

Austin American Statesman

TRAVIS COUNTY COURTS

Probationers getting in less trouble under new program

First measure of probation department overhaul shows its working.

By [Steven Kreytak](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
Monday, March 30, 2009

A two-year overhaul of the Travis County adult probation department seems to have reduced the number of people arrested for a new crime within a year of being put on probation, results that criminal justice officials call exciting but too preliminary to celebrate.

Of the 1,287 people placed on probation in the six-month period of early 2006 that immediately preceded the overhaul, 29 percent were arrested for a new crime within a year, according to an analysis by the Council of State Governments. After the changes were fully put in place in late 2007, rearrests dropped to 24 percent. The 2007 numbers were drawn from a four-month period, the most recent data available, researchers said, and tracked 614 probationers.

After taking over as head of the Travis County Community Supervision and Corrections Department in 2005, Geraldine Nagy spearheaded an effort to let research and analysis guide how strictly probationers are watched and what combination of programs gives them the best chance to stay out of prison or jail.

Though other jurisdictions have put in place some of the same programs as Travis County, Nagy says she thinks the Travis department is the only one to base all of its practices on the most current research.

For probationers considered at high risk of committing a new crime, for example, the department has beefed up the number of classes that seek to teach them how to adjust their thinking and moral judgment.

For low-risk offenders, the department has minimized the number of visits required with probation officers, citing research that shows that saddling small-time offenders with too many obligations could increase their chances of winding up in prison.

"The big deal is that there is a jurisdiction (Travis County) that has been able to stick to a two-year reform project following a very well-crafted design," said Tony Fabelo, chief researcher for the Council of State Governments, which intends to share the reform methods with other governments nationwide. The council is a nonprofit group that identifies and forwards policy ideas to state leaders.

"So that's exciting," Fabelo said. "The big 'if' down the road is ,are these results sustainable?"

On March 1, 12,549 people were on probation in Travis County, about half of them felons, according to department data. They are supervised by 187 probation officers and assistants at an annual cost of \$20,771,000, 39 percent of which comes from fees paid by probationers.

Nagy, a former state probation department deputy director who has a doctorate in psychology, has worked at various levels of adult probation during her career, beginning as a probation officer in Bastrop County in 1981. Her teamwork with Fabelo, a well-respected former state criminal justice statistician, has earned the confidence of criminal judges, state District Judge Mike Lynch said.

"The judges are pretty impressed with what the probation office has done," Lynch said. "And we're a hard bunch of nuts to crack."

In 2005, Fabelo helped the county with an analysis of department operations. It found, in part, that probation officers were too bogged down with paperwork and heavy caseloads to help probationers succeed, that they did not have enough time to conduct home visits, that low-level offenders were too closely supervised and that data was not being regularly analyzed to determine which programs worked best.

In 2006 and 2007, the process was streamlined to eliminate repetitive paperwork and to reform the way defendants are evaluated before they are sentenced. Previously, probation officers prepared biographies of the defendants that included information about their criminal history and substance abuse problems, with input from the crime victims. The reports varied greatly in style depending on which probation officers prepared them.

Now, a group of probation officers is trained in conducting intake assessments, a more scientific analysis of risk and behavior that determines how closely offenders should be supervised.

Those classified as low-risk, such as some first-time drunken drivers, are told to report to probation officers every 90 days and are not required to attend intensive treatment programs. Nagy said that gives them a better chance of success and saves resources that can be used for dangerous felons, sex offenders and other high-risk probationers, who meet with officers three or four times a month and require more treatment, such as drug rehabilitation.

The changes at the Travis County department came amid a growing political willingness to use probation as an alternative to building expensive prisons.

It costs less than \$3 a day to supervise a person on probation, \$24 a day to house someone in the county jail and \$47.50 a day to keep a person in state prison.

The county department has been financed in recent years in part by state grants contingent on reducing the number of probationers sent to prison for so-called technical violations: all probation violations except new arrests, such as failing a drug test or failing to pay probation fees.

Nagy said rearrest data is the most valuable indicator of success, but she points to reports that show a decline in the overall numbers of revoked probations as proof that the new approach to probation is saving money.

In 2005, judges in Travis County revoked the probation of 1,052 felons. In 2008, revocations, including those of probationers who had committed "technical violations" and those arrested on new charges, dropped to 846, a 20 percent decrease, the analysis showed.

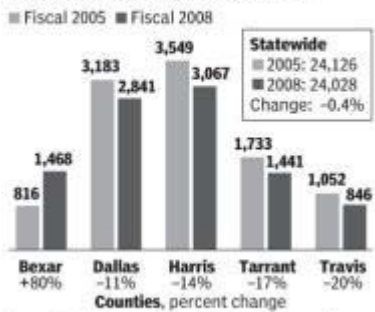
In a presentation to county commissioners this month, Fabelo estimated that the effort has saved the county and state more than \$5 million in incarceration costs since 2005.

"This is happening in a declining economy with a high unemployment. ... I think there is a good chance that these are sustainable results," Fabelo said. "This is the most rewarding thing I have done in the last 10 years or so, because it is very hard to influence good policy. It is very hard to change large organizations."

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Probation revocations

Travis County's 20% decrease in the number of felons sent to prison after failing at probation from 2005 to 2008 was the biggest decrease among the state's five most populous counties.

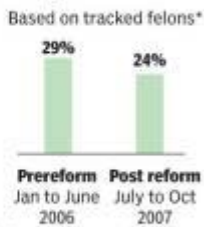


Sources: Travis County Community Supervision and Corrections Department, the Council of State Governments

Robert Calzada AMERICAN STATESMAN

Probationers rearrested one year after placement in supervision

Researchers tracked the percentage of probationers arrested for a new crime within their first year on probation before and after reforms.



* 1,287 people tracked during prereform period; 614 people tracked in post-reform period.

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