



FIRST JUDICIAL DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA
COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
TRIAL DIVISION CRIMINAL
ADULT PROBATION AND PAROLE DEPARTMENT
CHIEF ROBERT J. MALVESTUTO

The APPD Randomized Controlled Trial in Low Risk Supervision:

The Effect of Low Risk Supervision on Rearrest

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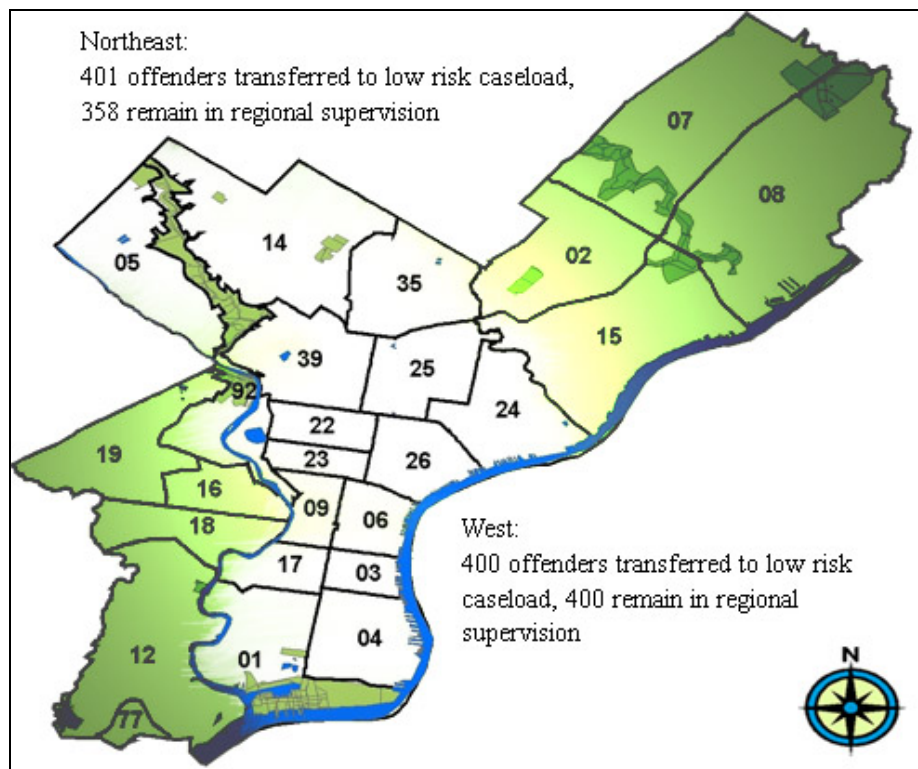
Introduction

A very small number of offenders under APPD supervision will be charged with murder or attempted murder within two years of the start of their probation/parole sentence (Berk et al, 2009). Identifying this small subpopulation enables a community corrections agency to target intensive supervision and support at those probationers/parolees who pose the greatest threat to public safety (Sherman, 2007). However, since resources are limited, an agency cannot deliver intensive surveillance and/or treatment to the few who are at high risk of serious violence without also creating large caseloads to supervise low risk offenders. In other words, creating large caseloads of low risk offenders frees up officers to supervise small intensive caseloads of high risk offenders.

The Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Department (APPD) operates with a fixed number of probation/parole officers, each of whom is under increasing pressure to respond to and manage a full range of offender risk and needs. A new risk tool constructed with and validated on local data now allows APPD to identify both high and low risk offenders with greater certainty than previous tools. Here we describe the implementation and results of an experimental evaluation of large caseloads of low risk offenders under supervision of APPD. The key research question is: Can low risk offenders be supervised in large caseloads without increasing the risk to public safety? If low risk offenders in large caseloads are rearrested at the same rate as low risk offenders in standard caseloads, then we can feel confident about implementing low risk caseloads department-wide.

Method of Evaluation

Offenders included in this evaluation are probationer/parolees predicted by Dr. Richard Berk's (University of Pennsylvania) statistical model to be at low risk of being charged with murder, attempted murder, robbery, rape (including child sex offenses), or aggravated assault within two years of his/her case start date. Offenders initially assigned to the West or Northeast regional divisions (shaded in green on the map below) that were identified as low risk were randomly assigned to either a low risk caseload or standard regional supervision (YVRP, gun court, domestic intervention, and existing low risk caseloads were excluded from the study). Two officers (one in each region) supervised caseloads of 400 low risk offenders randomly assigned to the experimental group. Low risk offenders randomly assigned to the control group remained in regional supervision caseloads and their low risk assessment was not shared with the supervising officer.



During the study period (10/1/07-10/1/08), cases in both the experimental group (one of two low risk caseloads) and the control group (standard supervision) dropped out for a variety of reasons (e.g. expiration of case, new arrest). New low risk cases were added to the two low risk caseloads on an as needed basis to maintain caseloads of approximately 400.

Low Risk Supervision Protocols (The Experimental Treatment)

The “treatment” for those randomly assigned to the experimental group consisted of being placed in a caseload of roughly 400 other statistically identified low risk offenders. Offenders remained in the low risk caseload until the termination of their case(s), unless the offender was re-arrested, in which case the offender was transferred back to regional supervision, or put on wanted cards.

The following supervision protocols applied to offenders in the experimental low risk caseloads:

- Office Reporting: Scheduled office visit once every six months, during which the officer reviews residence, employment, payments on fines/costs and restitution, and compliance with other conditions.
- Phone Reporting: Scheduled phone report every six months, occurring occur roughly midway between the office visits.
- Drug Testing: Drug testing during the scheduled office visit is administered only if such action is required by court order. The low risk officer will order a FIR evaluation after no more than three positive urines, and is free to refer a low risk offender to drug treatment at the offender’s request.
- Missed Contacts: Arrest warrants will be issued if there has been no case contact for six months. If the offender surrenders positively, the warrant may be removed with no criminal sanction.

While the two low risk officers were not responsible for a case once a new arrest occurred (e.g. they did not write violation summaries and/or appear in court for Violation of Probation hearings), they were responsible for handling the disposition of technical violations of their sentence.

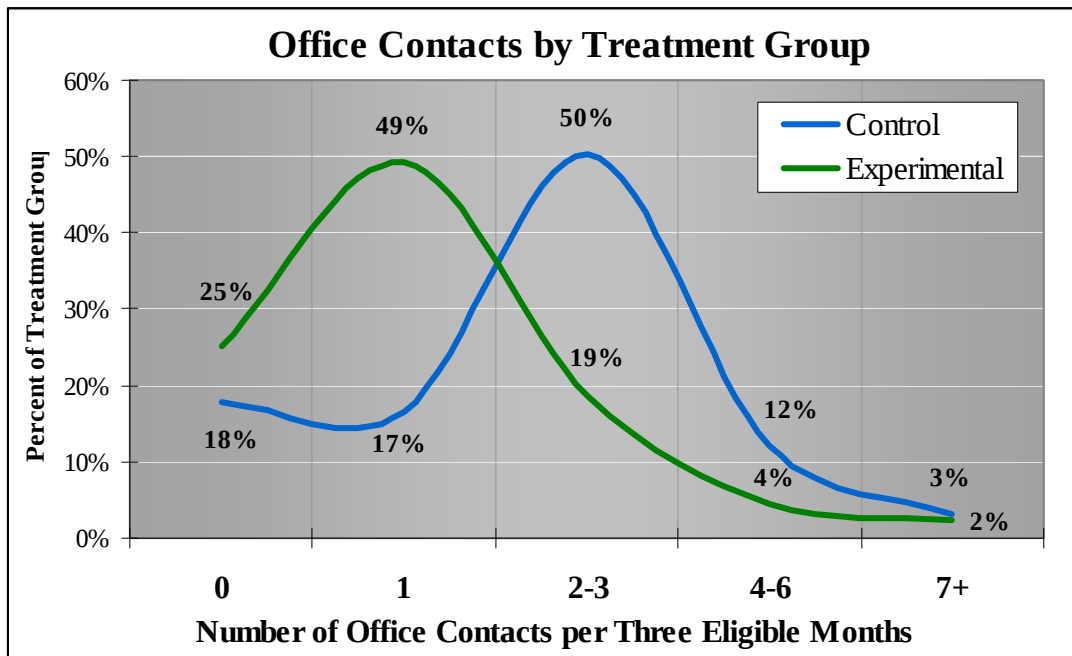
Implementation Measures: Resource Delivery

Office Contacts

For the purposes of this analysis, we standardized the number of contacts for each low risk offender by dividing the total number of office visit entries with a “contact” result by the number of months the offender remained arrest free and under active APPD supervision during the trial period (10/1/07 to 10/1/08). For offenders whose case(s) expired naturally prior to the trial end date, the probation end date defined the limit (or maximum) of eligible months. In other words, offenders were no longer eligible for contact as soon as all his/her cases expired naturally, or when a new arrest occurred (whichever came first). Using this method to count office contacts accounts for the varying lengths of time the low risk offenders remained active and arrest-free during the trial period.

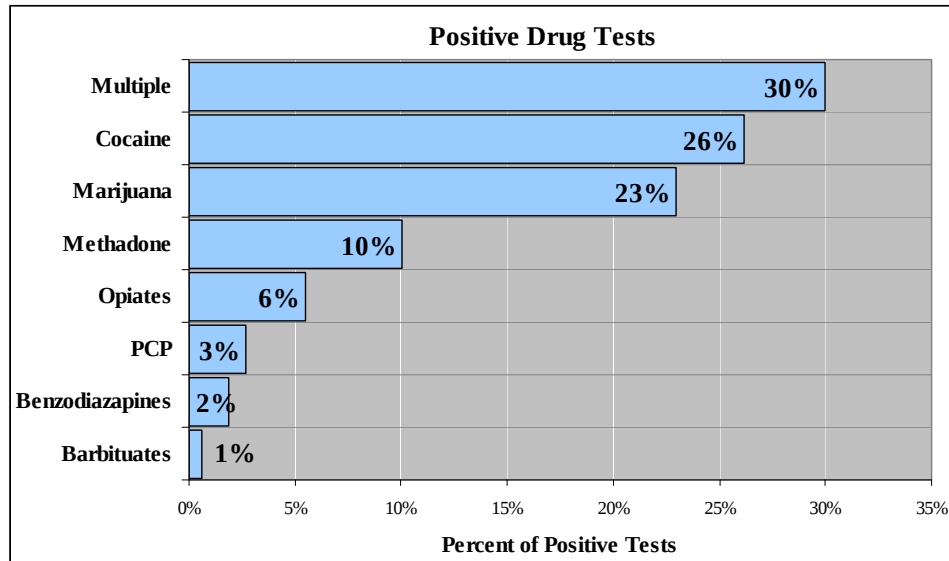
Low risk offenders in the control group had an average of 2.4 office contacts every three months they were eligible for contact, with a range from zero to 18, while those in the experimental low risk caseloads had an average of 1 office contact every three months, with a range from zero to 9. The difference between the number of office contacts in the control and experimental groups was statistically significant; therefore we can be confident that there were real differences between the two groups. The three month contact rates are summarized in Figure 1.1, below.

Figure 1.1 – Office Contacts by Treatment Group

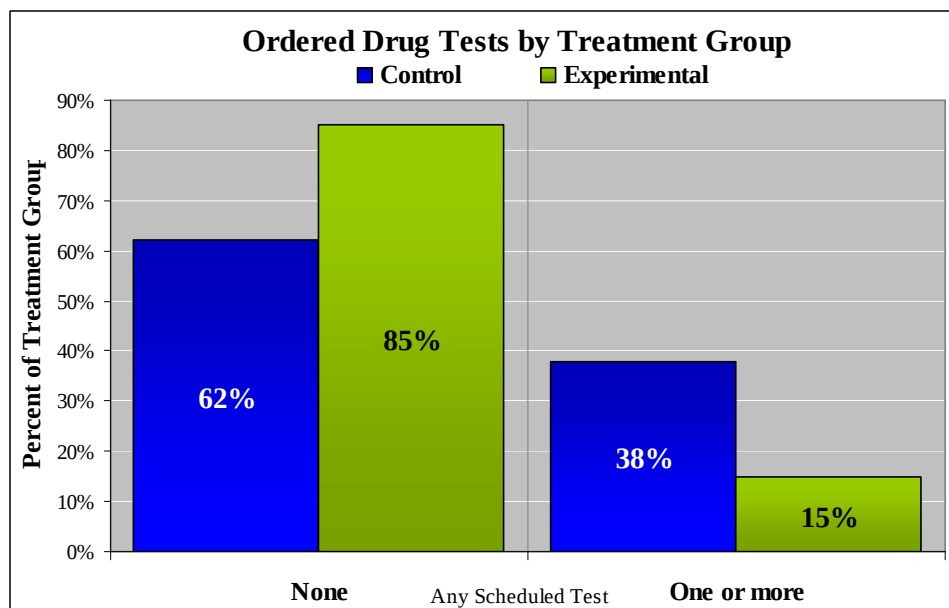


Drug Testing¹

From October 1, 2007 to October 1, 2008, 406 (26%) of the 1559 low risk offenders were scheduled for a total of 1222 drug tests. Half of the tests returned an overall positive result for any drug (alcohol excluded).

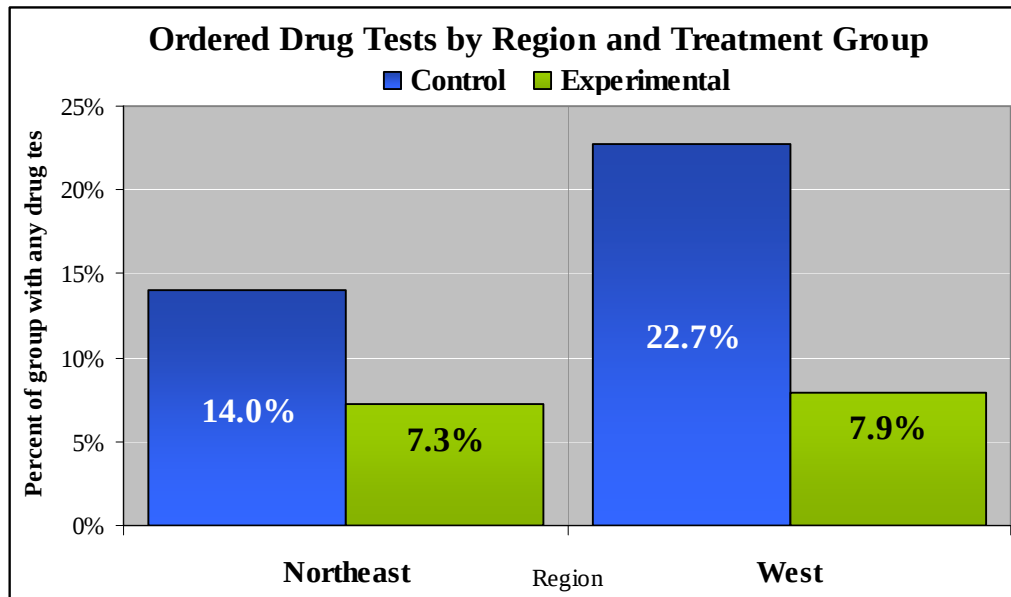


Less than half as many offenders in the low risk caseload (experimental group) than the control group were sent for a drug test during the study period. Fifteen percent (118) of those in the experimental group and 38% (288) of the control group were scheduled for at least one drug test during the course of the study. The difference between treatment groups was statistically significant.



¹ Thanks to Frank Johnson for the drug test data

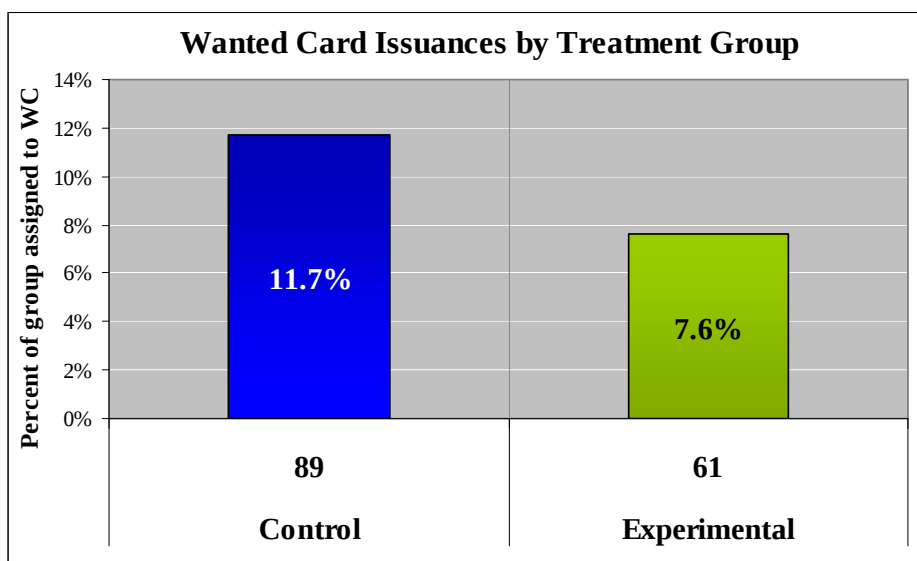
Offenders in the low risk caseloads in both the West and Northeast regions were less likely than those in West and Northeast general supervision to be sent by their officer for a drug test. Almost three quarters more of the offenders in the West control group (182) than the Northeast control group (106) were sent for at least one drug test.



Outcome Measures

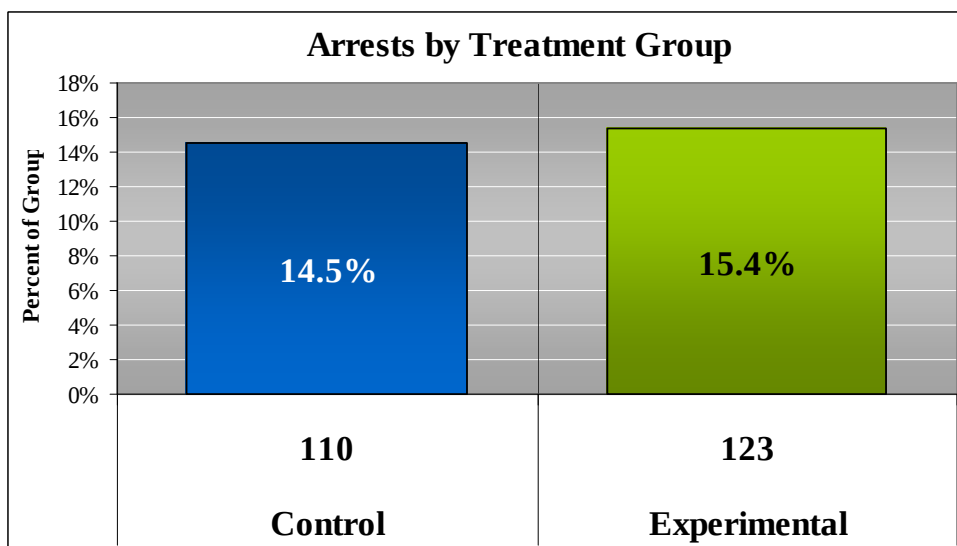
Absconder Warrants

Low risk offenders in general supervision were 50% more likely than low risk offenders in the two large (experimental) caseloads to be put on wanted cards during the study. This difference was statistically significant, indicating a meaningful reduction in the number of absconder warrants issued against low risk offenders supervised in large caseloads.

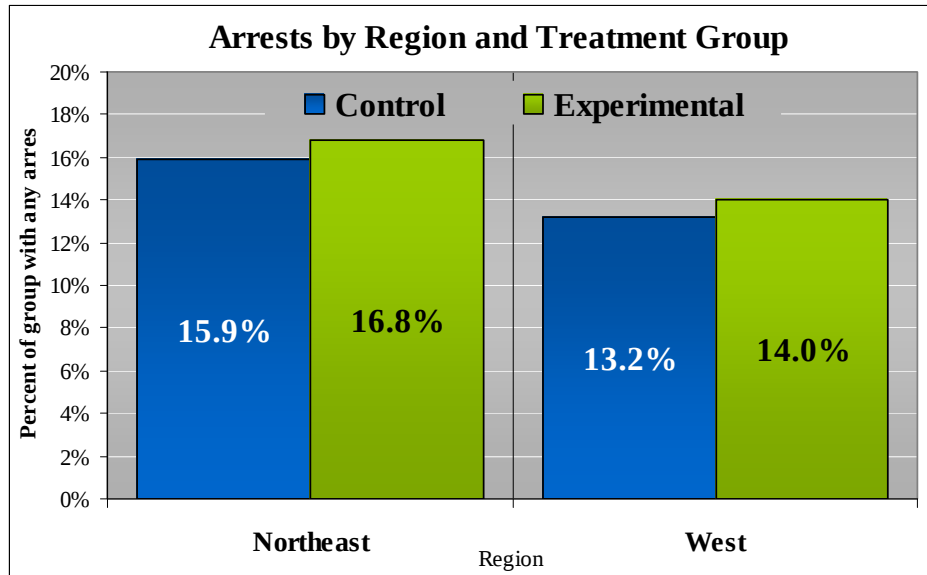


New Arrests

From Oct.1, 2007 to Oct. 1, 2008, 15% (233) of all low risk offenders (experimental and control) incurred a new arrest of any kind. There was no statistically significant difference in the arrest rate of the low risk offenders supervised in the low risk caseloads (the experimental group, 15.4%) and the low risk offenders who remained in regional supervision (the control group, 14.5%).

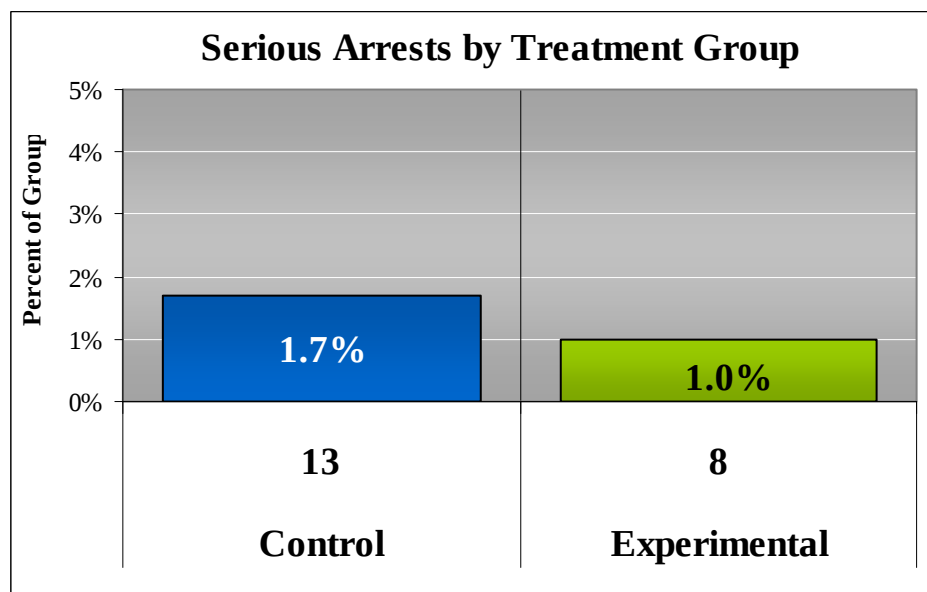


A larger percentage of the arrests were of offenders in the Northeast Region (16.4%) compared to low risk offenders in the West Region (13.3%). Across both regions, offenders in the experimental group were arrested slightly more often than those in the control group, but this difference was not statistically significant.

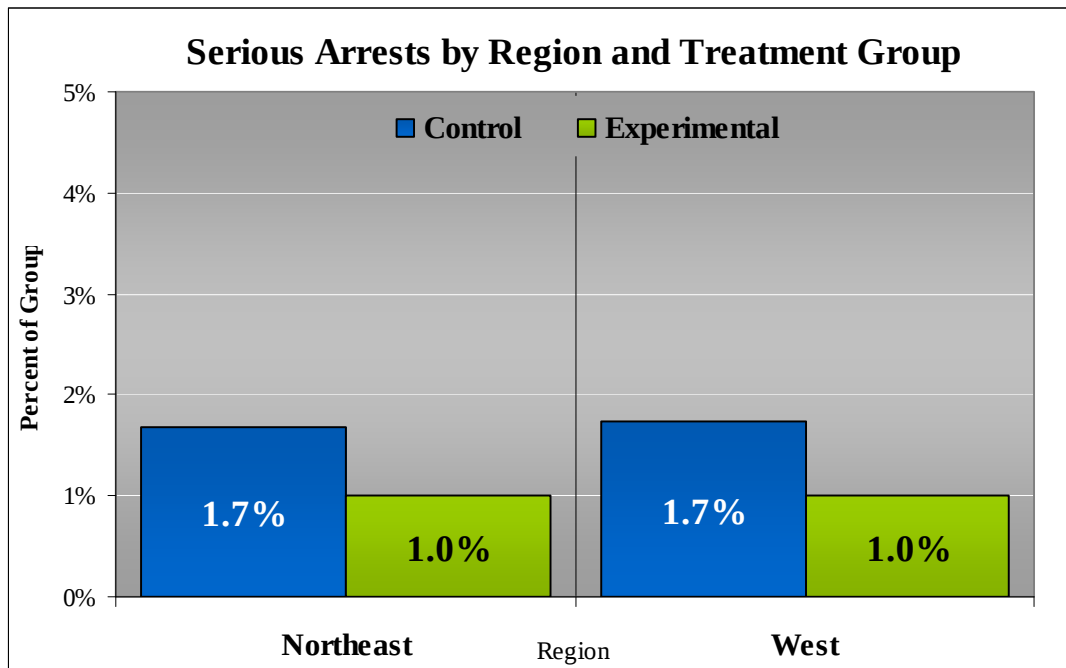


New Serious Arrests

A total of 21 low risk offenders (1.3% of all 1559) were arrested for a serious offense (murder or attempted murder, robbery or attempted robbery, aggravated assault, rape or child sex offenses). While there were five more serious arrests in the control group, this difference was not statistically significant.

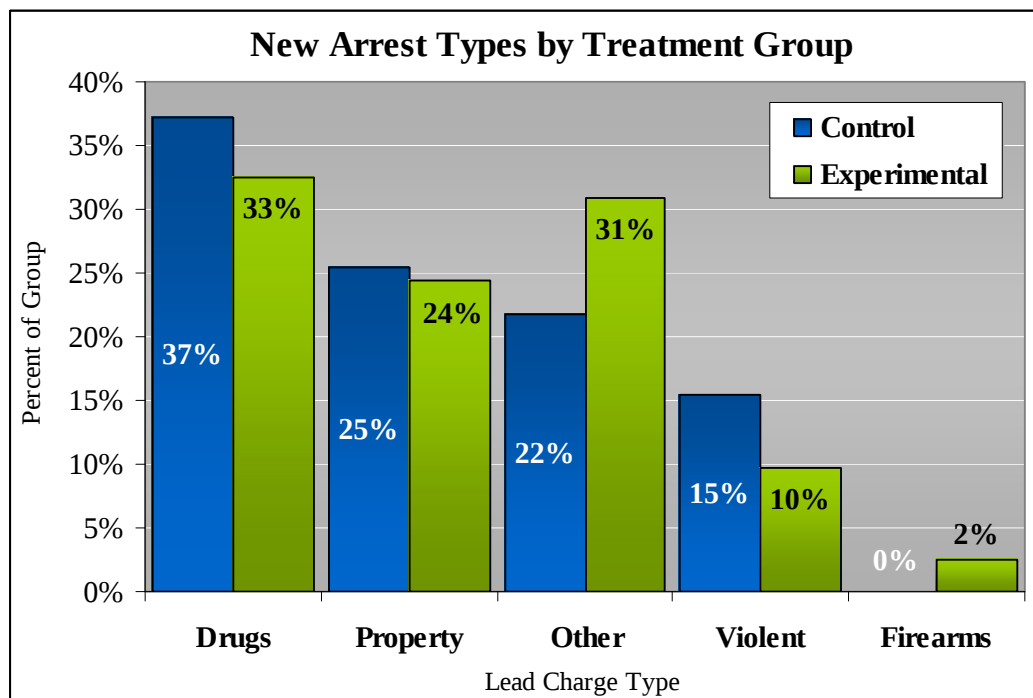


Offenders in the control group in both regions incurred more serious arrests than those in the low risk caseloads, however this difference was not statistically significant.



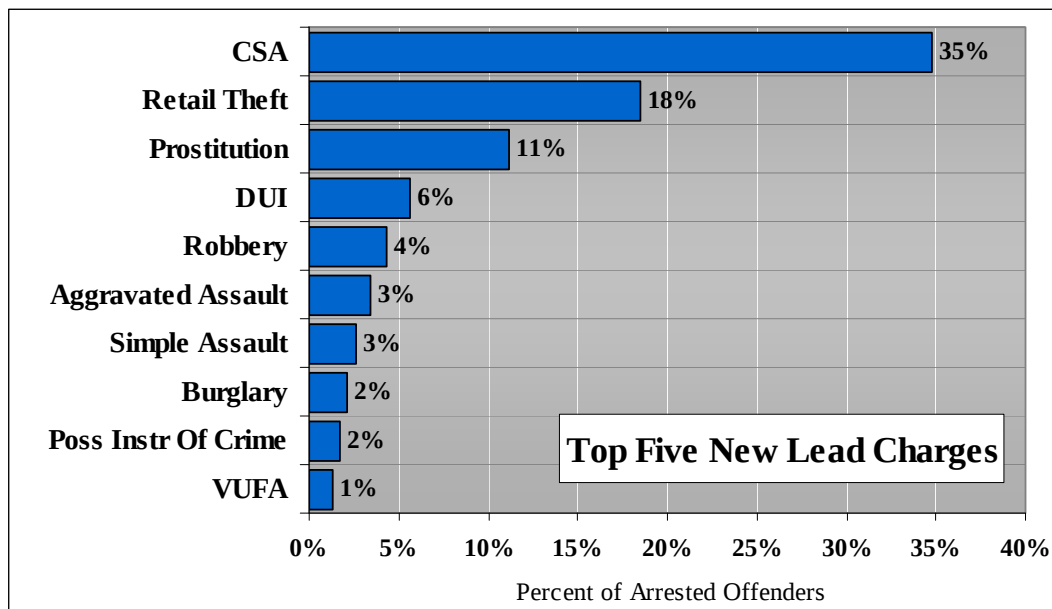
New Arrest Types

Among those arrested, there were no statistically significant differences in the type of new arrest between the control and experimental groups.



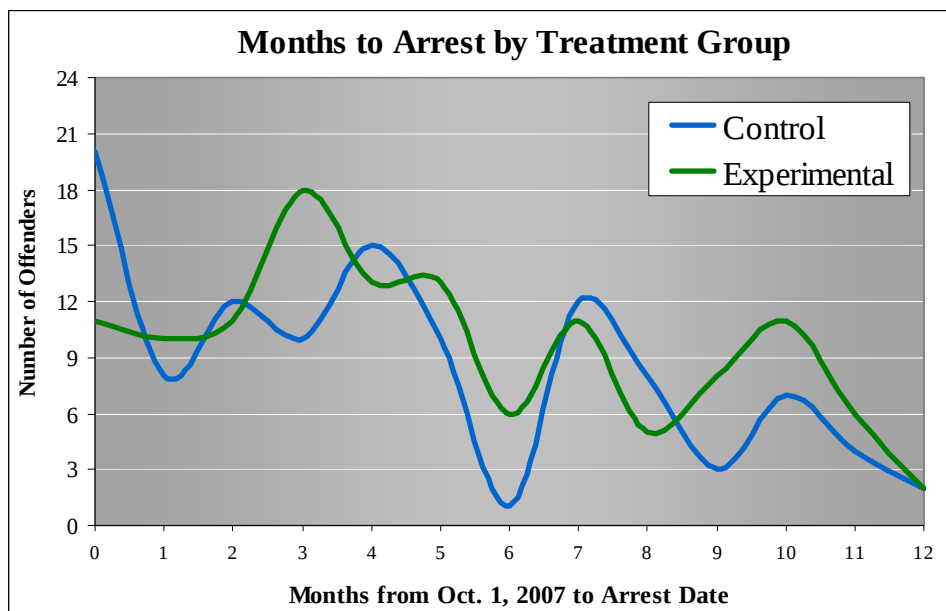
New Lead Charges

The most common new lead charge among low risk offenders with any new arrest was drug-related (CSA: Controlled Substances Act). Public disorder offenses (CSA, Retail Theft, Prostitution, DUI) comprised 70% of the top ten most common lead charges.



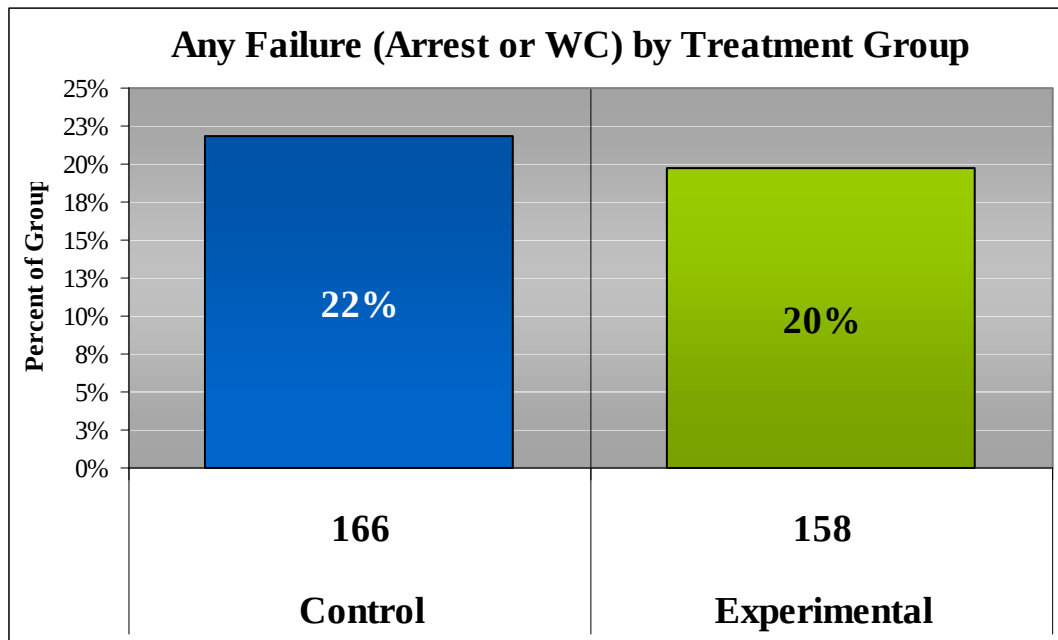
Months to Arrest

There was no statistically significant difference in the time to arrest between offenders in the control and experimental groups. A plurality (13%) of low risk offenders were arrested within the first month of the study. More than half of offenders incurring any new arrest were arrested within four months of the study.



Any Failure: Arrest or Wanted Card Issuance

There was no statistically significant difference in the number of failures between low risk offenders in the experimental caseloads and those who remained in general supervision. A case was considered a failure if the offender incurred a new arrest or was issued a wanted card. In those instances in which an offender was rearrested **and** had a wanted card issued whichever came first was included in this analysis.



Conclusion

The goal of the low risk experiment was to test whether or not low risk offenders could be supervised in large caseloads without increased risk to the public. The results of the experiment clearly indicate that large caseloads do not increase the risk of arrest for low risk offenders. There was no difference in either the rate of any arrest or an arrest for a serious offense between low risk offenders supervised in large caseloads and low risk offenders supervised in standard caseloads. The experiment also showed a significant reduction in the number of absconding warrants issued against low risk offenders.

In addition to its having no effect on arrest outcomes, low risk supervision also resulted in significantly less resources being used: low risk offenders in the large caseloads were seen less often in the office, and were sent by their officer to take less drug tests than those in the control group (general supervision). The significantly reduced rate of resource delivery within the low risk caseloads enables APPD to direct services at high risk offenders who pose the greatest risk and therefore stand to benefit the most from those services. And because those reduced services did not result in any increase in arrests (particularly arrests for serious crimes) or absconding, APPD can be confident that reduced supervision of low risk offenders poses no significant threat to public safety.

Expanding the low risk supervision program across the department will allow APPD to free up both officers and resources to supervise high risk offenders in small caseloads. Risk-based stratification of the entire APPD caseload, along with the reallocation of the agency's resources like drug tests, serves to maximize our impact on public safety while still maintaining the ability to confidently carry out orders of the court in a manner that is both efficient and effective.