



# Confronting Delinquency: Probations Officers' Use of Coercion and Client-Centered Tactics to Foster Youth Compliance

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## Abstract

Youthful compliance with juvenile court mandates is a cornerstone of effective probation practice. Despite this, research has not examined probation strategies for encouraging and enforcing youthful compliance with probation conditions. This study describes the use of confrontational tactics and client-centered approaches reported by probation officers in their supervision of delinquent youths. The study was conducted with data from a Web-based survey of probation ( $N = 308$ ). Results indicate that officers balanced confrontational approaches with client-centered approaches. Officers employed confrontational tactics more frequently than client-centered strategies for youths with substance use problems, with younger youths, and with African American females. Alternatively, officers reported more client-centered approaches with females who had higher histories of prior service utilization and with youths who were perceived by officers to be honest. These findings open new avenues for research on the

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effectiveness of confrontation and client-centered approaches toward an evidence base for effective probation practice.

### **Keywords**

juvenile justice; probation; delinquency, gender

For juvenile probation officers, youth compliance with probation requirements is a fundamental concern. Probation is formally defined as a period of suspended sentence when the delinquent juvenile submits to monitoring by a probation officer (PO) and agrees to participate in court-mandated interventions to remediate conditions that contribute to risk of future delinquency (Griffin & Torbet, 2002). When youths violate the terms of their probation, they risk exposure to increased sanctions and deeper penetration into the juvenile justice system. Because more than 60% of youths adjudicated delinquent are ordered to probation supervision (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006), the success of probation, which relies in large part on the cooperation of youths with its conditions, is a large concern for juvenile justice scholars and policy makers. Unfortunately, research with juvenile offenders suggests that many violate the terms of their probation or parole and that from a third to a half will reoffend (Cottle, Lee, & Heilbrun, 2001; Piquero, 2003; Schwalbe, 2007).

Gaps in the literature on compliance-promoting practices hamper efforts to develop a knowledge base of effective probation strategies. The best practice literature on probation and evidence from allied human services fields offers advice and guidelines generally falling into two categories: confrontational tactics and client-centered approaches. However, these guidelines have not been experimentally evaluated, leaving POs uninformed about the optimal balance between confrontational tactics and client-centered approaches. Furthermore, efforts to develop training curricula and evidence-based probation approaches are hindered by a lack of knowledge about current practices in the field. This study builds on the extant literature by examining the practices POs use to enforce and encourage compliance among adjudicated youths. It describes the strategies employed by POs with adjudicated youths and tests hypotheses about the influence of youth legal and social factors as well as PO characteristics on these strategies and tactics.

### **Confrontational Tactics in Probation**

Confrontational tactics deter youthful noncompliance by informing youths' expectations about the certainty and severity of potential consequences for

noncompliant behaviors (Griffin & Torbet, 2002; Walsh, 2001). Confrontational tactics can take the form of benign reminders about the consequences of nonconforming behaviors or more assertive or aggressive approaches, such as threatened consequences. These strategies are rooted in a deterrence approach to juvenile justice. Deterrence theory suggests that antisocial behavior originates in a subjective cost-benefit analysis of delinquency and in expectations about the likelihood of detection (Kurlychek, Torbet, & Bozynski, 1999; Matsueda, Kreager, & Huizinga, 2006; Maxwell & Gray, 2000; Ward, Stafford, & Gray, 2006). That is, delinquent behaviors are more likely when youths value the rewards of delinquent behaviors more than their negative consequences and when youths believe that the chances of being caught are low. POs may employ confrontational tactics to influence youths' values, attitudes, and perceptions about perceived rewards and consequences for delinquency and noncompliant behaviors (Griffin & Torbet, 2002; Walsh, 2001).

The effects of deterrence-informed probation strategies on youth outcomes have not been evaluated. Nevertheless, the best practice and training literature suggests that youthful noncompliance should be addressed firmly, directly, and consistently (Griffin & Torbet, 2002). For instance, Walsh (2001) recommended that for many offenders, "any legal violation, no matter how minor, [should] result in official action" (p. 131). Moreover, the Graduated Sanctions approach advanced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), relying as it does on an escalating sanction severity for chronic and serious offenses, enconces this approach as the formal policy of many jurisdictions across the United States (Bender, King, & Torbet, 2006; Howell, 1995, 2003; Kurlychek et al., 1999; Maloney, Romig, & Armstrong, 1988; Wiebush, 2002). Maxwell and Gray (2000) provided indirect evidence in support of deterrence-based strategies in a study of adult probationers. Among adults sentenced to an intensive probation program ( $N = 516$ ), participants who had a higher expectation of punishment for drug or alcohol use had lower rates of program failure than participants with a low expectation of detection and punishment.

## **Client-Centered Approaches in Probation**

Approaches grounded in traditional casework models and emerging research in evidence-based practices present an array of alternatives to deterrence-informed confrontation and coercion (Pratt, Cullen, Blevins, Daigle, & Madensen, 2006). The essence of these approaches is the development of a strong working relationship or affective bond between the PO and the juvenile that enables the PO to influence youthful compliance through role modeling,

persuasion, problem solving, or other interpersonal means. Such approaches have deep roots in the juvenile justice system. In one of the earliest texts about probation, Flexner and Baldwin (1914) described the imperative of winning the confidence of children and their parents. He suggested that “their [probation officers’] real strength lies not in the power which the court has over parents and children, but in the use of the same human qualities which characterize helpful relations between people generally” (p. 138). Later, Young (1937) wrote against “ordering and forbidding” techniques in favor of the casework approach built on careful study of individual cases and close personal relations between POs and probationers. For both writers, personal influence, rather than force or authority, was portrayed as the strongest tool of the probation officer.

Three streams of empirical evidence lend contemporary support for client-centered approaches in probation and inform ongoing developments in the field. The first is the growing evidence in favor of cognitive-behavioral principles in the treatment of delinquent youths (Landenberger & Lipsey, 2005; Lipsey & Wilson, 1998). Cognitive-behavioral interventions emphasize the roles of beliefs, attitudes, social skills, and problem-solving capacity in the development of conditions such as antisocial behavior as well as in their remedy. Prototypical cognitive interventions focus on increasing skills for social engagement and on challenging faulty or unhelpful belief structures (Goldstein, Glick, & Gibbs, 1998). For probation officers, approaches informed by cognitive-behavioral research may include modeling of interpersonal problem-solving skills and the use of behavioral management plans that include incentives and rewards for compliant and cooperative behaviors.

The second stream can be found in the growing interest among justice systems in Motivational Interviewing (Alexander, VanBenschoten, & Walters, 2008; Clark, 2005; Clark, Walters, Gingerich, & Meltzer, 2006). Motivational Interviewing is a brief intervention designed to help people overcome ambivalence and engage in health-promoting behavior change (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Although it was developed in the field of addictions, it has been tested in numerous settings and is gaining acceptance in justice-related settings as well (Feldstein & Ginsburg, 2006; Miller & Mount, 2001). A defining feature of Motivational Interviewing is its reliance on empathic listening and its nondirective approach, which eschews direct confrontation. Miller and Mount (2001) showed that training for probation officers in Motivational Interviewing can increase the frequency of nondirective counseling strategies such as reflection, reframing, and affirmation. Although we are not aware of any evaluations of Motivational Interviewing by probation

officers, there is a growing chorus of interest in this approach, and it is commonly recommended for justice settings of all kinds.

A third stream of evidence is emerging in research with adult probation programs. Skeem and colleagues study predictors and effects of the working alliance in probation and parole among adult offenders who have severe mental health problems (Skeem, Emke-Francis, & Loudon, 2006; Skeem, Encandela, & Loudon, 2003; Skeem, Loudon, Polaschek, & Camp, 2007; Vidal & Skeem, 2007). Their research suggests that structural characteristics of probation programs shape typical probation strategies with this population. For instance, rather than employing negative pressure and coercive approaches common in standard probation, officers in specialized mental health probation programs employ more problem-solving approaches and outreach. Furthermore, their research indicates that strong working alliances in probation, like that across all human service settings in which the alliance has been studied, are associated with more positive outcomes, including greater compliance, fewer violations, and less recidivism.

## **Predictors of Confrontational and Client-Centered Approaches**

Whether probation officers employ more confrontational approaches or more client-centered approaches may depend on the intersection of PO traits and characteristics with youth offending histories, youth psychosocial need profiles, and with youth demographic characteristics. As an example, one may expect POs to confront youths who exhibit patterns of more serious or chronic delinquency, whereas POs may employ more client-centered approaches with youths who have greater psychosocial needs such as mental health problems or family discord (Campbell & Schmidt, 2000; Fader, Harris, Jones, & Poulin, 2001; Lyons, Baerger, Quigley, Erlich, & Griffin, 2001; Matarazzo, Carrington, & Hiscott, 2001; Schwalbe, Hatcher, & Maschi, 2009). Evidence from probation officers themselves suggests that they vary in their attitudes toward punishment (Leiber, Schwarze, Mack, & Farnworth, 2002; Lopez & Russell, 2008; Shearer, 2002). One would expect, for instance, that POs who strongly endorse punishment would tend to employ confrontational tactics, negative pressures such as threatened consequences, and swift execution of negative sanctions. Moreover, evidence suggests that latent or preconscious stereotypes about youths of color and about female offenders prime POs toward a more confrontational approach through their effect on attitudes toward punishment (Gaarder, Rodriguez, & Zatz, 2004; Graham & Lowery, 2004).

In an earlier study (Schwalbe & Maschi, in press), we examined predictors of probation approaches, as reported by POs who responded to a Web-based survey ( $N = 308$ ). Results from that study showed that POs tended to employ a balanced approach with youths. That is, they utilized about equal amounts of accountability-based approaches, which included direct measures of confrontational approaches, and rehabilitation-based approaches. The roles of youth age, level of psychosocial needs, and PO attitudes toward treatment and punishment in the overall intensity of PO approaches stood out as predominant findings of that study. Notable youth and PO characteristics that did not predict the intensity of probation approaches included youth race, gender, and offending characteristics.

## Current Study

The present study examined interpersonal probation strategies, including confrontational approaches and client centered approaches, used by POs to encourage and enforce compliance. These strategies were conceptualized on a continuum of approaches where the continuum midpoint represented a balanced approach and where the continuum endpoints represented either more frequent use of confrontation compared to client-centered approaches on the one end or more frequent use of client-centered approaches compared to confrontation on the other. These analyses were designed to identify youth characteristics and PO characteristics that predicted extreme probation strategies. Findings from this study point to youth-related and PO-related factors that contribute to more or less confrontational and punitive approaches in probation supervision.

## Methods

### Sample

A Web-administered electronic survey was conducted with the membership of the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA). Actively employed probation officers who supervised juvenile offenders were eligible to participate. Survey respondents were entered into a drawing for one of 10 \$20 e-gift certificates to a well-known online retailer. In total, 384 respondents entered the Web-based portal to register for the drawing; 308 respondents completed the survey. Survey respondents were recruited via an announcement in an electronic newsletter that targets probation officers ( $n = 11$ , 3% of total), a direct e-mail invitation to the membership list of the organization of probation

officers ( $n = 225$ , 59% of total), and two follow-up e-mails spaced at approximately 2-week intervals ( $n = 68$  [18%] and  $n = 80$  [21%], respectively). Because the APPA database does not identify members according to the focus of their work in probation (i.e., adult, juvenile) and because the APPA membership includes affiliated organizations in addition to individual members, it is impossible to calculate response rates or to accurately describe the sampling frame of juvenile probation officers.

## Measures

The aim of the survey was to elicit probation strategies and practices used by officers with a specific youth during the preceding 3-month period. Respondents randomly selected an index juvenile from their caseloads using procedures adapted from a similar study of child welfare caseworkers (Hansen & Warner, 1994). Respondents were directed to insert their names into an alphabetical list of their juvenile caseloads and to select the next youth on the list who met the following criteria: (a) has been formally adjudicated, (2) has been known to the respondent for at least 3 months, and (c) is under 18 years old. Respondents then completed a survey of youth demographic, offending, and psychosocial characteristics; of probation approaches used in the preceding 3-month period; and questions about attitudes and demographic characteristics of the survey respondent. Measures are described in more detail in the section that follows.

*Probation Practices Assessment Survey (PPAS)*. The study utilized the PPAS compliance practices subscales (Schwalbe & Maschi, in press). The compliance practices subscales measure the frequency of 15 strategies and approaches employed by POs during the past 3 months to encourage youth compliance. Compliance practice subscales include *confrontation tactics* (4 items,  $\alpha = .81$ ; e.g., "How often did you threaten consequences like violation of probation or detention placement?"), *counseling tactics* (6 items,  $\alpha = .75$ ; e.g., "How often did you ask the youth about how his/her current behavior is related to his/her long-term goals?"), and *behavioral tactics* (5 items,  $\alpha = .80$ ; e.g., "How often did you offer incentives for completing tasks?"). Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *every contact*.

Three outcome variables were derived from the PPAS compliance practices subscales. In the first, a continuum of confrontation tactics and counseling tactics was calculated by subtracting the counseling tactics scale score from the confrontation tactics scale score. Values approaching zero indicate that counseling and confrontation were used at about equal levels with the index youth; positive values indicate more frequent use of confrontation, whereas

negative values indicate more frequent use of counseling. The second outcome, a continuum of confrontation tactics and behavioral tactics, was calculated in the same manner. Finally, a third continuum was calculated that averaged counseling tactics and behavioral tactics into a single score and subtracted this combined score from the confrontation tactics scale score.

**Youth characteristics.** Respondents completed 31 questions about youth demographics (i.e., age, gender, and race), offending characteristics (i.e., severity, type, and prior adjudications), and psychosocial characteristics (i.e., school functioning; involvement in specialized mental health, substance abuse, and child welfare service systems; peer relationships; drug and alcohol involvement; and parental criminality). Survey items were adapted from previously validated risk and needs assessment instruments such as the North Carolina Assessment of Risk, the Joint Risk Matrix, and the Youth Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (Hoge & Andrews, 2003; Schwalbe, Fraser, & Day, 2007; Schwalbe, Fraser, Day, & Cooley, 2006). Respondents reported known alcohol use and known illicit drug use on 4-point scales ranging from *does not use* to *uses more than once per month* and whether youths were known to associate with gang members. To each of these items (alcohol use, drug use, and gang association), respondents had the option to respond "information not available." Two measures of school problems were obtained: whether youths were suspended from school or were truant from school during the past 3 months. Five items measuring involvement in specialized health and social services prior to the most recent adjudication were combined into an additive index of *prior social service involvement* (i.e., outpatient mental health treatment, inpatient mental health treatment, outpatient substance abuse treatment, inpatient substance abuse treatment, and child welfare involvement).

**Compliance.** POs completed a 9-item youth compliance scale. The compliance scale measures the frequency of cooperative youth behaviors on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from *never* to *always*. Four items indicated compliant behaviors (i.e., attended scheduled meetings with the probation officer, attended scheduled meetings with other service providers, was polite toward the probation officer, and was forthcoming and told the truth to the probation officer); four items indicated noncompliant behaviors (i.e., missed appointments with the probation officer, missed appointments with other service providers, lied or misrepresented the truth to the probation officer, and yelled at or swore at the probation officer). Items measuring noncompliant behaviors were reverse-scored so that higher scores represent greater compliance. In addition, a single item measured global compliance (i.e., overall cooperation with the PO). Factor analysis of the specific compliance items (i.e., omitting



global compliance) revealed three subscales: *truth telling* (2 items,  $\alpha = .72$ ), *polite behaviors* (2 items,  $\alpha = .57$ ), and *attendance* (4 items,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Probation officer characteristics and attitudes.* Respondents reported on their demographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, and race), years of experience in juvenile justice settings, and education level. In addition, they completed the 6-item *attitude toward punishment* scale ( $\alpha = .75$ ; Leiber et al., 2002), two items measuring respondent beliefs about the *helpfulness of probation officers* with youths who have alcohol and mental health problems ( $\alpha = .66$ ), and two items measuring respondent beliefs about the *effectiveness of mandated treatment* on drug problems and mental health problems ( $\alpha = .87$ ; Polcin & Greenfield, 2003).

### Missing Data

A total of 172 cases (56%) had complete data on all analysis variables. Missing data were distributed across 43 unique patterns, ranging from a small number of cases missing a single variable to a single case that was missing 21 of 59 variables. To preserve the full sample of cases, missing data were imputed via multiple imputation using SAS Proc MI (Schafer, 1997). Multiple imputation with SAS Proc MI is an iterative procedure to replace missing data with estimates based on empirical relationships observed in the data. The procedure introduces random error by estimating multiple values for each missing variable (Schafer & Graham, 2002). By introducing random error into the imputation process, multiple imputation results in more accurate variance estimates compared to other imputation procedures (Allison, 2002). Following convention, five data sets were imputed.

### Results

Respondents to the survey were predominantly White (63%) and female (64%). They ranged in age from 23 years old to 63 years old (mean = 38, standard deviation [*SD*] = 9.5). Twenty-three percent had master's degrees. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the index youths. Differences between the complete data analysis with listwise deletion and the imputed data were inconsequential. Nearly a quarter of youths described by respondents were female, and about 42% were youth of color. On average, youths were approaching their 16th birthdays, whereas about 33% ( $n = 101$ ) were 15 years old or younger. Nearly two thirds of all offenders had multiple prior offenses. Compared to first time offenders, offenders with multiple prior offenses were slightly older (15.9 vs. 15.6 years old;  $t(299) = 2.18, p < .05$ )

**Table 1.** Demographic and Offending Characteristics of Index Youths

	Listwise Deletion		Imputed Data
	Effective N	Estimate	(N = 308)
Youth demographics			
Female (%)	305	23.9	24.0
African American (%)	305	13.8	14.0
Latino (%)	305	18.0	18.0
White (%)	305	58.7	58.1
Youth age (mean, SD)	304	15.8 (1.11)	15.8 (1.11)
Youth offending characteristics			
Felony (%)	308	48.7	43.5
Property (%)	308	34.4	34.4
Person (%)	308	23.7	23.7
Drug (%)	308	21.8	21.8
First-time offender (%)	304	36.5	36.7
Youth psychosocial characteristics			
Prior service utilization (mean, SD)	308	1.0 (1.03)	1.0 (1.03)
School suspensions past 3 months (%)	239	32.2	33.9
School truancy past 3 months (%)	238	38.7	42.5
Known alcohol use (mean, SD)	297	1.4 (1.20)	1.4 (1.19)
Known illicit drug use (mean, SD)	304	1.5 (1.27)	1.5 (1.26)
Gang member or associate (%)	291	30.5	31.5

Note: SD = standard deviation; VOP = Violation of Probation

but did not differ by gender, race, or offense severity. Felony adjudications were most common (48.7%), followed closely by adjudications for misdemeanor offenses (43.8%); few youths, only 6%, were adjudicated for status offenses. About one in three had property-related offenses, nearly one in four had person-related offenses, and about one in five youths had drug-related offenses. The average youth had used one specialized mental health, substance abuse, or child welfare intervention prior to his or her most recent adjudication. Over a third of all youths had school suspensions or were truant during the preceding 3 months (33.9% and 42.5%, respectively), and about a third were known to associate with gangs. Average levels of alcohol and illicit drug use (mean = 1.4 and 1.5, respectively) suggested that the typical youth used these substances either occasionally or about once per month. It should be noted that although the median youth used these substances occasionally, at least 30% used alcohol more than once per month, and 37% used illicit drugs more than once per month.

**Table 2.** Distribution of Confrontational Tactics, Counseling Tactics, Behavioral Tactics, and VOP

	Estimate	Range	Interquartile Range
Confrontation tactics (mean, <i>SD</i> )	3.6 (1.38)	0-6	2.8-4.8
Counseling tactics (mean, <i>SD</i> )	3.5 (1.21)	0-6	2.7-4.3
Behavioral tactics (mean, <i>SD</i> )	3.9 (1.18)	0-6	3.2-4.8
Confrontation-counseling (mean, <i>SD</i> )	.16 (1.57)	3.4-3.8	-.7-.9
Confrontation-behavioral (mean, <i>SD</i> )	-.29 (1.38)	-4.2-4.9	-1.1-.6
Confrontation-client centered (mean, <i>SD</i> )	-.06 (1.22)	-3.5-4.4	-.8-.7

Note: *SD* = standard deviation.

### *PO Use of Confrontation*

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for the PPAS compliance subscales, the confrontation-counseling tactics continuum, the confrontation-behavioral tactics continuum, and the confrontation-any client-centered tactics continuum. On average, POs reported using about equal amounts of confrontational tactics (mean = 3.6, *SD* = 1.38), counseling tactics (mean = 3.5, *SD* = 1.21), and behavioral tactics (mean = 3.9, *SD* = 1.18) with youth on their caseloads. Indeed, when the continua between confrontation and the client-centered approaches were calculated, all means approached zero. The interquartile range shows that about 50% of POs had scores clustered within 1 point of zero, indicating that a balanced approach was widely employed among POs with these youths. Nevertheless, a close examination of the distributions indicates that about 12% of POs had extreme scores (less than -2 or greater than 2) on the confrontation-counseling tactics continuum ( $n = 37$ ), 16% of POs had extreme scores on the confrontation-behavioral tactics continuum ( $n = 49$ ), and 12% of POs had extreme scores on the confrontation-any client-centered continuum ( $n = 37$ ).

### *Multivariate Analysis of PO Use of Confrontation and Client-Centered Approaches*

The multivariate analysis began with ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions of the three continua of confrontation and client-centered approaches. As a first step, bivariate regressions were estimated to identify statistically significant associations between the outcome and predictor variables (i.e., youth

demographic characteristics, offending characteristics, psychosocial characteristics, youth compliance, PO demographic characteristics, and PO attitudes). In these and all regression analyses, SAS PROC MIANALYZE (Schafer, 1997) was employed to combine estimates and standard errors across imputed data sets. Any predictor variable associated with the outcome variables was retained for multivariate analysis. A low threshold of statistical significance ( $p < .20$ ) was adopted to guard against the possibility of omitting variables that may be significant at conventional levels ( $p < .05$ ) when potential confounding variables are controlled. Across the three outcomes (confrontation-counseling tactics, confrontation-behavioral tactics, confrontation-any client-centered tactics), 13 variables were retained for multivariate analysis: youth gender, youth race/ethnicity (i.e., African American, Latino, Other race/ethnicity), youth age, number of prior offenses, school suspensions, school truancy, alcohol use, illicit drug use, prior service utilization, truth telling, PO attitudes toward punishment scale, PO age, and PO gender. Variables that were not retained for multivariate analysis included youth gang membership, offense type, offense severity, PO race, PO education, and PO attitudes about the helpfulness of probation and about the effectiveness of mandated treatment.

Table 3 shows the results of the multivariate OLS regression of the three continua outcomes on the 13 youth and PO predictors retained from the bivariate analysis. Across all three models, youths' illicit drug use was associated with greater confrontation and fewer client-centered approaches. Alternatively, youths who had higher scores on the truth-telling scale and who had higher prior social service involvement received more client-centered approaches. Moreover, older youths received less confrontation than counseling tactics, whereas African American youths received greater confrontation compared to counseling tactics. Among PO characteristics, POs who endorsed stronger attitudes favoring punishment employed greater confrontation relative to the client-centered approaches. PO age was inversely associated with confrontational approaches, such that older POs were more likely to employ client-centered approaches than confrontational approaches. PO gender predicted probation strategies in a single model: Female POs were more likely to employ behavioral tactics relative to confrontational tactics, compared to male POs.

Next, interaction effects were tested in each model. We tested two hypotheses in these analyses: (a) that the effect of any predictor variable may vary according to youth demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, race, and age) and (b) that the effect of youth compliance (i.e., truth telling) may depend on

**Table 3.** OLS Parameter Estimates for Confrontation Versus Client-Centered Approaches

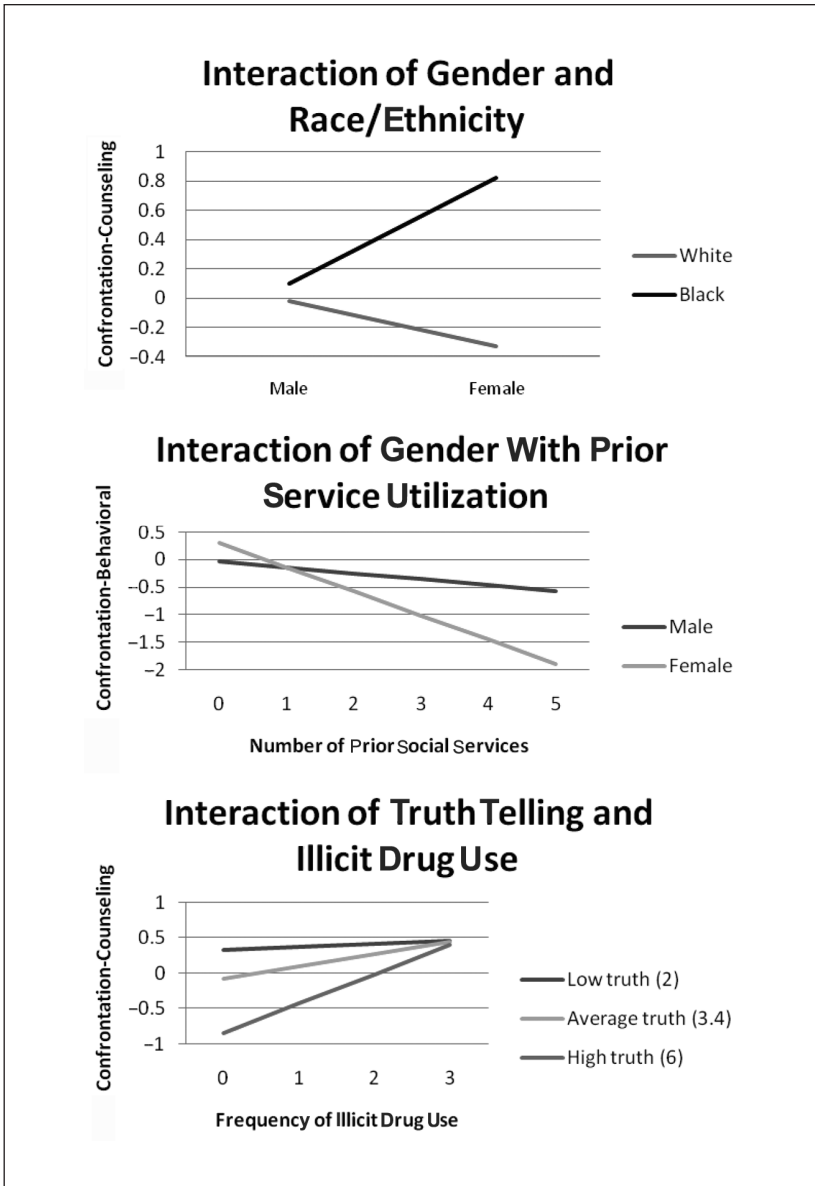
	Confrontation-Counseling		Confrontation-Behavioral		Confrontation-Other	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Intercept	3.84***	1.11	2.55*	1.20	3.19**	1.07
Female	.04	.17	-.05	.06	-.00	.16
Age	-.16**	.06	-.11	.07	-.13*	.06
African American	.41*	.20	.09	.21	.25	.19
Latino	.10	.18	-.21	.19	-.05	.17
Other race/ethnicity	.29	.24	.12	.26	.21	.23
Prior offenses	.04	.04	.04	.05	.04	.04
School suspensions	.16	.16	.16	.18	.16	.15
School truancy	-.00	.18	.21	.18	.10	.17
Alcohol use	-.01	.08	-.04	.08	-.02	.07
Illicit drug use	.17*	.07	.17*	.07	.17**	.06
Prior services	-.21**	.07	-.18*	.07	-.19**	.07
Truth telling	-.16**	.05	-.29***	.06	-.22***	.05
PO punish	.16	.10	.24*	.11	.20*	.10
PO age	-.03***	.01	-.02 <sup>+</sup>	.01	-.02**	.01
PO gender (female)	-.08	.15	-.38*	.17	-.23	.15
R <sup>2</sup>	.21		.27		.26	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.17		.23		.22	

Note: OLS = ordinary least squares; PO = probation officer; B = unstandardized regression coefficients; SE = standard error.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

illicit drug use. Three statistically significant interactions were observed in these analyses and are illustrated graphically in Figure 1.

Two interactions involved youth gender. First, an interaction was observed between gender and race in models predicting the confrontation-counseling tactics continuum ( $p = .02$ ) and the confrontation-any client-centered tactics continuum ( $p = .05$ ). This interaction term, presented in Figure 1 for the confrontation-counseling tactics model, indicates that the effect of race differs by gender. Whereas race did not have an effect on use of confrontation compared to counseling tactics among males, POs were more likely to employ a confrontational approach with African American females and were more likely to employ a balanced approach with White females. Second, an interaction effect between gender and history of prior service utilization was



**Figure 1.** Statistically Significant Interactions of Gender With Race/Ethnicity and With Prior Service Utilization and of Perceptions of Honesty With Substance Abuse

observed in one model predicting the confrontation-behavioral tactics continuum ( $p = .05$ ). This interaction indicated that youths who had low prior service utilization received a balanced approach regardless of gender, whereas females with high rates of prior service utilization received more behaviorally oriented approaches compared to males.

A third interaction was observed between the youth truth telling and illicit drug use in models predicting the confrontation-counseling tactics continuum ( $p < .01$ ) and in the confrontation-any client-centered tactics continuum ( $p = .02$ ). Figure 1 illustrates this interaction with the confrontation-any client-centered tactics continuum. It shows that youths who scored low on truth telling (truth telling = 2) received more confrontation regardless of drug use. On the other hand, youths who scored high on truth telling (truth telling = 6) received more client-centered approaches relative to confrontation only when their drug use was low; when their drug use was more frequent, they tended to receive as much confrontation as youths with low compliance on this measure.

## Discussion

Findings from this study showed that confrontational approaches are widespread in standard probation practice. Scores on the PPAS confrontation tactics subscale suggested that POs employ some type of confrontation in about half of their contacts with youths. Equally prevalent were the use of client-centered approaches, however. Thus, the first overriding finding of this study affirmed that confrontational approaches were employed in balance with client-centered approaches. Balanced approaches to probation supervision are consistent with the Balanced and Restorative movement in juvenile justice policy and with graduated sanctions policies (Maloney et al., 1988; Wiebush, 2002). Moreover, research on intensive probation programs with adult offenders suggests that a balanced approach is associated with less violation of probation (VOP) and less recidivism than either a more extreme law enforcement approach (i.e., confrontation) or casework approach (i.e., counseling or behavioral tactics) (Paparozzi & Gendreau, 2005). Thus, probation officers who employ a balanced approach are functioning in step with policy prescriptions and may be aligned with empirical evidence as well.

Although a balanced approach was reported by many respondents, the second overriding finding of our study was that POs employed more extreme approaches contingent on key youth and PO characteristics. For instance, illicit drug use frequency stood out as a prominent predictor of confrontation. In every model, more frequent illicit drug use led to greater use of

confrontation compared to alternative interpersonal strategies and tactics. Clearly, the tendency of POs to employ confrontational approaches with respect to youth drug use was out of step with contemporary trends in the field of addictions (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Research with Motivational Interviewing underscores the benefits of maintaining a nondirective approach to reduce client defensiveness and resistance and to increase client engagement with the treatment process. Results of this study suggested that either POs had not been trained in this approach or that they were unwilling to abandon directive approaches, such as confrontational tactics, altogether. As indicated above, POs clearly embraced both intervention styles. This finding points to the need for research to study how POs package both types of strategies and to evaluate their relative effectiveness for youths with substance use problems in the context of probation.

Three youth-related factors tended to decrease confrontational tactics: youth age, prior service utilization, and youth compliance. The finding that younger youths received more confrontation than older youths was unexpected. This finding may indicate a greater hope or urgency for prevention with younger youths compared to their older peers, thereby justifying more frequent confrontation. On the other hand, POs may have expected more independence from older youths, granting them more latitude to make choices and to face court consequences. The gendered effect of prior social service utilization demonstrated in this study suggested that POs were more prone toward problem-solving approaches for females than for males when prior service use was high. Such a finding is consistent with the chivalry hypothesis in which juvenile justice systems seek to protect female offenders from harsh sanctions (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998; Leiber & Mack, 2003). In this case, girls with previously identified treatment needs were the beneficiaries of a more gentle and positive approach.

The interaction between gender and race suggested that the chivalry hypothesis was conditional, however. Whereas the chivalry hypothesis was supported for White females who received less confrontation than African American females, POs reported more confrontation with African American females than any other group. The tendency of POs to confront these girls was consistent with the stereotype sex role hypothesis, whereby the juvenile justice system employs coercive and controlling interventions to enforce a middle-class standard of female role behaviors (Chesney-Lind & Sheldon, 1998; Leiber & Mack, 2003). Results of this study suggest that although White girls benefited from officer protection, African Americans encountered more pressure to conform.



Among all youth factors, the most consistent predictor of confrontational approaches was youth compliance. In bivariate analyses, each dimension of youth compliance (i.e., global compliance, attendance, polite behaviors, and truth telling) predicted less confrontation. Thus, it appears that when presented with youthful noncompliance, POs defaulted to more deterrence-oriented and accountability-oriented tactics and strategies. Of note across all of our findings was the prominence of PO perceptions of youth truth telling or honesty. More than any other aspect of youth compliance, results of this study demonstrated that POs valued youth honesty and that probation strategies were conditioned on this perception. Whether POs were accurate in their assessments of youth honesty cannot be ascertained from the available data, nor can we know whether the youths themselves or their parents would agree with PO assessments of honesty. Nevertheless, results of this study point to the wide-ranging influence of PO impressions of youthful honesty and dishonesty in their intervention decisions.

Among PO characteristics, the effect of officer age stands out, about which several interpretations are possible. For instance, that older officers were more likely to employ client-centered approaches relative to confrontational tactics could reflect a cohort effect based on overriding policies toward youth well-being and accountability that have changed during the past quarter century. POs hired earlier entered a justice system that was more strongly oriented toward the well-being of youths relative to the current policy framework that prioritizes accountability and public safety. Alternatively, this finding may also reflect the effects of maturity, in which older officers are less reactive to youthful noncompliance. The former explanation points to the challenge of retooling staff as agency policies change. The latter explanation suggests the need for close supervision of younger, less experienced staff in their use of client-centered approaches and confrontational tactics.

This study had at least four notable limitations related to its measurement and sampling designs. First, it is likely that POs' reports of their tactics and strategies were biased by limitations of recall. Our study design sought to attenuate this limitation by constraining the duration of recall to a period commonly employed for case reassessment (3 months) and by linking PO reports to a specific youth rather than to an average youth or to their whole caseload. In these ways, the survey primed respondents to think in specific rather than general terms. Second, it is not clear that POs' definitions about specific strategies, "confrontation," for instance, would be invariant across other participants or observers. As this study represented the perspectives of POs on their use of interpersonal strategies, it would be instructive to obtain the perspectives of youths, parents, and objective observers as well. Third, as respondents to our study belonged to a professional association of probation

officers, they represented a skilled and motivated subset of POs whose experiences and use of probation strategies may or may not represent the typical PO serving in the field. Finally, structural variables, such as local agency policies, philosophies, and procedures, were not included in the survey and were therefore unavailable for this analysis. Alongside youth and PO characteristics, structural factors such as these would be expected to influence probation strategies as well.

Despite these limitations, this study opens new avenues for future research toward an evidence-based approach to juvenile probation. The probation strategies examined here need to be evaluated for their effects on outcomes such as youth and family cooperation, engagement in treatment, VOP, and recidivism. Such an evaluation should strive to identify an optimal balance of confrontational and client-centered approaches. Moreover, such an evaluation should identify styles and approaches to confrontation that are more or less effective with key justice outcomes. Currently, best practices in the field are based on nonempirical literature on practice with involuntary and mandated clients in corrections and social work. By advancing into longitudinal and experimental evaluations, the literature could inform training curricula for probation officers and build a more sturdy evidence base for probation practice. In the long run, this stream of research promises to guide POs toward an optimal balance between confrontational approaches and traditional client-centered strategies that foster youths' prosocial development and successful completion of probation requirements.

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