

UDK: 343.9
Received: 25. 09. 1996.

Juvenile Restitution in the United States: Bringing »justice« for Victims?

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Summary

In the United States, victim restitution programs are being used for juvenile offenders since the late 1970s. Victim restitution calls for a decision by a criminal/juvenile court and mostly, financial reimbursement made by an offender to his/her victim. The practice of victim restitution is now interwoven into the American juvenile justice system. As originally conceived, the purpose of these programs has been to restore victims to the conditions existent prior to their victimization. The inclusion of these programs in our juvenile justice system might lead the optimistic observer to conclude that victims' right to be recompensed by their offenders is on its way to being well ingrained in the justice process. The contention here is that the outcome of these programs is in conflict with the current philosophy of the American juvenile justice system – to punish, to incarcerate, and possibly, to deter. In this paper, the authors critically assess the practicality of these programs in achieving »justice« for victims.

Key words: victim restitution programs, juvenile offenders, United States

Introduction

Restitution calls for a decision by a criminal/juvenile court and payment by an offender to the victim. As Schafer (1972:26) maintains, »restitution is something an offender does and as it requires effort on his part, it is especially useful in strengthening his feelings of responsibility«.

The practice of restitution through court order is now interwoven into the American juvenile justice system, often alongside other sanctions like probation (Roy, 1995). Victim advocates contend that in case of property crime, the victim's primary interests are recovery and financial reparation. As originally conceived, the purpose of restitutive sentencing has been to restore victims to the conditions existent prior to victimization (Upson, 1987). This is what Friedman (1985) and Zehr (1989) consider to be a sentence that attempts to bring about »justice« for victims. Also, the very act of making restitution payments is assumed to be rehabilitative as well as punitive as the juvenile is forced to make reparation for the harm caused by his criminal act (Finn and Lee, 1987). By using restitutive

sentencing the state seeks to retribution on one side and deterrence and rehabilitation on the other. Consequently, since the late 1970s the use of juvenile restitution has gained remarkable significance in the United States.

Since the late 1970s, a notable development in the American juvenile justice system has been the introduction of victim rights to sentencing process. Victim rights advocates argue that victims have rights, just as offenders have rights. For instance, Margery Fry (1951), a leading British penologist asserts that victims have the right to financial recompense for the crimes they encounter. In the U.S., a number of Acts have been enacted at federal as well as state levels focusing on victim restitution. The inclusion of restitutive sanction in our juvenile justice system might lead the optimistic observer to conclude that the rights of victims are on their way to being well ingrained in the justice process. The contention here is that the sentencing of restitution is in conflict with the current philosophy of the juvenile justice system – to punish, to incarcerate, and possibly, to deter. Hence, the purpose of this article is to take a critical look at the impact

of juvenile restitution on victims since its inception during the late 1970s. First, the evolution of restitutive sentencing in the United States and the theoretical rationale (victim-oriented goal) of restitution is delineated. Second, the administration of juvenile restitution programs is discussed. Then, empirical studies on juvenile programs focusing on the victim-oriented goal restitution are reviewed. Finally, this article revisits the victim-oriented goal restitution and explicates the problems in achieving them.

Restitutive Laws and the Theoretical Rationale for Restitution

In the United States, although a few states started using restitutive sentence for juveniles during the late 1970s, there was no federal legislation on restitution until 1981. In 1982, the President's Task Force on Victims of Crime specifically recommended that judges should order restitution to victims in all cases in which the victim has suffered financial loss. The President's Task Force recommended (Executive and Legislative Recommendation 10) that –

Legislation should be proposed and enacted to accomplish following: require victim impact statements at sentencing; provide for the protection of victims from intimidation; require restitution to victims; and develop and implement guidelines for the fair treatment of crime victims (p. 33).

Following the recommendation, in the same year, the federal government enacted a restitutive law – the Victim Witness Protection Act (VWPA). Another significant federal legislation during the 1980's was the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) of 1984. A major contribution of VOCA was the establishment of the Crime Victim's Fund. This fund, originally capped at \$100 million, funded state victim compensation and victim assistance programs (Doerner and Lab, 1995). Furthermore, during the early 1990s, gains in victim rights came with the passage of the Crime Control Act (CCA) of 1990 (Doerner and Lab, 1995). One important component of the CCA was the »Victims' Rights and Restitution Act«. Probably the most remarkable aspect of the CCA was the creation of the federal Crime Victims' Bill of Rights; one of them was the right of the victim to restitution by his/her offender. The most recent federal legislation mandating restitution to victims was the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA) of 1994 (U.S. Department of Justice, Briefing Book, September 24, 1994). This Act mandates that in addition to property crimes, defendants be ordered to pay restitution to victims of sexual abuse and to victims of

federal child pornography offenses. Also, under this Act, the defendant must pay the full amount of the victim's losses, including costs incurred for medical services relating to physical and psychiatric care, lost income, and attorney's fees. In addition to the federal legislation's, the majority of the states have enacted restitutive laws. For instance, in 1991 the state of Ohio legislated selected victims' rights under the Ohio Revised Code to incorporate restitution for victims (Doerner and Lab, 1995). Overall, given this context that restitutive sentence has been codified into laws both federal and state levels, ostensibly chances are better than ever for victims to be recompensed for any damages inflicted on them by their offenders.

Victim advocates contend, the victim needs experience »justice« (Zehr, 1989). Restitution offers an excellent opportunity to satisfy this need. »Restitution is a mechanism for reintegrating victim interest into the justice system, for contributing to the state interest in reforming offenders, and for providing a punishment for the offenders« (Galaway, 1988:3). That is, in addition to punishing those who break the law, victims are provided with an opportunity to achieve »justice« by being directly recompensed by their offenders.

According to the proponents of restitution, the »victim-oriented« goal (reparative goal) of restitution is that this sentence provides victims with »an opportunity to claim all relevant losses« (McGillis, 1986:66) incurred through their victimization. »Restitutive sentencing responds to the growing interest in crime victims in the way that there is potential for reimbursements to the crime victims by their offenders« (Roy, 1990:32).

Administration of Juvenile Restitution Programs

Following the federal and state legislation's, restitutive sentences are being used for juvenile offenders across the United States. This sentence is used as a sole sanction or as a condition attached to probation or intensive supervision of juvenile offenders. Among the three types of victim restitution available in the U.S. (financial reimbursement, community service, and service to victim), the first two types are predominantly used with juvenile offenders.

Also, in the United States restitution programs for juveniles are administrated by two types of agencies – public and private. Public programs are mostly administered by juvenile Probate Courts or Family Courts. Private programs (e.g. Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs) are administered by private non-profit organizations like PACT

(Prisoners And Community Together) in Valparaiso and Michigan City, Indiana, and the Center for Community Justice in Elkhart, Indiana.

Court-based programs are operated at two levels – pre-adjudication (non-formal) and post-adjudication (formal), depending upon the jurisdiction. For instance, in Kalamazoo County, Michigan, the Country Juvenile Probate Court operates a restitution program at the »intake« level (Roy, 1993). This pre-adjudication program provides the Court an alternative to adjudication where victims suffer loss or damage to property. The main objectives are – the participants should be accountable for their unlawful acts; victims should be reimbursed financially by their offenders; the juveniles should complete the terms of their agreements; and consequently, recidivism should be reduced among the participants (Roy, 1993). The important point is, in these court-based programs, the offenders do not meet their victims face to face. The restitution agreement is signed by an intake/probation officer and the juvenile. One interesting point is that participation in non-formal programs is voluntary for the juveniles. Conversely, participation is mandatory in formal programs.

As mentioned earlier, private programs like VORP are operated by private agencies. Currently, there are more than one hundred VORPs operating across the country. The essence of the VORP process is a face to face encounter between the victim and the offender. For instance, juvenile cases are referred to the VORP by the Elkhart County Juvenile Court after adjudication (Roy, 1993). After a referral is received and screened, both the victim and the offender are contacted by the VORP staff. At that time, the program is explained and participation is solicited. If both parties agree to meet, the case is then assigned to a volunteer trained in mediation. Consequently, the victim and the offender meet face to face in the presence of the mediator. In these meetings, the facts of the cases are deliberated, restitution's negotiated, and agreements are reached regarding the nature and amount of reimbursements. The mediation and reconciliation are assumed to make the offenders accountable and responsible for their wrongdoing and also committed to financially reimburse the victims' damages. Regarding private programs like VORP, Zehr (1982: 66-67) contends,

The offender is held personally accountable through the VORP process. In a unique way, he or she is forced to confront the real consequences of his or her actions, to learn the human dimensions of a specific criminal act. In addition, the offender is encouraged to take responsibility for this or her own action.

At this point, some significant aspects of the VORP must be noted. First, participation in the

process is voluntary for both offenders and victims. Second, after they agree on repayments, restitution contracts are signed by both parties. Most of all, the VORP process does not involve any official from criminal justice agencies.

Empirical Studies on Juvenile Programs in the U.S.

Since the late 1970s empirical studies evaluating juvenile restitution programs in the United States have been reported to focus on their impact. Most of these studies focus on the percentages of successful completion of restitution contracts on the part of offenders.

In an evaluation of the National Juvenile Restitution Initiative during the late 1970s, the Institute of Policy Analysis found that a little over 86% of all referrals (financial reimbursements to victims and community service) successfully completed their restitution contracts (selected findings from this evaluation were reported by Armstrong et al., 1983).

Research conducted during the 1980s and 1990s has revealed findings similar to that reported by the IPA, and in some instances, the percentages of successful completion were significantly higher. For example, Haarman and Covington (1981) reported a success rate of 90.9% from their study in Jefferson County, Kentucky. Overall, the reported percentages of successful completion ranged from 57% to almost 100%. High percentages of successful completion have been reported from Summit County and Lucas County programs in Ohio (98% and 92% respectively; Fishbein et al., 1984), Lyme County Juvenile Restitution Center, Connecticut (89.8%; Crotty and Meier, 1980), Lake County, Indiana program (82%; Roy, 1995), Ada County, Idaho program (79%; Schneider, Schneider and Evers, 1981), and Kalamazoo County, Michigan program (78%; Roy, 1993). The most impressive of all has been the Orange County, California program; Binder and Shichor (1982) reported almost 100% completion.

Contrary to the high percentages of completion indicated above, several programs have been found to be successful in terms of victim reimbursements. A case in point is the Orleans Parish Juvenile Restitution Project, New Orleans, Louisiana. Hunt (1981) reported only 57% successful completion of restitution contracts. Also, Beck-Zierdt (1980) in her tri-county study in Minnesota found only 66% completion rate. Furthermore, Wilson (1983) reported 65% completion from his study on the Ventura County Restitution Project, California.

All the studies discussed so far in this section were conducted on court-based juvenile restitution programs. As for the VORPs in the U.S., a few research reports have been available. Coates and Gehm (1985) conducted an evaluation of six VORPs in Indiana and Ohio. In those six programs, about 90% of the restitution contracts were completed. However, the authors did not report their findings separately on adult and juvenile offenders (e.g. what percentages of adults and juveniles completed their restitution contracts). Regarding VORP, one study on victims and offenders was conducted by Umbreit (1988) in Minnesota focusing on client satisfaction. Both victims and offenders reported high levels of satisfaction. About 95% of the victims and 87% of the offenders believed that the VORP should be used as an alternative to the traditional sentencing of incarceration. However, one empirical study conducted by Umbreit and Coates (1992) reported 70% and 57% completion of restitution contracts from their study on VORPs for juveniles in Minneapolis and Albuquerque.

All those empirical studies on juvenile programs discussed above reported the percentages of juveniles completing their restitution contracts or repayments to their victims. One important limitation of those studies was that the researchers did not classify »first-time« and »repeat« offenders completing their financial reimbursements. Juvenile restitution programs across the country involve »first-time« as well as »repeat« offenders. Empirical studies on these programs need to report their findings separately on »first-time« and »repeat« offenders.

As for public and private programs utilizing restitution, McGilis (1986), Galaway (1988), and Schneider and Warner (1989) contended that private programs like VORP are more effective than public/court-based programs in terms of offenders making restitution payments to their victims. According to these scholars, because the offenders do not meet their victims face to face in public programs, the probability of completion of restitution contracts is lower than private programs.

During the early 1990s Roy (1993) conducted an evaluative study comparing a private program (in Kalamazoo County, Michigan) with a public program (VORP in Elkhart County, Indiana). The impact of the programs was measured in terms of the reparative goal of restitution, i.e. offender repayments to their victims. No significant difference in completion of restitution contracts was found between the two programs. One important fact was that participation by offenders in both programs was voluntary; consequently, voluntary participation in restitution programs turned out to be a significant factor in completing restitution con-

tracts. However, one valuable finding was that those juvenile offenders who had records of prior convictions and substance abuse histories were less successful than their counterparts with no such histories in completing their restitution contracts.

In sum, a number of empirical studies on juvenile restitution programs across the United States have been reported since the late 1970s. Almost all of them focused on the reparative goal of restitution; they reported the percentages of juveniles completing their financial reimbursements to their victims. Yet, the majority of them did not distinguish between »first-time« and »repeat« offenders completing their repayments. Research findings on completion of restitution contracts by these two groups of offenders are necessary for offender selection criteria. Also, for those juveniles who failed to complete their recompense, the majority of these studies overlooked the factors or characteristics (social/individual, case, and program) which led to their failure. If victim restitution is a priority in property and personal crimes, then these are significant issues for juvenile justice officials in terms of offender selection criteria for restitution programs.

Reparative Goal and Constraints in Achieving this Goal

As mentioned earlier, to consider victim rights, in the United States varied restitutive laws have been enacted at both federal and state legislatures since the 1980s. According to these laws, juveniles and/or their parents may be court-ordered to make financial recompense to the juveniles' victims. Consequently, restitutive sentences are being imposed on juvenile offenders across the country. Ideally, this sentencing provides the victim of a crime with an opportunity of financial reparation by his/her aggressor for the damage/s incurred through the victimization. This section takes a critical look at the impact of this sentencing on victims of crimes and explicates the problems in achieving the reparative goal of restitution.

First, the discussion on the findings from empirical studies on juvenile restitution programs in the United States indicates that regardless of public or private programs, or court-ordered or voluntary participation, not all juveniles who participated in these programs repaid their victims. At the lower end of the »range of completion of restitution contracts Parish Juvenile Restitution Project, New Orleans (Hunt, 1981) and the program in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Umbreit and Coates, 1992) – 57% completion. Interestingly, the first one was a public program while the second one was a private program (VORP). At the higher end of the range,

we found the program in Orange County, California (Binder and Shichor, 1982) – almost 100% completion.

In terms of completion of restitution contracts, there are two other concerns. The programs administrators apparently use term »completion« in a broad sense. It is not clear whether the term »completion« means that the offender makes one hundred percent financial reimbursement or makes the major part (less than 100%) of the reimbursement. In other words, the programs' objectives in reaching the reparative goal of restitution are not well-defined. Another issue is that research indicates that when repeat offenders and substance-abusing offenders are sentenced to these programs, the probability of their victims being reimbursed goes down, compared to first-time or low-risk offenders. The sentence of restitution is also punitive for juvenile offenders. Van den Haag (1985:86) maintains that punishment is essential to rehabilitate, because »without punishment rehabilitation is unlikely to take place«. Likewise, completion of reparative payments on behalf of the offender should be mandatory to make him/her accountable and responsible for unlawful behavior.

Second, law-imposed limitations on the amount of recoverable losses create another hurdle for victim reimbursement. An example of this comes from the state of New York. Article 60 mandates that financial reimbursement to victims should not exceed \$5,000 in felony convictions and \$1,000 in misdemeanors. Another example comes from subsections 18(12) and 44(7) of the State of Michigan House Bills 4558 and 4240 (for juvenile restitution) respectively. Under these subsections, the amount of restitution a juvenile is court-ordered to pay must not exceed \$2,500. That is, these subsections enforce a maximum limit for both misdemeanor and felony cases. Although many offenses do not involve such losses (B.J.S., 1989), it is conceivable that they could.

Third, »justice« for victims is hindered by the emphasis on the part of juvenile justice system to achieve the current goal of incapacitation/incarceration, despite an order by the court to make restitution payments to the victim. In this context, »the sentencing objectives of incapacitation and retribution may lead to a decision to incarcerate (the offender), thereby functionally excluding the possibility of restitution« (Brown, 1985:20). Clearly, an individual who is court-ordered to pay restitution but serving a prison sentence has blocked opportunities to meet the court-order (Cohen et al., 1985).

Fourth, when retribution is a significant consideration and restitution is ordered in conjunction with probation or parole, fear of failure due to financial hardship on the part of the offender beco-

mes a primary concern and victim's loss becomes secondary (Brown, 1985). When financial hardship for the juvenile offender and/or the offender's parents turns out to be the primary concern, the court may cancel all or part of the victim restitution ordered. A case in point is the subsection 18(8b) of the State of Michigan Bill 4558. This subsection mandates that the court must annul all or part of the amount of victim restitution due if it appears to the court that restitution payments will impose manifest hardship on the offender. Additionally, Bill 4558 is also concerned about the financial resources of the juvenile's parents. The subsection 18(14) stipulates that a parent who has been ordered to pay restitution under the subsection 18(12) may petition the court for a modification of the amount of restitution owed, or for a cancellation of any unpaid portion of restitution. Again, in this situation, the court should cancel all or part of the amount of restitution due, if it appears to the satisfaction of the court that payment of amount due will impose financial hardship over the victim's plight or loss. However, addressing this issue, Van den Haag (1975:236) asserts that »the amount (of restitution) should be independent of the offender's ability to pay and dependent on the financial loss suffered (by the victim). However, ability to pay should determine the rate of pay«.

By examining restitutive sentencing in our juvenile justice system it is doubtful that this sanction will fully meet the expectations of the proponents of victim restitution. The VWPA of 1982 provides excellent example. The Act specifically authorizes judges to order victim restitution for those convicted of property crimes. However, at the same time, the Act does not require imposition of this sentence. Instead, the Act indicates that sentence is not imposed, the judge merely needs to specify the reason(s) for not using it. The fact is – there are no specific standards against which these reasons can be assessed (Brown, 1985). Apparently, the concern primarily centers around how offenders may be adversely affected by this sentence. Consequently, the Act discourages imposition of restitutive sentence if it appears that such sentence would unduly complicate the sentencing process.

Finally, »justice« for victims is also hindered by emphasis on the part of juvenile justice system officials that the traditional sentencing option of incarceration should be considered first. When this is the case, »the traditional sentencing objectives of incarceration and retribution may lead to a court decision to incarcerate (the offender), thereby functionally excluding the possibility of restitution. Clearly, an offender serving a prison sentence has blocked opportunities to financially reimburse his victim for damages. Given this context, the victim's

right to be reimbursed for damages becomes secondary to the traditional sentencing objective of retribution.

An indication that restitutive sentence is not compatible with the current sentencing practices of the juvenile justice system is the conversion of restitution to other forms of punishment. Typically, if victim reparation is willfully not made, incarceration or unpaid community service immediately follows (Brown, 1985). The Court has the authority to alter the terms and conditions of restitution in favor of community service. Consequently, crimes initially defined as committed against an individual are subsequently redefined as crimes committed against the state.

Conclusion

The Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution provides »equal protection of law« for all people. The standard interpretation of this promise is that federal as well as state criminal justice systems should consider issues like social class, race/ethnicity, nationality, religion, and gender as irrelevant to the administration of justice. Traditionally, criminologists and political activists have applied this important principle of equal protection to the way suspects, defendants, and convicts are handled by justice system officials or agencies (Karmen, 1996). Typically, the main focus has been discriminatory treatment of poor or minority offenders. To draw an analogy, the issue of »crime« is like a coin having two sides – victim on the one side and offender on the other. To comprehend the issue of crime, we need to equally concentrate on both sides of the coin. We have traditionally been concerned about offenders. Until recently, the equally significant fact of discriminatory treatment of victims has escaped notice (Karmen, 1996).

The proponents of victims' rights advocated for legislation of their rights for centuries across the world. In the United States, to consider victims' rights the federal and state legislatures have enacted restitution laws. Some proponents of restitution stress that in addition to financially balancing the scales, restitutive sentence can help in the victim adjustment process. For instance, Zehr (1985) contends that when victims participate in the sentencing process of their aggressors, they feel that justice is being served and gain a better understanding of the situation. Put another way, participation in the sentencing process and/or at least being financially repaired by their offenders for damages caused by crimes can help victims gain a sense of »justice«.

A careful examination of restitutive laws and juvenile restitution in the United States suggests that restitutive sentencing conflicts with the traditional sentencing goals. While on the surface victims stand a better chance of being recompensed for losses due to crimes than before, they are far from achieving equal support or emphasis within our justice system. Although the original purpose of restitution has been to restore victims back to the same financial status as prior to their victimization, this paper has explicated a number of problems in reaching that goal.

It also appears that is a lack of commitment on the part of the juvenile justice system officials to make restitution a functional alternative to incarceration or other forms of traditional punishment. A case in point is the practice of converting reparation to victims to unpaid community service when restitution payments are willfully not made. Evidently, the juvenile justice system wants to use heavier hand when the state opts for retribution by using sentence than when individual victims benefit.

The fact is, crime victims suffer from what officials consider as their own victimization and also exploitation by the justice system (Elias, 1986). Victims suffer not by competing with defendants, whose rights are regularly honored in the breach, but rather by competing with official objectives. For victims, the ultimate result is the state opting for retribution against offenders through incarceration.

Overall, it appears that the contents and current use of restitutive sentencing are, for the most part, contrary to its symbolic meaning. Until the juvenile justice system adjusts its orientation and places equal importance on both offenders and victims, no appreciable change in the pursuit of »justice« for victims will be seen. As Elias (1986:231) concludes,

Research suggests that victims function to bolster state legitimacy, to gain political mileage, and enhance social control. By championing the victim's cause, government may portray itself as the friend of victims. Victims may provide considerable political advantage for officials seeking re-election and political support, such as sponsoring popular victim compensation programs. And victims may help promote greater social control, by not benevolently as an age-old formula reducing victimization, but rather as a rationale for enhancing state power.

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