THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

24-hour surveillance people. Wikimedia

Tagging more offenders can't just be quick fix for prison numbers

October 7, 2016 3.32pm BST

Electronic tagging of offenders is going to be considerably expanded in Scotland under new plans announced by the Scottish government, part of a wider trend towards more tagging across much of Europe. Where this kind of monitoring is only currently used in Scotland to track convicted offenders for periods of time at home, in future it will be used for suspects awaiting trial who would otherwise be remanded in custody.

GPS monitoring will be introduced to make it possible to monitor offenders without restricting them to the home for the first time and there are also proposals to trial tags that monitor alcohol levels in the sweat of offenders whose crimes are deemed to be linked to problems with alcohol.

First rolled out in Scotland in 2002, electronic tagging has been slowly expanding ever since. It currently accounts for some 11% of all people detained by the criminal justice system. Extending its use mirrors trends seen elsewhere in Europe. Many countries already use GPS monitoring, for example. England and Wales are particularly heavy users of tags, while the likes of the Netherlands and Germany use the technology to a lesser extent.

Extending electronic monitoring is attractive to the Scottish government for several reasons. It makes it easier to tailor punishments to the individual and allow them to maintain contact with their families

Author

Katrina Morrison
Lecturer in Criminology, Edinburgh Napier University

and keep their employment. This is part of a wider policy agenda to reduce reoffending with what are known as "asset-based approaches", which essentially aim to empower individuals. We see them in other areas such as public health and community development.

An equally important priority for the government is reducing Scotland's prison population, including those people on remand. It is currently one of the highest in Western Europe at 142 per 100,000 (only England and Wales is slightly higher at 146 per 100,000 – albeit dwarfed by Russia's 447 and the US's 693).

Imprisonment incurs massive financial and social costs – and the Scottish government has long said this must change. Criminal justice professionals refer to electronic tagging reducing prison numbers at the "front door" for remand prisoners; and at the "back door" for releasing prisoners sooner from prison subject to conditions and restrictions.

This is just one of a range of tools the Scottish government is using to address its high prison population. Others include reducing the use of short prison sentences and reforming community justice services – both of these on the back of previous related attempts.

What could go wrong

Whether more electronic tagging is merely a short-term fix for the prison population or helps reduce reoffending in the longer term depends on the context in which it is used. Simply placing individuals on a tag and restricting their liberty will not address factors underpinning offending behaviour.

Scotland's last big extension to tagging in 2006 did not have the desired effect. Widely perceived as a move to reduce prison overcrowding, a failure to incorporate other strategies, particularly around sentencing, meant that the number of prisoners kept rising.

This time it is vital that increasing the role of the companies who monitor tags – currently G4S – complements the role of criminal justice social workers and other points of contact for offenders, rather than replacing them. These people are considerably skilled at helping offenders and suspects change their behaviour, but they are already stretched. If there's going to be an increased pool of individuals on community sentences, these support workers need more resources.

Tagging contractor. Wikimedia

It also needs to be ensured that increased tagging doesn't lead to a creeping increase in the number of people in the criminal justice system. It must not make a community sentence a more attractive option than no sentence at all, or extend a sentence beyond what would currently be imposed. This is what is known as "up-tariffing" and "net widening".

As for using what has been dubbed the "sobriety tag", this is no doubt influenced by insights from Scotland's Violence Reduction Unit into the links between crime and problematic alcohol consumption. But monitoring sobriety will clearly only help people alongside substantial support aimed at addressing this problem. This area needs considered carefully.
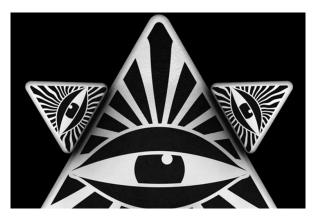
Supervision nation

Scotland is right to prioritise moving away from its shamefully high levels of imprisonment, but we shouldn't be certain that expanding electronic monitoring will reduce the prison population on its own.

Directly comparable statistics are unfortunately not available, but research cautions us not to be too optimistic: jurisdictions with high rates of imprisonment also have high rates of electronic monitoring. Scotland has entered an era of mass supervision alongside many other European countries. Community sentences have been growing alongside prison sentences rather than replacing them.

While we might argue that electronic tagging is at least less draconian than a prison sentence, such punishments fall under the radar of public concern in a way that the effects of imprisonment do not. This might make it more attractive in a political climate that supports cutting prison populations, yet we should also be wary of the increased use of any criminal sanction.

The results of these reforms need to be closely scrutinised in the coming

years to make sure they fulfil their potential and are not simply another quick and easy fix to reduce the prison population. Electronic monitoring still restricts people's liberty and represents an infliction of pain from the state.

Eyes have it. STVinMotion

USA   **England**   **Russia**   **Scotland**   **Criminal justice**   **Prison**

G4S   **Wales**   **Scottish Government**   **Electronic monitoring**

probation officer   **prison population**   **offender**