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BRIEF REPORT

Community service for misdemeanours in Accra: Preferences of offenders, victims, judiciary, and community members

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Taking religiosity into account, the study explored preferences for community service sentencing by victims, offenders, judiciary, and community members from Accra, Ghana. One hundred and ninety respondents were sampled (females = 38.42%, offenders = 5.26%, victims = 58.95%, law enforcement = 10.52%, members of the Judiciary = 4.74%, and general community members = 65.26%). They responded to the Attitude Towards Community Service Questionnaire, and the data were analysed utilising ANOVA between group difference tests. Offenders expressed a higher preference for community sentencing than victims and members of the judiciary. Religion aligned participants supported community sentencing. Community sentencing seems a preferred sentencing option by a cross section of Ghanaian community members for adult non-violent offenders.

Keywords: community service, imprisonment, misdemeanours, restorative justice

Introduction

Community service (as a sentencing condition) is increasingly utilised across jurisdictions for several benefits; including a reduction in recidivism (Muiluvuori, 2001), and cost effectiveness (Bouffard & Muftic, 2006; Lutze, Johnson, Clear, Latessa, & Slate, 2012). Additionally, community service has the advantage of equipping offenders with some employable skills when implemented with work participation options (Coyle, 2002). It comes in different forms when being used as a sentencing condition for some category of offenders as opposed to imprisonment. It is used as a sentencing condition on its own (Harris & Lo, 2002), or sometimes used concurrently with probation or the imposition of fines (Bouffard & Muftic, 2007). The views of offenders, victims, and ordinary community members may influence its wider adoption as a correctional alternative. A number of studies have been conducted on the utility of community service sentencing in developed countries (Anagnostaki, 2011; Doble, 2002). However, there is a dearth of evidence of this in developing country settings. This study investigated preferences for community service by offenders, victims, judiciary, and ordinary community members in Ghana.

Community sentencing: Rationale and processes

Communities may value a sense of involvement in the criminal justice process that contribute to the well-being of inhabitants (Caputo, 1999). One of the principles of community service is that the work to be carried out (as part of the sentence) should be visible to the victims of the crime to help placate them (Bazemore & Karp, 2004). Over a decade ago, Doble (2002) examined the attitudes of residents in North Carolina towards the use of community service and reported that over ninety seven percent (97%) of the participants displayed favourable attitudes toward the use of community service as an alternative sentencing

condition for some offences. Furthermore, Anagnostaki (2011) reported that the judiciary supported the introduction of community service in Greece.

Community service appears to align with Afrocentric jurisprudence and morality. It seeks to restore the severed relationship between the offender, victims, and the rest of the community as a result of the crime committed (Birungi, 2005; Ngabirano, 2008). When one committed an offense in the African setting, a social disequilibrium is created between the relationships of the offender, the victim, and the community as a whole (Adeyemi, 1994). With community service as restorative justice (Dhami, Mantle, & Fox, 2009), the broken relationship between the offender, the victim, and the community at large may be restored (Verhoef & Michel, 1997). Stern (1999) considered community service as a viable alternative to imprisonment sentences in resource constrained African countries.

The Ghanaian offender sentencing system

Ghana, which utilises mostly incarceration, might consider community service as a way of decongesting its prisons, while serving the public by engaging offenders in community development programs. A previous study reported Ghanaian judges to hold favourable attitudes toward the use of community service for some offenses such as petty theft (Alifo, 2006; Parimah, Osafo, & Nyarko, 2015). This view seemed to be shared by other Ghanaian community members (Parimah et al. 2015). Regarding petty theft, religiosity might influence preferences for community service sentences. This might be explained, in part, by the fact that faith-based teachings tend to support restoration justice (Grimsrud et al., 2002). For that reason people of faith might prefer community-oriented restorative justice (Dhami et al., 2009).

The current study sought to replicate and extend findings of previous studies on the use of community service as a

Table 1. Multiple group comparisons on attitudes towards community sentencing

Groups	Mean	Mean difference			
		1	2	3	4
1. Members of the judiciary	32.00	–	-10.40*	-3.36	-1.63
2. Offenders	42.40	10.40*	–	7.03*	8.76*
3. Victims	35.36	3.36	-7.03*	–	1.72
4. Ordinary community members	33.63	1.63	-8.76*	-1.72	–

* $p < 0.05$

sentencing condition for adult non-violent offenders. In addition, the study sought to clarify the role of religion in preferences for community sentencing on non-violent adult offenders. The specific research question was: To what extent do Ghanaians show favourable attitudes toward sentencing adult non-violent offenders to community service?

Method

Participants and setting

The sample comprised 190 general community members from Accra, Ghana. The majority of the participants were ordinary community members (65.26%); with minor representation of members of the judiciary (4.74%), law enforcement (10.52), legal fraternity (14.21%), and offenders (5.26%). In terms of victimisation, 58% of the sample had ever suffered as victims of theft. According to the 2009 victimisation survey conducted by the Ghana Statistics Service, Accra had the highest rate of recorded petty theft cases (Ghana Statistical Service, 2010).

Measures

Participants completed the Attitudes Toward Community Service Questionnaire (ATCSQ: Parimah, 2015) and the Dimensions of Religiosity Scale (DRS: Joseph & DiDuca, 2007). Additionally, they provided their demographic data.

The ATCSQ is a ten item measure scored on a Likert scale (ranging from strongly disagree = 1, to strongly agree = 5). The questionnaire measures respondents favourable attitudes toward community service based on the severity of an offence. An example of the items from the scale is: "I support the idea that, an 18 year old who was sentenced to six months in hard labour for stealing items worth GHS 12.70 should have been sentenced to community service". Scores from the scale achieved a reliability coefficient of 0.87 in the present study.

The DRS is a 20-item self-report measure assessing religious thinking and behaviour with four dimensions of religious preoccupation, guidance, conviction, and emotional involvement. Sample items include: (i) preoccupation (e.g., my thoughts often drift to God); (ii) guidance (e.g., I pray for guidance in everyday matters); (iii) conviction (e.g., I am sure that Christ exists); and (iv) emotional involvement (e.g., I feel happy when I think of God). Each item is answered on a 5-point Likert scoring system, ranging from strongly agree = 5, to strongly disagree = 1; with the scoring reversed for negatively worded items. Scores from the scale achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90 in the present sample.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of attitudes towards community sentencing by community group membership

Groups	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Members of the judiciary	9	32.00	13.46
Offenders	10	42.40	4.83
Victims	99	35.36	8.98
Ordinary community members	72	33.63	8.26
Total	190	34.92	8.96

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Humanities (ECH) of the University of Ghana. Subsequently, letters were written to the various groups with the exception of the general community members, spelling out the objective of the study. After receiving feedback, the researcher booked appointments with members of the various groups. After receiving their consent, the questionnaires were administered. The confidentiality of participants was strictly upheld.

Data analysis

Data were analysed using ANOVA between group difference tests, with multiple comparisons (LSD) carried out to ascertain community service preference differences among members of the judiciary, offenders, victims, and ordinary community members. The religiosity of participants of taken into account.

Results

Table 1 indicates that there is a significant difference between two of the groups on their attitude towards community service, $F(3, 186) = 3.328, p < 0.05$. In effect, from the multiple comparison (LSD), offenders ($M = 42.40, SD = 4.83$) showed more favourable attitudes toward community service as compared to victims ($M = 35.36, SD = 8.98$), $F(1,189) = 3.328, p < 0.05$.

Similarly, offenders ($M = 42.40, SD = 4.83$) displayed more favourable attitudes toward community service as compared to members of the judiciary ($M = 32.00, SD = 13.46$) (see Table 2).

The community service preference difference between victims ($M = 35.36, SD = 8.98$) and ordinary community members ($M = 33.63, SD = 8.26$) on community service was not significant, $F(1,189) = 3.328, p < 0.05$. It was also found that religious participants supported community service sentencing $r(162) = 0.226, p < 0.01$.

Discussion and conclusion

Offenders supported the use of community service more than any other grouping. This might be explained by the benefits they envisage they would glean from such a sentence, as opposed to incarceration. In contrast, the reason victims ascribed to their unfavourable attitudes toward community service was that community service benefited offenders to the detriment of victims (Birungi, 2005). Consistent with some studies (e.g., Roberts, 2002; Roberts & Stalans, 2004), this study found no significant difference between victims and ordinary community members on their overall attitudes toward community sentencing. Although the reasons for the preference of community sentencing are unclear, it is likely that the community member saw non-custodial sentencing as a way of preventing petty offenders from coming into contact with hardened criminals, and decongesting of the prisons (Parimah et al., 2015). Participants with high levels of religiosity were more favourable of community service. This might be explained by the fact that faith-based teachings are in support of restorative justice (Grimsrud et al., 2002).

The study revealed that, to a large extent, Ghanaians displayed favourable attitudes toward community sentencing, paralleling that of other studies. Additionally, participants' religiosity did have a bearing on their attitudes toward community sentencing for adult non-violent offenders. Community service appears to be a viable alternative to the imprisonment of adult non-violent offenders in a developing country setting.

Author note

The data used for this paper is from a broader study conducted by the first author in partial fulfilment of the award of a Master's Degree in Psychology.

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