

Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice:

Research in Brief



PRELIMINARY FELONY RECIDIVISM OUTCOMES OF THE COMMUNITY PARENTING ALTERNATIVE

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Introduction

It is often said that parenting is the most difficult job anyone will ever do. This is especially true for parents who have been away from their families for an extended period of time due to incarceration. Most offenders who are incarcerated are released, creating a heightened need for expanded and effective reentry initiatives. The Parenting Sentencing Alternative was passed in Washington State in 2010 to assist offenders who have minor children in their care with the reentry process by strengthening family bonds to ease the transition from incarceration to their homes and communities. This *Research in Brief* describes felony recidivistic outcomes from the second year of the Community Parenting Alternative implementation.

Program Description

The Parenting Sentencing Alternative (PSA) is an alternative to total confinement for offenders who have minor children in their custody. It was created by the Washington state legislature (Substitute Senate Bill 6639), passed June 10, 2010. The PSA was a collaborative effort between the Department of Corrections and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

The mission of the Parenting Sentencing Alternative is to build sustainable families, reduce intergenerational incarceration, reduce duplicative services, and maintain family and community safety. Goals include encouraging successful reentry, maintaining family units by providing structure and support, and

intervening at the lowest level if violations occur.

There are two alternatives of the Parenting Sentencing Alternative (CPA). The first is the Community Parenting Alternative. Offenders who are currently incarcerated and have at least 12 months remaining to their sentence are eligible to apply. A committee comprised of representatives from the Department of Corrections, the Department of Social and Health Services, community agency representatives, and other stakeholders select offenders who have been nominated to participate. Offenders can nominate themselves, or someone from the community or Department of Corrections can recommend them for the program.

Selected offenders agree to spend the majority of their last year participating in programs and activities to build life skills and family bonds while living with their minor children in their homes. CPA offenders are required to be on intensive supervision for the duration of their community incarceration.

The Family Offender Sentencing Alternative (FOSA) is the other alternative of the Parenting Sentencing Alternative. Offenders participate at the discretion of the court in lieu of incarceration. An attorney for either the prosecution or defense refers offenders to the program. The supervision requirements for FOSA participants result from coordination between the Court and the assigned community corrections officer. Requirements are more individualized to each offender for FOSA participants compared to CPA participants.



There are a few program requirements that both alternatives share. First, offenders progress through three sequential phrases during their participation in the program. They share the same specialized group of community corrections officers, who are dispersed throughout the state. There are approximately eight corrections officers who supervise offenders in both alternatives.

Both CPA and FOSA participants are required to participate in extensive parenting programs following the Strengthening Families approach. Offenders in both alternatives under the Parenting Sentencing Alternative must meet the eligibility criteria statutorily authorized. That is, offenders must have custody of their minor children, they cannot be eligible for deportation, and the time allowable for their current or pending sentence must be more than one year. There is one minor difference between FOSA and CPA eligibility requirements. FOSA offenders cannot have any current or prior felonies for violent or sex offenses, while CPA offenders cannot have any current violent or sex offense felonies.

Additionally, offenders in both alternatives must sign a release of information regarding the child's welfare. CPA offenders must demonstrate they had an ongoing and substantial relationship with their child prior to the commission of their offense and subsequent incarceration, and DSHS must agree that placing the child with the offender is in the best interests of the child before the alternative is granted.

Evidence from the Literature

Theoretically, the approach of the Parenting Sentencing Alternative will be effective at reducing recidivism by easing the reentry process for participating parents of minor children. Incarceration often strains family bonds as offenders and their children may have a difficult time relating to each other while the offenders are incarcerated, as well as during the transition home. Additionally, when offenders are released to their communities, they often lack the essential life skills and necessary resources to provide a stable environment for their children.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature supporting the hypothesis that incarceration is intergenerational. Children of incarcerated parents are more likely to become offenders themselves. Criminological theory informs this hypothesis, as social-learning theory suggests children learn both pro-social and antisocial behavior from their parents. Control theory purports parents teach children self-control, so if they are unavailable or unable to do so, children may lack the necessary self-control to protect them from becoming offenders themselves.

Finally, children of incarcerated parents experience increased trauma, which may place them at greater risk when their parents are incarcerated. They may be placed out of the home, witness the criminal events or the arrests of their parents, or suffer from increased disadvantage due to a lack of financial or social resources.



Evaluation Method

The current study addressed the following research question: *are offenders who participated in the Community Parenting Alternative significantly less likely to be convicted of a new felony within two years after release compared to similarly situated historical control group of offenders who did not participate?*

To investigate this question, a secondary data analysis of official offender records was conducted. The Institute for Criminal Justice at Washington State University provided the data for this analysis through collaboration with the Washington State Department of Corrections. Data came from institutional offender records provided by the Washington State Department of Corrections.

The study sample frame included all offenders who met the statutory eligibility criteria for selection (n= 442). A historical comparison group was comprised of offenders who would have been eligible for selection and were released between 2008 and 2010 (n=334), prior to the implementation of the Community Parenting Alternative. The Community Parenting Alternative participants were released between 2010 and 2012 (n=108).

The participant and comparison group offenders were matched to each other using propensity score modeling techniques. An inclusive matching model was created using all significant predictors. The propensity score match resulted in a reduction of overall sample size from n=393 to n=116.

Results

This preliminary analysis revealed that within the first year after release, 8.6 percent of the offenders in the comparison group were convicted of a new felony offense. In contrast, zero of the participants of the Community Parenting Alternative recidivated during the first year. After the second year, 17.2 percent of offenders in the comparison group had recidivated while only 5.2 percent of the CPA participants had.

To evaluate the impact of the Community Parenting Alternative after matching the comparison and participant subjects, a crosstabs analysis with the chi-square statistic for significance was completed. This analysis revealed that participants were significantly less likely than the comparison subjects to be convicted of a new felony two years after release.

Furthermore, the odds ratio for the analysis revealed that being a Community Parenting Alternative participant reduced the odds of being convicted of a new felony two years after release by 71 percent.¹

¹ Detailed descriptions of these methods and preliminary results are available. Contact the author at chyla.aguiar@wsu.edu.



Future Research

Future research will investigate the impact of the Family Offender Sentencing Alternative, as this analysis focused on offenders who participated in the Community Parenting Alternative. It did not include outcomes from offenders who participated in the Family Offender Sentencing Alternative. Researchers from Partners for Our Children from the School of Social Work at the University of Washington will be conducting additional analyses on the FOSA alternative, as well as providing a cost-benefit analysis for both alternatives of the Parenting Sentencing Alternative.

Furthermore, future research will include analysis of additional indicators of program success based on program goals and objectives include additional measures of recidivism, and control for second-level factors to compensate

for the lack of a process analysis. Additionally, significant differences in recidivistic outcomes will be measured after three and five years of release from supervision.

Finally, a more suitable comparison group must be identified for these results to be reliable. As this program is replicated in more locales and with more diverse populations of offenders, the results of this analysis will be generalizable to more offenders. Future research is needed to establish this program as evidence-based.

Recommendations and Policy Implications

While this is a preliminary analysis, and results should be interpreted with caution, a significant reduction in recidivism among participants was observed two years after release. Additional research is needed to establish the program is evidence-based.

Suggested citation: Aguiar, C. (2015). *Research in brief: Preliminary felony recidivism outcomes of the Community Parenting Alternative*. Spokane: Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice.



Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice was created in 2009. The Institute is divided into two divisions – Policing & Security and Corrections & Sentencing. The institute's mission is to act as a resource for applied social science, and for technical assistance and training for the criminal justice community in the state of Washington and nationally.

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