THE NET OF PRIVATIZED PUNISHMENT: EXAMINING THE USE OF PRIVATE PROBATION IN COLORADO

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The expansion of privatized punishment has raised important questions about the impact that these private actors have on the punishment practices of criminal justice systems. Critics suggest that using private punishment services can lead to “net-widening,” in which a greater number of individuals are subject to carceral control. This study examined the use of private probation by local court districts in the state of Colorado from 2002 to 2017. Using a decomposition model, this study shows that districts who used private probation had higher probation sentencing rates and higher active probation rates, and that these rates were higher when reliance on private probation was higher. Importantly, these associations were not explained by differences in crime rates or community context. This study supports net-widening research by showing how using private probation leads to a greater number of individuals being subjected to state supervision. Findings also emphasize how the structural arrangements of punishments, particularly through privatization, can impact local punishment practices. Exploring the ways in which private punishment services can change the use of sanctions in local court systems is essential to understanding the full impact of these public-private correctional partnerships.