Restitution Reduces Recidivism

by Howard Zehr

The inevitable question comes a few minutes into the discussion period: “Do offenders who go through VROP and make restitution get back into trouble? What is the recidivism rate?”

“That’s not why we do victim-offender reconciliation,” we may reply. “We think that when you wrong someone, you create an obligation and you ought to make things right - regardless of whether it changes your life.” Still, recidivism is an important question, one that ought to be answered.

Today the answer to that question can be a bit more definite, at least about young people, thanks to research released in Galaway and Hudson’s new book (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). It includes a study by Laurie Ervin and Anne Schneider that looked at recidivism (repeat) rates in six U.S. juvenile courts which used restitution. One of the programs included victim-offender mediation as a component. What the researchers discovered is encouraging. Restitution programs, especially intentionally structured programs such as VROP, do indeed appear to reduce recidivism rates and by a measurable amount.

Young people who made restitution were less likely to recommit offenses than those who did not, especially when restitution was made through formal, organized programs. When restitution was informal, simply attached to traditional sanctions such as probation, the recidivism rate dropped by 18% per year. However, when it was made through an organized restitution program, the rate dropped 27%.

The researchers explored several explanations. They tested and rejected the theory that young offenders were deterred by the threat of this punishment. What did seem to emerge was that VROP and restitution, unlike traditional “punishments,” required concrete action on the part of the juvenile and then gave tangible, positive results. For each payment or service, there was a tangible reward. Juveniles who complete restitution, they concluded, have done something positive and tangible, providing a sense of success. Apparently they are more likely to experience this success in a formal program than in restitution which is informally connected to a traditional sanction such as probation.

Does the opportunity to make things right reduce crime? Apparently so, says this study, when young offenders are positively rewarded for taking responsibility.

(See also Deference and Juvenile Crime: Results from a National Policy Experiment by Anne L. Schneider. Published by Springer-Verlag, New York, 1990.)

Community Sentences Effective for Juveniles

Massachusetts led the way in reducing incarceration of juveniles in the early 1970s. Significantly, that state “has also been more successful at reducing crime among juveniles than other states studied. In addition, by incarcerating only the violent offenders, Massachusetts operates an extremely cost-effective system without compromising public safety.”

So concludes a new recidivism study by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD). The shift to less secure, community-based programs did not increase juvenile crime rates. “This data puts to rest the notion that public safety is at risk or that juveniles are more likely to offend if placed in a community-based system,” concluded NCCD president Barry Krisberg.