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Text Message Reminders Can Improve Community Supervision Outcomes and Reduce Inefficiency

Community supervision refers to several programs that allow criminal offenders to remain in their communities rather than being incarcerated, albeit under varying degrees of oversight by an officer assigned to their case. The two main forms of community supervision are probation and parole. Nearly 3.7 million adults are on community supervision programs like probation and parole—that's nearly twice the number of people incarcerated in jail or prison.

Contact with supervising officers is among the most common and important conditions of community supervision.

- At required in-person meetings, supervisees commonly provide employment updates, receive support and treatment, and are tested for recent drug use.
- Higher-risk supervisees are typically required to have more frequent contact.
- Failure to maintain contact through in-person meetings can result in a revocation of community supervision and a return to jail or prison.

Missed meeting appointments waste supervision agency resources.

- Supervision agencies are frequently underfunded, and officers are often overloaded with cases.
- As the number of people on parole and probation has grown over recent decades, supervising agencies and the officers they employ have been required to do more with less.
- Research suggests that effective supervision can improve long-term outcomes for individuals on parole and probation, but supervising officers need adequate time and resources to do their jobs effectively. Reducing missed appointments could allow supervising officers to spend more time managing the cases of higher-risk supervisees.

Automated text message reminders can improve supervision meeting attendance.

- From picking up prescription medications to reminding us of a doctor's appointment, text message reminders are commonplace in everyday life for most Americans.
- A recent randomized experiment in Arkansas found that supervisees who received a text message one day before upcoming supervision meetings had 21% fewer canceled meetings and 29% fewer missed appointments relative to those who did not receive a text message.
- To the extent that missed appointments lead to technical probation and parole violations and increase the burden placed on supervising officers, text message reminders could be a low-cost improvement. The program only costs the Arkansas Division of Community Corrections about two cents per text message.

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