



Court-Ordered Community Service A National Perspective

Court-ordered community service, often consisting of short-term mandates to clean up public spaces or work with local organizations, has been a staple of sentencing practice in the United States since the 1960s. Yet there has been surprisingly little study of how it is currently being used across the country. As more jurisdictions consider including community service as part of efforts to reform local justice systems, we wanted to know what kinds of rules regulate its use and explore its potential to function as an alternative to fines and fees or short-term jail.

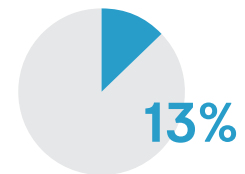
Our study draws on a survey of more than 600 lower-level criminal courts across the country.

What did we find?

1. Community service mandates are widely used; 65 percent of the courts we surveyed reported using community service as a sentencing option. While it is sometimes used as an *alternative* to other sentence types, particularly in lower jurisdiction courts, it more commonly functions as one component of a broader sentence (e.g., probation with a community service requirement).

2. Manual labor is by far the most common type of service work available to participants (three out of four courts), an obstacle to those unable to perform physical labor. More than one-third of courts reported participants are asked to identify their own service provider and many courts lack the infrastructure to effectively monitor compliance or the conditions of community service work.

Only 13% of courts reported running their own community service program



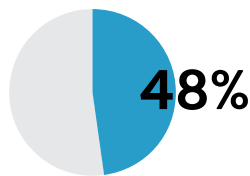
3. While three out of four courts say community service should function as an alternative to fines and fees, court practice on the ground does not always reflect this ideal:

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courts reported using community service in addition to the imposition of fines and fees

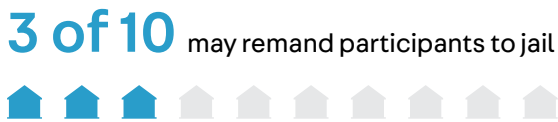
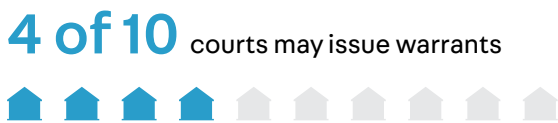
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courts responded that community service could be combined with jail sentences

- 4. Defendants with prior convictions, mental health issues, or physical disabilities were more likely to be flagged as inappropriate or ineligible for community service mandates, leaving them more vulnerable to financial sanctions or jail.
- 5. The practice of participants “working off” fine and fees via community service is endorsed by three-quarters of courts. We found no common standard for converting service hours into debt payments with defendants’ court costs often paid off at minimum wage. This can lead to lengthy service mandates—a challenge for participants with full-time paid employment, caregiver roles, etc.
- 6. Our survey uncovered great variability in how community service is meted out with decisions regarding mandate length often left up to the discretion of individual prosecutors and judges.

48% of courts said they have no standards for determining mandate length



- 7. For failing to complete community service:



Recommendations

With few exceptions, we found that court actors view reducing the impact of fines and fees to be an important aspect of community service. Realizing this ambition will require further development and professionalization of the field:

- 1. **Develop Models for the Field.** The widespread use of community service provides a basis for generating evidence-based models through future research. At the moment, there is no definitive model of community service, with courts reporting a diverse range of eligibility standards and mandate lengths, and a largely ad hoc approach to the administration and oversight of service programs.
- 2. **Diversify the Offerings.** More non-manual work options—including those put forward by community members themselves and online alternatives—would make community service more accessible and increase its profile within the community.
- 3. **Standardize Fine-to-Work Conversion Rates.** The absence of such standards places a burden on low-income and already marginalized individuals, leading to potentially onerous terms of service work.
- 4. **Change the Perception.** Our findings suggest community service is often viewed as a “safe” sentencing option, one more appropriate for first-time offenses, young people, and those without physical or mental challenges. This limits the ability of community service to function as a true alternative to jail and monetary sanctions.

For More Information

Read the full report: courtinnovation.org/publications/community-service

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