

Electronic monitoring bracelets are only crime deterrence tools, they can't 'fix' offenders

Written by Lacey Schaefer, Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice, Griffith University

The man arrested after a [deadly gun attack in Darwin](#) Tuesday night is [reported](#) to have been on parole and wearing an electronic monitoring bracelet.

This leads to the same reaction we see following any high-profile crime. How could such a thing happen?

People may speculate that the criminal justice agencies involved have somehow dropped the ball. The offender was on their radar, after all.

Read more: [*Online tools can help people in disasters, but do they represent everyone?*](#)

While this finger-pointing may serve a cathartic function, it is important we also question our expectations before assuming a failure occurred.

We need to understand what electronic monitoring intends to achieve, how it works, and what are its capabilities and limitations.

Electronic tagging

In the context of the corrections system, electronic monitoring refers to the tagging of a person as a form of surveillance, usually in the form of a GPS-enabled ankle bracelet.

[In Australia](#), each state and territory uses electronic monitoring differently, guided by their own legislative frameworks.

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Practices vary considerably between jurisdictions. For example, in some places, certain offenders are targeted (high-risk recidivists, those who repeatedly reoffend, for example). In others, specific types of offences are the focus (such as child sex offences).

The application of electronic monitoring even differs between offenders, as the supervising agency uses it for reasons specific to each person.

A police department might use electronic monitoring to ensure a domestic violence perpetrator does not visit the victim before a trial. A probation officer might require an offender to wear a bracelet for 12 months to ensure they are attending treatment and meeting their curfew. A parole officer could place the GPS tracking condition on an offender for the first three months following release from prison to better understand how the parolee spends his or her time.

Each of these experiences will be quite different, as each is intended to fulfil a unique aim.

Ordinarily, electronic monitoring is used as a tool of incapacitation and deterrence.

In the first instance, an offender may be told to follow a particular rule – for example, to be home by 8pm, to stay away from the victim, to attend a treatment program, or not to go within 1km of a school. Electronic monitoring allows authorities to monitor the person's compliance with such a condition.

In the latter instance, an offender may be deterred from certain behaviour if they believe their actions are likely to be detected through electronic monitoring.

Monitoring actions

When an offender is subject to electronic monitoring, a computer database is updated with information about the rules he or she has been instructed to follow. Each jurisdiction and each agency may have their own database, so where the offender appears in the database will depend on who is supervising the electronic monitoring order.

The database is then monitored by enforcement authorities, although this is sometimes outsourced to private providers or overseas companies. While the data is generally sent from the offender's GPS device to the monitoring agency in real time, there can be delays in how long it takes for that information to be passed to police or corrective services.

What occurs when an offender breaches one of the rules and a computer alert is generated depends on factors such as legislation and the priority of a case influencing the response. The database includes information about what to do in the event of specific kinds of breaches with specific offenders.

In some cases, an alarm on the device may go off or, very rarely, the police may be immediately notified.

Most often, for routine cases and ordinary breaches, the monitoring agency will notify the offender's supervisor (such as a parole officer or a local police department), who will then determine how to proceed.

There may be a lag of several days during this process. For example, if a low-risk offender misses their home curfew on Friday night (as determined by the GPS bracelet), the parole officer will not receive notification of this breach until Monday morning.

The pros and cons of tagging

There are a range of [benefits and disadvantages](#) to the electronic monitoring of offenders.

It can be effective in holding offenders accountable, protecting victims and enhancing community safety and preventing crimes. These come with important cost savings, particularly when offenders can be safely monitored in the community in lieu of imprisonment or as a mechanism of early release from prison.

But some of the downfalls are that offenders can tamper with their devices, and there can be GPS dead zones – particularly in a geographically vast country such as Australia. There may

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also be human error in using the systems, such as improper monitoring or unreasonable decision-making after an alert.

Yet collectively, the research evidence highlights that electronic monitoring can be an effective tool for discouraging recidivism. But it is only that: a tool.

The most effective practices for [supervising offenders in the community](#) include those that identify and reduce a person's risks for continued criminal behaviour.

Read more: [*AI can help in crime prevention, but we still need a human in charge*](#)

Electronic monitoring will be most effective when it is used to support supervision that limits a person's access to chances to commit crime. Such supervision should help them redesign their routines so that any risky settings are avoided and are replaced with more positive influences.

Thus, rather than simply giving offenders a long list of rules for what *not* to do, effective probation and parole strategies help offenders lead productive lives.

More broadly, it is imperative that correctional authorities provide rehabilitative interventions that address the underlying factors that contribute toward a person's criminal behaviour. The [most effective approaches](#) use cognitive-behavioural techniques to give offenders skills that encourage good decision-making.

Yet electronic monitoring cannot "fix" an offender's impulsivity, lack of empathy, or any other underlying crime-conducive traits. Thus we should not confuse a technological aid with meaningful treatment.

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