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TECHNICAL REPORT

A synthesis of literature on the effectiveness of community orders

Robert Davis, Jennifer Rubin, Lila Rabinovich,
Beau Kilmer, Paul Heaton

Prepared for the National Audit Office

The research described in this report was prepared for the National Audit Office.

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1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
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Executive summary

This report reviews research on the effectiveness of ten of the common requirements contained in community orders – sentences that allow offenders to remain in the community, but under special conditions or requirements. Through examining reviews, systematic reviews and meta-analyses we draw conclusions about the effectiveness of unpaid work, mental health treatment, education/skills training, drug treatment, anger management, alcohol treatment, programmes for spouse abusers, regular probation, intensive probation and cognitive/behavioural programming. We also assess the strength of the evidence on whether each of these requirements affects the likelihood of re-offending.

The quality of research in the criminal justice field is variable

Many of the individual studies included in the reviews and meta-analysis examined in this report do not have strong methodological design. In criminal justice research, as well as research in other fields, experimental designs are the gold standard for evaluating interventions and policies. However, experimental design remains underutilized as a research method in the field. The use of other methods –notably quasi-experimental and non-experimental designs – provides less reliable evidence on the effectiveness of interventions in reducing re-offending.

There is strong evidence that community-based cognitive/behavioural programmes and some types of drug treatment work in reducing recidivism

We find that in two areas – cognitive/behavioural programming and drug treatment – rigorous research exists that points to a reduction in the odds of re-offending. There is a clear consensus that cognitive/behavioural programmes in general are effective in reducing the likelihood of re-offending. However, study methods are often weak and there are still few studies using random assignment. Also, data on which types of programmes work best for different classes of offenders is still sparse and will require more scientifically rigorous research. In terms of drug treatment, some programmes such as methadone treatment, appear to have stronger effects than others. However, because most of the evidence originates in the USA, it is important to take contextual differences in populations and other factors into account when drawing lessons for UK policy-making.

Available evidence suggests that some community-based interventions have no positive effects in reducing recidivism

In four areas – programmes for spouse abusers, unpaid work, education and basic skills training, and intensive probation – existing studies have not suggested that the programmes have a positive effect of recidivism. However, studies have shown that some of

these, notably education and skills training, may have positive effects when implemented in prison rather than the community.

For a number of community-based interventions the evidence is inconclusive regarding their effectiveness in reducing re-offending

In four areas – anger management, probation and alcohol and mental health treatment – the question of impact on re-offending remains unsettled. This is both due to limited research in the field and to low quality of research design in existing studies. This review highlights the need for more rigorous research – especially randomized trials – into the requirements that constitute community orders.