

**Washington State Institute for Criminal Justice:**

Research in Brief



## **Research Brief**

# **Washington State Swift and Certain**

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*Expenditures for state corrections topped \$52 billion in 2011. Long prison and community supervision sentences, probation and parole officer violation practices, and a lack of programming all contribute to this costly model. As a nation, we can no longer deny that such expenditures are not only financially amiss, but that current policy and practices do little to change offender behavior.*

In 2012, in response to mounting budget concerns, the Washington State Department of Corrections (WADOC) embarked on an ambitious effort to restructure their community supervision model. Based on the passage of SB 6204, changes were made to “match” the level of supervision to offender’s risk level, utilize evidence-based treatment, and implement swift and certain (yet moderate) jail sanctions for community supervision violations. This change in how probation violations were managed came to be referred to as the Swift and Certain (SAC) policy. The policy was modeled from the successful Hawaii HOPE program, which largely focused on low-level drug offender violation behavior through the use of immediate and certain sanctions. Unlike the HOPE program, the WADOC opted instead to aggressively expand the HOPE model to a much broader community- based criminal justice population. The SAC policy in Washington aimed to respond to all violation immediately, yet reduce confinement time via a “Behavior Accountability Guide,” while still ensuring public safety. WADOC officials estimated that the use of such methods could significantly reduce correctional costs associated with short-term confinement for violation sanctioning, thereby reducing costs to taxpayers of incarceration and supervision.

To assess the effectiveness of SAC, researchers at Washington State University (WSU) completed a multi-phase project to examine the implementation process and provide an outcome and cost-benefit evaluation of SAC. The process, outcome and cost-benefit studies included the following steps:

**Process Evaluation:** The purpose of the process evaluation was to provide a deeper understanding of the implementation, adoption and use of SAC with over 10,000 offenders across Washington. Careful review document review of policies and procedures, focus groups with community corrections officers and supervisors (CCOs & CCSs), as well as focus groups with offenders on supervision were all completed for the evaluation.

**Outcome and Cost-Benefit Evaluation:** The core focus of the outcome and cost-benefit evaluation was to examine if SAC was meeting its intended goals, including

- 1) Reducing sanctions that resulted in confinement in jail
- 2) Reducing recidivism
- 3) Increasing treatment utilization
- 4) Reducing overall violation behavior over time
- 5) Reducing correctional and associated costs.



WSU Researchers used a quasi-experimental design and made use of a historically matched comparison group of offenders that participated in community supervision prior to SAC's implementation. A total of 15,561 records were used to measure findings.

Findings: While some implementation challenges were apparent; SAC's rollout was relatively efficient and is likely the result of the training model used and quality assurance measures implemented. It is also interesting to note that, while some minor differences were identified; overall SAC's implementation and practices are similar across the six correctional regions. What is most remarkable about the study findings is that despite the accelerated timeline provided by the legislative mandate, SAC was implemented as intended and is achieving its objectives.

WSU Researchers found substantial overlap in the focus group results between officers and offenders. Both groups held strong opinions about the lack of discretion provided under SAC. In addition, there was a desire to individualize case management, providing a wider array of interventions for offenders. It was also indicated that SAC might not be appropriate for all offender types, including those with significant mental health diagnoses and active drug/alcohol addictions.

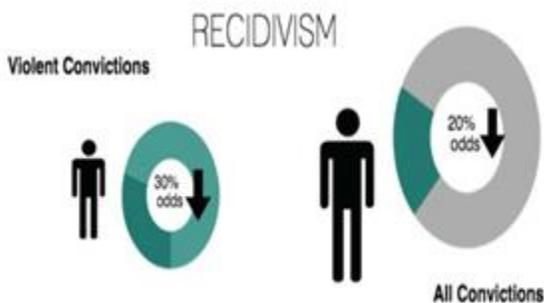
For the outcome study, overall the findings were positive, demonstrating effectiveness across several key areas. Findings show that:

- 1) SAC participants had fewer incarceration sanction days following a violation. SAC significantly reduced the number of offenders confined following a violation and the duration of time they served for those violations.
- 2) SAC's implementation did not impact public safety negatively, as participants were found to be less likely to recidivate. SAC Participants were found to have 20 percent reduced odds of any conviction, including general felony conviction and property conviction. When isolating SAC participants possessed 30 percent reduced odds of a violent felony conviction.

### SANCTION REDUCTIONS



The duration of confinement was reduced by an average of 16 days in the initial 12 months of supervision.



SAC participants were found to have 20% reduced odds of any conviction. SAC participants possessed 30% reduced odds of a violent felony conviction.



- 3) SAC participants were more likely to access, participate in, and complete more treatment programming.
- 4) SAC participants greatly reduced their propensity of committing “any” and “non-serious” violations and a reduced propensity for “serious” violations.
- 5) As anticipated, supervision and confinement costs decreased, while the costs of treatment provision increased as a result of SAC. Overall, recidivism reduced among participants, which generated costs savings for the policy. The WADOC and taxpayers experienced a cost savings ratio of 16 dollars saved for every dollar spent on SAC.

Overall, SAC has been successful in meeting its intended objectives and, in some respects, may have exceeded expectations. While additional factors may have contributed to the findings, our results indicate that not only was public safety maintained but that reductions in recidivism were also observed. Furthermore, while correctional and associated costs were significantly reduced, what is still unmeasured are the societal cost reductions provided through the reduced confinement time, which (qualitative analyses confirmed) resulted in maintained offender employment, social support and increased treatment participation.



**Considerations for Transfer and Adoption of SAC:** While SAC still has room for improvement, there are many strengths and “take-aways” of the initiative that can be utilized by other states or agencies looking to adopt programs similar to SAC.

- 1) While the certainty of sanctioning was the key policy alteration for the WADOC, it was combined with a graduated sanctioning schedule that provided distinctions between low versus high-level violations. This schedule<sup>2</sup> (for the most part) was well known to all offenders. Findings revealed greater reductions of violations overtime and focus group results of SAC indicated greater appreciation of known consequences and the consistency of their application.



- 2) Portions of the monies saved were reinvested in programming in an attempt to further improve offender's reentry transition and reduce recidivism as a result.
  
- 3) Perhaps key to this entire initiative was that the WADOC implemented training and quality assurance practices to maintain SAC's fidelity. This contribution has been notably absent in many historical policy shifts or program applications in the corrections field. Still in place currently, the WADOC quality assurance team was an important model component that should be replicated if SAC is attempted in other jurisdictions.
  
- 4) In contrast to many deterrence-based sentencing strategies implemented in previous years that relied on longer periods of incarceration for violations, SAC reduced the length of confinements and created greater proportionality with regard to the violation level. Although WADOC significantly reduced the amount of time spent in jail on violations, these reductions had no appreciable

Negative impacts on public safety, and in fact our findings indicate improved public safety as a result of SAC.

For further details about the SAC research findings or the operations of the program, WSU Researchers can be contacted at [zachary.hamilton@wsu.edu](mailto:zachary.hamilton@wsu.edu) or [jvanwormer@wsu.edu](mailto:jvanwormer@wsu.edu)

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Pew Center on the States, 2012

<sup>2</sup> The Behavior Accountability Guide can be found at: <http://www.doc.wa.gov/policies/default.aspx?show=400>