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Electronic monitoring of released prisoners: an evaluation of the Home Detention Curfew scheme

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The Home Detention Curfew (HDC) scheme came into operation in January 1999. It allows for the release of eligible prisoners up to 60 days early on an electronically monitored curfew. This paper summarises findings from the evaluation of the first 16 months of the scheme and includes: data on eligibility, releases, completions and recalls; results from a survey of curfewees; the results of a cost-benefit analysis; and findings of a reconviction study.

Key points

- Approximately 4,500 prisoners per month were eligible for early release on Home Detention Curfew. An average of about 1,300 per month were subsequently granted HDC following a risk assessment – a release rate of 30%.
- 5% of curfewees were recalled to prison following a breach of the curfew restrictions.
- Variations in release and recall rates between different types of establishment and different groups of prisoners appear to be related to risk of reconviction and reimprisonment.
- Curfewees and their families were very positive about the scheme, though it was felt that more could be done to prepare them for and support them after release.
- Probation officers supervising curfewees were generally positive about the scheme and felt that it was beneficial to their work.
- Recalled prisoners cited a number of factors leading to their breach of the curfew, many of which could be addressed by better preparation for release, better information for curfewees and their families and awareness of support networks in the community.
- The HDC scheme reduced the prison population by 1,950 places in the first year of operation at a time of significant overcrowding pressures. Over this period, HDC yielded net benefits of £36.7 million.
- The impact of HDC is broadly neutral in terms of reoffending. Including the HDC period and the six months following what would have been their automatic discharge date, those eligible for HDC had very similar reconviction rates to a control group. Differences were not statistically significant.
- The reconviction analysis confirms the effectiveness of the risk assessment in selecting those with low potential for reoffending

Table 1 Home Detention Curfew eligibility, releases and recalls over the first 16 months of operation

Numbers eligible to be considered for HDC	72,400
Numbers released on HDC	21,400
Release rate (as percentage of those eligible)	30%
Number recalled to prison	1,100
Recall rate (as percentage of those placed on HDC)	5%
Average number on curfew at any one time	2,000

N.B. All figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

THE USE OF HOME DETENTION CURFEW

Most prisoners sentenced to at least three months but less than four years are eligible for consideration for early release on Home Detention Curfew (HDC). Prison and probation staff carry out an assessment of the suitability of the inmate for HDC, and of the suitability of where he/she proposes to live. Subject to the final decision of the prison governor, the inmate may be released up to 60 days before his/her automatic release date (depending on the length of the original sentence). Of the 72,400 prisoners eligible in the first 16 months of operation, 30% were granted release on an electronically monitored curfew under the HDC scheme (see Table 1).

Over the first 16 months of the scheme, over 21,000 inmates (an average of over 1,300 per month) were released on HDC to spend the last part of their custodial sentence on curfew in the community. At any one time, an average of 1,960 prisoners were on HDC (this was 1,950 for the first 12 months which was used for the cost-benefit analysis).

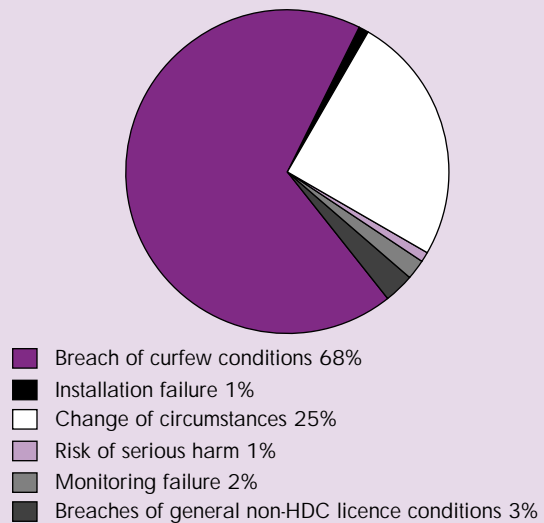
Of those released in this period, only 5% were recalled to prison following a breakdown of the curfew. The main reasons for recall (see Figure 1) were breach of the curfew conditions (for example, unauthorised absences or deliberate damage to the monitoring equipment – 68% of recalls) or a change of circumstances (25%). Only eight curfewees (less than 1% of all recalls) were returned to custody because they represented a risk of serious harm to the public.

DIFFERENCES IN RELEASE AND RECALL RATES

Release rates varied a great deal between different types of prison and inmate. Differences between types of prisoner were largely explained by the risk of reconviction or reimprisonment for the particular population. Those groups within the prison population that were granted HDC less often than average tended to have higher than average risk scores. This suggests that the risk assessment process was generally working effectively. Variations in release rates by establishments reflected the populations they held but may also result from different approaches to the HDC assessment process taken by Area Managers and Governors. There was less variation in rates of recall to prison and no relationship between this and rates of release by establishments.

Women prisoners were more likely to be released on HDC than men (40% of the eligible population compared with 29% for male inmates). This reflects the different risks of reoffending and reimprisonment. In general, older prisoners were more likely to be granted HDC than younger ones. Black prisoners were marginally more likely than white to be

Figure 1 Reasons for recall to prison in the first 16 months of HDC



granted HDC (31% compared with 29%), but South Asian (51%) and Chinese and Other (39%) inmates were much more likely to be released onto the scheme. Again, these rates were linked to actuarial risk assessments and reflected similar patterns found in decisions on parole.

Analysis of the release rates by offence type also highlights the importance of risk assessment in these decisions. Offenders convicted of offences which have higher reconviction rates, such as burglary and theft and handling, have lower HDC release rates. Those convicted of offences with lower reconviction rates (such as drugs offences or fraud and forgery) have higher release rates.

The rate of recall of curfewees to prison (at around 5%) was fairly constant over the first 16 months of the scheme. There was no clear link between prison release rates and recall rates – those establishments that released proportionately more eligible inmates onto HDC were not associated with higher levels of recall.

SURVEY OF CURFEWEES, FAMILY MEMBERS AND SUPERVISING PROBATION OFFICERS

A survey of curfewees, family members and supervising probation officers confirmed that the scheme has had some success in achieving its aim of easing the transition from custody into the community. Respondents did, however, identify some areas where the scheme might be improved.

Curfewees were very positive about the scheme (only 2% said they would have preferred to spend the time in prison rather than on HDC). 37% of curfewees interviewed said that the prospect of being granted HDC had influenced their behaviour in prison (e.g. attending courses, taking on work). Other household members were very positive about the scheme and probation officers responsible for supervising curfewees on non-HDC licences (for example, automatic conditional release licences) also felt that HDC was helpful to their work in general.

Most curfewees interviewed (83%) recalled being given something in writing with the rules of the scheme, though only 29% had seen the video about the scheme while in prison. Almost half (49%) felt quite poorly, or very poorly informed about the scheme prior to release.

The main advantages of the scheme cited by curfewees were being out of prison (82%) and meeting up with their families (63%). Other household members said that the main advantages were having the curfewee home again (72%) and the end of prison visits (69%). Few disadvantages were mentioned by either group. However, unsurprisingly, 41% of curfewees cited the curfew restrictions as a disadvantage.

At the time of interview, 28% of curfewees were in full-time work and a further 6% in part-time work. A further 36% were seeking work, and this group was most likely to cite advantages (such as developing a routine and enabling them to look for work) and also more likely to cite disadvantages (such as the difficulty of finding a job because of the curfew restrictions and the inconvenience of the curfew hours for other household members).

61% of curfewees said they had experienced a curfew violation (an infringement of the curfew rules – if these are sufficiently serious, whether in isolation or in conjunction with other violations, then the curfewee may be breached and recalled to prison). Nearly two-thirds of these claimed that the violation was down to equipment failure rather than any fault of their own, though Home Office and contractor records did not indicate any significant problems with the equipment. Monitoring staff were praised by curfewees and household members as being polite, helpful and professional. This was particularly so at the installation but also when dealing with violations.

RECALLED PRISONERS

Qualitative interviews were carried out with a small sub-sample of recalled prisoners to find out more about the reasons behind their breaches of the curfew conditions. There were four main types of factor involved: equipment problems, psychological issues, housing and domestic issues and work/lifestyle.

Equipment

Some of those interviewed claimed that problems with the monitoring equipment lay behind their recall.

Psychological issues

Motivation was a key issue, with a number of those interviewed appearing to have been unable to exert enough self-discipline to keep to the curfew. Some had experienced problems with returning to drug use or to the life of crime that they had known prior to prison. There were also problems for some with anger management. Arguments with other members of the household or with the monitoring staff had led (directly or indirectly) to recall.

Housing and domestic issues

Problems with unsuitable housing or unstable tenure were a factor in some recalls to prison. Relationship problems were also often associated with either a loss of accommodation or curfew violations. Family support was an important factor in a curfewee's ability to cope with the curfew. Isolation and boredom were particular problems for those living by themselves.

Work and lifestyle issues

For curfewees in work, the need to be available to work shifts, long hours or to do overtime, especially at short notice, could conflict with the curfew requirements. Some of the recalled prisoners interviewed had, when they were released on the curfew, returned to the hedonistic lifestyle they had enjoyed before prison with its largely nocturnal setting of pubs and clubs. For these offenders, disregarding the requirements of the curfew inevitably led to recall to prison. The impact of drug and alcohol use on the ability to keep to curfew times or other licence conditions was also a factor in some recalls.

Most of the recalled curfewees interviewed said that the lure of 'freedom' on HDC was very strong and made it less likely that those being assessed would be realistic about the chances of their completing the curfew period. This, coupled with the high numbers who felt poorly informed, suggests that more could be done to inform and prepare prisoners both before and during the assessment process. They would then understand some of the pressures that they could face and have a chance to think about how to cope with them.

CONTACT WITH THE PROBATION SERVICE

Three-quarters of those curfewees interviewed had been in contact with the probation service since release as part of their post-release supervision. Of these, two-thirds described their meetings as 'generally helpful'. Probation officers who supervised these curfewees were also interviewed. 23% said that HDC helped their work with the specific offender a lot, 20% that it helped their work a little and 53% that it made no difference. However, in *general* terms, 76% of probation officers interviewed felt that HDC helped the work of the service.

COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF HDC

This analysis involved identifying the main costs in each of the main HDC processes: risk assessment; contractor operations; and recalls. This included estimating the actual resource cost to prisons and probation services of carrying out the assessments and to the Sentence Enforcement Unit in making decisions on recalls.

The average period spent on HDC was 45 days, at a cost of approximately £1,300 per curfew (equivalent to £880 per month). The scheme reduced the prison population by 1,950 places during the first 12 months of operation (the average number of curfewees at any one time) and will continue to save places (see Table 2).

The biggest costs by far were payments made to the electronic monitoring contractors, while the savings were mainly driven by the reduction in prison places. The total estimated net benefit of the Home Detention Curfew scheme over the first year was £36.7 million (this excludes start-up costs for all but the electronic monitoring contractors and changes in level of offending). This does not represent a reduction of £36.7 million in Prison Service cash flows as the Service still has to run the existing establishments but at a time when the prison population was rising, it helped reduce the need for capital expenditure on new prisons.

Table 2 Costs and benefits of Home Detention Curfew over the first 12 months

Agency	Estimated cost	Estimated benefit
Prison staff costs	£3.2m	
Probation service costs	£2.3m	
Contractor costs (actual charges made ex. VAT)	£21.0m	
Sentence Enforcement Unit (recalls)	£0.15m	
Prison resource savings		£63.4m
Net benefits		£36.7m
Reduction in prison places		1,950

Table 3 Reconviction rates for offences committed up to six months after normal discharge date (not including offences committed during the HDC period), showing numbers eligible for follow-up at this point

Follow-up period	Programme group: granted HDC	Programme group: not granted HDC	Whole programme group (weighted)	Control group
3 months	6.5% (1,488)	25.4% (5,185)	19.3% (6,673)	19.0% (6,828)
6 months	9.3% (118)	40.5% (558)	30.5% (676)	30.0% (6,723)

ANALYSIS OF REOFFENDING

A key concern has been whether HDC has had any impact on reconvictions. A reconviction analysis was carried out on a sample of prisoners who were eligible for discharge on HDC in May and June 1999. This programme group was compared with a control group of similar discharged prisoners taken from October and November 1998 who would have been eligible for HDC had it been in force then. Data on short-term reconvictions up to six months after the automatic release date (the date on which they would have been discharged anyway, even if they had been refused HDC) were analysed for both groups using the Police National Computer.

2.1% of curfewees were reconvicted for offences committed while subject to HDC. In the six months after the curfew period or discharge date, offenders eligible for HDC had very similar reconviction rates to the control group – 30.5% and 30% respectively (see Table 3).

When convictions for offences committed during the HDC period are taken into account, the difference between the two groups is slightly greater – 30.8% for the programme group and 30.0% for the control group at the six-month follow-up (these differences are not statistically significant). This suggests that the impact of HDC is broadly neutral in terms of reoffending.

The analysis provides further evidence that the risk assessment process is effective: of those granted HDC, the reconviction rate for the six-month period after their automatic release date was 9.3%, compared with a rate of 40.5% of those who were refused HDC.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, Home Detention Curfew appears to be operating relatively smoothly and has gone some of the way to achieving its central aim of easing the transition from custody to the community. Furthermore, this has been achieved while realising significant cost savings and with little adverse impact on reoffending.

For a more detailed report, see *Electronic monitoring of released prisoners: an evaluation of Home Detention Curfew scheme* by Kath Dodgson, Philippa Goodwin, Philip Howard, Siân Llewellyn-Thomas, Ed Mortimer, Neil Russell and Mark Weiner. Home Office Research Study. London: Home Office.

Copies are available from the Communications & Development Unit.

These Findings were written by Ed Mortimer who is a Senior Research Officer in the Offenders and Corrections Unit, Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate. It summarises the full report by Kath Dodgson et al. (see above).