

E-Parole

A Networked System to Improve the Current Parole System

Summary: E-Parole is a network-based system that facilitates the collection of relevant information from both the side of the parolee and parole officer, enabling a more successful (and eventually shorter) time during parole. Our goal is to give the parolees and parole officers the tools they need to communicate with each other on a higher level the status of such things as location, drug & alcohol intake, as well as heighten accessibility of existing services for parolees that are now very underutilized. The system consists of two devices: the monitor and the partner. The monitor is an ankle bracelet that takes in information from the parolee and sends it to a database for the parole officer to view. The partner is a PDA-like device that enables the parolee to make use of current services available, as well as maintain the status of his/her parole sentence. These devices work in tandem to bring back the focus of deterrence and rehabilitation into the criminal justice system.

The Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system is a complex system that is often overlooked in terms of design as well as most technology-based systems. We began working on this project with a very simplistic view of how it worked, and slowly began to understand how involved it really is. Here is a brief (and simplistic) overview of how it works:

- A crime is committed
- The offender is caught by the police and arrested
- He/she is given a trial and sentenced to a certain amount of time in parole and a certain amount of time in prison
- During the time of parole, the offender is watched to ensure that he/she is able to integrate and become a productive member of society (E-Parole focuses primarily on this period of time.)

The system is flawed, however. **Two-thirds** of parolees go on to commit more crimes and return to the cycle of the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system has three main purposes: punishment, deterrence and rehabilitation. Currently, the criminal justice system is only succeeding at one of these: punishment. By focusing on the time that offenders spend in parole, E-parole provides a networked solution with the goal of reducing the recidivism rate.

The Devices

The Monitor (Deterrence)

The system of E-Parole is made up of two devices: **The Monitor** and **The Partner**. The devices work in tandem to provide both deterrence and rehabilitation.

The first device, The Monitor, provides the parole officer the information necessary to ensure that the parole officer is staying on track for the duration of the parole sentence. The Monitor is an ankle bracelet, similar to the ones used now for house arrest. The first feature of the ankle bracelet is the location tracker. The current ankle bracelets are based on local radio signal. This one works in real-time. The data is collected and the sent to a database where it is aggregated and distributed to the appropriate sources.

The current parole system has many problems. One is in the ratio of parolees to parole officers. There are 60 parolees a single parole officer. That is less than 1 hour per week a parole officer is able to spend on each individual parolee. That is not nearly enough time to provide the kind of support and resources each parolee requires for the necessary rehabilitation. And out of the offenders that are serving their parole, **ten percent** of those people disappear in the eyes of the system. They do not show up to their parole meetings and the parole officers have no idea where they have gone.

We spoke to Al Rosario, who has been working in the Brooklyn Parole Office for about thirty years. He is head of all the parole officers in Brooklyn. Al Rosario spoke about what it is like to be a parole officer and how much he wanted a better system for the ankle bracelets. For example, one parolee led a life of crime while completely sticking to his parole plan:

“[He] just did nothing wrong as far as parole supervision went, but he was dealing drugs and shooting people with twelve-gauge shotguns...”
- Al Rosario, Brooklyn Parole Services Specialist

It would seem that putting ankle bracelet trackers on parolees would solve the problem, but that is not the case. The current ankle bracelet is a large device attached to the ankle that communicates using a local radio system. The ankle bracelet communicates to a device that attaches to the phone. This does not work if the phone has an answering machine, call waiting or any other additional functionality. This is hard to implement in situations where a person is staying in a halfway house or shelter where there are multiple users for each phone. Lastly, the current ankle bracelets run on a binary system between two places. The parolee is either there or not. In between those two places, it does not detect where the parolee may be.

The second feature of the Monitor is a substance detector. This can determine if the parolee has been using drugs or alcohol in real time. There is a technology similar to this in use right now called the sweat scan. The sweat scan is a patch that is worn on a person's arm. It records the presence of drugs or alcohol, which is then registered once it is taken off in about a week's time. The E-Parole substance detector works in real-time.

The Partner (Rehabilitation)

The second device in the system is The Partner. The Partner is a simple PDA-like device that allows the parole officer to plan, implement and measure the successful integration of the parolee back into society. The most important feature is feedback. People learn by feedback.

The Partner has three different parts. One is a display of the area in which the parolee is allowed to go. During the time of parole, the parolee is often times given physical boundaries in which they must remain. The Partner has a map interface that color-codes different areas and (in tandem with use of The Monitor) will alert the parolee if he/she has stepped outside the bounds. During a one-month time, the boundaries start out very restrictive. However, over time, the parolee is allowed to go to more places on the map. Similarly, the area is reduced if the parolee does not cooperate within the restrictions of parole.

The second part is a calendar interface that enables the parolee to view his/her daily routine and keep on track in terms of work, parole appointments and other responsibilities. As in the map, the calendar offers a very restrictive schedule at first and then broadens over time to allow the parolee more time to spend doing what he/she would prefer (within reason.) Feedback is given to the parolee on progress and rewards, such as extended free time, are offered in cases where much progress is made.

The third part of The Partner is a stage to coordinate existing service organizations such as those used for education, jobs, or drug/ family counseling. Charlotte Davidson has mentioned that this is one of the things they don't have but really need.

The Status Report (Second Chance)

Parolees that have completed parole, often times are faced with the issue of getting a new job. The job application usually has some yes/no question pertaining to a person's criminal record. There is a non-discrimination policy- unless he/she is a felon.

The status report offers a detailed description of the parolee's progress during the parole. This fights the social stigma associated with the criminal record by offering positive (hopefully) additional information. It empowers the parolee and allows the opportunity to become productive citizens of society and support themselves independently.

Results

The system of E-Parole focuses on bringing back deterrence and rehabilitation into the criminal justice system. With better monitoring of the parolees and the feedback mechanism allowing them to take a more active role in rehabilitation, we can change the way parole boards think.

Over time, this system of E-Parole can allow us to reduce prison time. This saves money and allows us to redistribute funding to methods that have been proven effective. The parole officers can spend less time policing and more time on counselling and other important services for the parolee. E-Parole is an important step in breaking the cycle of crime.