
Paper 8: Playing Tag

There is an evil character in the Spiderman Comics called "King Pin". He lives in Hell's Kitchen. In 1979, in order to keep tabs on Spiderman so that he always knew where the superhero was. King Pin fitted Spiderman with an electronic tag.



In the same year a judge, rather splendidly named Judge Jack Love of Albuquerque, New Mexico reasoned, having seen this cartoon, why not develop a real thing like this? So instead of prisoners going into prison, they can be electronically tagged. He was the inventor of the electronic tag. But the idea came directly from a Spiderman comic.

The modern inheritors to the King Pin tradition Serco and G4S, receive about £120 million per annum for the contract, or £1,500 for each person on a 120 day period of tagged detention. At present offenders can only be tagged for six months and for no more than 12 hours per day. Under the new scheme the length of the time on a tag would increase to 12 months and to 24 hours a day. This will also, therefore, sharply increase costs. Tagging is highly profitable, with only a third of those tagged being involved in a potential violation.

There has been an incremental rise in the number of persons tagged either as a condition of a community order or as a freestanding curfew, over the last 15 years, yet there is as yet no research evidence that shows that freestanding tagging can cut crime. Currently the Probation caseload is 240,000, with on average 30,000 to 35,000 persons either tagged as a condition of a community penalty or on early release from prison, known as home detention curfew. The coalition has announced that it expects the number of persons tagged in the community to rise to 180,000.

It currently costs the taxpayer £1,250 for a 90 day tag, rising to £1,500 if the tag sentence is for 120 days and only about a third involve call outs. The profit margins are therefore very high. The annual revenue received by tagging companies currently exceeds £120 million and this seems set to rise to over £1 billion by 2015, when the new scheme goes ahead.

The case studies show that often equipment is faulty but nevertheless offenders are breached and often recalled to custody. They show that in many instances the tag is not fitted, in some cases for up to two months, and in two cases the tag was never fitted at all and the order expired.

A parliamentary answer on 14 May 2012 (Hansard 106513) showed that the total amount paid to the two companies, excluding payments made by the United Kingdoms Border Agency, for 2011/12 was £54.6 million to Serco and a further £62.3 million for G4S. The number of persons starting electronic tagging in any one year grew from 37,920 in 2002/3 to 115,870 in 2010/11 (parliamentary answer 14 May 2012 – Hansard 106511). The average number of days that each offender is electronically tagged for both schemes has averaged from between 65 and 68 for each of the last six years.

The total number of days that individuals are electronically monitored per year has doubled from four million to nearly nine million over the past six year period (parliamentary answer 14 May 2012 – Hansard column 18W)..

	Nos P/A	G4S	Serco	Total
2002/3	37,920			
2003/4				
2004/5				
2005/6				
2006/7				
2007/8				
2008/9				
2009/10				
2010/11				
2011/12	115,870	£62.3 m	£54.6 m	£116.9 m

When the contracts were first negotiated in 2005 the Home Office claimed that they would reduce the average contractual cost of monitoring each person to from £1,943 to £992. This reduction is equivalent to a saving of £49.5 million per annum, based on the 53,230 people who were monitored in 2004-05. The Ministry of Justice has spent £961m on electronic monitoring in the last 13 years.

The Home Office procurement team used the re-tendering exercise to correct anomalies identified in the previous contracts. For example, they changed the payment mechanism so that the contractors are now paid on the basis of a price per curfewee per day. Therefore contractors are paid only for curfewees that they are actually monitoring. Fewer than 3,500 electronic tagging orders were made in 1999, a figure that rose to cover more than 70,000 people last year. It is estimated that more than 450,000 people in England and Wales have spent time electronically tagged over the past decade.

The electronic monitoring contracts cost the Home Office £102.3 million in 2004-05, an average of £1,943 per curfewee. The large volume of offenders released on Home Detention Curfew and Adult Curfew Orders accounted for 78 per cent of this expenditure. Apportioning this cost between the number of offenders tagged does not, however, represent the total cost of electronic monitoring per person as it does not take into account the time spent by prison, probation and court staff in administering each case, or the costs of police time spent dealing with offenders. The National Audit Office interviewed key staff and monitored their work in order to determine the typical time spent dealing with such offenders and estimated the additional costs to be £334 per curfewee on Home Detention Curfew, and £417 per curfewee on an Adult Curfew Order. Around 80,000 offenders are tagged every year, including former prisoners released early and criminals serving community sentences.

Tagging costs £13.14 a day per offender in England and Wales, compared with only £1.22 in the US.

In the United States the tags are made by Black Creek Integrated Systems Corp:



The government has hired auditors to investigate whether it was overcharged on contracts for electronic tagging and monitoring of offenders which have cost £107m over the past year.

The Ministry of Justice said that auditors from PricewaterhouseCoopers would examine contracts with Serco and G4S that were signed in 2005.

The current eight-year contracts, which are held by G4S and Serco electronic monitoring services, are due to end shortly. The Ministry of Justice says more than 30 companies have expressed an interest in competing for the new contracts when bids are invited this October.

Lord McNally, warned a Liberal Democrat conference fringe meeting of the danger of a "semi-monopoly" developing with the largest security companies, such as G4S and Serco, winning the majority of justice contracts.

If the tagging service in England and Wales was delivered in line with standard practice seen in the United States, the contracts would be considerably cheaper as the service charge element (covering costs of the private suppliers' personnel) would be much smaller. The differential – or service premium – between the core service (hardware, software, network) price seen in the US (£1.22 per day) and the price paid per monitored day in England and Wales (£13.14) can be identified and in 2011–12 stood at almost £12 per day.

This sum scales, across the 8.9 million days of monitoring in 2011–12, to £106 million. An alternative policy could have seen this service spend redirected to existing agencies so that the providers were only paid for the hardware, software and network access, with the supervision responsibility falling to offender management teams in the police and probation services. Such an approach would have seen up to £883million freed up in total to fund 2,000 probation officers or more than 1,200 police officers to work on offender management in each of the 13 years of the most recent electronic monitoring contracts.