

OP: A Prisoner in your home

Damien Brooks

Staff Reporter

We are now entering the age of digital incarceration, from prison cells to the homestead. Though the prison population is seeing a decline, there is a rise in the use of electronic monitoring. The Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), describes electronic monitoring as a form of digital incarceration, often using a wristband or ankle bracelet. These electronic monitoring (EM) devices can monitor an individual's location, and blood alcohol level. Most often they are used in times of a person's pretrial release, or post-conviction supervision, such as parole or probation. Recently the scope that determines someone's need for surveillance has widened to include juveniles, the elderly, people accused or convicted of a DUI or domestic violence, adults in drug programs and immigrants awaiting legal proceedings.

The intentions of a device such as this are perceived to be good and better for the community. To many it makes sense to keep an eye on those who may be at risk of fleeing the country to get away from the police, or go into hiding to avoid being deported. However, the intentions are not always those which we generally perceive or would like them to be. One of the concerns is that, similar to the prison system, it will disproportionately affect people of color. An example of this is currently happening in Cook County, IL, where black people make up only 24 percent of the population, but they account for 70 percent of those currently on EM.

Another concern that arises with the increase of EM is how it interferes with the daily life of the individual being monitored. For example, the zone to which one is limited will make it difficult for that person to get or keep a job, attend school, care for their children or visit friends and family. You're basically taken from a cell in a prison and put into a cell no bigger than your designated zone. On top of not being able to function freely throughout life, you also bear the burden of paying an involuntary leasing fee of up to \$300/month. With so many stipulations, if any of them are broken, an individual can find themselves back in prison. Even if the GPS system malfunctions due to technical difficulties, a person can go back to jail. If a person is even 3 days late in paying their monthly fee to the private company that owns their EM device, they will go back to prison.

EM can be very useful, but there needs to be some changes to the way in which it is administered and the stipulations that it puts on the individual. For example, there doesn't need to be a computer system of algorithms put in place to determine if someone is even set free. These systems are supposed to be used as an unbiased way of releasing people, but the information put in place to determine whether or not it sets someone free is biased in itself. There also needs to be an allowance of more freedom given to people that are placed on EM. Range of motion should be determined on a case by case basis, that way it doesn't interfere with an individual's ability to get or keep a job, attend school, or care for children.

When someone is set free from prison after serving years in a cell, they should not be required to be placed under EM. They already served their time for the crime that they committed, so why are they being sentenced again. Which brings me to the need for a change in the people who are placed under EM. The people placed under EM should be an actual flight risk, and not just a presumed flight risk. There are other ways in which individuals could be monitored, for things such as BAC and drug use. Meeting with an official a few times a week and even calling in once or twice a day.

I may not have all of the answers, but I know the way that EM is currently going is not the right one. If we continue to use EM the way that we are, it will do nothing but create another system of injustice and mass criminalization. We went from slavery to Jim Crow, from Jim Crow to mass incarceration, now from mass incarceration to Electronic Monitoring. Like Michelle Alexander mentioned in her article for The New York Times, "If our goal is not a better system of mass criminalization, but instead the creation of safe, caring, thriving communities, then we ought to be heavily investing in quality schools, job creation, drug treatment and mental health care in the least advantaged communities."