



CRIMINAL JUSTICE SOCIAL WORK
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What Works in Community Service?

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Introduction

In recent years our understanding of ‘what works?’ in reducing recidivism among offenders has gradually grown (e.g, McGuire, 1995) and there has also been a greater understanding of how that knowledge base can be applied in the supervision of offenders in the community (Chapman and Hough, 1998). Most of the discussion about effective practice has focused upon interventions with offenders who are subject to probation orders or post-release licences, with recent research extending that understanding by focusing upon what offenders value about supervision. As Rex’s study of desistance among probationers (Rex, 1999) and recent studies of probationers and parolees in Scotland (McIvor and Barry, 1998, 2000) have shown, offenders appear genuinely to value the supervision that they receive, especially if it embodies the concepts of pro-social modelling and legitimacy. These same concepts are useful for understanding why community service might be effective in reducing re-offending and for providing pointers as to how the effectiveness of community service might be further enhanced.

Can community service reduce recidivism?

As interest in effective practice has increased, so too has community service arguably become increasingly marginalised across the UK (McIvor, 1998). This is unfortunate because, while comparisons of recidivism between different sanctions generally suggest that prison sentences and community-based disposals have similar reconviction rates, offenders on community service consistently have lower reconviction rates than would be predicted by their criminal history, age and other relevant characteristics (Lloyd et al., 1995). For example, May (1999) found that reconviction rates among offenders given community service were better than predicted even when social factors such as unemployment and drug use were taken into account. In a Swiss study, Killias et al. (2000) found lower reconviction rates among offenders sentenced to community service than among those given short prison sentences.

The Scottish Executive has recently conducted a comparison of reconviction rates following different sentences (Scottish Executive, 2001). This analysis suggested that when factors such as sex, age and previous criminal history were controlled for, reconviction rates tended to be similar following prison sentences and

a range of non-custodial disposals (such as probation orders, community service and fines). These data suggest that, at the very least, community-based disposals are no less effective than imprisonment. However the custodial sample upon whom the analysis was based included prisoners serving sentences of up to 12 years. If a comparison had been made between offenders given community sentences and those who served shorter prison sentences (for example, up to 12 months) it is likely that community service would have lower reconviction rates than custody. Recent data published by the Scottish Prison Service demonstrate higher return to prison rates for prisoners serving less than six months in prison (Ash and Biggar, 2002).

What makes community service effective?

Community service may, it appears, have a positive impact upon recidivism even though it has not traditionally been regarded as an explicitly rehabilitative disposal. For example, the original National Objectives and Standards for Community Service located the order firmly as a fine upon the offender's free time, though they did also encourage approaches to provision that might enhance the value of community service both for the offender and for the community.

It is worth examining, therefore, what features of community service may make it effective in reducing reconviction. Killias et al. (2000) found a relationship between the perceived fairness of the sentences offenders received and reconviction, leading Rex and Gelsthorpe (2002) to suggest that perceiving a community service sentence as 'fair' makes offenders more receptive to re-integrative opportunities that arise when they undertake court-mandated unpaid work.

The re-integrative potential of community service was illustrated by a survey of placement providing agencies in Scotland (McIvor, 1992). Around half of the agencies surveyed indicated that on at least one occasion a community service worker had stayed on in a voluntary (and sometime paid) capacity after they had completed the work ordered by the court. This was more likely to occur in agencies in which community service workers were better integrated with agency staff and volunteers and in which they enjoyed direct contact with the service users who would benefit from the work they carried out.

Following the introduction of community service as a court disposal in the UK in the 1970s, there was considerable debate about the relative merits of team and individual agency placements. The former were usually adjudged to be inherently 'inferior' because they were less likely to bring offenders 'into close touch with those members of the community who are most in need of help and support' (Advisory Council on the Penal System, 1970, para. 33). Research into the operation of community service in Scotland suggested that the situation was slightly more complex. Both types of placement, it seemed, could offer something to offenders, though what they offered varied. More important than the work setting, was whether the work enabled offenders to acquire new (practical or interpersonal) skills, brought them into contact with the beneficiaries and was valued by the beneficiaries. These placements qualities made community service a more positive experience for offenders and those who had a more positive experience of community service were less likely to re-offend (McIvor, 1992). As McIvor (1998, pp 55-56) has observed:

... community service placements which were viewed by offenders as most rewarding - and which were associated with reductions in recidivism - might best be characterised as re-integrative and as entailing a degree of reciprocity or exchange. In many instances, it seems, contact with the beneficiaries had given offenders an insight into other people and an increased insight into themselves; the acquisition of skills had instilled in them greater confidence and self-esteem; and the experience of completing their community service orders had placed them in a position where they could enjoy reciprocal relationships - gaining the trust, confidence and appreciation of other people and having the opportunity to give something back to them in return.

Another feature of community service that was associated with improved completion rates (though its link with recidivism was more difficult to assess) was the provision of assistance to offenders who were found to have other problems while completing their orders. Schemes that tended to adopt a more problem-focused, 'holistic' approach had better completion rates than would have been predicted on the basis of the 'riskiness' of the offenders on orders (McIvor 2002).

Enhancing the effectiveness of community service

Andrews et al. (1990) and Andrews (1995) have suggested that effective offender supervision tends to be characterised by the following features:

- The ‘firm but fair’ use of authority
- the use of pro-social modelling
- problem solving
- advocacy and brokerage (referring on to other relevant agencies)
- open, enthusiastic and caring styles of delivery.

McIvor (1998) has argued that the ability of community service to impact upon recidivism might be further increased if these features are incorporated into community service practice.

McIvor (1992) found that key elements of the relationships between offenders on community service and their supervisors were consistency, fairness and mutual respect. The *‘firm but fair’* use of authority involves a clear distinction being made between rules and requests. Progress is monitored and compliance with supervision is rewarded. In community service, this is most clearly relevant to the enforcement of the order. A consistent but rigorous approach to enforcement that is clearly conveyed to offenders along with fairness and consistency in the supervisory process will encourage increased compliance. It may also at serve to increase the ‘legitimacy’ of the community service officer or supervisor and thereby increase the commitment of offenders to positive change (Rex, 1999). Inconsistency in the application of sanctions is, by contrast, likely to result in resentment, lack of commitment and, ultimately, limited compliance.

Andrews and his colleagues also stress, however, the importance not just of responding consistently to instances of non-compliance but of positively rewarding compliance. Offenders frequently allude to the sense of achievement they feel when they successfully complete work ordered by the court though some suggest that this is not always matched by appropriate recognition by community service schemes. The issuing of completion certificates (possibly graded to reflect effort and achievement) at the end of the order could easily rectify this. It is a practice that already occurs in some schemes but is by no means universal.

The concept of *pro-social modelling* has been drawn upon by Rex (1999) and Trotter (1993, 1999) in the former case to explain why probation supervision may be effective in helping offenders to change and in the latter to provide a framework for effective intervention. Both Rex and Trotter adopt a broader definition of pro-social modelling than that alluded to by Andrews and his colleagues. Instead, in addition to the demonstration and reinforcing of alternatives to pro-criminal thoughts, feelings and behaviour, the importance of honesty, concern and commitment on the part of the supervisor is emphasised along with a focus upon collaborative problem-solving and upon client defined problems and goals. The broader definitions of pro-social modelling advocated by Rex and Trotter effectively encompass the remaining four features of effective supervision identified by Andrews et al. (1990).

Community service presents considerable opportunities for pro-social modelling (in the narrower sense of the term) and problem-solving. Within individual agency placements, for example, staff, volunteers and beneficiaries might represent a powerful, if informal, source of pro-social modelling, demonstrating alternative viewpoints, values, behaviours and lifestyles to offenders on orders. Pro-social modelling may be even more critical in team placements, since these placements by their very nature bring groups of offenders together and provide opportunities for the expression and reinforcing of anti-social attitudes and behaviour. Supervisors trained in pro-social modelling could help to neutralise the negative impact of peer attitudes and behaviour by encouraging offenders to actively challenge inappropriate attitudes and actions on the part of other group members.

Community service supervisors could also be encouraged to adopt a *problem-solving* approach to the tasks that offenders in teams are required to undertake rather than simply instructing them what to do. This might include, for example, asking team members to suggest alternative ways to approach the elements of a task

and to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative approaches. Problem solving, as defined by Andrews et al. involves not just the resolution of immediate problems – through, for example, referring the individual to agencies that might provide appropriate advice and support – but the acquisition of skills that enable offenders to make better informed choices in the future. Community service, by building offenders' confidence and sense of self-efficacy, may help them to deal effectively with other social and personal problems and enhance their motivation to change.

Adding value to community service

Community service and community re-integration

Although the proportion of offenders who are unemployed when they are sentenced to community service is lower than it was previously, community service may provide some offenders with their first experience of working life. Most unemployed offenders in McIvor's (1992) study thought that completing their community service order had increased their chances of finding paid work, though in most cases this is likely to have been misplaced optimism. However, as already discussed, community service placements may offer some offenders the option of continuing as a volunteer once their order is completed and there are occasional instances of placement agencies taking offenders on as paid members of staff.

Although the concept of community re-integration is not entirely unproblematic (see, for example, Raynor, 2001) in recent years there has been growing interest in the re-integrative potential of community service. This has no doubt been encouraged by the broader 'what works?' literature, which identifies community re-integration as one of the principles that underpin effective practice (Chapman and Hough, 1998). In England and Wales this has resulted, in some probation areas, in the accreditation of skills acquired by offenders on community service. Offenders work towards a variety of awards with the assistance of specialist Education, Training and Employment staff (Rex and Gelsthorpe, 2002). The aim is to increase the employability of offenders and, consequently, their likelihood finding work or undertaking further education or training after they have completed their orders.

Enhancing the integration of community service and probation

McIvor (1998) has suggested that community service might be made more effective if greater attention was paid to the potential to integrate the probation and community service elements of a combined order. For instance, a pro-social approach might be adopted to the supervision of offenders on community service so as to reinforce a pro-social approach to one-to-one or group work in the context of probation. Similarly, the actual experience of completing a community service order could be accorded greater prominence in discussions with probationers. These discussions might usefully focus upon the emotional impact of contact with beneficiaries or service users or the impact upon offenders' self esteem and confidence of meeting new people, learning new skills and feeling that they have a useful and valued contribution to make to their communities. Offenders' experiences of community service and its impact upon their attitudes, feelings and behaviour may, in this way, become a vehicle for engaging offenders in an exploration of their offending behaviour - including the needs it fulfils and the effects it has upon offenders themselves, their families and the victims of crime - and the means by which they can begin to meet their social and personal needs without recourse to further criminal behaviour.

Putting the theory into practice: 'community punishment' pathfinders in England and Wales

In April 2001 the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 came into force, resulting in the community service order in England and Wales being renamed the community punishment order. It is somewhat ironic that legislation enacted to emphasise the punitive nature of community service should be accompanied by a government initiative aimed at enhancing the rehabilitative potential of community punishment orders. Community Punishment Pathfinders were established in 2000 under the Home Office's Crime Reduction Programme. A total of seven pathfinders were set up across ten probation areas and, like the other Home Office Pathfinders, they have been subject to evaluation (Rex and Gelsthorpe, 2002). The projects have focused upon the use of pro-social modelling, skills accreditation and addressing the problems underlying offending

behaviour in various combinations. In some projects attempts were also made to improve the quality of work placements and, hence, their perceived value to offenders. One project focused specifically upon enhancing the integration of the community service and probation elements of combination orders through improved induction and supervision planning.

Rex and Gelsthorpe found that short-term outcomes were encouraging, with offenders showing reductions in perceived problems and pro-criminal attitudes (as measured by Crime-Pics 2). Two-thirds of offenders on orders were viewed by staff as having undergone positive change and as having good prospects of future change while (no doubt because they were relatively low risk in the first place) three-quarters were thought by staff to be unlikely to re-offend. A similar proportion of offenders considered that their experience of community service had made them less likely to re-offend. Importantly, the features of community service that were most strongly linked with changes in offenders' attitudes were whether they perceived the work to have been of value to themselves and to the beneficiaries. The next phase of the pathfinder evaluation will examine whether these positive attitudinal changes are translated into reduced rates of reconviction.

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