Initial evaluation of reconviction rates in Community Justice Initiatives

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The aim of the project was to assess the initial impact of the Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) in North Liverpool and Salford on later measures of offending.

Community Justice is a method of addressing the problems of offending in a local area by engaging with the local community, making the court more responsive to local people and working in partnership with criminal justice agencies, support groups and the local community. The concept was first demonstrated by the Red Hook Community Justice Centre, Brooklyn, New York. The then Lord Chief Justice (2002) and the then Home Secretary (2003) visited this centre and resolved to create something similar in the UK (McKenna, 2007). A commitment to this was noted in the March 2003 Home Office White Paper Respect and Responsibility - Taking a Stand Against Anti-Social Behaviour.

Key points

- In order to assess the initial impact of the CJs in North Liverpool and Salford on re-offending a method was used which allowed for comparison of offenders that had passed through the Community Justice courts in North Liverpool and Salford, with a matched group of offenders who had not.

- Analysis showed that the rates of re-offending within the first year for all three areas were not statistically significantly different.

- Results from this study, which were based on the experiences of offenders who passed through CJs in their first year of operation, should be seen as tentative. Once greater numbers of offenders have passed through the Community Justice courts, and the changes initiated have become deeply embedded, this, along with data on specific interventions and types of offence on reconviction, could provide more robust evidence on the impact of Community Justice Initiatives.
The key principles of Community Justice are:

- **Courts connecting to the community**
  There should be significant liaison between the courts and the local community so that the community is able to put forward its views, and the court has a view of the wider context of the crime.

- **Justice is seen to be done**
  Better information about the criminal justice services so that local people have an opportunity to put forward their views on the way offending is tackled. Compliance with the court’s orders or other penalties should be seen and recognised by the community.

- **Cases handled robustly and speedily**
  Harnessing the combined potential of a range of agencies working together, meaning increased speed and ensuring offenders begin sentences promptly.

- **Strong independent judiciary**
  Enabling the judiciary to lead the problem solving approach and maintain oversight over offenders’ progress after sentence.

- **Solving problems and finding solutions**
  Making use of a range of available service providers in order to tackle the underlying causes of offending. Problem solving can operate both at the community level - tackling safety concerns raised by local people - and also when dealing with individual offenders at court.

- **Working together**
  A team approach to decision making and dealing with offenders. Ensuring that a range of agencies, necessary for problem solving, are available to the court, delivering an end-to-end service to offenders, victims and the community.

- **Repairing harm and raising confidence**
  Seeking the views of the community on what projects should be carried out by offenders on unpaid work. These unpaid work projects should then be badged once completed so the community can see what has been achieved (Engaging Communities in Criminal Justice, Green Paper, April 2009).

The North Liverpool Community Justice Centre opened in September 2005. The centre brought together a magistrates’ court and a range of services and facilities for those in the Local Authority areas of Anfield, Everton, County and Kirkdale. It was intended as a one-stop shop for tackling crime by using a problem solving approach with offenders and delivering preventative and social services to the rest of the community. The Salford Community Justice Initiative began in November 2005 at Salford magistrates’ court, with similar objectives to the Liverpool project. It was established as a pilot project to assess the extent to which community justice principles could be implemented within an established magistrates’ court.

**Approach**

In order to assess the initial impact of the CJIs in North Liverpool and Salford on re-offending a method was used which allowed for comparison of offenders that had passed through the Community Justice courts in North Liverpool and Salford, with a matched group of offenders who had not. This comparison group was taken from Manchester (an area with a similar demographic profile). This was based on similarities in:

- the economic context based on presence in the North West region;
- similar socio-demographic characteristics in the court catchment area based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2007;
- Similarity of case types going through the courts (MOJ 2009).

Offenders were matched on a range of background characteristics associated with re-offending. This allowed for statistical control of pre-existing differences between those who received the intervention and those who did not (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2009).

Data was collected from the police national computer (PNC) database. Individuals who had exclusively breached an order, who were incarcerated from their index offence, females, and those under 18 were excluded. The final sample was of 6016 from Manchester, 424 from North Liverpool and 94 from Salford. Due to the small sample sizes in North Liverpool and Salford, it was expected that

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1 Technical information on the methods and statistical tests used is available on request to the Ministry of Justice.
only a 5-10 percentage point impact of the CJIs on re-offending rates would be detectable robustly using tests of statistical significance. Therefore, in addition to this approach, tests of effect size which are not impacted by sample size (specifically Cohen’s d statistic) were also used.

Results

Analysis showed that the rates of re-offending within the first year for all three areas were not statistically significantly different: 37.0% of offenders in the comparison group, Manchester, were reconvicted within one year, compared with the CJI areas of North Liverpool (38.7%) and Salford (38.3%). This meant that those in Salford and North Liverpool were as likely to be reconvicted as those in Manchester.

Those in North Liverpool and Salford combined were significantly\(^2\) more likely to breach sentence conditions than those in Manchester. Again, this supports the hypothesis that CJIs were not decreasing the prevalence of offending (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2009). Overall, the effect sizes found suggest that an increased sample size would not substantially alter the results. In order to show any marked changes of greater statistical significance for this effect size, one would need a sample of 20,000 from North Liverpool and Salford, which would take many years to collect.

There was an indication that CJIs may have a positive impact on reducing the number of offences per offender. For example, those predicted to commit between 3.2 to 3.7 re-offences, the average predicted number of re-offences was 3.45, and the actual number of re-offences committed was 2.8. However, these results were not statistically significant. A larger sample size of 1700 for North Liverpool and Salford combined would have provided a 70% chance of detecting a significant difference (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2009). It was not possible to investigate whether the CJIs were having an impact on reducing the overall seriousness of reconvictions, as information was only available about the type of offence for the first reconviction.

Implications

The results from this project do not necessarily mean that CJIs are having no impact. The one-year reconviction rate can be viewed as a relatively simple measure of re-offending rates. The evidence in relation to the more complex measure of number of offences per offender does provide some indicative evidence that the CJIs may be having a positive impact. However, this result was not statistically significant as it was based on a relatively small sample. Analysis of a larger sample size, measured over a longer time period, could provide more definitive evidence on the effectiveness of CJIs.

CJIs only began in late 2005. Their success depends on many factors, not least the importance of having strong links with the local communities to support offenders both in and out of court, and increased confidence in the Criminal Justice system. New initiatives and ways of working take time to become embedded within the community, and this is true of CJIs. Therefore, results from this study, which were based on the experiences of offenders who passed through CJIs in their first year of operation, should be seen as tentative. Once greater numbers of offenders have passed through the Community Justice courts, and the changes initiated have become deeply embedded, this, along with data on specific interventions and types of offence on reconviction, could provide more robust evidence on the impact of Community Justice Initiatives.

Community Justice does not have reducing re-offending as its sole objective; it also involves strategies for working more closely with the community and increasing confidence in the Criminal Justice System. Previous qualitative research has shown that satisfaction levels of victims and witnesses in North Liverpool increased due to speedier resolution of queries; and the average time from arrest to sentence has decreased (McKenna, 2007). Respondents from the local community who had heard of the initiative were positive about the aims of the centre, and felt it was a better approach to tackling the causes of crime in an area with longstanding problems with offending behaviour (Llewellyn Thomas and Prior, 2007).

The data used for this study only gave information about whether an individual had been referred to the North Liverpool or Salford CJI. It did not include data on which precise and tailored interventions they

\(^2\) Statistical significance = P<.05
received, for example around problem solving and reintegration with the community. Investigation into the nature of interventions and the offender’s degree of engagement with them, for instance, may provide greater evidence about the impact of the initiatives. Additionally, no information was available on types of offences other than for the first reconviction. Only very small numbers from North Liverpool and Salford had reconvictions leading to custody (which may also help measure the seriousness of offence). This meant no analysis on whether CJIs reduced the overall seriousness of convictions was possible.

The result showing that North Liverpool CJI offenders were significantly more likely to breach sentence conditions compared to Manchester offenders may reflect the nature of the CJI interventions. Offenders in North Liverpool may have breached their order more often due to the high level of offender monitoring, rather than this finding reflecting a real difference in individuals’ behaviour between Manchester and North Liverpool (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2009). Probation officers working with the CJIs may be applying the guidelines for breaching an offender more rigidly than in other areas. A strict approach to breach is part of the emphasis placed on ongoing oversight of the offender, alongside any interventions received as part of the problem-solving approach. Similar outcomes for the relationship between increased supervision and increased breaches for technical violations were found in previous research on Intensive Supervision Programmes in the US (Petersilia and Turner, 1993). The significant increase in breaches in North Liverpool and the possible positive impact this may have on re-offending merits further research.

References
Ministry of Justice (2009). Personal correspondence with Head of Research (Dr. Tina Golton) in Constitution and Access to Justice – Analytical Services