

Restorative Community Service: Earning Redemption, Gaining Skills, and Proving Worth

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A prominent leader in the movement towards restorative approaches in juvenile justice presents cutting-edge practices for community service. Such programs balance community safety, accountability for behavior, and development of the competency of youth. This article describes the benefits and challenges of implementing this model and suggests the justice system advance the place of service with the same passion as the widely heralded Civilian Conservation Corps programs of the Depression Era.

Pattern of Successful Intervention Strategies Emerges in the Juvenile Justice System

One must wonder if the 1899 Illinois Legislative Assembly of the United States had any inclination of the great search the Assembly would cause by charging America's first juvenile court to dispose of court cases "in the best interest of the child." During this past century, judges, attorneys, probation officers, corrections officials, and social studies experts have experimented with and studied virtually thousands of efforts to curb delinquency. This "best interest" mission raises numerous questions that appear to be timeless. Should the juvenile justice system hold as its primary goal the protection of our citizenry, or should the primary attention focus upon helping juvenile offenders become competent, law-abiding individuals? In the same vein, should we hold youngsters directly accountable for their delinquent acts, or should we turn our efforts to correcting the social ills that play a substantial role in producing conditions ripe for youth crime and antisocial behavior, thereby excusing delinquents from primary responsibility? Further, does taking a position on these issues necessarily result in a basic, uncompromisable opposition to those persons who have sided somewhat differently in responding to the same questions?

A team of authors, with extensive practical, academic, and policy experience, stepped forward to reconcile these questions by bringing a definition to the "best interest" mission (Maloney, Romig, & Armstrong, 1988). They define the best interest disposition as a measure that results in delinquent youth becoming safer, more accountable, and more competent. This narrowed definition has allowed practitioners to focus their intervention strategies on risk management and treatment that reduces recidivism (repeat crimes), that imposes accountability through community service and restitution, and that delivers skill training that boosts offender competence. While justice system officials have made a virtual science of risk management and progressive sanctions programs for nearly 30 years, it is the field of competency development that has recently demonstrated the greatest cause for enthusiasm. After nearly 100 years, it is becoming increasingly clear that all forms of treatment should result in youth becoming more responsible, competent citizens as a result of juvenile court intervention.

Meanwhile, across the country, many young offenders sit in detention centers, where in the interests of "community protection" and "risk management," they shuffle from their cell to the TV room in slippers and orange overalls. They argue over what show to watch or which video game to play.

Given the offense histories of these youths, society must ask: Which approach advances genuine public safety? Which approach gives priority to the offender's responsibility for restoration? Which approach imparts values and behavior patterns necessary for long-term change? Which approach begins the process of reintegration of offenders into communities by helping to build a sense of belonging and changing public perception of these youths?

Service and various forms of unpaid labor have long been used as sanctions in the American juvenile and criminal justice systems. Some early efforts focused on useful work, and some youth programs taught vocational skills. For example, in the early 20th century, the McLaren School for Boys, a state correctional facility in Oregon, operated as a full-fledged shoe and bootmaking manufacturing center. Delinquent boys were trained to design and construct shoes and boots and left the school prepared to work as cobblers. Hence, McLaren and many other juvenile correctional institutions were designated as training centers or training schools as opposed to reformatories or reform schools.

Unfortunately, McLaren's attempts were not widely replicated. Unpaid labor by youths and adults helped line the pockets of wardens and local businessmen. Concerned about exploitation of both children and adults, states had already begun restricting prison labor practices by the end of the 19th century.

Community service was not used significantly again until 1966 in Alameda County, California, when municipal judges initiated a program requiring traffic offenders to perform unpaid labor. By the mid-1970s, criminal justice leaders, recognizing the tremendous potential of these sanctioning options, began initiating community service and restitution programs.

Judge Albert Kramer of Quincy Court, Massachusetts, became a spokesperson for the community service movement, and his "Earn-It" program became a national model for victim restitution and community service programming.

In 1978, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) launched a \$23 million initiative that enabled 58 jurisdictions nationwide to develop pilot restitution and service programs in juvenile courts and juvenile justice agencies. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration provided similar support for programs for adult offenders.

Although federal funding for community service decreased significantly by the late 1980s, an estimated 500 community service programs were operational nationwide as of 1990.

However, positive changes in the offender rarely are discussed as objectives of community service, and punitive, menial assignments are the rule in many courts. Community service simply is not afforded the attention it deserves as a sanction capable of influencing offenders' attitudes or providing public benefits.

If community service is to realize its full potential, it must be placed within a new mission for community supervision that gives priority to these restorative and rehabilitative goals.

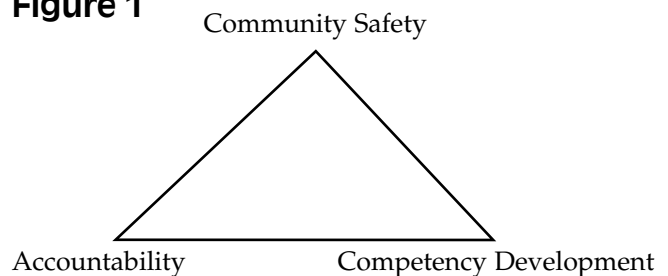
The Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach to Juvenile Justice

The Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach is a mission statement that incorporates the goals of community safety, accountability, and competency in every dispositional order. This mission allows juvenile justice systems and agencies to improve their capacity to ensure community protection and accountability of the offender and the system. It also enables offenders to become more competent and productive citizens (See Figure 1).

The balanced approach to justice is best served when the community, victims, and youth receive balanced attention, and all gain tangible benefits from their interactions with the juvenile justice system. The Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach is based on three performance objectives geared to each of the three "clients" of juvenile justice.

Community Safety. The public has a right to a safe and secure community and must be protected during the time the offender is under juvenile justice supervision. Juvenile justice must provide a range of intervention alternatives geared to the varying risks presented by offenders.

Figure 1



Accountability. Victims and communities should have their losses restored by the offenders making reparation, and victims should be empowered as active participants in the juvenile justice process.

Competency Development. Rather than simply receive treatment and services that suppress problem behavior, offenders who come within the jurisdiction of the court should make measurable improvements in their ability to function as productive, responsible citizens.

Using these performance objectives, the most common traditional approach to community supervision, casework probation, warrants critical scrutiny.

Limitations of Casework Probation

Casework probation for supervising, sanctioning, rehabilitating, and reintegrating offenders is difficult to defend as a sanction that delivers tangible community safety or accountability. Casework probation relies on a judge to order a set of rules or conditions for the offender to follow. The conditions are typically negative: "Cease acquaintance with delinquent peers," "Refrain from use of alcohol or drugs," "Avoid contact with victims," and the catch-all, "No further law violations."

To this list of don'ts, a list of dos is added. This generally requires that offenders participate in services or activities such as counseling, drug education, family therapy, tutoring, special education classes, and job preparation to help them with their underlying problem. However, casework probation has one serious shortcoming: There is little, if any, attention paid to outcomes. Neither the prohibitions nor the prescribed activities require that the offender do anything beyond showing up for a counseling session or school.

A close look at these probation practices illustrates inherent weaknesses and erroneous underlying assumptions in the juvenile probation system. First, expecting a single probation officer, who may be responsible for tracking 100 or more offenders, to influence the behavior of these people is farfetched. Second, simply ordering offenders to cease certain behaviors or even adopt positive behaviors assumes they have the skills to do so, which is often incorrect.

There is little in the casework probation system to reinforce either accountability or a sense of bonding between the offender and the community.

These assumptions may explain the findings of Dennis Romig (1992) who reviewed more than 12 major studies on juvenile probation in the United States involving 3,000 youths. In his book, *Justice for Our Children*, Romig says, "The results were conclusively negative. Casework probation is not effective in the rehabilitation of delinquent youth."

Given the passive nature of probation casework, Romig's findings are not surprising. There is little in the probation system to reinforce with accountability or a sense of bonding between the offender and the community.

Potential of Community Service

In contrast, community service offers tremendous potential to fulfill the objectives of the Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach mission. For example, young offenders in community service work crews may be under adult supervision four, five, or even six days a week for several hours a day. The adult supervisor not only observes the young person's work habits but detects whether he or she arrives for work intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. Further, because offenders often work beside others, staff can observe and monitor disruptive or violent tendencies that warrant more intensive supervision. More advanced community service programs incorporate victim restitution stipends credited as an element of hours served thereby delivering direct benefits to crime victims.

Accountability is at the very heart of the community service philosophy. Although courts may use coercive measures to ensure that offenders comply with orders, ultimately it is up to the offender to arrive at worksites on time and put in the required hours.

Offenders, in effect, sign a social contract that says: "If you commit a crime against your fellow citizens, you have damaged the peace as well as general quality of life of the community. You will work to earn restitution to repay your crime victim. You can also expect to give up time and energy to perform work that will provide restoration to the community for the disruption as well as for financial losses incurred (e.g., vandalism, police time)." Although offenders may not like being on work detail, those who complete service orders have nonetheless chosen to fulfill an obligation. This demands a more active personal commitment than visiting a probation officer.

In addition, the potential for competency development is strong with well-run community service programs. The basic habits of reporting to work on time, cooperation with co-workers, following instructions, accepting constructive criticism and finishing tasks can be carried over into life in the community. More sophisticated community service programs even provide vocational training opportunities that complement the basic program. Others reward workers who do a good job with a referral to a public or private employment agency. When offenders complete their community service hours at a nonprofit agency in the community, it is not uncommon for the agency to recognize their work with positive reference letters, commendation gatherings, or even permanent employment.

If public safety, accountability, and competency are important goals to be achieved during the dispositional phase of juvenile proceedings, then a well-run community service program is strategically suited to deliver results. The added outcomes of achieving genuine gains for communities set this requirement apart from any disposition that simply seeks to control behavior of adjudicated youth.

Principles of Restorative Service

Community service operates at its best when the work is seen by the crime victim, the entire community, and the young offenders as honorable and worthwhile and when it improves citizens' lives. The following principles can help juvenile justice systems design projects that fulfill the full potential of community service as an intervention capable of meeting the goals of the Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach.

Interestingly, the higher plane approach to community service is not that much more costly or time consuming than traditional programs, and the benefits are invaluable.

I. Worthwhile Work:

The benefits of meaningful service work should be apparent to youth. If it is not, a brief explanation may be necessary. For example, before beginning a brush clearing project, the project leader should discuss the fire hazards caused by brush and highlight the fire prevention benefits of the cleanup. In Deschutes County, Oregon, young adult workers constructing a shelter for battered women and rape victims clearly understood how

meaningful their task was. They asked to continue their work after their sentences expired.

II. Youth as Resources:

When community service operates on its highest plane, the work is the focus of attention, and workers are treated as essential resources needed to complete the job. Many delinquents have been on everybody's "most unwanted" list since early childhood. When community service programs focus on tackling tough local problems, staff should convince the youth that they are genuinely needed to solve those problems. Being treated as a resource helps youth develop stronger self-images, and they are viewed by peers and the community in a different light.

Jerry Dulhum, a longtime community service team leader in Deschutes County, has successfully supervised nearly 1,000 youth and young adult workers. He takes a no-frills, straightforward approach to his work. Dulhum (personal communication) describes it this way:

Most of these young folks don't need someone getting into their heads to find out about their bed-wetting habits as kids. They need somebody who has high expectations of their capabilities and pushes them to make a contribution. I've never understood why we spend so much time probing about what they can't do. When I'm on work detail, I try to bring out their strengths. Everybody is good at something. We've got a firewood program in our county. If one of my workers slacks off, I jump on him and say something like, "Hey, fella, if we don't get this wood in, some widow is going to be cold tonight." You'd be surprised how much firewood we get to the folks with our approach.

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III. Attention to Transferable Competencies:

One ideal outcome of community service is to impart skills that can be used beyond the community service experience. Basic work skills can be reinforced without much additional effort. Specific technical skills gained can be inventoried and listed in a letter of reference for the youth. Equally important, social competencies, the ability to work with others, and reliability are valued in any occupation.

IV. Sense of Accomplishment, Closure, and Community Recognition:

Whenever possible, projects should be designed to have a clear beginning and end. That way, youth can see firsthand the impact of their efforts. Seeing a project through to completion boosts personal satisfaction, allows staff to formally recognize workers for their contribution, and provides a complete learning experience about the benefits of community service.

Delinquent youth have prior offense records and other documentation that tend to follow them around, influencing perceptions of them in school, at work, and elsewhere. Community service allows them to accomplish something positive, to establish a record of success. Restorative community service leaders should build on this opportunity by arranging for recognition through adult service clubs. These organizations can honor participants with certificate awards, tickets to sporting events, special luncheons, and other gestures. A positive community response could contribute to the youth making better decisions.

V. Focus on Helping the Disadvantaged:

There is a special atmosphere surrounding community service projects that benefit the disadvantaged. Something seems to click with offenders when they help at Special Olympics events, work in community kitchens, or build homeless shelters. Perhaps it has something to do with the role reversal—they are doing something for someone less fortunate.

In a report, "Young Adolescents and Community Service," Joan Schine sums it up well:

Adolescents who help to care for young children, who assist the handicapped, serve in soup kitchens, tutor their peers or younger children, visit with the aging, assist shut-ins, or advocate for the homeless are filling the void that our age of technology and specialization has created in their lives; like their counterparts of an earlier era, they are assuming meaningful roles and responding to real needs of their society as well as to their own need to be needed. (1998)

Service on Its Highest Plane

Restorative community service that follows the principles discussed above fulfills the objectives of the

Balanced and Restorative Justice Approach to achieve community restoration, offender competency development, and community protection. It also provides added value to the community and offenders over and above the benefits that come from meeting these objectives.

Restorative community service strengthens what criminologists refer to as the "bond" between youthful offenders and the community. As offenders take on meaningful roles providing service to others—and as they are treated as a resource rather than a problem—they increase their sense of belonging, usefulness, and attachment to the community. In turn, as the community sees offenders making meaningful contributions, it becomes more accepting and supportive.

These new directions in community service illustrate that programs can do more than establish a baseline of accountability and punishment. They can become the foundation for an entirely new set of expectations and behaviors for offenders and the community.

Characteristics of Cutting Edge Restorative Service Programs

Cutting edge community service programs generally fall into five categories:

1. *Mentoring and Intergenerational Service*—While the past decade has seen a revived interest in mentoring programs for delinquent youth, these programs often lack the structure necessary to build and sustain a meaningful relationship between youth and adults. Service projects where youth and adults work together to improve their communities provide an important vehicle for placing participants in productive roles that increase bonding and solidify the mentoring relationship. One of the most innovative and exciting manifestations of this youth/adult service is the involvement of seniors, especially low income seniors, in working with youth on intergenerational projects. These projects are placing youth and seniors in meaningful service roles that appear to be breaking down barriers between generations while building understanding, a sense of interdependence, and mutual support.
2. *Economic Development*—Whenever possible, service projects should be chosen that have maximum visible impact on the quality of life for a commu-

nity. Service projects that are linked directly to improvements in the local business climate are likely to win support, especially from business and civic leaders whose financial backing and credibility can make or break a project. Cleaning up graffiti, landscaping projects, or other restoration efforts that help make commercial areas more hospitable to business are high impact, high visibility initiatives. Rather than invent these projects, organizers should ask business and civic groups for their ideas.

3. *Citizenship and Civic Participation*—A frequently discussed problem of young people today is the lack of civic appreciation for the interdependence and commitment that are essential elements of a civil society. As the cultural infrastructure of our society seems to be unraveling, young people (including young offenders) must become engaged in activities that reinforce civic values and prepare them to be contributing members of society. Service projects that involve youth in solving community problems relating to their social and physical environment, cultural conflict and racism, educational access, political involvement, and related issues can create a sense of shared responsibility. Such projects also promote democratic values and bring youth together with persons from a variety of backgrounds.
4. *Crime Prevention Projects*—The restorative message in community service may be most clearly communicated when offenders are required to repair damage caused by crime. For example, a service project in Philadelphia assigned crews comprised primarily of drug offenders to renovate or dismantle crack houses. Tasks that prevent crime also are effective in teaching offenders that crime threatens the safety and quality of life for all citizens. Assisting citizen crime watch groups provides an obvious restorative link for communities and offenders.
5. *"Giving Something Back"*—One of the more advanced steps on the road to reintegration and recovery for drug abusers and alcoholics in the "12 step" philosophy is providing assistance and support for those still struggling with addiction. Likewise, offenders, as part of their service requirement, may be asked to provide assistance to programs that help other offenders. For example, offenders who graduate from service programs such as the Youth Conservation Corps can become crew supervisors, assistants, or peer

counselors. One of the most powerful and restorative interventions for drug dealers is assigning them to work in drug treatment programs to assist others who have contracted the addiction and to encourage their sobriety.

In summary, during the Great Depression, this nation rallied to engage millions of unemployed and at-risk young men and women to serve their nation and learn a career skill. They changed the face of America in profound ways. Restorative community service may well be one of the most effective dispositions available to juvenile court judges and magistrates to repair harm, reduce risk, and build community by engaging today's at-risk youth in a term of civil service.

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