

English summary

Prison at liberty. An evaluation of electronic monitoring

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On October 1st 2001, a pilot project was initiated employing electronic monitoring for those sentenced to a prison term of at least two years. They are given the opportunity to serve the final part of their sentence – up to a maximum of four months – outside prison under electronic monitoring, also known as the EM-release programme. The objective is to reduce levels of reoffending by providing those convicted of crime with an opportunity to spend time in the community with more support and control than they would receive following their conditional discharge from prison.

The National Council for Crime Prevention has been commissioned by the Government to evaluate this pilot project. This first report describes the project in relation to those who started an EM-release during the first eight months of the programme. It is based on information relating to those inmates who were granted an EM-release, to inmates who did not apply for an EM-release, and also to inmates who applied but whose applications were turned down.

During the entire investigation, conversations and discussions have been continuously conducted with probation service inspectors, prison staff and representatives for the Prison and Probation Administration.

Forty per cent of long term inmates applied for an EM-release

In order for an application for EM-release to be granted, the inmate must have access to a place to live, a telephone, electricity and a regular occupation. In addition, a number of requirements are made to ensure the safety of members of the community during the period of execution, i.e. to minimise the risk for relapse into crime during the period of electronic monitoring. An EM-release may not be granted if it is feared that the inmate in question will abscond, reoffend or abuse alcohol or drugs during the period of electronic monitoring.

The Prison and Probation Administration assesses the inmates' applications. Over the course of 2002, 315 individuals applied, which is estimated to comprise approximately 40 per cent of those serving long term prison sentences. i.e. a prison term of at least two years. Of these, 48 per cent were granted, which corresponds to approximately 20 per cent of the entire group of long term prison inmates.

Those granted an EM-release had more favourable backgrounds than other long term inmates

Most of those whose applications for EM-release were granted had not previously been convicted of offences. Virtually none had abused alcohol or other drugs during the six months immediately preceding the application.

In addition, the group granted EM-releases had a more favourable background in other respects too, and a better social starting point than others serving long prison sentences. They were better educated and were also married or cohabiting to a greater extent. Their social situation was substantially better – most had a place of their own to live or lived in a house or flat belonging to a family member. They also had a forward looking form of employment, and could support themselves financially as a result of their own work or studies or a labour market initiative to a greater extent than the others.

Lack of freedom, stress and isolation – reasons for not applying

A little over ten per cent of those who chose not to apply nonetheless fulfilled the requirements for an EM-release. One of the reasons that they did not apply was that they felt electronic monitoring involved too many regulations and controls. Several felt that daytime work leave constituted a better alternative, with a greater degree of freedom, since it meant being able both to stay outside the prison during the day and to have relatively frequent periods of prison leave. One person took up the feeling of stress

associated with the exacting requirements of punctuality. Another took up the risk of feeling alone and isolated during the period of electronic monitoring.

Prison and Probation Administration, prison institutions and probation service not always in agreement on which applications to reject

The most common reason for rejecting an application for EM-release was the risk for substance abuse and/or reoffending. This was the motivation employed in relation to over 80 per cent of the total number of applications. In the remaining cases rejection was motivated by the fact that the inmates intended to live with the victim of the crime that led to their imprisonment or that they lacked regular employment or a place to live.

According to the Prison and Probation Administration's regulations, both the individual prison and the probation service are to assess whether an EM-release is suitable in the individual case. In practically all those cases where an application was granted, the probation service and the prison were in agreement with the Prison and Probation Administration. As regards those applications that were rejected, however, both the probation service and the prison recommended the application in 30 per cent of cases. These recommendations were most often based on motivations relating to the inmate's need for an EM-release, general good behaviour or willingness to change.

Few clients breached the terms of EM-releases

In addition to the control involved in electronic monitoring, the clients were also monitored by means of visits at home, at the workplace and by means of telephone controls. Most commonly such checks were conducted two to four times per week. Home visits were most common, whilst controls at the workplace took place less often. In the course of these control visits, breath tests were conducted as a matter of course, and urine samples were also taken on occasion.

Only six per cent of the clients were in breach of their release conditions during the period of electronic monitoring. In five of these cases, this breach took the form of prohibited use of alcohol or other drugs, and in one case the client was late arriving. In all cases, the breach led to the immediate cancelling of the EM-release and the client was returned to prison or placed in a remand prison to serve out the remainder of their sentence.

Time allotted for special activities not fully utilised

The support provided to clients is intended to take different forms. According to the regulations, the client's daily occupation, or employment, may be complemented by treatment, for example, participation in some form of self-training programme, or so-called special activities. Support may also be provided through contacts with probation service officers and possibly lay supervisors.

The special activities take two forms; the one obligatory, the other voluntary.

The voluntary activities were utilised to the full by 75 per cent of clients, and the obligatory activities by 45 per cent. One reason for this under-utilisation of the obligatory activities may be that the clients have a settled social situation and rarely any substance abuse problems, and thus do not need activities of this kind. Another factor may be that a contact person must always be appointed for the obligatory activities, such as the coach at the football club attended by the client, for example. Those clients who do not want to reveal to those around them that they have spent time in prison, therefore, choose not to participate in the obligatory activities. A further reason for this under-utilisation may be that it is a little unclear within the probation service what these obligatory hours may be devoted to. These issues will be examined in the National Council's next follow-up.

Less support needed from the probation service than expected

The number of visits to the probation service varies between zero and twelve per month. Most commonly, the clients attend scheduled appointments between two and four times per month, i.e. an appointment every week or every other week. The relatively low frequency of these visits may in part be a result of the fact that the social situation of the clients is relatively settled and that they do not therefore require very much assistance. In part it may be a result of the fact that the clients themselves contact the agencies or support organisations they need. The study shows however that the clients who have been in need of assistance have also received help. A large proportion of them, 70 per cent, also have lay supervisors.

Satisfied clients

The majority of clients were satisfied with their time on EM-release. It lived up to their expectations or worked even better than they had expected. They say that they would have chosen the same option today if they were faced with the same choice. As a rule, they had chosen EM-release because they wanted to be together with their families or in order to be able to live at home. Most of them wished that they could have been on EM-release for longer than four months.