



## Victims & Offenders

An International Journal of Evidence-based Research, Policy, and Practice

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uvao20>

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To cite this article: Thanaphon Nunphong, Jeff Mellow, Deborah Koetzle & Craig Schwalbe (2022): Exploring Thailand's Probationary Practices Since COVID-19: Changes in Strategies with Regards to Probation Supervision, *Victims & Offenders*, DOI: [10.1080/15564886.2022.2131667](https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2022.2131667)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564886.2022.2131667>



Published online: 12 Oct 2022.



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# Exploring Thailand's Probationary Practices Since COVID-19: Changes in Strategies with Regards to Probation Supervision

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic had a critical impact on the Thai criminal justice system. The goal of this study is to explore policies and practices of Thailand's Department of Probation as it responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study surveyed probation officers in Thailand (N = 534) from March to April 2021, focusing on probation practices and case management issues prior- and post- COVID-19. Data reveals that, overall, the frequency of officer-offender contacts remained steady even though the type of contact changed after COVID-19. In-person contact was replaced by remote contact strategies, specifically telephone calls, which increased significantly following the onset of the pandemic.

## KEYWORDS

Thailand; probation; parole; community corrections; community supervision

## Introduction

The global COVID-19 pandemic has infected over 386 million and killed over 5.7 million people worldwide as of February 7, 2022 (World Health Organization, 2022). COVID-19 has not only affected people's lives, but it has also changed how the world operates due to lockdowns and social-distancing policies (Sheth, 2020). Many sectors of society across the world have been disrupted, and the criminal justice system is no exception. The pandemic has caused extensive challenges to the standard operating procedures in the criminal justice system due to the high levels person-to-person contact inherent with these practices (Jackson et al., 2021). As a result, many criminal justice agencies (i.e., law enforcement, courts, and corrections) have had to change their policies and practices, which involved the use of technology, to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus (Erisman, 2020; Nyingi, 2020)

As in other countries, COVID-19 has had a critical impact on the Thai criminal justice system as the infection rate and death toll in Thailand continues to increase. The surge in covid cases largely stemmed from the growing infections in overcrowded prisons; Thailand's prisons are operating at 148% overcapacity which has made social distancing impossible and good personal hygiene difficult (BBC News, 2021; Marcum, 2020; Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020). In an effort to help prevent the spread of coronavirus, the Thai correctional system adopted front- and back-end measures to reduce prison overcrowding during the pandemic. For example, back-end measures included releasing prisoners who

were granted conditional releases and nonviolent prisoners (Erisman, 2020; Thailand Institute of Justice, 2020; Williams, 2020). As a result, new parole cases alone increased by 65% in 2020 compared to new parole cases in 2019 (Department of Probation, 2022).

During the same time, the Department of Probation (DOP) of Thailand issued an official guideline for probation officers during COVID-19 on March 19, 2020 to assist them in their operational tasks. This guideline advised probation officers to suspend large gatherings and community service activities, take caution when in-person interactions were needed, use telephones for witness interviews during the fact-finding process, and contact the courts via e-mail, unless an in-person meeting was necessary (Department of Probation, 2020a). Shortly after the first guideline was issued, Thailand's first COVID-19 wave started and the number of confirmed cases rapidly increased. The DOP immediately published another guideline on March 24, 2020 recommending officers to shift to remote work to prevent the spread of coronavirus (Department of Probation, 2020b).

Due to the nature of probation work, frontline probation officers typically operate in high-contact work environment. However, COVID-19 has caused significant challenges for probation officers to manage their caseloads and provide supports for their clients (i.e., individual on community supervision) because face-to-face interactions were limited (Viglione et al., 2020). In truth, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated problems that already existed as Thai probation officers were already facing high caseloads resulting from not having enough staff even prior to the pandemic (Abraham et al., 2020). While it may be true that the Thai probation department proposed preventive and responsive measures to COVID-19, the practical applications of these measures have not been thoroughly studied. In addition, research in the field of criminal justice has been relatively limited in Thailand, with even less research related to community supervision.

To fill a research gap, this study aims to explore how probation practices in Thailand have changed in response to the pandemic. Since COVID-19 is not the first global pandemic, it will not be the last (Gill, 2020). Therefore, this study will establish a knowledge base that will be valuable for and beneficial to policymakers, practitioners, and community supervision stakeholders in Thailand for effective future planning for probation practices and measures to better manage current and future outbreaks.

## Literature review

### *An overview of the probation system in Thailand*

The Department of Probation (DOP) of Thailand is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice and currently has 117 offices: three special-sized offices,<sup>1</sup> 20 large-sized offices, 39 mid-sized offices, and 55 small-sized offices. The DOP has roughly 2,200 probation officers throughout the country, who generally handle around 560,000 cases each year, including both probation and parole cases. Statistically speaking, probation officers have a caseload ratio of 1:255 in Thailand. The majority of the community supervision population are adult probationers aged 18 or older, while adult parolees, who have been released from prison and are completing their sentence in the community, typically represent around 20–30% of clients. Less than 1% of clients are juveniles (Chokprajakchat & Sukomol, 2004; Department of Probation, 2022).

The probation system in Thailand has changed since it was first established in 1952 in order to adapt to the changing needs of the country's criminal justice system. Prior to 1952, the Thai probation system was solely used with youth. However, penal code 56–58, enacted in 1952, allowed judges to sentence individuals to probation. Initially, the courts only suspended sentencing without applying probation services due to the lack of probation officials. Later, in 1979, the DOP began to provide probation services for adult offenders in Bangkok. Services were expanded in 1983 with the development of regional probation offices. And, eventually, in 2020, probation became the main organization responsible for providing drug rehabilitation for those involved in drug-related crime, in accordance with the Narcotic Addict Rehabilitation Act. This 2002 Act requires drug abusers, referred to as patients, who commit the drug-related crimes (i.e., drug consumption; drug consumption and possession; drug consumption and possession for disposal; and drug consumption and disposal) to engage in the Compulsory Treatment System (Department of Probation, 2007; Macdonald & Nacapew, 2013).

The main duties of probation officers include conducting pre- and post-sentence investigations, as well as supervising and rehabilitating offenders. Prior to sentencing, probation officers are directed by court order to collect the criminal history and background information of offenders, conduct witness interviews, and prepare a pre-sentence investigation report, with recommendations for appropriate punishment and treatment programs (Department of Probation, 2007). Additionally, probation officers engage in similar activities for sentenced individuals in prison who are eligible for parole or sentence remission, with findings reported directly to the parole board. Besides pre- and post-sentence investigation, probation officers are also responsible for supervising and rehabilitating offenders. Probation officers must assess offenders' risk to reoffend (i.e., risk assessment) in order to recommend probation and treatment plans. Basic needs that should be provided to probationers include educational and employment services, medical assistance, and a food allowance (Ministry of Justice, 2020). During the time served on probation, probationers, and parolees are also required to report to probation officers; failing to do so may result in revocation of probation.

Additionally, probation officers are assigned to supervise and provide treatment programs for drug offenders. If an offender is diverted from prison, there are two operational phases in the diversion process. The first phase is a drug assessment phase in which probation officers identify whether the accused is a narcotic consumer or a “drug addict.” During this phase, Drug Addict Rehabilitation sub-committee will determine what type of treatment program is suitable. The next step is drug rehabilitation phase in which individuals are assigned to either non-custodial or custodial rehabilitation programs; both programs are overseen and facilitated by the DOP (Chokprajakchat & Sukomol, 2004; Department of Probation, 2007).

### ***Challenges facing community supervision during COVID-19***

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant hardships in Thailand (e.g., job loss, income reduction, business loss, food insecurity, and psychological distress) due to the stringent measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of the virus (Oxford Policy Management and United Nations, 2020; The World Bank, 2021). According to a phone survey that interviewed around 2,000 adults in Thailand (The World Bank,

2021), over 50% of respondents were affected by job losses and roughly 60% of low-income households ran out of food. Additionally, approximately 30% of households that needed medical assistance could not access health services. Social impacts associated with COVID-19 also led to psychological distress including stress, anxiety, and depression. According to Department of Mental Health (UNICEF, 2021), 28% of adolescents in Thailand have experienced high levels of stress, and 32% are at risk of depression.

It can be assumed that these hardships extended to those who are on community supervision, who often represent vulnerable populations. Although the literature on community supervision in Thailand is relatively limited, probation officers and individuals on community supervision in Thailand may have experienced similar strains to those in other countries. In the U.S., Schwalbe and Koetzle (2021) found that the majority of probation officers reported that they were affected by school or day care closure and had mental health issues while their clients experienced twice the number of psychosocial impacts related to COVID-19 than them, including job loss and food insecurity. These findings were consistent with a study in Chile that found individuals on community supervision were reported to have experienced high rates of job loss and job suspension, while probation officers reported having high rates of mental health and anxiety (Galleguillos et al., 2022).

Similar findings have been found in Europe. For instance, Stempkowski and Grafl (2021) found that Austrian probation officers perceived working from home as stressful because of mixing work and private life. Moreover, nearly 60% of officers reported clients had experienced job loss and psychological stress. Similarly, Irish probation officers indicated that they felt concern and had some degree of anxiety at the beginning of social restrictions, especially for their own families (Norton, 2020). English and Welsh probation staff's experiences were no different from those who are in Austria and Northern Ireland. Phillips et al. (2021) revealed that probation officers had difficulty juggling between work and family which led to emotional burdens while supervised individuals appeared to experience mental health issues and socioeconomic distress. Presumably, Thai probation officers and individuals on community supervision were anticipated to be affected by COVID-19 in the same way.

### ***Community supervision response to COVID-19***

The impact of COVID-19 has forced community corrections to change its procedures and policies in accordance with national measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. As previously noted, on March 19, 2020, Thailand's DOP issued its first official correspondence requesting for officers' cooperation to be cautious against COVID-19, especially in rehabilitation centers across the country. Probation officers were advised to postpone large gathering activities, but if events could not be suspended, preventative measures needed to be taken. In addition, probation services, namely pre- and post-sentence investigations, and supervision and rehabilitation could still operate in in-person setting, but safety measures were required. Nevertheless, telephone contacts were recommended if face-to-face contacts were not necessary (Department of Probation, 2020a). Likewise, probation agencies in a few European countries also emphasized on using telephone contacts in probation services when the in-person restriction measures were imposed (Dominey et al., 2021; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021).

Shortly afterward, the first wave of COVID-19 in Thailand began and the infections spread swiftly to 68 of the 77 Thai provinces. Work protocols were immediately sent out to probation officers. These measures stated that telephone contacts and any forms of electronic media communications were required in probation services (Department of Probation, 2020b). Meetings and communications between officers must be conducted through electronic medias and telephone communications as well. In addition, officers were required to consult with their general managers to determine who needed to come to the offices as part of public health and social measures (Department of Probation, 2020b). Similarly, research in the U.S. found that 90% of all agencies implemented some form of technology (e.g., teleworking, video, and telephone calls) due to social-distancing regulations (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021; Swan et al., 2020). The shifting from in-person contacts to remote communications in community supervision during the pandemic was found not only in North America, but also in South America. In Chile, probation officers switched from face-to-face communication to remote contact including calls, text messages, and videoconferencing (Galleguillos et al., 2022).

### ***Effect of COVID-19 on community supervision strategies***

The nature of probation officer's job primarily involves face-to-face interactions with clients as they seek to hold clients accountable and promote behavior change. Common strategies used to promote client compliance include both behavioral approaches such as motivational interviewing and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and confrontational tactics such as using negative reinforcement and outlining negative consequences of unacceptable behavior (Gleicher & Green, 2020; Schwartz et al., 2017). Previous studies have shown that probation officers often use a balance of behavioral and confrontational approaches when supervising individuals on community supervision to encourage compliance with the conditions of supervision (Bolin & Applegate, 2018; Schwalbe & Maschi, 2011). Preliminary research also suggested that utilizing dual roles – law enforcement (i.e., confrontational approach) and social work (i.e., behavioral tactics) orientations – is associated with reducing recidivism (Kennealy et al., 2012; Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005).

Although probation services have generally relied on in-person interactions (Department of Probation, 2007; Viglione et al., 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic forced probation officers to change the nature of their contacts (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021; Viglione et al., 2020). The reliance on remote supervision tools is not without its challenges. In some cases, there is limited access to the technology needed for remote supervision (Galleguillos et al., 2022; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021). Even when technology is present, the lack of face-to-face interactions poses unique challenges. For example, the majority of probation officers in the Netherlands reported that the lack of non-verbal communication was a major challenge for remote supervision, as it makes more difficult to assess clients' behavior and engage clients online, especially with high-risk individuals (Sturm et al., 2021). Similarly, probation officers in Austria had negative experiences associated with the lack of personal contact (Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021). In the U.S., Viglione et al. (2020), Lockwood et al. (2021), and Swan et al. (2020) discovered that one of the most common issues was the inability to hold individuals on supervision accountable due to the use of remote supervision.

Despite the challenges with remote supervision, it may also have some advantages. For example, there is some evidence to suggest people on probation appear to feel more relaxed, supported, and open during the telephone or video calls, which allows for a deeper engagement between officers and clients (Martin & Zettler, 2021; Norton, 2020; Swan et al., 2020). Similarly, the use of video supervision was found to be associated with the use of behavioral approaches to supervision (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021). Importantly, there is also evidence to suggest that officers are able to maintain a balanced approach of behavioral and confrontational approaches while using remote technology (Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021).

### ***The current study***

The COVID-19 pandemic certainly led to an operational change in community supervision in Thailand. Protocols and guidelines were issued to probation officers; however, there is little-to-no information on the practical implications of these guidelines for probation officers. The goal of the current study was to explore how the Thai Department of Probation responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. This study has the following three guiding research questions:

Research Question 1: What challenges do probation officers, probationers, and parolees face during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 2: How has communication between Thai probation officers and their clients changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research Question 3: What was the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on strategies and techniques that Thai probation officers use to encourage client compliance?

## **Method**

### ***Data collection and sampling***

Permission to conduct the present study was approved by The Department of Probation of Thailand and the Institutional Review Board at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Data for this study was obtained by surveying probation officers in the 117 probation offices across all 77 provinces in Thailand using SurveyMonkey, an online survey software program. The survey was open from March 8 to April 1, 2021. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and anonymous as probation officers were not asked to provide any identifying information about themselves or their clients. In addition, the DOP did not have access to responses as the information went directly to the researcher.

### ***Sample***

The sampling frame consisted of all 2,214 probation officers working across the country in March 2021. Using Yamane's formula, it was estimated that a minimum sample size of 338



**Table 1.** Demographic information for survey completers and non-completers, % (n).

	Completers 75.64% (534)	Non-Completers 24.36% (172)	Total 706
Gender			
Female	60.2% (315)	67.5% (54)	369
Male	37.1% (194)	31.3% (25)	219
Education			
BA/BS – criminal justice	5.8% (30)	5.1% (4)	34
BA/BS – social work	1.5% (8)	3.8% (3)	11
BA/BS – psychology	6.9% (36)	7.5% (6)	42
BA/BS – sociology	4.8% (25)	2.5% (2)	27
BA/BS – law	38.6% (201)	35% (28)	229
BA/BS – other major	27.6% (144)	28.7% (23)	167
Age			
Mean (SD)	40.21 (8.0)	40.26 (7.553)	554

was needed for generalizability (Israel, G. D, 1992). A total of 706 officers responded to the invitation to participate. Approximately 24% of the submissions were considered incomplete and were excluded from the analysis. Incomplete surveys were defined as completing less than 70% of the survey. Examples include respondents who skipped all questions asking about index clients and/or supervision practices. Seventy- six percent of the respondents completed at least 70% of the survey; all of these were retained for analysis. Survey completers did not differ from non-completers as there were no significant differences between them with respect to age, gender, and education ( $p > .05$ ). For example, the mean age of completers and non-completers was 40.21 and 40.18, respectively. Both survey groups also had similar education levels with nearly 40% graduating in Law and the majority were female. The final sample includes 534 officers, representing a 24.12% response rate. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the officers in the final sample. While it is not possible to precisely establish the representativeness of the survey sample, the sample parameters are similar to the study published by Sinthunawa (2011), a survey of the Thai probation officers.

## Measures

The 67-item survey used in the current study was a modified version of the COVID Community Supervision Survey developed by Schwalbe and Koetzle (2021) to better understand probation practices and case management issues in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was translated into the Thai language by the first author, who is a native Thai speaker, and was reviewed by two native Thai speakers who work at the Department of Probation and are familiar with the corrections field to ensure accuracy of the translation.

## Officer characteristics

Probation officers were asked about their demographic characteristics, including gender, age, years of service, education, their caseload characteristics (i.e., caseload size, population: juvenile/adult/mixed, caseload type), and agency characteristics (i.e., agency size, locations, judicial division). Officers also reported on their attitude toward themselves on a continuum from lenient to punitive orientations.



### ***Client characteristics***

Respondents were asked to report on characteristics of an index client, selected using a semi-random procedure. Officers were asked to create a list of their clients and select the 10th client who had been on supervision at least a month prior to the onset of COVID-19 (e.g., January 6, 2020) to serve as the index client (see, Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021). Once selected, respondents were asked to report on a number of characteristics including gender, age, risk of recidivism, time served on probation/parole, and technologies (telephone, smartphone, home computer with internet, text messaging, e-mail, video conference) available to them. In addition, probation officers were asked to rate their clients' compliance on a scale from 0% to 100% before and after COVID-19 in the following four areas: (1) reporting or attending probation appointments; (2) clients' forthcomingness and truthfulness; (3) clients' obedience to probation conditions, case plans, or both; and (4) new police contact or arrest. The pre-COVID-19 period was defined as the month prior to the onset of the pandemic, and the post-COVID-19 was defined as the last month at the time the survey was completed.

### ***COVID-19 impacts***

Officers were asked four questions related to COVID-19 impacts. First, officers were asked whether they or family members had experienced job loss, food insecurity, lost housing, lost income for rent or mortgage, as well as having a child at home because of school or daycare closures, someone moving into or out of the home, anxiety, or other mental health concerns, increased drug or alcohol use, and medical emergencies. Second, respondents were asked whether they or a member of their household had fallen ill to the COVID-19 virus. Third, officers were asked to rate their level of concern about COVID-19 using a 5-point scale (1 = Not at all concerned, 5 = Extremely concerned). Finally, officers were asked to rate how COVID-19 had impacted their lifestyle using a 5-point scale (1 = None at all, 5 = A great deal). The first two items were duplicated to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on clients by asking for reports of impacts and illness on index clients and their family members.

### ***Supervision practices***

In order to assess the effects of COVID-19 on probation practices, officers were asked about: (1) the contact frequency of six types of contacts with clients pre- and post-COVID-19 (measured on a 6-point scales, ranging from "less than once a month" to "more than once per week"), (2) two subscales of probation techniques or strategies used to encourage client compliance pre- and post-COVID-19; a three-item confrontation strategies subscale (e.g., "How often did you remind the client about the legal consequences of criminal/delinquent behavior") and a five-item behavioral strategies subscale ("How often did you praise or compliment the client"), (3) two subscales of case management approach; a five-item rehabilitation approach subscale (e.g., "How often did you discuss treatment needs with the client") and a three-item law enforcer approach subscale (e.g., "How often did you remind the client about the consequences of non-compliance"; Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021). All subscales were measured on a 7-point scales, ranging from "never" to "every contact."

### ***Coding and analysis***

The study's data was analyzed using SPSS version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to simplify large data in a sensible way to characterize the sample and explore the challenges

faced by probation officers, probationers, and parolees during the COVID-19 pandemic, probe clients' compliance and cooperation pre- and post-COVID-19, and examine strategies and techniques used. Additionally, we employed Chi-square to explore factors associated with officers' mental health, and inferential statistical analysis (e.g., t-test, ANOVA) was used to predict values of five supervision practices: (1) behavioral approaches, (2) confrontational approaches, (3) treatment-oriented case management, (4) accountability-oriented case management, and (5) contact frequency. Each supervision practice was calculated by summing scores on its subscores to obtain pre- and post-COVID scores. For example, confrontational approach had three items, which were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 to 6, with 0 indicating never and 6 indicating every contact. Three items were summed and divided by three to acquire the average score of confrontational approach.

## Results

### *Probation officers and clients' demographics*

Most participating probation officers were females (60.6%), in their 40s (mean = 40.21 years old,  $SD = \pm 8.0$  years), who had more than nine years of service in probation (64.4%). About 38% of participants reported having a bachelor's degree in law. Over 60% of respondents supervised adults only while 29.5% supervised both juveniles and adults, and 1.3% reported supervising only juveniles. Overall, caseload sizes ranged from one to 1,200 cases (median = 266.82 cases). Over 60% of the officers worked in urban locations, and nearly 42% of respondents reported working for medium-sized agencies (i.e., those with 20 to 40 officers). Index clients randomly selected by respondents were mostly male (59.26%), in their 30s (mean = 31.19 years old,  $SD = \pm 6.67$  years). Additionally, as shown in Table 2, most index clients were on probation (21.66%) and 15.24% were in the drug assessment phase under the Addict Rehabilitation Act B.E. 2545 (2002). Nearly 15% of the index clients were on parole and Good-Time Allowance. The majority of the index clients were identified as having a medium risk of recidivism (60%) on a standardized risk assessment form.

### *COVID-19 impact*

During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as shown in Table 3, despite over 90% of participants reporting that neither they nor their households were infected with COVID-19, a majority of probation officers reported experiencing anxiety and other mental health concerns in addition to having a child at home because of school or daycare closures (28.23% and 17.38%, respectively). Less than 10% experienced other problems such as food insecurity (8.17%), job loss (6.24%), and falling behind on rent payments (6.24%).

An analysis of factors revealed that probation officers' mental health was related to caseload size and agency characteristics. As shown in Table 4 below, there was a statistically significant relationship between officers who managed high-risk cases and those who did not regarding their mental health challenges ( $X^2 = 4.4474, p < .05$ ). Moreover, there was significant evidence of a positive association between officers who reported having anxiety and officers who supervised other specialized caseloads ( $X^2 = 4.145, p < .05$ ). In addition to caseload characteristics that related to officers' mental health, we found

**Table 2.** Characteristics of probation officers and index clients.

Variables		Officer (n = 534)	Index Client (n = 534)
Mean Age (SD)		40.21 (8.0)	31.19 (6.67)
Gender (%)	Less than 18 years old (%)	–	0.6
	Female	60.6	25.15
	Male	36.7	59.26
	Non-binary/Other	1.3	15.59
Recidivism Risk (%)	Prefer not to say	1.3	–
	Low or very low	–	16.7
	Medium	–	60.0
	High or very high	–	23.3
Legal Status (%)	Pre-sentence investigation	–	12.40
	Drug assessment	–	15.24
	Probation	–	21.66
	PSI <sup>a</sup> – Parole	–	10.87
	PSI <sup>b</sup> – Good-Time Allowance	–	10.28
	Parole	–	14.95
	Good-Time Allowance	–	14.59
Education (%)	BA/BS Law	38.8	–
	BA/BS other major	27.4	–
Years of Service (%)	Less than 1 year	1.1	–
	1 to 3 years	14.9	–
	4 to 6 years	7.5	–
	7 to 9 years	12.0	–
	More than 9 years	64.4	–
Caseload	Juveniles (%)	1.5	–
	Adults (%)	62.4	–
	Adults and Juveniles (%)	36.1	–
	Mean Size (S.D.)	375.62 (586.67)	–
	General (%)	19.98	–
	High risk (%)	14.74	–
	Mental health (%)	8.36	–
	Drug use (%)	23.63	–
	Sex offending (%)	7.90	–
	Low risk (%)	13.60	–
	Other specializations (%)	11.78	–
	Judicial Division (%)	Provincial Probation Office 2	16.4
	Provincial Probation Office 3	14.5	–
Locations (%)	Urban	61.94	–
	Suburban	22.75	–
Agency Size (%)	Rural	15.32	–
	6–10 officers	1.4	–
	10–20 officers	16.1	–
	20–40 officers	41.8	–
	More than 40 officers	40.6	–

<sup>a</sup>Post-sentence investigation of offender who is eligible for parole<sup>b</sup>Post-sentence investigation of offender who is eligible for good-time allowance

a positive link between officers reported changes in how they meet clients (e.g., in-person, field, and remote/electronic) ( $X^2 = 6.264, p < .05$ ). One could conclude that this rapid shift from in-person contact to remote supervision may help to account for some of the change in the officers' mental health.

On the other hand, approximately 30% of respondents reported that they had not experienced any problems during the pandemic. However, index clients were reported as having a higher rate of psychosocial issues than were the probation officers. They were also more likely to have had anxiety and other mental health concerns (15.81%) as well as increased alcohol and drug use (13.42%). A majority of index clients experienced job loss (33.60%). Approximately 10% of index clients were reported to have food insecurity and fell

**Table 3.** COVID-19 impacts and technology availability.

		Officer	Index Client
Confirmed COVID (%)	Yes	0.4	2.2
	Unsure/maybe	1.9	40.7
	No	97.7	57.1
Level of Concern (%)	Not at all concerned	4.2	–
	A little concerned	23.4	–
	Moderately concerned	42.7	–
	Very concerned	20.0	–
	Extremely concerned	9.7	–
Lifestyle Change (%)	None at all	2.7	–
	A little	22.3	–
	A moderate amount	37.9	–
	A lot	24.4	–
	A great deal	12.8	–
COVID-19 Impact (%)	None	30.61	3.48
	Mental health or anxiety	28.23	15.81
	School/daycare closure	17.38	8.45
	Food insecurity	8.17	10.74
	Job loss	6.24	33.60
	Fell behind on rent/mortgage	6.24	9.94
	Medical emergency	1.93	1.19
	Drug/alcohol use	0.74	13.42
	Moved in/moved out of home	0.30	1.79
	Lost housing	0.15	1.59
Tech Availability	Telephone	–	44.17
	Smartphone	–	30.22
	Home computer with internet	–	13.44
	Text messaging	–	6.91
	E-Mail	–	2.30
	None of these	–	1.66
	Video conference	–	1.28

behind on rent or mortgage payments. Eight percent were reported as being affected by school or daycare closures. Fewer than five percent of clients were reported as needing emergency medical care, losing housing, and having someone move into or out of the house.

According to probation officers, the majority of index clients and/or their families have access to landlines (44.17%) and smartphone (30.22%). In other words, more than half of the index clients have access to some types of telephone. However, access to communication technologies including text messaging, e-mail, and video conferencing appear to be limited; probation officers reported that less than 12.5% of index clients have access to those types of communication technologies. Moreover, only 13.44% of index clients reported having a home computer with internet.

### **Probation supervision**

Prior to COVID-19, most probation officers perceived that their agencies prioritized training in effective practices in community supervision and risk assessment (20.09% and 20%, respectively). However, graduated sanctions were least reported to be a priority among agencies (4.69%). Following the onset of the pandemic, agencies needed to suspend or change their standards due to COVID-19 restrictions. As shown in Table 5, during the COVID-19 crisis, 25.7% of the respondents saw a change in methods to meet clients and so

**Table 4.** Mental health challenges and personal, caseloads, and agency characteristics.

	Mental Health Challenges	Statistical Test
Officer (%)		
Gender		
Female	59.3	$X^2 = 3.958$
Male	37	
Year of service		
Less than 1 year	0	$X^2 = 3.787$
1 to 3 years	14.3	
4 to 6 years	7.4	
7 to 9 years	13.2	
More than 9 years	65.1	
Recidivism risk (%)		
Low or very low	17.5	$X^2 = .163$
Medium	58.5	
High or very high	24	
Caseload types (%)		
General supervision	51.3	$X^2 = .036$
Specialized – High risk	43.4	$X^2 = 4.474a$
Specialized – Mental health	23.3	$X^2 = .744$
Specialized – Drug use	65.6	$X^2 = 3.592$
Specialized – Sex offender	21.2	$X^2 = .219$
Specialized – Low risk	38.6	$X^2 = 2.178$
Specialized – other	34.9	$X^2 = 4.145a$
Agency (%)		
Supervision changes		
How often officers see clients	54.1	$X^2 = 3.235$
How officers meet clients	73.9	$X^2 = 6.264a$
Technical violations	10.8	$X^2 = .700$
Compliance monitoring	29.9	$X^2 = 2.508$
Drug testing	35	$X^2 = 3.023$
Graduated sanctions	12.1	$X^2 = 3.315$
Graduated incentives	8.9	$X^2 = 2.698$
Risk/needs assessments	17.2	$X^2 = 3.023$
Written case plans	12.7	$X^2 = .143$
Service referrals	19.1	$X^2 = .810$
EBPs	9.6	$X^2 = .436$
Agency size		
6–10 officers	2.5	$X^2 = 2.543$
10–20 officers	15	
20–40 officers	40	
More than 40 officers	42.5	

\* $p < .05$ 

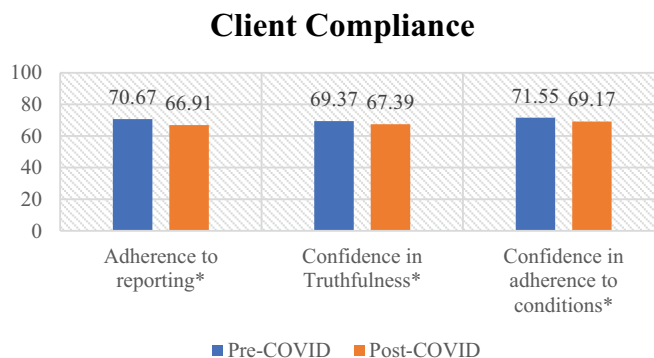
did the contact frequency (18.5%) whereas graduated incentive or contingency management remained unchanged as it was perceived to be the least priority in the agencies prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 11% of respondents reported that drug testing had changed or suspended during the pandemic, likely reflecting shifts to remote contacts.

**Table 5.** Probation officers reporting changes in supervision standards during COVID-19.

Supervision Standards	Officer Change during COVID (%)
How officers meet clients	25.57
How often officers see clients	18.49
Drug testing	11.42
Compliance monitoring	9.81
Risk/needs assessment	8.21
Written case plans	5.19
Technical violations	4.81
Graduated sanctions	3.40
Graduated incentives	2.45

As shown in Figure 1, probation officers' perceptions of compliance significantly changed as officers had less confidence that clients adhered to reporting requirements post-COVID. Officers were, on average, 69.37% confident that index clients were forthcoming and told the truth prior to COVID-19; this confidence decreased to 67.39% post-COVID-19. Lastly, officers were, on average, 71.55% confident that index clients complied with probation conditions and case plans prior to the pandemic, but this confidence dropped to 69.17% post-pandemic.

The main goal of the study is to examine whether the pandemic changed probation practices. The frequency of contacts remained steady even though the types of contact changed following the onset of the pandemic. Expectedly, in-person contacts, specifically both office and field meetings, showed a statistically significant decrease during the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, officers met with index clients in person an average of two to three times a month. Following the onset of COVID-19, the frequency of in-person meetings slightly dropped. Furthermore, remote contact strategies increased following the onset of the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, officers reported contacting index clients by telephone calls two to three times a month; this increased to nearly more than once per week after the pandemic. Expectedly, the type of contact changed to remote contact following the onset of COVID-19, so text messaging, video conferencing, and emailing were increased both prior to and following the onset of the pandemic. However, the average contact frequency for those contact types were still low which suggest the alternative strategies allows officers to maintain contact with their clients at the same level as before (as shown in Table 6).



\* $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1.** Perceptions of compliance before and following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 6.** Supervision practice pre- and post-COVID.

	Pre-COVID	Post-COVID	T-Statistic
Supervision Practice <sup>a</sup> (M, S.D.)			
Behavioral approach	3.37 (1.17)	3.45 (1.18)	-4.778a**
Confrontational approach	4.62 (1.27)	4.70 (1.23)	-4.007***
Treatment case management	3.15 (1.30)	3.19 (1.31)	-2.614*
Accountability case management	3.48 (1.34)	3.74 (1.35)	-8.112***
New police arrest <sup>b</sup>	55.1	56.4	–
Contact frequency <sup>c</sup>			
Overall average (M, S.D.)	9.04 (4.45)	9.25 (4.54)	-1.551
In-person office	2.88 (1.53)	2.46 (1.47)	6.751***
In-person field	2.00 (1.42)	1.79 (1.43)	3.597***
Telephone	2.76 (1.58)	3.25 (1.56)	-7.528***
Video conference	0.49 (1.03)	0.57 (1.12)	-3.119**
Text messages	0.70 (1.18)	0.89 (1.37)	-5.021***
E-Mails	0.28 (0.77)	0.37 (0.97)	-3.630***

\* $p = 0.009$ . \*\* $p = 0.002$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>Items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 to 5, with 0 = never and 6 = every contact

<sup>b</sup>Contingency Coefficient = 0.597 ( $p > 0.001$ )

<sup>c</sup>Frequency ranged from 0 to 5, where 0 = less than once per month and 5 = more than once per week

Supervision strategies were examined pre- and post-COVID-19. Of particular interest is the change with respect to the behavioral approach, confrontational approach, and accountability-oriented case management, which all showed a statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) increase during the post-COVID period. However, the use of treatment-oriented case management slightly increased (1.27%). The patterns held true even prior to COVID-19, when officers favored the confrontational approach over the behavioral approach, and accountability-oriented case management over treatment-oriented case management.

At the time of the survey, the Department of Probation of Thailand had issued a couple of operational guidelines recommending officers to shift from in-person contacts to telephone calls. Hence, telephone contact was the main communication channel between officers and supervised individuals since around March 2020 until the time of the survey which was April 2021. As expected, the frequency of contact by telephone (as shown in Table 6) experienced a statistically significant increase during the onset of the pandemic. Additionally, the post-COVID-19 crisis, average levels of three supervision strategies – behavioral approach, confrontational approach, and especially accountability case management – were higher when clients were spoken to via telephone than those who were not spoken to via telephone at all.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore how COVID-19 impacted community supervision in Thailand. Evidently, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused community corrections agencies to change how they operate and impacted both supervised individuals and officers. As in many countries, the study revealed expected results that people who are under supervision experienced high rates of economic fallout, specifically job loss, and mental health issues. Maintaining employment is a standard probation condition and yet, the results indicate that a third of those on



supervision lost a job as a result of the pandemic. Developing additional strategies for helping clients secure and maintain jobs, even during a pandemic may be necessary. For example, the Thai probation department could consider establishing career training programs that enhance both interpersonal (e.g., effective communication, time management) and technological skills (e.g., cybersecurity, video conferencing software) for those working remotely. Probation officers were no different from those on supervision as many of them experienced mental health problems. However, with regard to occupational problem, most of officers had to juggling childcare as the result of school or daycare closures. These findings are consistent with research studies based in North and South America (Galleguillo et al., 2022a; Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021), as well as in Europe (Norton, 2021; Phillips et al., 2021; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021).

In addition, we found the connection between officers experiencing mental health issues and caseload types and supervision changes. The sudden change from face-to-face to remote contact may cause an increase in work-related stress and anxiety as it is more difficult to engage clients, especially high-risk individuals, in probation services and supervise during the pandemic. According to Sirdfield et al. (2022), the reduction in face-to-face contact impacted negatively on officers' ability to monitor and establish rapport with high-risk and medium-risk individuals. This pressure of full range work required during the pandemic could lead to mental health concern and burnout.

The main goal of this study was to explore how communication and supervision strategies has changed since the pandemic has begun. Due to the extended pandemic measures in Thailand, the frequency of in-person office and field meetings declined as expected. Based on the operational guidelines that the Thai probation department published, probation officers were advised to shift to telephone contacts. Expectedly, the study revealed that telephone calls increased to nearly more than once per week after the onset of the pandemic. Although in-person visits were still required, remote contacts, specifically telephone calls became a predominant tool in Thailand, as well as in Europe and America (Dominey et al., 2021; Galleguillos et al., 2022; Schwalbe & Koetzle, 2021; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021; Swan et al., 2020). While, in the current study, we did not examine the advantage of remote contacts, prior research by Dominey et al. (2021) suggested that telephone calls benefit probation officers in communicating with supervised individuals as it allows clients to be more proactive in communicating with officers.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the implementation of the "new normal" practices was carried out during the onset of pandemic where social distancing measures were imposed. These changes in probation services are inclined to reverse back to their original ways (i.e., face-to-face contacts) since the government lifted nationwide COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, the data suggests that index clients have limited access to other communication tools, besides telephone contacts, for remote supervision. Therefore, returning to in-person contacts can help probation officers build relationship and trust with clients more easily and quickly as officers can read clients' body languages and be more engaged with them (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2022). Likewise, intervention programs in groups, as part of probation supervision, that were suspended have restarted when the lockdown restriction were ended.

While there is growing evidence to suggest an increased reliance on videoconferencing for remote supervision in other countries, its use was limited as reported in the

current study, even in the post-COVID period. One plausible explanation was the fact that the Minister of Justice officially announced that the probation department had started a pilot scheme for using videoconferencing in 10 provinces in May 2021 and, later on, the probation department issued another operational procedure recommending using videoconferencing in July 2022, which was after the deployment of the survey. It is likely that its use might have grown since that time. Future research should examine this more fully, particularly considering the finding that only 14% of index clients have home computers with internet and only 30% have smartphones.

The low levels of access to this type of technology is noteworthy considering the emerging literature in support of video-supervision (Martin & Zettler, 2021; Stempkowski & Grafl, 2021; Sturm et al., 2021). For example, Schwalbe and Koetzle (2021) found that videoconferencing facilitated the use of behaviorally based approaches to supervision while minimizing disruption in clients' lives by reducing the need for travel to probation offices (see also, Lockwood et al., 2021). Probation and parole officers report that although videoconferencing poses some challenges, they have been able to successfully build relationships with clients and hold clients accountable, as needed, when operating remotely (Galleguillos et al., 2022b). While offering a number of benefits, there is some concern that the use of video-supervision may also exacerbate inequities across clients (see, Galleguillos et al., 2022a). Further research should explore this issue, particularly in countries or regions marked by lower-rates of internet access.

While communication shifted to remote contacts, a pattern of supervision strategies used to encourage client compliance remained the same as officers favored the confrontational approach over the behavioral approach, and accountability-oriented case management over treatment-oriented case management. In addition, even though the result suggested that officers utilized both the confrontational approach and the behavioral approach, the confrontational approach was more favored by officers. These results are similar to prior research in which probation officers used client-centered communication, but authoritarian techniques were more dominant in order to help offenders successfully complete probation (Hanim & Hassan, 2012; Viglione et al., 2017). In part, the current findings may reflect challenges that probation officers face in holding supervised individuals accountable via remote supervision (Lockwood et al., 2021; Swan et al., 2020; Viglione et al., 2020). Probation officers in the current study emphasized the focus on negative consequences of noncompliance to encourage clients to comply with conditions of supervision. For example, officers focused on reminding clients about legal consequence or threatening consequences like jail placement if probation conditions were violated. Additional research is needed to examine whether these approaches promote successful completion of probation, especially during unprecedented times, and whether the implementation of videoconferencing for remote supervision affects supervision approaches.

## Limitations

This study has its share of limitations. While a consecutive sampling technique makes for a better sample representation, a nonrandom sampling technique tends to be regarded as biased (Gideon, 2020) and caution must be taken when generalizing the findings. Second,

probation officers were asked about clients' compliance at least one month before COVID-19; therefore, probation officers may have had difficulty remembering how their clients were doing before the survey was issued. That the findings largely mirror those of Schwalbe and Koetzle (2021) despite differences in time and setting suggest that probation officers remained relatively stable in their approach despite the chaos imposed by the pandemic.

Even though this study provides an overview of impact of COVID-19 on probation in Thailand, it is important to note that it only captured the situation at the specific time. The context can change due to external factors such as the new measures taken by the government, new technological implementations, and new COVID-19 variants. Despite its limitations, this study was the first to explore the impact of COVID-19 on community supervision population and practices in Thailand. Since there is a lack of data and literature in the field of community supervision, even prior to the onset of the pandemic, this study is essential for the Department of Probation as it helped address this fundamental gap in the research.

## Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the results indicate that probation agencies were able to maintain the supervision levels under the coronavirus-related restrictions, despite the sociopsychological impact on officers. Although the contact methods were radically changed to remote communication tools, namely telephone calls, and text messaging, the nature of supervision contacts remained relatively stable, even a year into the pandemic.

Though the nature of supervision remained relatively stable, it is not clear how the ongoing pandemic will impact clients or officers. As Thailand shifts its probation practices to a "new normal," care must be taken not to exacerbate vulnerabilities and inequities often associated with a probation population. COVID-19 increased drug and alcohol use, mental health anxieties, food insecurity, and housing stability for at least 10% of index clients and nearly a third experienced job loss because of COVID-19. At the same time, probation officers were less likely to trust clients. Despite its potential benefits, moving to video supervision may introduce new strains to the officer-client relationship, particularly for clients who lack the necessary equipment or knowledge to use videoconferencing. As the pandemic wears on, it will be important to consider how issues of "pandemic fatigue" impacts officers, their interactions with client, and ultimately, the ability of clients to receive the services and support they need. Considering the COVID-19 situation is still getting worse in Thailand, future research is needed in order to explore which pandemic practices probation agencies institutionalize and which are discarded in favor of traditional supervision practices. In addition, future studies should study how changes in probation practices have affected the rates of probation completion, probation supervision compliance, and prerelease and post-release recidivism rates.

## Note

1. The office size is determined by two factors; 80% of the determination is represented by the size of the caseloads in the past two years, and the remaining 20% accounts for the area of jurisdiction.

## Declarations

All authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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