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# Citizens' Perceptions of A "Good" Electronic House Arrest Program

Michael P. Brown and Preston Elrod

*The successful implementation and operation of electronic house arrest (EHA) depends upon community acceptance. Research has explored the conditions under which the public supports EHA as an alternative to incarceration, but it has failed to fully address what the public believes are appropriate program characteristics and offender activities. In order to gain insight into these issues, the present article reports the findings of a survey (n = 521) of Oneida County, New York, residents. Respondents indicated that a "good" EHA program has rules and regulations that reduce the possibility of recidivism and promote individual and societal safety.*

*Key Words: community acceptance, divert, electronic house arrest, incarceration mentality, intermediate sanction, policy maker, public safety*

## Introduction

The development of intermediate sanctions continues to be a priority for criminal justice policy makers who want to keep dangerous offenders off the streets while simultaneously curbing rapidly growing jail and prison costs.<sup>1</sup> One of the more popular intermediate sanctions that has been developed and implemented across the country is electronic house arrest (hereafter referred to as EHA). The number of jurisdictions implementing EHA programs as well as the number and types of offenders under some form of electronic surveillance have grown dramatically since the mid-1980s.<sup>2-4</sup> It has been estimated that by 1994 more than 20,000 adult male offenders and over 3,000 adult female offenders were being monitored electronically.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it has been estimated that as many as 1,000,000 persons may ultimately be subjected to some form of electronic monitoring.<sup>4</sup>

The popularity of EHA is fueled in large measure by its ability to satisfy diverse constituencies of policy makers and citizens.<sup>5</sup> For example, EHA promises some relief from jail and prison overcrowding by diverting offenders from institutional settings, thus freeing up needed bed space for more serious offenders.<sup>6</sup> It also promises some relief from the fiscal problems associated with costly institutional placements—and does this while providing close supervision of offenders. Therefore, EHA plays well to a diverse audience of fiscal conservatives, those who are concerned about punishing serious offenders, as well as those who maintain that traditional

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forms of community supervision have done little to protect public safety. In addition, EHA is supported by those who are concerned with the treatment and rehabilitation of offenders. As a community-based alternative, EHA diverts offenders from the criminogenic influences of correctional institutions; avoids the stigma associated with prison and jail; helps offenders maintain, establish, or reestablish ties to prosocial individuals and institutions in the community; and allows offenders an opportunity to take advantage of community treatment programs. Moreover, it does this while closely monitoring offenders' activities and progress.

Given its appeal to these diverse interests, it is perhaps not surprising that the limited research done on citizens' perceptions of EHA has found strong but conditional support for this form of intermediate sanction. For example, citizens believe that EHA is a cost-effective way to deal with many offenders at the pretrial, trial, and postadjudication stages of the criminal justice process. However, support for the use of EHA appears to wane when it is used with offenders who have committed "serious" offenses.<sup>7</sup>

Understanding the level of public support for various community-based correctional interventions is important because successful program implementation and operation is dependent upon community acceptance.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, there is limited information about the conditions under which the public is supportive of EHA sentences. This study provides insight into this question by asking a sample of county residents what they believe to be the characteristics of a "good" EHA program and what activities are appropriate for offenders who are serving EHA sentences. This information could be very helpful to those who are interested in implementing successful EHA programs. Misinformation or a general lack of understanding about EHA—on the part of policy makers and the general public—can be the largest impediment to implementing and operating such programs. By surveying the public, decision makers are in a better position to educate those who are uninformed or misinformed about this type of correctional intervention. Such information may also be beneficial to decision makers when developing the purposes and practices of EHA programs so that educational strategies can be designed to address public concerns.

## Public Opinion Research

Although a large percentage of the public seems to possess an incarceration mentality—i.e., the perception that prison represents punishment and other forms of criminal sanctioning are merely slaps on the wrist—this mentality appears to be waning.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the public is less concerned with social order and safety than in the past or that prison sentences have become unpopular. On the contrary, fear of crime has been American's number one concern since 1994 and there has been more than a three-fold increase in the prison population since 1980.<sup>10,11</sup> These facts notwithstanding, public opinion research has revealed that community-based sanctions (e.g., EHA) are viewed as viable sentencing alternatives to incarceration, especially when used with "nondangerous" offenders.<sup>5,7,12-14</sup>

What appears to have changed is that the public is increasingly more pragmatic than it was two decades ago. This pragmatism appears to be related to increased awareness of the consequences of mass incarceration. Thomson and Ragona, for example, found that when people are made aware of the costs associated with incarceration, community-based alternatives are looked upon more favorably than institutionalization.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the public is skeptical of the utility of incarceration sentences. For instance, a recent survey revealed that only 26 percent of US citizens have "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the nation's prison system.<sup>16</sup>

In light of these findings, it is not surprising that a number of studies show a substantial level of support for community-based sentences in general and EHA in particular. For example, a California survey found that 83 percent of respondents favored boot camps, restitution, drug treatment, and house arrest over

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prison sentences.<sup>12</sup> A similar survey conducted in upstate New York revealed that 92 percent of respondents preferred house arrest over incarceration for minor, nonviolent offenders.<sup>7</sup>

Other studies have also found support for community-based sanctions.<sup>13,17,18</sup> Doble, for example, found that when community-based sanctions are used as alternatives to incarceration there is an expectation that offenders will have mandatory attendance at a job, job training program, or school.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the International Association of Residential and Community Alternatives reported that offenders who are sentenced to the community are expected to hold jobs, perform community service, pay restitution, and enter into counseling.<sup>19</sup>

Available research indicates that when community-based sanctions are used as alternatives to incarceration, the public has expectations with respect to offenders' activities and correctional goals. However, research has failed to fully articulate these expectations. This study endeavors to more fully articulate the public's expectations of EHA programs and the activities of offenders sentenced to EHA.

## The Present Study

### Sample procedures and response rate

A survey of a systematic, representative sample of the population under consideration is perhaps the best way to determine how citizens on the whole feel about an issue.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, survey questionnaires examining citizens' perceptions of EHA were mailed to 1,000 households in Oneida County, New York, in June 1993. The sample was selected randomly from the 1992 voter registration list, which represented 84.3 percent of the total households in the county. Of the 1,000 questionnaires mailed, 70 (7 percent) were returned due to a change of address. No attempt was made to replace the sample members. Of the remaining 930 surveys, 529 or 56.9 percent were returned. Due to missing data, 521 surveys are used in the present analysis.

### Contact procedures

The households selected to receive the questionnaire were potentially contacted three times in order to maximize the return rate. The first mailing consisted of a survey and cover letter. The cover letter

stressed four primary points: (1) the purpose of the study; (2) the importance of returning each questionnaire, so as to maximize the representativeness of the study; (3) that an adult member of the household should respond to the questionnaire; and (4) that the questionnaires would be confidential. Approximately one week later, postcards were mailed to households that had not yet responded, encouraging their participation, and approximately two weeks later another questionnaire and cover letter were mailed.

To give respondents an idea of how an electronic house arrest program functions, the cover letter contained a brief example of an active monitoring system. First, offenders are monitored 24 hours a day. Second, if offenders go beyond the range of the monitor, a potential violation will be immediately reported to corrections officers who supervise offenders serving electronic house arrest sentences. Third, potential violations are investigated within 24 hours of the reported infraction. Fourth, in addition to electronic surveillance, a system may utilize voice verification.

### The sample

Nearly equal percentages of males (52 percent) and females (48 percent) responded to the questionnaire. Whites comprised approximately 92 percent of the sample, and 85 percent of the respondents had a high school diploma or more. The survey respondents reported their median age to be 49 and their median income to be \$26,053.

According to 1990 Census data, the sample appears to be representative of the population in terms of gender, race, age, and income.<sup>20</sup> Males made up 49 percent of the county's population; and nearly all (91.5 percent) were white. Of those who were 18 or older (i.e., those of voting age), the median age was 42. Further, \$26,710 was the median income for the county.

The sample does not appear to be representative of the population in terms of educational attainment. Of Oneida County residents, 75 percent possessed a high school diploma or more. Although the differential is not great (85 percent versus 75 percent), caution should be exercised when generalizing survey findings to that segment of the population with less than a 12th grade education.

**Table 1**  
POSITIVE PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Percent Agreeing
Frequent contact with corrections officer	73.0
Regular drug testing	60.1
Punish offenders	43.1
Rehabilitate offenders	47.3
Protect public from offender	58.8
Reduce costs associated with incarceration	63.7
Offenders should pay for the:	
entire cost of the program	25.7
cost of the program based on their ability to pay	57.5

It is noteworthy to mention that there is no evidence to suggest that the respondents were biased by incidents involving offenders serving EHA sentences. The authors are unaware of any media accounts that detailed the activities (criminal or otherwise) of EHA clientele. Moreover, while all of the respondents had heard of EHA, most of them (83 percent) indicated that they did not know that EHA was being used as an alternative to incarceration in Oneida County, New York.

## Findings

### Characteristics of a good program

Survey respondents were asked to indicate which of the characteristics listed in Table 1 are reflective of a good EHA program. As can be seen, most of them (73 percent) believed that a good program required frequent offender-corrections officer contact. Most respondents also believed that a good program would reduce the costs associated with incarceration

*Only eight percent of the respondents believed that offenders should be allowed to participate in any activity as long as they first obtain permission.*

(64 percent). But when asked whether offenders should be required to pay for the entire cost associated with an EHA sentence, only 26 percent believed that this would be indicative of a good program. Instead, most respondents (57 percent) believed that offenders should pay on a sliding scale—according to their financial ability.

Regularly testing offenders for drug use is viewed by most respondents (60 percent) to be a characteristic of a good EHA program. The concern over drug use appears to be based more on the relationship between drugs and the commission of crimes than the rehabilitation of offenders. That is, more respondents believed that a good program protected the public from harm (59 percent) rather than rehabilitated offenders (47 percent). Less than half of the respondents (43 percent) believed that a good program exacted punishment.

### Offender liberty and a good program

The data indicate that respondents supported restricting offender liberty and limiting the discretion of correctional officers (see Table 2). Only eight percent of the respondents believed that offenders should be allowed to participate in any activity as long as they first obtain permission. This suggests that a good EHA program has clear guidelines that delineate appropriate offender conduct.

Insight into these guidelines is provided by what respondents expect of offenders while they serve out their sentences. Most respondents believed that offenders should work (75 percent), attend school (66 percent), receive psychological counseling (71 percent), and attend church services (56 percent). On the other hand, only a small percentage of the respondents think that offenders should be allowed to go grocery shopping (38 percent) or attend to personal business (35 percent) on a weekly basis.

## Conclusions

In a relatively brief period of time, EHA has gained widespread support among criminal justice decision makers and the public. It is considered to be a viable sentencing alternative for a variety of offenders, at all stages in the criminal justice process. Available evidence suggests that EHA will continue to be a popular correctional intervention, due in large part to

Table 2  
OFFENDER ACTIVITIES

Characteristic	Percent Agreeing
Work	74.7
Attend school	65.6
Shop for groceries weekly	38.4
Attend counseling sessions	71.5
Leave residence weekly to tend to personal business	35.2
Attend church services	56.0
As long as the offender obtains permission from authorities, she/he should be allowed to do or go anywhere	8.1

characteristics that appeal to diverse political and correctional interests.

These facts notwithstanding, the present study suggests that the public is concerned about its safety when EHA is used. When asked to indicate the characteristics of a good EHA program and the activities considered appropriate for offenders serving electronic house arrest sentences, this study suggests that a good EHA program protects the public from harm. Public safety is accomplished by establishing mechanisms to control offender behavior. For example, control over offender behavior, according to most of the respondents, is accomplished by requiring frequent offender-corrections officer contact and regular drug testing. Moreover, a good program structures offenders' lives while they serve out their sentences in the community. Most respondents indicated that appropriate activities for offenders serving an electronic house arrest sentence include working, attending school, meeting with a counselor, and attending church services. Although some of these activities may be viewed as having more merit than the others, the central premise is that they impose a structure on offenders' lives. When offenders leave their residences, there is a destination—work, class, a counselor's office, a church service. Presumably, once the workday is complete or the church service has ended, offenders are expected to return home.

The priority placed on controlling behavior may help to explain the general lack of support for such

activities as grocery shopping and attending to personal business. These activities lack structure. There is no time clock to punch or a preestablished meeting time. It is difficult to determine if offenders are where they are supposed to be.

Interestingly, respondents tend not to view the control of behavior as being accomplished through punishment—that is deterrence. Also, there is little emphasis on long-term behavioral change, as evidenced by the lack of support for rehabilitation. One might surmise that the respondents are primarily concerned about their immediate safety; that is, their safety while offenders are serving out their sentences in the community. It appears that the public's support for strict control over offenders is an attempt to obtain reassurance that harm will not come to them, at least while offenders are under correctional control. Hence, according to the present study, a good EHA program prevents recidivism.

If the results of this survey are generalizable to other communities, program administrators and policy makers might find that public support for EHA is enhanced by stressing community and personal safety issues. The presence of characteristics that attempt to control offender behavior—that is, those that are above and beyond the control provided by electronic telemetry—appear to translate into feelings of security. For example, the public could be informed that:

- Offender supervision is two dimensional (i.e., 24-hour electronic surveillance, in conjunction with frequent contact by the supervising corrections officer).
- Offenders who have a history of drug use are tested on a random or scheduled basis.
- Offenders are required to retain or obtain a job or attend school.
- Offenders must receive counseling if an initial assessment recommends it.
- It is permissible for offenders to attend religious services, if they wish to do so.
- Offenders are expected to make arrangements to have their groceries delivered to their homes and that personal business would take place via the telephone or through some other method.

It may also be instructive to point out that the costs associated with incarceration would be reduced through the use of EHA sentences. Although it is fre-

quently difficult to provide precise cost savings, reasonable estimates are obtainable. The public may likewise be informed that EHA program participation involves a financial assessment to ascertain the extent to which qualified offenders have the ability to pay for the supervision services they receive.

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