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What's promising in community service: implementation of seven Pathfinder projects

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Community Service Pathfinder projects were set up by the National Probation Directorate under the Crime Reduction Programme in 1999. They were a complex series of interrelated pilots of specific elements of community punishment. They used different approaches to working with offenders and targeted various factors for change in order to reduce further offending. This study examined the implementation, outputs, outcomes and costs of three approaches used in seven projects, to inform further developments and practice of community service.

Key points

- 74% of offenders in the evaluation were on community punishment orders and 26% were on community punishment and rehabilitation orders. 64% were serving 100 hours or less.
- The sample was broadly representative of the national profile of offenders on community punishment – mainly male (92%), white (89%), average age 27 years and in stable accommodation. Most were in the low-medium OGRS bands for risk of reoffending.
- Effective implementation was helped by commitment, understanding and support from managers and colleagues. Team-work, staff adopting creative problem-solving and flexibility in delivery also helped.
- 73% of offenders successfully completed the ordered hours. Those in more stable situations, with jobs or education, who were older, or with a lower risk of continued offending, did better in completing projects.
- For 61% of the sample who completed Crime Pics II assessments, there was, on average, a statistically significant reduction in both pro-criminal attitudes to offending and problems. Although this was not necessarily a result of the projects, 60% of offenders were also rated by staff as having undergone positive change.
- Tentative conclusions suggest that projects focussed on skills accreditation and pro-social modelling were promising, while projects focussed on using community punishment work to tackle other offending-related needs did not appear to produce positive outcomes overall.

Seven projects were set up across ten probation areas in 1999. Three different approaches were tested in the seven pilots:

- **pro-social modelling (PSM):** community service supervisors served as PSMs and used rewards to encourage pro-social expressions and actions
- **skills accreditation (SA):** enabled offenders performing community service to acquire

skills and qualifications that would improve their employability

- **tackling other offending-related needs (TON):** used community service to address problems underlying offending, e.g. poor problem-solving, a lack of employment-related skills and poor perspective-taking.

Renaming of community service order

With effect from April 2001, the 'community service order' was renamed 'community punishment order' and the 'combination order' was renamed 'community punishment and rehabilitation' or 'combined order'. In this Findings, 'community service' refers to work undertaken by offenders under a community punishment or combined order.

Data collection

The evaluation of the community service Pathfinder projects covered 1,851 offenders who came into the projects after January 2000 and whose orders terminated by 30 November 2001. The sampling periods varied between areas. The research drew on probation area databases, supervision records, the Offenders Index (a Home Office database of convictions), assessment forms and termination summaries completed by staff, interviews with 127 members of staff, Crime PICS II administrations (which measures offender attitudes), offender questionnaires, and data on resources expended pre-project, during set-up and during project operation. Additionally, data on in-county comparison groups of 84 offenders and on out-of-county comparison groups of 596 offenders were collected.

Staff achieved a high level of return for assessment forms (88%), but a lower rate for termination summaries as orders ended (68% of orders were successfully completed, or 50% of the sample as a whole). Forms administered to offenders and follow-up questionnaires for those who completed orders had lower return rates of 61% and 20% respectively. The results may not be representative of all offenders on the community service Pathfinders, given the absence of outcome data on those who failed to complete their orders. For further details, see the full report (Rex et al., 2004).

The offenders

Of the 1,851 offenders covered in this evaluation, 74% were on community punishment orders and 64% were serving 100 hours or less. 28% had been convicted of motoring offences and 23% for violence. The sample was broadly representative of the national picture of offenders starting community punishment orders (see below).

Project implementation

On the whole, the projects appeared to have succeeded in implementing what they intended, and – in the view of most staff interviewed – to have achieved their aims of implementing the Pathfinders. The factors that seemed to facilitate effective implementation were:

- the level of commitment and understanding of project aims displayed by the majority of staff
- training for the projects (where it was received)
- the level of support given by managers and colleagues
- teamwork
- flexibility and ability to come up with ingenious solutions
- readiness to refine practices in the light of early experience and practical difficulties.

Staff were motivated by feedback from offenders and the effort they put in to achieving skills accreditation, as evidence of the value of the work that had been undertaken. The impact that they perceived the projects to be having on offenders – arising from contact with beneficiaries, acquisition of skills and achievement of awards – was another strong motivator for staff.

Factors to consider for effective implementation of the Pathfinder projects nationally

A variety of factors impeded the effective implementation of the Pathfinder projects, which may be relevant to national roll-out of the projects. Some factors related to external pressures, such as:

- the lack of priority given to community service work in general and to the Pathfinder initiative in particular
- staff reservations about the overall coherence and feasibility of the projects in the light of practical constraints (such as the tensions between assessing individual offenders on accredited skills and supervising the whole work party) and offenders' amenability to this kind of work
- staff felt that their ability to target suitable offenders for the projects was hampered by a lack of influence over sentencing outcomes and competition from accredited programmes.

Profile of offenders starting community punishment orders

Characteristics

The average age was 27, with younger profiles in Gloucestershire and Durham, and older profiles in Norfolk, Suffolk, Somerset and Leicestershire. 8% were female and 11% were from ethnic minority groups (27% in Bedfordshire and 24% in Leicestershire). OGRS scores were in the low-medium risk band, with an average score of 47.

On Crime PICS II, offenders registered comparatively low scores on both pro-criminal attitudes and self-perceived problems. Staff assessments indicated high levels of motivation and support from friends and family for completion of community service hours.

Lifestyle

Offenders showed a comparatively 'settled' profile. Only 3% were in unstable accommodation (bed & breakfast, hostel or no fixed abode). Over half were in employment or education (though unemployment rates were high in Northumbria and Durham). 51% had achieved some school-leaving qualification. Staff had assessed 22% as having some basic skills problems (there was an inverse association between these factors).

Substance use

Little use of drugs was recorded. 6% of offenders reported the use of Class A drugs and 36% acknowledged links between their use of alcohol and offending.

The Offender Group Reconviction Scale (OGRS)

OGRS uses criminal history and demographic factors to predict the probability that an offender will be reconvicted within two years of the start of a community sentence or release from custody (Taylor, 1999).

A variety of internal factors arose from the way the projects were implemented, for example:

- some front-line staff (community service unit staff and community service supervisors) felt a lack of involvement from the outset and some resistance to the additional work created by the projects
- to some extent, staff felt ill-prepared and inadequately trained, and that they had received insufficient information and direct communication about the projects. Perhaps as a result, there seemed relatively little investment by staff in programme integrity, that is, ensuring that intended practices were upheld. Indeed, the Pathfinder projects revealed the difficulties of maintaining integrity in the setting of community service work sites, which rely on site visits and checklists completed by unit staff and managers.

Factors which influenced effective implementation

Preparation and commitment

There was much evidence of positive commitment by staff to the projects and a well-developed understanding of their aims, despite the stresses and frustrations experienced in implementation (often arising from perceptions of lack of prior consultation or preparation). In three areas, staff thought that wider reorganisation overshadowed the project. The coherence of the projects was sometimes called into question by staff who perceived conflict in integration with other elements of community service and probation practice, and competition with offending behaviour programmes for suitable offenders. Staff proposals for improving effective delivery included a need for more managerial support for the projects and organisational/structural changes to support their implementation.

Training

Notwithstanding the numerous positive comments relating to training – that it reinforced existing ideas, gave legitimacy to existing practice and set out expectations – its benefits were not always obvious to staff and were sometimes seen to dissipate all too quickly once people became immersed in practice. The cost of staff training (indicating the amount of resources put in) ranged widely between the projects, from under £1,000 to over £12,000.

Liaison, communication and support

Staff in project areas gave examples of ways in which the Pathfinder projects had facilitated more effective communication. Levels of support, within and between different groups of staff, were usually described as strong. In the main, there was a preference for direct meetings between staff, rather than more formal written communication, to maintain project momentum.

Project delivery

Staff reported that the targeting of offenders for the projects was constrained by a tremendous variability in sentencing decisions, and a lack of direct influence on this by community service staff. Some offenders were seen as unsuitable for project work (or for community service), on

the grounds of health and safety (offenders who had disabilities), youth, aggression, drug and alcohol misuse and mental ill-health. Staff's descriptions of mechanisms to ensure consistent and effective delivery suggested considerable variation and little reliance on formal documentation or procedures, though portfolios and offender feedback were often seen as good indicators of high quality delivery. The projects were described as having a range of positive effects:

- improved assessments of offenders (and therefore allocation to placements)
- better working relationships with offenders and stronger case management
- positive cultural changes within the organisations as a whole.

Completion of community service hours

Across all the projects, 73% of offenders successfully completed the ordered hours, and 23% did not (either because the order was revoked due to failure to comply with it, or because of subsequent sentences for other offences, or possibly in some cases a combination of both). This compared with 71% on community punishment orders and 60% on the community service element of combined orders (68% combined rate) successfully completed across England and Wales as a whole in 2000; 22% and 32% respectively were revoked for failure to comply or a further conviction (Home Office, 2002).

A small number of offenders in this sample (4%) could not be classified as successful or unsuccessful in completing their orders, because of revocations which could not be ascribed to the offender (such as relocation and death). There were some differences between areas, with completion rates of between 86% and 66%. It should be noted, however, that the Pathfinder offenders were not similar in all areas (see the boxed profile of offenders), thus it is not possible to make direct comparisons of successful completion rates without taking offenders' different characteristics into account.

Offenders in more stable situations, with existing jobs or educational qualification, who were older, with a lower risk of continued offending, were more likely to complete the projects. Of those enrolled for skills accreditation, 54% were successful in gaining awards – again it was offenders in comparatively stable situations who seemed most likely to achieve awards.

Staff ratings on termination summaries for those who successfully completed their orders indicated high levels of compliance and performance: 75% of offenders were rated as achieving very good/good levels compliance, and 81% very good/good levels of performance. Younger offenders with higher OGRS risk scores seemed to perform less well than other offenders.

Outcomes

Crime PICS II

Crime PICS II provides a fairly straightforward and easily administered method for collecting information on offenders' attitudes and perceptions of their problems, both at the outset

of the order and again towards the end, to assess whether there has been any change. It consists of two components:

- 20 items that measure the extent to which attitudes are pro-criminal, i.e. supportive of crime
- a 15-item problem inventory that measures the number and extent of self-perceived problems (Frude, Honess and Maguire 1998).

Results from Crime PICS II were obtained from cases where there had been two completed valid administrations of the measure. These offenders may not have been representative of all offenders in the sample. Within this group, there was an average reduction in both pro-criminal attitudes to offending and problem scores between first and second administration. Their average pro-criminal attitudes score dropped by 1.0 and the problems score by 0.8. This represents statistically significant reductions in both scores amongst this group of offenders (at the 99% and 95% confidence levels respectively). In 241 cases (about 30%), there was both an improvement in attitudes and a reduction in problems. It is possible that those who completed the test on both occasions were more likely to show signs of change than those who did not complete the test. Thus, the finding may not be a result of the intervention.

Termination summaries

In termination summaries, staff rated around two-thirds of offenders as having undergone positive change and having good prospects for future change. The impact on employment status was seen as less marked, though views were more positive in areas where the focus of the project was skills accreditation. Staff rated nearly two-thirds of offenders as having no or a low likelihood of reconviction – probably a reflection of their relatively low risk profile at the outset.

Offender questionnaires

In community service worker questionnaires, offenders expressed positive views on community service as part of a sentence, 91% agreeing with the statement that it was 'a chance to do something for other people' and 77% that it was 'a chance to learn new skills'. Component scores were calculated to reflect different aspects of offenders' experiences on community service. Scores reflecting how offenders saw themselves as being treated were high, with an average close to 80%. Scores on value to the offender and levels of motivation were generally quite high

(averaging 63% and 67% respectively). Scores on value to the beneficiary were middling (averaging 54%). Asked whether community service made a difference, offenders were more likely to see the experience as having an impact on their propensity to offend (76%) than on their attitudes (58%) or behaviour (47%).

Follow-up questionnaires were obtained from 20% of the sample three months after completion of community service:

- over half the offenders reported being in full-time employment
- over a third reported having experienced a change in status (which they were most likely to attribute to experiences on community service in Leicestershire and Norfolk)
- 84% reported no further charge or court appearance since completing community service.

Costs

The additional costs of the Pathfinder projects (in terms of management time and offender-related tasks such as induction, supervision and assessment) ranged between £114 and £1,700 per offender. This is additional to the average unit cost of a community punishment order of £1,700 (Home Office, 2002). Taken at face value, this is a large cost increase. However, much of the cost of the projects arose in the form of opportunity costs (i.e. the work displaced other activities) and start-up costs. Longer term costs are, therefore, likely to be lower.

Conclusions and future research

Until a reconviction analysis is undertaken, any conclusions must be provisional. We cannot know how reconviction rates relate to those predicted by OGRS, to other offender characteristics, or to the outputs and intermediate outcomes reported here. Tentatively, however, outcomes suggest that the projects focusing on skills accreditation (SA) produced the best results, although the costs of pro-social modelling (PSM) were lower. A combination of skills accreditation with pro-social modelling appeared effective. Projects prioritising other offender-related needs (TON) did not appear to produce positive outcomes overall, possibly because a lack of strong focus hampered success.

References

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Frude, N., Honess, T. and Maguire, M. (1998). *Crime Pics II Manual, 2nd Edition*. Cardiff: Michael and Associates.

Taylor, R. (1999). *Predicting reconvictions for sexual and violent offences using the Revised Offender Group Reconviction Scale*. Home Office Research Findings No.104. London: Home Office.

For a more detailed report, see *Crime Reduction Programme An Evaluation of Community Service Pathfinder Projects Final report 2002* by Sue Rex, Loraine Gelsthorpe, Colin Roberts and Peter Jordan. (2004). Home Office Occasional Paper No. 87. London: Home Office. Copies are available from the Communication Development Unit.

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