the community would not be receptive to videoconferencing ($n = 115$).

Around 72% of respondents indicated before the COVID-19 pandemic they did not allow staff to work from home ($n = 245$), but since the pandemic, 44% of respondents agreed their agency is
considering (or possibly considering) allowing staff to work from home after the COVID-19 crisis is over. Fifty-five percent of administrative respondents agreed with allowing staff to continue working from home after the COVID-19 crisis would help improve employee retention rates (n = 189). Some of the reasons administrators oppose staff working from home include the following: (1) accounting for what staff is doing (27%), (2) purchasing extra equipment like laptops (20%), or (3) no money in the budget for it (13%, n = 44), and (4) cyber security concerns (14%, N = 50). Administrators were asked if they had to discipline any staff for violating the work-from-home policy. Around 21% (n = 72) of respondents reported having to issue a verbal warning or reprimand to staff, 4% issued a written disciplinary, only 6% of respondents indicated a staff member was terminated (n = 22).

**Financial impact.** Next, administrators were asked about the financial impact COVID-19 has had on the field and/or their agency. Nearly 50% of respondents agreed with the statement “decisions were made outside of the probation department’s control by state or local county officials that severely impacted the department’s budget.” Sixty-three (63) percent of respondents agreed COVID-19 has severely impacted their department’s budget (n = 212). Nearly 20% of respondents reported they may have to “lay off” or furlough personnel because of the pandemic (n = 105). Approximately 74% of administrators indicated they are very concerned about their departments’ budget (n = 242).

The crisis has also affected training funds for departments. Most administrative respondents indicated they will now use more online training opportunities for staff (as opposed to in-person training/conferences). About 75% of respondents reported their budgets have been holding them back from incorporating the use of technology more into operations/supervision.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on department budgets and for a long time, community supervision has not received adequate funding to carry out the complicated job of affecting long-lasting changes in probationers, while also holding them accountable to court orders. The overwhelming majority of respondents (86%, n = 287) agreed with the following statement: “The Legislature needed to provide more funding to community supervision agencies before the COVID-19 crisis, but especially now.” Next, 82% of management respondents agreed the pandemic has highlighted the need to revise the way community supervision in Texas is funded (n = 272). When asked if the state should consider allowing departments to keep surplus funding instead of returning at the end of the fiscal year, 100% of management respondents agreed.

The majority of management respondents (66%) agreed the COVID-19 crisis will continue to affect department budgets long after the crisis “is over” because arrest rates significantly decreased during the pandemic, which means fewer probation placements (n = 144). This result mirrors the administrator survey conducted by Viglione et al. (2020) where most respondents reported a reduction in the number of new probation placements during the pandemic. The way the funding for adult probation departments is structured depends largely on the collection of probation fees. When there are fewer people on probation, there is less money in the budget.

Administrators were asked to rank in order of severity which of these items has had the most negative impact on their departments, with the following overall rankings:

- Reduction in probation placements (44%)
- Individuals unable to pay probation fees (27%)
- Providing cell phones, laptops, and other equipment to staff during the crisis (7%)
- Community concerns about individuals on probation (7%)
- Getting the technology set up at home for staff to work from home (5%)
- Tracking employee productivity (4%)
- Political concerns (3%)
In a separate question, administrators were asked what their biggest concern was, and fifty-five percent answered it is funding/financial ($n = 179$). This finding contrasts the administrator survey conducted by Viglione et al. (2020), where only 10% of administrators reported budget concerns as their most pressing issue.

**Information Technology Personnel Questions**

Information Technology (IT) personnel ($n = 62$) had a specific set of questions in the survey, as they were a critical part of the adaptation in operations and transitioning to the office to telework. The pandemic forced changes highlighting the importance of a paperless system. Technology personnel were asked about the need to digitize probation records, and 51% agreed probation departments should move toward this as a standard operation, while 27% of respondents indicated they already have a paperless record-keeping system. Moreover, having a paperless case management system can save departments money in the long run. Some departments already utilize this technology, but it is not widespread throughout the state.

Next, IT professionals were asked about various obstacles staff encountered in transitioning from the office to teleworking. The most frequently reported obstacle was connectivity issues (i.e., no Internet, unreliable internet, not enough data) to work from home, with 47% of respondents identifying this as a problem. Other reported obstacles by IT personnel included software issues (30%), lack of technology skills (30%), lack of appropriate hardware (30%), appropriate work from home space (30%), and lack of adequate cybersecurity (16%). Approximately 40% of respondents agreed many staff are intimidated by the idea of having to learn to use new technology. However, the vast majority (79%) agreed once staff gets past their initial resistance to new technology, they will see the benefit of efficiency for their jobs.

IT personnel were asked to identify which types of technology they believed the field of probation could benefit from using with probationers or in other business operations. Many respondents indicated probation could benefit from the use of tablets (82%), videoconferencing (81%), docu-sign/electronic signature technology (77%), a paperless file system (68%), online supervision portals (67%), kiosks (61%), and a more advanced agency website (60%).

**Conclusion**

The novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, has impacted our way of life and every institution in society. Probation agencies have been forced to quickly change operations and the way things have always been conducted. The results of this survey revealed several salient issues for probation practice: (1) review and update of planning documents and emergency management-contingency plans for continued operations; (2) financial impact and need for sustainability in funding structures; and (3) the need for more flexible and innovative approaches in supervision efforts.

**Emergency Management-Contingency Plans**

Generally, emergency management issues are not something probation directors think about on any given day. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, major emergencies have been at the forefront of day-to-day concerns. Collaborative networks proved to be imperative during the pandemic, as state oversight agencies and local government officials’ flexibility and support of probation agencies helped to minimize interruptions in necessary continuous operations. Communication from oversight agencies was frequent as agency waivers of standards and requirements were granted, changes in Executive Orders from the Governor’s office were released, and local public health and government officials also released changes in policies, rules, and ordinances.
Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the need for probation agencies to have emergency contingency plans, updated plans, or at the very least be knowledgeable about county government emergency management plans already in place. The purpose of an emergency operational contingency plan is to outline systematic responses to emergencies that may threaten an organization and the records and information necessary for continuing operations (Murray & McCutcheon, 1999). These plans should account for potential natural, technological, and man-made threats, and, as we have learned recently, public health threats. Agencies should conduct a hazard vulnerability assessment to screen for risk and plan for the strategic use of limited resources (Cagliuso et al., 2010). One example of strategic use of limited resources offered by a survey respondent was to replace all desktop computers with laptops so operations can “go mobile” at any time, which could also assist agencies in times of non-emergency situations such as conducting field visits, going to court, or attending meetings and having laptops available for timely documentation, note-taking, and critical email communications.

The survival of an agency is not just about getting through the immediate threat, but also considering the financial stability of an organization immediately following and continuing long after an emergency. The results of this survey reveal concerns about the financial impact COVID-19 has had on probation agencies which may have negative long-term effects on operations and agencies’ ability to fulfill their missions.

Financial Impact

This survey project showed budgets and financial uncertainty were the top concerns of probation administrators. Total shutdown of daily life led to skyrocketing unemployment rates, fewer arrests, and fewer future probation placements, which have ultimately affected adult probation budgets. About one-third of respondents indicated they may have to “lay off” personnel and others may need to “temporarily furlough” staff. Departments’ budget dollars are stretched thin, and the majority of administrator survey respondents agreed change in legislative appropriations for probation is necessary, even before the pandemic but especially now. Currently, adult probation in Texas relies on probationer-based fees to operate their departments and a thirty-year-old state funding formula. For example, “the amount of state aid used to calculate the amount of basic supervision funding to be appropriated for the operation of probation departments in the State has not changed in thirty years. Instead, departments have relied on the growth of caseloads over the years to support increases in costs [by way of collecting supervision fees from clients]. However, with lower cases across the state, this is no longer an option for most departments,” (Jermstad, 2021, p. 34).

With COVID-19 resulting in fewer new supervision placements, adult probation departments’ budgets have been impacted. For instance, one director reported felony placements decreased nearly fifty percent from the fiscal year 2019 to the fiscal year 2020. Adult probation departments get paid roughly $1.04 per day for each individual reporting face-to-face for a felony in the jurisdiction. A rough calculation for the loss of revenue for the department reporting a nearly fifty percent decrease in placement translates into a loss of $1,255,716.80 if each of these individuals were under supervision for two years, in addition to a $627,858.40 loss of probation fees assuming fees were paid each month by every individual. Regarding funding for misdemeanors, that same jurisdiction, the fourth largest in the state, experienced a fifty percent decrease in misdemeanor probation placements for nearly a $500,000 loss of state funding in addition to the loss in probation fees. These types of decreases in placements were reported by 80% of adult administrator survey respondents. Juvenile probation departments in Texas were required to decrease budgets by five percent toward the end of 2020, and an expected additional six percent decrease was reported by the Texas Legislative Budget Board. Like adult probation departments, juvenile probation agencies
experienced a decrease in referrals as police activity was also impacted during the COVID-19 health crisis in 2020 (LBB, 2021). A resounding majority of supervisory respondents (86%) agreed departments should be allowed to keep any “surplus” funding left over from their department budgets at the end of the fiscal year, instead of returning it to the state.

Furthermore, the fiscal deficit created by COVID-19 will undoubtedly affect some departments’ ability to provide raises in the future and retain quality staff, as probation generally has lower salaries compared to other jobs in the criminal justice field. Probation agencies often compete against federal probation, law enforcement, and other industries that can offer more attractive salaries. Retention and salary problems present before the COVID-19 crisis are now only exacerbated, while probation departments are still responsible for more individuals in the criminal justice system compared to penal institutions.

**Flexibility and Innovations in Supervision**

The COVID-19 health crisis forced probation agencies to make major changes in operational procedures rapidly, especially by suspending face-to-face contact with individuals on probation. Traditionally departments have been resistant to telecommuting because of the nature of the business, as well as the culture of “control” common within probation agencies. However, the results indicate through this pandemic there are alternative ways to carry out the job. While virtual visits may be convenient, probation officers agreed face-to-face interaction with their clients is critical, especially regarding community safety and with being agents of change. Higher-risk individuals need to be supervised more intensely (Latessa & Lowenkamp, 2005) and virtual visits may not be appropriate for all clients, as survey respondents indicated victim advocacy groups and other community stakeholders might be resistant to virtual supervision for high-risk clients. Although, low-risk individuals, individuals with mental health issues, and those with transportation issues could benefit from occasional virtual reporting opportunities.

Operational changes such as drug testing, court proceedings, counseling and treatment sessions, and home visits, were suspended at one point or another for many agencies. Some jurisdictions were able to use videoconferencing for treatment sessions and this was helpful for individuals [in complying with conditions of supervision] with transportation issues, no transportation, no driver’s license, or unreliable transportation, who have difficulty making it to in-person treatment sessions because of these issues. There is a possibility of using this in the future to help individuals be more successful on probation and comply with court orders. Some agencies reported they subcontract to a laboratory for substance abuse testing, so drug testing was not affected for them. There are many advances in technology for drug/alcohol monitoring, such as hair, saliva, or fingerprint testing, that could supplement or replace the traditional collection of urine specimens during a health crisis providing less exposure or risk of contraction of a virus.

Probation administrators agreed there are opportunities for positive changes in the field of probation due to the COVID-19 crisis, with many advocating for the continued use of videoconferencing in select situations—albeit not replacing face-to-face interactions between officers and individuals on probation. Our results support the work of Viglione et al. (2020), as directors reported the use of remote supervision and technology to supervise individuals as the most beneficial policy in response to COVID-19. Most administrator survey respondents agreed utilizing technology more in various areas of departmental operations is necessary going forward, but budget constraints are hampering these efforts. Some jurisdictions have already begun utilizing advanced technologies in daily operations. Paperless file systems, electronic signature systems, kiosks, a “probation app” for smartphones, and many other types of technologies could streamline operations. Furthermore, regarding teleworking, about 45% of probation administrators may consider allowing staff to work from home on occasion to help improve morale and staff retention rates. This could be used as a job
perk, especially since some jurisdictions are not able to offer salary increases at all and others not consistently according to survey respondents.

It is important to note several limitations to the current study. First, since the survey was limited to probation personnel only in the state of Texas, the results of the survey may not be generalizable to other states. However, several of our findings regarding administrator perceptions corroborate the work by Viglione et al. (2020) regarding the need for innovation and the expanded use of technology in supervision. More research is needed on a national scale to fully understand how the pandemic has affected probation officers and support staff. Additionally, only agency response rate was calculated, thus we were unable to identify the overall response rate at the individual level. This is a limitation of our findings, as we do not know how non-response may have biased results (Pickett et al., 2018). As the response rate for juvenile agencies was much lower, future research may want to delve into the specific challenges juvenile probation has faced due to COVID-19.

In sum, the findings of the survey demonstrate the adaptability and resilience of adult and juvenile probation agencies in the face of a global pandemic. The consensus among survey respondents was telework can be used in certain situations, to help with agency retention rates and staff burnout, and videoconferencing with individuals on probation may be used in certain circumstances, but cannot replace face-to-face interactions with clients, especially those that are higher risk. Probation staff understand that having a rapport with clients is critical to quality supervision and would not forego in-person interactions simply for their convenience or benefit. The pandemic led some officers to be more helpful [than usual] to their clients. Others had the realization clients have the same fears as probation staff: contracting COVID-19, providing for their families, and remaining healthy. These findings highlight the need for continued improvements to the efficiency, effectiveness, and human impact of probation.

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Notes
1. Open-ended question data is still being analyzed and thus not included in this article.
2. Since we did not have emails of all individual staff targeted for the survey, only emails of probation directors, it was left to the probation directors to forward the survey link to targeted staff. This and other technological difficulties, such as firewalls and erroneous emails from the lists we had to work from, contributed to a lower response rate than anticipated.
3. State funding for misdemeanor cases differs from felony cases.

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*Martin and Zettler*
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