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# **Pandemic Preparedness and Response among Community Supervision Agencies:**

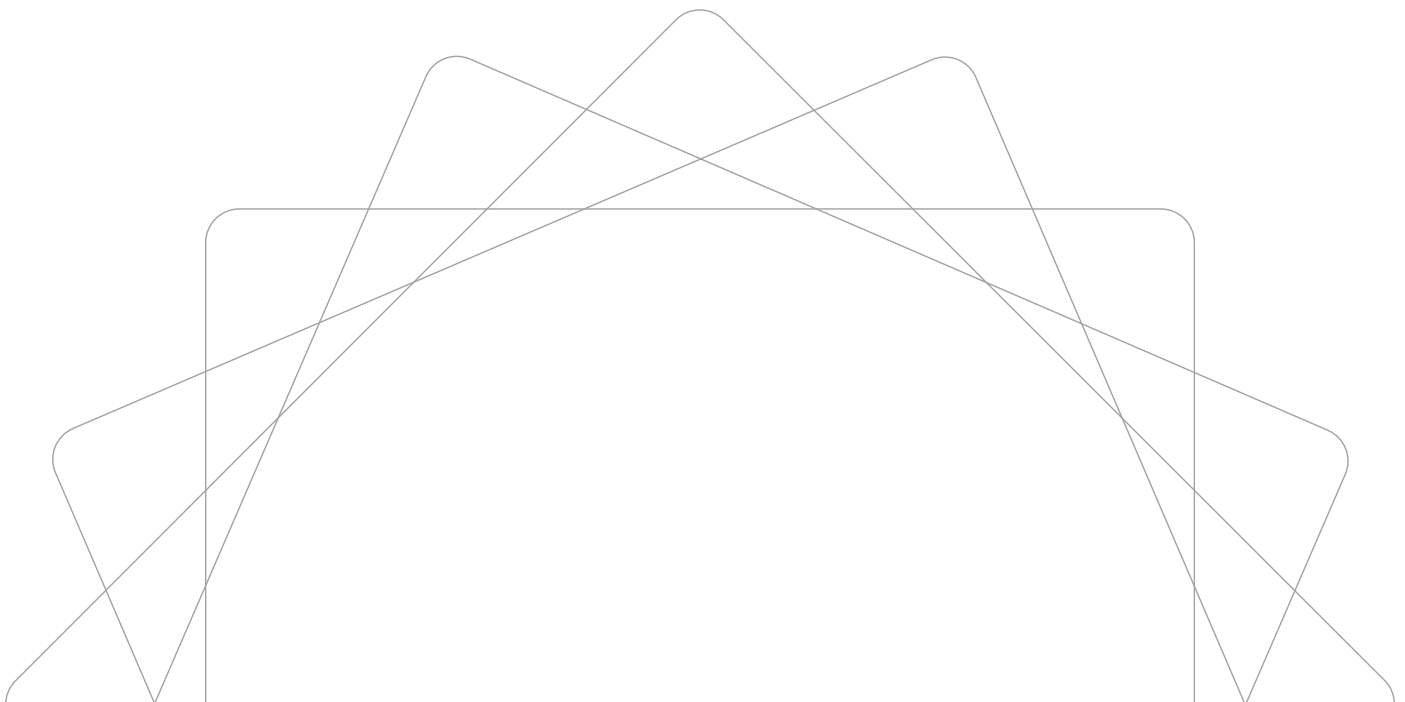
## **The Importance of Partnerships for Future Planning**

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the United States (U.S.) justice system—from policing to reentry—has been profound (Chapman, Irazola, and Swan, 2020). Appropriately, much of the focus in media and scholarly outlets has been on the impact of the pandemic on prisons and incarcerated populations (Akiyama, et al., 2020; Busanksy, 2020; Burki, 2020; Kinner, et al., 2020; Leibrenz, et al., 2020; Nadel and Campbell, 2020; Yang & Thompson, 2020). However, the pandemic also has had direct impact on community supervision agencies and populations. Any changes at other points along the justice continuum also will have direct or indirect impacts on community supervision. In this white paper, we discuss those impacts, how agencies have responded, factors that have influenced agency responses, and suggestions for how researchers, professional associations, agencies, and funders can work together to answer critical questions for future planning and response.

## Community Supervision in the United States

According to the most recent statistics published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, about 4.5 million adults (approximately 1 in 55 adults) are under community supervision in the U.S. (Kaeble, 2018). In fact, most people under supervision by the U.S. justice system are living in their communities (Kaeble, 2018; Kaeble & Glaze, 2017), and many incarcerated individuals will end up on community supervision at some point during their sentence (Luallen, Cutler, & Litwok, 2018). As a result of mass incarceration and the subsequent decarceration of individuals in correctional institutions, the number of adults under community supervision has grown and will continue to grow (Shiraldi, 2018). Such growth will continue to expand officers' already high caseloads without corresponding growth in resources needed to support this expansion (Shiraldi, 2018). Most individuals under community supervision are serving time on probation,<sup>1</sup> but the population on some form of parole or supervised release in the community post-incarceration in a state

or federal prison is growing (Kaeble, 2018). Although there are nuances between the probation and parole populations<sup>2</sup>, we include both populations when we reference community supervision in this paper.

Community supervision agencies must simultaneously maintain public safety and work to prevent recidivism – all with ever diminishing resources. These aims require officers to engage in activities related to both surveillance and rehabilitative intervention with the people they supervise to address their often myriad psychosocial needs (Abt Associates, 2019; Campbell, Swan, and Jalbert, 2017). In other words, to borrow the analogy put forth by Dr. Brian Lovins, community supervision officers often need to act as both a referee and a coach (Lovins, 2020). To accomplish these goals, under the commonly applied risks-needs-responsivity (RNR) framework, community supervision agencies implement a variety of practices, the application of which is guided by supervisees' risks for recidivism and needs for intervention (Bonta & Andrews, 2007; Jalbert, Rhodes, Flygare, & Kane, 2010; Taxman, 2018). Such practices are implemented in a combination of office visits and home or field contacts and include activities such as individualized case planning, evidence-based and core correctional practices (such as cognitive behavioral programming), drug testing (toxicology and breathalyzer), referrals to treatment programs and other therapeutic or reentry-focused interventions, and searches/arrests (Abt Associates, 2019).

Key to the application of each of these activities is the emphasis on in-person, face-to-face contact between supervising officers and their supervisees, whether in the office or the field. In a recent study that we conducted on the role of field work in community supervision, we found that for medium- to high-risk supervisees, phone and virtual contacts are quite rare relative to contacts made in the office (Abt Associates, 2019). The officers we spoke with all felt that in-person contact with their supervisees, particularly in the field, is critical to their job. Field work enables the officer to see the “true story” of how (and what) their supervisee is doing, directly observe obstacles for improvement and change, make

connections with family and friends, and establish a presence in the community to help foster rapport and maintain public safety (Abt Associates, 2019). Being in the community is so core to the job that as one officer put it, “Probation/parole, it started in the field, it didn’t start in an office” (Abt Associates, 2019, p.26).

## **The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Community Supervision**

With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, community supervision agencies have had to rapidly adapt their practices to accommodate the widespread “stay-in-place” and social distancing directives from all levels of government. In essence, the “community” aspect of community supervision abruptly halted. In this context, across society and around the world, increased uptake and use of technology has been critical for conducting operations in all social sectors. However, the ability of community supervision agencies to adopt or scale technological solutions varies widely depending on capabilities within the agencies as well as the community within which they are operating.

At the same time that already strained community supervision agencies have to adapt to the pandemic, they are bearing the consequences of adaptations at other points along the justice system continuum. For example, efforts by prisons and jails to reduce overcrowding, such as speeding up and increasing releases of individuals in their custody, shift the responsibility of oversight of those individuals to community supervision agencies (Nadel and Campbell, 2020). Many courts have also implemented limitations on the types and frequency of cases they will see to limit their own exposure to the virus and to minimize incarcerations (Chapman, Irazola, and Swan, 2020). Such changes may be reducing the number of people incarcerated, but individuals are being sentenced to community supervision instead. Similarly, in many jurisdictions, courts are suspending hearings for probation/parole technical violations. Changes to court procedures have limited the availability of such mechanisms for community supervision officers to

use when maintaining public safety (Simmons, 2020; Nadel and Campbell, 2020). Likewise, some of the tools that community supervision officers have to promote rehabilitation among their supervisees (e.g., referrals to treatment or other social services) have been impacted by reductions in already limited capacity and capabilities among community treatment and service providers.

In addition to how the agency operates, social responses to the pandemic have disproportionate impacts on the community supervision population. For example, the state of the economy due to the pandemic further restricts the already limited ability of adults on community supervision to obtain employment (Betesh, 2020). When they do get jobs, they often face a disproportionate risk of infection given their higher prevalence of employment in jobs that have continued during the pandemic (e.g., manufacturing, janitorial, and food industries) among this population (Lindquist et al., 2018). Social responses to the pandemic have also produced changes in patterns of criminal activity, such as increases in domestic violence (Marbach, 2020), and heightened existing vulnerabilities among individuals who have or are susceptible to substance use disorder (Volkow, 2020). These changes have implications for the role and capacity of community supervision officers who manage domestic violence and other specialized cases within the strained community and agency contexts.

## **Community Supervision Agency Preparedness & Response**

To understand how community supervision agencies across the country are responding to these impacts, the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA) developed a short survey that it administered to its membership through the APPA members portal on March 25, 2020<sup>3</sup>. The survey asked how agencies have responded to the crisis, how prepared they were for the crisis, and the perceived effectiveness of their response. The survey closed on April 24, 2020. Staff at APPA compiled the collected data into an Excel file, de-identified the data, and sent it to Abt for analysis.

## Survey Data and Analytic Approach

A total of 339 individuals responded to the survey. To obtain accurate information related to agency preparedness and response, it was important to identify respondents from the same agency. The survey asked respondents for the name of their agency and state, and we used this information to identify agencies. When responses to these questions left doubt as to whether two agencies were the same, we erred on the side of assuming responses were for separate agencies. We excluded 21 respondents who indicated they worked for a non-profit or private organization (e.g., provider of electronic monitoring devices), which left a sample of 318 individual respondents.

We identified 203 unique agencies from 43 states and the District of Columbia. The responding agencies came from across the United States, with 10.34% of agencies from the Northeast, 39.09% from the Midwest, 21.67% from the South, and 28.08% from the West. Most agencies had local jurisdiction (67.98%), with about a quarter having statewide jurisdiction (26.11%). A few were federal (5.42%), and one respondent had tribal jurisdiction. The respondents themselves were mostly line staff (50.31%), executive management (20.75%) or mid-level management (18.24%), with a few respondents who were administrative (3.46%), program or policy (4.72%), or some other type of staff (2.49%).

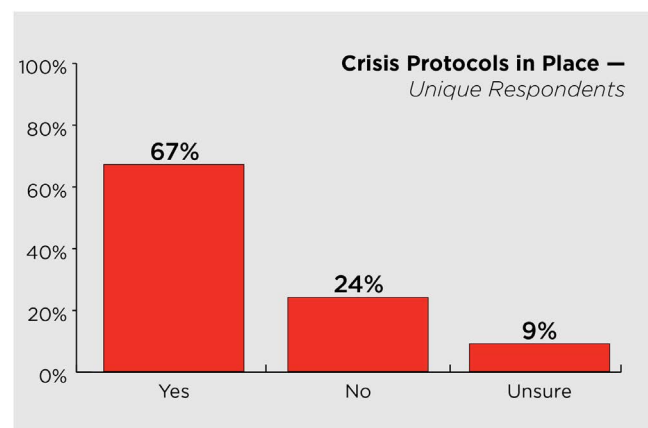
When responses to a question differed within an agency, we used the most common response when possible and otherwise used the affirmative response. For example, we assumed that when asked whether an agency had implemented Policy Y, and Respondent 1 said “No” or “I Don’t Know” but Respondent 2 said “Yes,” the correct answer for that agency was “Yes.” We believe it is more likely that Respondent 1 either didn’t know about the policy or completed the survey before the policy was in place than that Respondent 2 falsely reporting implementation of a policy the agency had not implemented. Our analysis consisted of calculating frequencies of survey responses.

## Agency Preparedness

In 2009, APPA published guidelines for community corrections to be prepared for and respond to an influenza pandemic and other emergency crises, such as bioterrorist attacks and natural disasters. The guidelines focus on five areas: planning and decision-making, prevention and detection, human resources, communication, and offender supervision strategies. APPA intended for community corrections agencies, regardless of size and location, to use the guidelines to develop comprehensive plans to effectively respond to pandemics, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, there has been little research about the extent to which agencies used the guidelines over the past decade to develop such plans; some of the survey questions were created with these guidelines in mind to provide some data on their use.

As shown in Figure 1, while many agencies had crisis protocols in place before this pandemic, a quarter of them (24%) did not, and respondents from nearly a tenth of agencies (9%) did not know if their agency had crisis protocols in place.

**Figure 1.** Were crisis protocols in place before this pandemic?



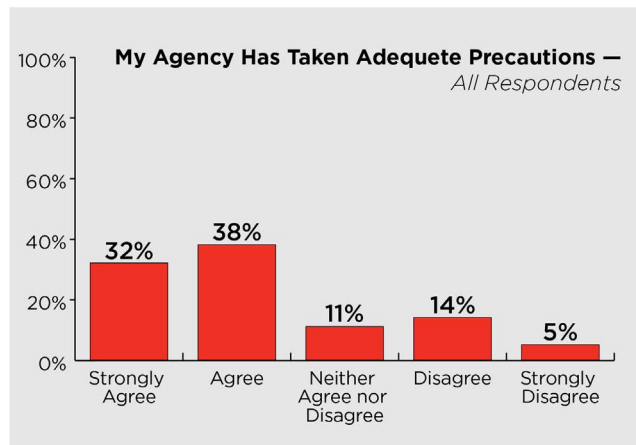
The survey also asked participants to provide open-ended feedback on agency preparedness. Most notably, respondents indicated a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), which officers need when conducting face-to-face contacts. Respondents also indicated feeling

particularly vulnerable and felt their agency took a long time to respond to the crisis, which suggests they were not prepared. While many community supervision agencies exhibited some level of preparedness, this pandemic warrants revisiting preparedness guidelines. One respondent noted that their “agency was not ready for this sort of public health crisis. Moving forward, I see leadership focusing on implementing policies to address any future public health pandemics.” Based on the survey data, it seems reasonable to conclude that APPA’s pandemic influenza guidelines were not widely applied by community corrections agencies.

### Agency Response

Agencies responded to this crisis by making a number of changes. Most respondents (70%) felt their agency took adequate precautions, as illustrated in Figure 2.

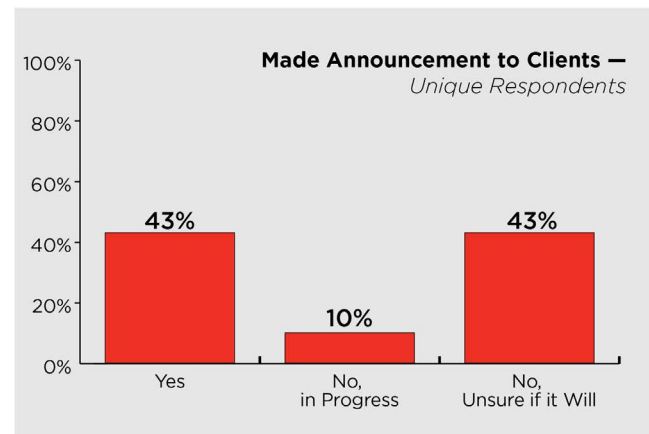
**Figure 2.** To what extent do you agree that your agency took adequate precautions?



Nearly all agencies (90%) had some form of teleworking in place; only about half (46%) indicated they had adequate resources to do so. A majority of agencies suspended in-office reporting (95%), in-person group activities (87%), and home or field contacts (73%). In addition, many agencies suspended arrests for technical violations (66%) and reported that courts in their jurisdiction suspended hearings (77%). Fewer sites encouraged clients to report offsite (59%), and despite

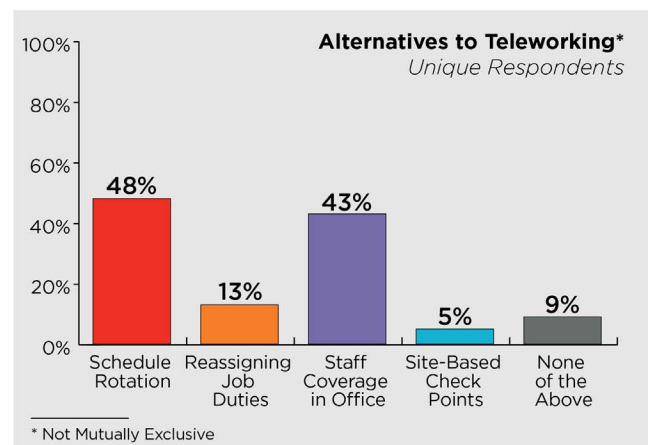
the magnitude of these changes, respondents indicated that less than half of the agencies had made any sort of announcement to their clients about the changes or the pandemic (43%) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Did your agency make an announcement to your clients?

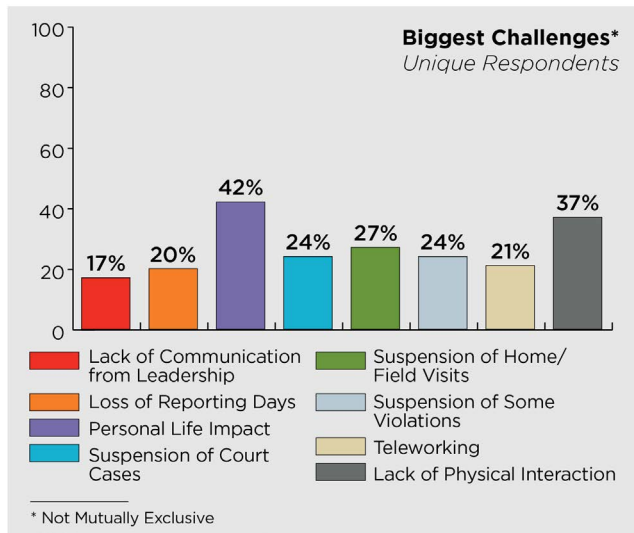


Many agencies implemented strategies other than or instead of teleworking to minimize spread within the workplace (see Figure 4). The most common strategies included schedule rotations (48%) and staff coverage in the office (43%). Less common were reassigning job duties (13%) and site-based check points (i.e., identified locations for staff to report in at selected dates/times) (5%). Many agencies implemented more than one strategy.

**Figure 4.** What alternatives to teleworking has your agency implemented?



**Figure 5.** What are some of the biggest challenges of this pandemic?



Respondents found the implementation of many of these changes challenging (see Figure 5). The most commonly noted challenges are not unique to community supervision (personal life impact: 42%; a lack of physical interaction: 37%). But about a quarter of respondents found the suspension of home and field contacts (27%), suspension of court cases (24%), or the suspension of some violations (24%) to be among their biggest challenges. About a fifth of all respondents reported the lack of communication from agency leadership (17%) and a loss in reporting days (20%) as challenging. In addition, many respondents noted the lack of PPE for community supervision officers and the increased workload as stressors. Many of the actions taken to minimize the spread of the virus in prisons and jails increase the burden on, or even endanger, community supervision officers. As one respondent noted, “mandates for keeping the virus out of the facility come at a cost to us as [front line] employees.”

It is not surprising that respondents find these changes challenging. These necessary changes have altered the very core of community supervision. As noted earlier, as a result of the pandemic, in-person contact, especially during field work, is a core component of community supervision for many officers that has been suspended. Indeed, among the challenges unique to community

supervision, the loss of home and field contacts is the most commonly cited challenge. One respondent noted that before this crisis, face-to-face contact was “85% of our job.” Further, through the suspension of arrests for technical violations and court hearings, one of the key tools of the profession has been removed as officers can no longer use these deterrents in response to negative client behavior. Another key tool of the profession, referral to or practicing group therapeutic activities, has also ceased in many agencies. As one respondent noted, the two biggest challenges of the pandemic are being “unable to hold offenders accountable for their behavior and not able to provide treatment programming.”

One other major outcome of this pandemic is the increased use of technology, not only as a virtual office space where meetings can occur but as a way in which to stay in contact with clients. As a respondent said, “The current situation has caused us to implement technology that had been available previously but not implemented.” One respondent noted that in the rural area where the person works, this change may be beneficial for clients who had to drive long distances to report before, but can now do so virtually. A few respondents said they believe that their clients feel more supported because of the telephone and virtual contacts, as it allows officers to check in more often.

Unfortunately, current research provides us with only a limited understanding of what the short- and long-term impacts of these changes might be on community corrections. Home and field contacts are an understudied area of community supervision, but the few studies that do exist suggest there are benefits to their use (Abt Associates, 2019; Alarid & Rangel, 2018; Meredith, Hawk, Johnson, Prevost, & Braucht, 2020). Thus the lack of field contacts may hinder success for current supervisees. There has been little research about the impact of reducing arrests for technical violations. Revocations for technical violations, such as violating a curfew, make up a large share of the revocations within community supervision. But very little research speaks to the impact of the use of revocations for technical violations on other

important outcomes, such as recommission of crime (Grattet & Lynn, 2016; Osterman, Hyatt, & DeWitt, 2019). Similarly, little is known about the relative effectiveness of virtual contacts when compared with more traditional office or field contacts. While some research suggests that tele-therapy and other forms of virtual therapy can be effective, research has not yet tested this within a community supervision population (Turgoose, Ashwick, & Murphy, 2018).

## Planning for the Future

The changes made as a result of this pandemic provide us with an opportunity to better understand what agencies need to be prepared (i.e., guidelines, resources) to respond to the next emergency. We also understand very little about the elements of community supervision that this pandemic has changed, such as field work, technical violations, and virtual contacts. We are presented with an urgency to better understand what components of community supervision work best (and why) so that agency leaders know what aspects can be sacrificed without harm to supervisees and the community—and what aspects cannot be sacrificed. As one survey respondent succinctly noted, “I think we can learn from this situation.”

## Understanding Preparedness

The results of the survey presented in this white paper are just the very first step in learning more about agency preparedness. A more comprehensive and rigorous survey is currently being conducted by researchers from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Columbia University that will provide a fuller, richer picture of how prepared agencies were and what gaps in preparedness existed. Beyond a broad understanding of preparedness, this pandemic requires us to ask and answer questions that will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what agencies need. Specifically, we believe the field could benefit by addressing the following research questions:

**RQ1: *Were agencies in locales that previously endured large-scale disasters/crises (such as, New Orleans, New York City, Los Angeles) better prepared than others?*** Answering this question would enable us to understand the role that experience plays in effectively responding to disasters or crises. For example, in the APPA survey, respondents from two areas with recent crises (New York City, which experienced Hurricane Sandy and the events of September 11th, and Harris County, Texas, which experienced Hurricane Harvey) indicated that their departments had crisis protocols in place before this pandemic occurred.

**RQ2: *Were agencies already using innovative practices better prepared than others?*** As emergencies often require quick innovation, it would be helpful to understand if jurisdictions that had already implemented innovative practices, such as being early adopters of virtual contacts, fared better in this crisis.

**RQ3: *What variation, if any, exists between geographic regions or by urbanicity/rurality, and why?*** In addressing this question, we can better understand the different barriers to community supervision presented by rurality. For example, in the APPA survey, respondents from rural agencies were less likely to indicate they felt they had adequate resources for teleworking.

**RQ4: *What aspects of community supervision were agencies looking to change/adapt that the pandemic accelerated (e.g., teleworking, virtual contacts)?*** The APPA survey suggests that this pandemic has accelerated the use of virtual contacts, but answering this question would provide a clearer sense of all the elements of supervision that were implemented only because of this pandemic and what the barriers to implementation were before.

**RQ5: What resources did agencies have in place and what resources did they identify as missing but that they wish had in place to respond and adjust operations rapidly in the future?** While this survey identifies some elements departments had in place and some they felt were missing, a comprehensive study of this would enable agencies to better prepare for the next emergency.

**RQ6: What impact did different levels of preparedness or different types of response have on pandemic and justice outcomes?** It is likely that preparedness has meaningful outcomes both for the spread of the virus and the success of supervisees. Measuring these outcomes would help inform agencies when taking the necessary steps to prepare for the next crisis.

## Understanding What Works in Supervision and Why

The changes agencies have needed to make to appropriately respond to the pandemic require us to better understand what works in community supervision. Specifically, we believe the field would benefit from addressing the following research questions:

**RQ1: What is the differential impact of different types of contact, with an emphasis on how important in-person contact is and how effective virtual contact is?** Very little research assesses the mode of contact between officers and supervisees. For this reason, it is difficult to determine the impact that reduced field contacts and increased virtual contacts will have on supervisee outcomes. Addressing this question will provide this information and enable an understanding of the different benefits of office, home, and virtual contacts.

**RQ2: What can be done during supervisee contact to improve effectiveness while limiting contact?** There is also little understanding about what can and should be done during a contact to improve effectiveness. Abt Associates is currently conducting a randomized

controlled trial in collaboration with the APPA and funded by the National Institute of Justice to understand how the use of rehabilitative practices, such as Carey Guides and motivational interviewing, affects client outcomes. This information is vital during a crisis because when agencies understand the activities that make contacts most effective, they may be able to reduce the quantity of contacts by ensuring each contact is of a higher quality.

**RQ3: What is the effect of the threat of arrests/incarcerations for minor offenses and technical violations on successful reentry?** As this pandemic has dramatically reduced the use of revocations for technical violations, it raises the question of whether these revocations serve a role in reducing offending and improving successful reentry.

**RQ4: How do supervisees respond to lowered levels of supervision in all but the highest risk cases?** This pandemic has also resulted in an overall reduction in the level of supervision, with officer unable to conduct usual screenings (e.g., drug tests), meet in-person with clients, or use the potential for unscheduled contacts as a deterrent, suggesting researchers need to better understand the appropriate level of supervision.

**RQ5: How effective are virtual treatment programs among a population on community supervision?** Virtual treatment has the potential to increase treatment access, especially among supervisees in rural areas. This pandemic has resulted in increased reliance on virtual treatment. Answering RQ5 would provide an understanding of how useful this approach is to treatment and whether it could be used to successfully increase access to treatment.

In addition to these five questions, researchers should be attuned to agency-specific changes that occurred as a result of this pandemic, with the aim of assessing how these changes impact supervisee outcomes, impact the safety of officers, and create efficiencies within the field.



## The Importance of Partnerships

Answering these questions will require partnerships among researchers, professional associations, community supervision agencies, and funding agencies. To close our white paper, we present what we envision as the role(s) for each stakeholder moving forward.

**Researchers:** Research provides methodologies and analytic tools for understanding what works, why, and for whom. Researchers must engage with agencies and professional associations to develop and conduct action-oriented research to generate practical evidence and inform guideline development and implementation. Such an agenda can assist policymakers and agency leaders in making informed decisions about how to allocate resources efficiently while obtaining the optimum impact on outcomes of interest.

**Professional Associations:** Professional associations, such as the APPA, serve as a central resource for members to obtain professional training, guidance, networking, and support. Given their role in providing training and developing guidelines, associations need to engage with agencies to identify preparedness gaps for guideline development and with researchers to identify evidence and knowledge gaps. However, as this survey and literature on guideline implementation suggest, guidelines may not be universally or reliably applied (Fischer et al., 2016). Therefore, associations can also partner with researchers to evaluate the most useful and cost-effective content and mode of training. For example, in the socially distanced context of this pandemic, what does the future of national, regional, and local training look like? Working with researchers and agencies to

understand training and preparedness needs and how to fill those needs is an essential task for associations.

**Agencies:** As the boots on the ground, agencies are responsible for implementing policies, guidelines, and resources and for training their staff to efficiently and effectively achieve the agency's goals. It is critical that agencies not operate in the dark. By engaging with researchers and professional associations and participating in research studies, agencies can identify best practices for both daily operations and disaster preparedness and test implementation strategies for future preparedness and response. Involving clients in research and dialog is also necessary to understand what works from their perspective (see Patten et al., 2016).

**Funders:** Each of these tasks would not be possible without the support of funders. It is critical that funders engage with researchers, associations, and agencies to understand agency priorities and limitations, methodological and ethical feasibility of research studies, and the potential for impact of operational changes—at all points along the justice continuum—on short- and long-term public health and public safety outcomes.

The coronavirus pandemic required rapid and substantial adaptation by agencies in every social sector. By evaluating how community supervision agencies responded and what practices work best, why, and for whom, we can harness data-driven lessons from this pandemic to inform guidelines for future preparedness. We will all be better prepared for future pandemics and other large-scale crises, as well as the daily challenges faced by community supervision agencies, if we work together to produce and implement effective day-to-day practices and feasible contingency plans.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Probation is a court-ordered period of correctional supervision in the community, generally as an alternative to incarceration. In some cases, it may be a combined sentence involving incarceration followed by a period of community supervision.” – Kaeble, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Sentencing and supervision practices vary across the country. Individuals serving a parole or other post-incarceration supervised release sentence are often sentenced for more serious offenses (e.g., felonies vs. misdemeanors) and may be supervised by jurisdictions (states vs. counties) that are different from those serving a probation sentence. However, supervision practices and guidelines are rarely dependent on the type of supervision (e.g., probation or parole) but instead on risk of recidivism as determined by a validated risk assessment tool. In fact, in jurisdictions where the same agency supervises both types of supervisees, supervising practices and guidelines may be identical for each group.

<sup>3</sup> Researchers from John Jay College of Criminal Justice and Columbia University are conducting a study of coronavirus response in community supervision agencies that includes a more rigorous survey of APPA members. This survey is currently in the field. Our white paper focuses on the data collected by APPA through their member survey and is not part of the study by John Jay and Columbia or any other research study.

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