

Community
Service For
Repeat
Misdemeanor
Offenders in
New York City

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By

Gail A. Caputo, Ph.D.

Douglas Young

Rachel Porter

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Additional copies of this report can be obtained from: Communications Department, Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th Floor, New York, New York 10279. (212) 334-1300. FAX: (212) 941-9407.

Requests for additional information about the research described in this report should be directed to Rachel Porter, Research Associate, at the above address, or to rporter@vera.org.

Executive Summary

In 1997, the New York City Council and the New York City Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator asked the Vera Institute of Justice to conduct a study of the Community Service Sentencing Project (CSSP), the city's largest alternative-to-incarceration (ATI) program. Established in 1979 and operated by the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services (CASES) since 1989, CSSP is one of the few community service programs in the country designed as an alternative to jail or prison. CSSP supervises adults with histories of misdemeanor offenses who are sentenced to perform 10 or 15 days of unpaid labor in low-income neighborhoods and provides services to assist offenders through the program. The study, conducted between January and June 1998, produced four main findings.

CSSP is supervising adult repeat misdemeanants as intended

The 146 offenders ordered to CSSP between December 5, 1997 and February 18, 1998 had accumulated a median of 14 prior arrests and 10 prior misdemeanor convictions. In the negotiations leading to the CSSP sentence, prosecutors initially sought a jail or prison term for all but two of them. In addition, the official criminal history of the average offender ordered to the program has increased in length over the past three years.

Most offenders are supervised effectively by CSSP

The rate of program completion for all offenders ordered to the program—66 percent in fiscal year 1998—exceeded the city's requirements. For those actually admitted to CSSP, 73 percent completed the program. These rates are consistent with those of the recent past, although the program is supervising offenders with lengthier criminal histories. Three individuals in the study group were terminated for new arrests. Twenty-four others were rearrested, but they either were terminated for not complying with program rules or completed the work requirements. Only one in the study group was arrested for a violent offense, and he was terminated from the program for that reason. CSSP reports all those who fail to complete the program to the court through the city's centralized screening agency. In this way, the system takes the first step in the process of holding these offenders accountable.

Offenders, CSSP staff, and community representatives have favorable views of CSSP

Offenders and staff say the program is well-ordered and well-managed. Also, community service through CSSP is helpful to offenders and to the community, benefiting each in different ways. Offenders say their experiences made them feel better about themselves and enabled them to "pay back" the community for their offenses. Community representatives appreciate the work and value their own involvement in the criminal justice system.

CSSP's five-day participant evaluation is an early indicator of termination

Several offender, court processing, and programmatic factors played a role in completion. The most helpful factors are the management strategies used by CSSP to evaluate and monitor the offenders' performance at an early stage. In their evaluations of offenders after five workdays, CSSP managers were able to identify the people who would eventually terminate the program, and CSSP staff responded appropriately, for example, with increased home visits.

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Introduction

Each year, the New York City Office of the Criminal Justice Coordinator and City Council collectively spend about 11 million dollars on 11 alternative-to-incarceration programs (ATIs). The Community Service Sentencing Project (CSSP) is one of those programs. It handles more offenders than any other ATI in the system and represents the city's largest ATI expense.

CSSP—established by the Vera Institute of Justice in 1979 and operated by the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services, Inc. (CASES) since 1989—supervises adult repeat misdemeanants as they perform community service work in low-income neighborhoods throughout the city. While the city's other ATIs supervise felony defendants and provide treatment, CSSP is a short-term, punitive alternative for chronic misdemeanor offenders. CSSP differs from other ATIs that include community service components in their programs because community service is the only sanction the courts impose on the offenders in CSSP.

In 1997, the city asked Vera to evaluate CSSP. This report presents the findings, which update and expand Vera's 1986 evaluation of CSSP. This report is the third in a series on the city's ATIs that Vera will issue over the next few years. This report answers four sets of questions about CSSP:

- Who are the offenders ordered to CSSP? Are they the people the program is designed to supervise?
- How effectively does CSSP supervise these offenders? How many complete the program? How many are arrested for new offenses during the time they are in CSSP? Are they held accountable when they fail to complete the program?
- How do offenders, staff, and the community perceive CSSP?
- What factors relating to the program and participants are associated with completion?

Program History and Description

The Original Demonstration

CSSP began as a demonstration project in Bronx County in 1979. The central aim of the demonstration was to provide a productive, community-based sanction for two groups of adult misdemeanants: those who would have served jail sentences of three months or less and those who would have received less severe sanctions, such as probation or a fine. Half of CSSP's population was meant to be jail-bound offenders.

CSSP was the first program of its kind in New York City and one of the first in the country. The program necessitated a change in the penal law that authorized a conditional discharge (CD), which required 70 hours (10 days) of community service work under the direction of CSSP. The sentencing court retained jurisdiction over the case until the offender completed the community service and complied with all other court-ordered conditions. Entry criteria excluded people with unstable residence, drug or alcohol dependency, and mental health problems because, it was assumed, these conditions would impede completion. People with histories of violent crime, presumed to pose a threat to public safety, were also excluded. Jail-bound offenders needed at least one prior conviction to qualify for the program. Staff members stationed in the court identified potential program candidates and advocated for their release to the program.

In 1984, Vera conducted research on CSSP. By then, the program had expanded to Manhattan and Brooklyn. Findings indicate that the rearrest rates of CSSP participants six months after completing the program were equivalent to those of a matched group of offenders six months after completing a jail sentence. Moreover, in 1984, CSSP participants worked an estimated 60,000 hours—a value of \$270,000 (based on the minimum wage). However, the research also indicates that CSSP was only effective in diverting Manhattan-based offenders from jail. In response, the program's selection practices in Brooklyn and the Bronx were changed to admit a larger proportion of offenders headed for jail.

The Evolution of CSSP

In 1989, the city and state governments established CASES to operate CSSP and another ATI, the Court Employment Project (CEP). By then, CSSP had expanded to Queens.

Consistent with its original mission, CSSP seeks to "provide a sentencing option that delivers punishment to repeat misdemeanor offenders and restitution to the community." Today, however, it is designed to serve only offenders headed for jail and has a 15-day community service sentence in addition to the original ten-day term. In past years, the program admitted more than 1,500 offenders annually. During fiscal year 1998, CSSP contracted with the city to serve 3,000 offenders but received fewer than 730 sentenced offenders from the courts.

At the start of 1998, CSSP had a staff of about 40. Upper management included the executive director of CASES and the associate director for CSSP. Two borough directors manage two central offices. Staffs of the Site Unit, the Compliance Unit, and the Support Service Unit are actively involved in supervising offenders. The Site Unit oversees the community service work and records attendance. The Compliance Unit, comprised exclusively of retired law enforcement officers, encourages attendance through daily telephone calls and home visits, and is authorized to execute bench (arrest) warrants for people under CSSP supervision.

The Support Services Unit meets basic needs, such as food and transportation. The program refers participants who need services such as substance abuse treatment, legal counsel, and financial help to other agencies. The fundamental purpose of the Unit is to help the offenders manage obstacles that may prevent them from completing the program. However, the staff hopes the assistance will also benefit offenders after they complete the program.

In an effort to centralize ATI placement, the city recently shifted certain functions of the ATIs—targeting and selecting defendants, advocating for their release to the ATI, and reporting to the court on their progress—to a new agency, the Central Court Screening Service (CCSS). The criteria for selecting offenders for ATI placement, in use since July 1, 1997, was developed by the parent organization of CCSS—the New York City Criminal Justice Agency (CJA). CJA built the criteria on a statistical model employed in the past by CASES for estimating terms of incarceration. The lower than expected number of offenders sentenced to CSSP during fiscal year 1998 is probably attributable to the implementation of this new method for selecting offenders.

Initially, this system used graduated terms of community service: 8, 12, 18, and 22 days. The 8 and 12-day terms correspond with a sentencing scheme known as Model A, which classifies people likely to receive between 20 and 45 days of jail time. The 18 and 22-day terms correspond with Model B, applied to people likely to receive a jail sentence of between 46 and 180 days. (The city also has a Model C scheme for felony defendants discharged to ATIs.) In early 1998, the city implemented a two-tiered system of 10-day terms (Model A) and 15-day terms (Model B).

Participating in CSSP

Upon release to CSSP, offenders are ordered to report daily to the base sites in the boroughs of their residence. If offenders do not report within three weeks of their release or do not complete the sentence within two months, the sentencing court issues a declaration of delinquency, and people are terminated. The workday begins at 9:00 a.m. and ends at 4:30 p.m. Breakfast and lunch are provided. Approximately one and one-half hours of work are performed each day at the base sites (located within housing projects) and the remaining hours are spent working at nonprofit agencies in low-income neighborhoods throughout the four boroughs. When an offender completes the program, CSSP notifies the court through CCSS, and the court retains jurisdiction over the case for up to one year.

Study Group and Method

The study group is comprised of the 146 offenders ordered to CSSP between December 5, 1997 and February 18, 1998. We identified the group using weekly attendance lists provided by the program and CJA.

Four sets of data were collected. First, we obtained information about the offenders' backgrounds, criminal histories, and current cases from the CASES information system.

Second, we conducted interviews with 86 of the offenders soon after they entered the program. We administered a widely used standardized measure, the Addiction Severity Index (ASI), to record demographics and to assess criminal history, education, employment, income, substance use, treatment history, health, and social relationships. The 86 interviewees were representative of the larger group.

Third, we conducted second interviews with 58 of the 86 offenders after they had participated in the program for about one week. The interview addressed the participants' CSSP experience—including work they had performed and assistance they had received—and their perceptions of the community service sanction.

Fourth, we collected data on the offenders' performance from CASES paper files and information system. This information pertained to attendance and completion as well as to the program's efforts to ensure compliance. We also interviewed twelve CSSP employees and representatives of eight community agencies that hosted CSSP work crews.

Findings

Who Are the Offenders Ordered to CSSP? Are They the People the Program is Designed to Supervise?

CSSP is an alternative sanction designed for adults who have histories of misdemeanor offenses. The study confirms that the offenders ordered to the program during the study period have had persistent involvement in low-level offending. They also have longer criminal histories than those ordered to the program in the past three years and face employment, substance abuse, and health problems, in addition to recurrent involvement with the criminal justice system.

Case Information. At their arraignments, 86% of the study group were charged with misdemeanors. These charges were primarily for petty larceny and criminal possession of stolen property. Fourteen percent of the group were charged with felonies, which included offenses against persons (robbery and assault), offenses involving property (grand larceny, burglary, and criminal possession of stolen property), and drug offenses (criminal possession and sale of a controlled substance). All of the felony charges were eventually reduced to misdemeanors.

During the processing of these cases, the prosecutor offers a sentence to the defendant. This sentence offer provides a rough sense of whether the prosecutor considered the case worthy of incarceration. All but two offenders were offered jail or prison terms. For most, the terms were less than two months (Table 1).

At sentencing, all offenders received a conditional discharge to CSSP. The sentence requires that offenders remain under the jurisdiction of the court for up to one year and that they comply with the community service order. In a majority of cases, the order was to perform 8, 10, or 12 days of community service (Model A). Eight days of work was the norm, but this will change as more people are ordered under the 10 and 15 day terms. Thirty-three percent were ordered to perform 15, 18, or 22 days (Model B).

The community service order carries a "promised" sentence, the recommended sanction should the offender fail to complete the program. Most of these sentences were for jail terms greater than four months—consistently longer than the first sentence offers. Given what is commonly known about the importance of prior records in the sentencing process, the promised sentences probably reflect judges' reactions not only to the current case, but also to the offenders' prior crimes.

Table 1. Current Case Information on Study Group (N=146)^a

	Percent
Highest Arraignment Charge Level	
Felony	14%
Misdemeanor	86%
Sentence Offer	
Less than 2 months in jail ^b	17%
Between 2 and 4 months in jail	26%
More than 4 months in jail (or prison)	
Promised Sentence if Violated	
Less than 2 months in jail	14%
2-4 months in jail	69%
More than 4 months in jail (or prison)	
Days of Community Service Ordered	
Model A (8, 10, 12 days)	33%
Model B (15, 18, 22 days)	67%

^a Due to missing data, numbers in tables throughout this report may not sum to the appropriate total. ^b Includes two cases in which the offer was a conditional discharge to CSSP, which includes no jail time. One person who received an offer of an unspecified jail term followed by probation is excluded from categories within "Sentence Offer" entirely.

Criminal History. As Table 2 shows, offenders in CSSP have significant histories of low-level crimes, with a median of 14 prior arrests and 10 prior misdemeanor convictions. In addition, their prior offenses were primarily theft-related, and very few have histories of violent offending. The table also shows that the offenders' median number of prior arrests and misdemeanor convictions has increased over the last three fiscal years. The increases are probably attributable to changes in the statistically-based selection criteria used by CASES and CCSS to exclude offenders not headed for jail.

Table 2. Criminal History Data for Offenders Ordered to CSSP: 1995-1998

	Second Half FY 95 N=835	FY 96 N=1613	FY 97 N=1113	First Half FY 98 ^a N=239	Study Group ^b N=146
Prior Arrests	7	8	11	13	14
	69%	74%	87%	88%	85%
Median	39%	43%	58%	64%	65%
% with 5 or more	14%	15%	23%	34%	36%
% with 10 or more					
% with 20 or more					
Prior Misdemeanor Convictions	4	5	7	10	10
Median	47%	51%	69%	75%	74%
% with 5 or more	26%	26%	39%	52%	47%
% with 10 or more					
Prior Felony Convictions	1	1	1	1	1
Median	39%	39%	34%	33%	31%
% with none	33%	32%	31%	25%	29%
% with 1	28%	29%	35%	42%	40%
% with 2 or more					
Total Prior Convictions	5	6	8	12	13
Median	55%	60%	79%	83%	83%
% with 5 or more	30%	31%	45%	60%	57%
% with 10 or more					

^a Data represent offenders sentenced between 7/1/97 and 12/4/97. ^b Offenders sentenced between 12/5/97 and 2/18/98.

Demographics, Education, Employment. The demographic characteristics of the group, outlined in Table 3, are similar to those of offenders sentenced to the program in the past. The average participant is 34 years old, more than four-fifths are men, and 61 percent are African-American.

Table 3. Study Group Characteristics

	Frequency or Average	
Gender		
Female	17%	
Male	83%	N=146
Age	34	
Mean/Median	19-65	N=146
Range		
Marital Status	72%	
Single	21%	
Married/Common law	7%	N=145
Separated/Divorced		
Ethnicity	61%	
African American	28%	
Hispanic	10%	N=145
White or Other		
Educational Level	42%	
Less than high school	39%	
High school diploma/GED	19%	N=142
Some college/college grad		

Employment Status Prior to Sentencing	77%	
Unemployed	23%	N=137
Employed		
Employment Income for Month Before Admission	\$512	N=20 ^a
Mean		
Months at Current Residence	48 months	N=146
Median		
Reports Using Heroin, Cocaine, or Crack Regularly Before Program Entry	16%	N=85
Reports History of Substance Abuse in Family	65%	N=85
Reports Having Chronic Medical Problems	59%	N=85
Reports Ever Experiencing Depression or Anxiety	53%	N=86
Reports Recent Conflict in Non-Familial Relationships	35%	N=86

^a Includes only employed persons who reported this information.

Many offenders in CSSP suffer from difficulties beyond criminal activity. Although most have at least a high school education, unemployment is a problem for more than three-quarters. The 86 offenders with whom we spoke have relatively stable residential histories, but their longest stay at a job averaged only three years. And the incomes of those who worked during the month prior to their sentencing were low, averaging \$512. When asked how they felt about their employment situations, more than two-thirds said they would like vocational assistance.

Substance Abuse, Medical Health, Mental Health. As Table 3 shows, only 16 percent of those interviewed reported regular use of heroin, crack, or powdered cocaine in the month before admission to the program. However, most of them reported histories of

drug problems. Sixty-one percent had attended a drug-treatment program, and more than half had used heroin, crack, or powdered cocaine on a regular basis for a year or longer.

In addition, twenty percent reported regular methadone use and slightly more than half said they drank alcohol at least once during the month prior to admission.

Moreover, almost 60 percent of the interviewees reported chronic medical problems, and the majority said depression and anxiety were problems. Very few said that they had received any counseling or treatment, however. About one-third said conflict in familial and other personal relationships were problems.

How Effectively Does CSSP Supervise These Offenders? How Many Complete the Program? How Many Are Arrested for New Offenses During the Time They Are in CSSP? Are the Offenders Held Accountable When They Fail to Complete the Program?

There are two central measures of the program's performance: completion rates and holding offenders accountable. To be considered a success, the program must ensure that a high percentage of offenders finish their work requirements, and that those who fail to complete the program do not escape consequences. The process of accountability involves not only the program, but the sentencing court. However, the program itself must initiate this process, and it is this first step that is used here as a measure of the program's performance.

Completion. The findings pertaining to completion are notable because, as previously discussed, the program is taking on offenders with longer criminal histories. To evaluate completion rates, we considered the program's contractual obligations and past performance. CSSP's completion rate (66%) is slightly lower in fiscal year 1998 than it was in the previous two and one-half years, but exceeds the contractual obligation with the city to achieve a 60 percent rate under Model A and a 55 percent rate under Model B. However, 74 people who never reported to the program are included in this fiscal year 1998 rate. Since CSSP no longer handles the selection of people to its program, and since the first contact between offenders and program staff occurs at program intake, failure to report may now be more of a system issue than a program performance issue. Removing these people from consideration generates a completion rate of 73 percent for the 1998 fiscal year.

Table 4. Completion Status of CSSP Participants: 1995-1998^a

	Second Half FY 95 N=834	FY 96 N=1612	FY 97 N=1105	FY 98 N=714
Completed	68%	72%	73%	66%
Terminated	32%	28%	27%	35%

^a Cases with missing data and those abated by death are excluded. For FY 98, 46 people pending completion are counted completed, since their performance is favorable, and eight people who were rejected by CSSP as ineligible for the program are excluded.

In the study group also, 74 percent of those who were admitted to the program completed it (Table 5). The differences in completion rates for those in Model A and Model B are not statistically significant—the number of hours sentenced does not affect completion.

Table 5. Completion Status by Sentencing Model for the Study Group^a

	Model A N=88	Model B N=46	Total N=134
Completed	78%	65%	74%
Terminated	22%	35%	26%

^a Twelve offenders rejected at intake or who never reported to the program are excluded.

Reasons for Termination. Three participants were terminated from the program for new arrests, all on theft-related offenses, including one robbery. They represent two percent of the 134 entering the program during the study period. All remaining participants who did not complete failed for program rule violations—usually absenteeism (Table 6).

Table 6. Reasons for Termination from CSSP

	Frequency
Unacceptable work performance	1
Voluntary resignation	1
Rearrested on new charge	3
Failed to attend regularly (absconded)	30
Total Terminated	35

Arrest During Program Supervision. Information provided by CJA indicates that, in addition to the three participants terminated for new arrests, 24 others were arrested during program supervision—all for nonviolent crimes—but were not terminated for the new arrest. Eleven completed the program despite the arrest, 12 others were among those terminated for absconding, and one remained in the program after the arrest and was eventually terminated for inadequate performance.

Because CSSP participants are habitual petty offenders, the city, CSSP, and CCSS expect that some will be arrested on new charges during the program. The offenders are supervised only during work hours and they can remain in the program for up to two months. The program and CCSS have developed policies and systems to deal with the rearrests. CSSP’s policy is to inform the court, through CCSS, of all rearrests and accept guidance from the court in determining whether the participant should be terminated or allowed to complete the program. At present, CSSP tracks rearrests only for those participants who have been absent for two consecutive days. The program then informs CCSS with a telephone call, and CCSS in turn informs the court. Additionally, CCSS has designed and is planning the implementation of a system to report to the program all new arrests listed on a court calendar. Hence, the systems designed by the agencies for tracking and reporting new arrests are operational in many cases, but they are not yet fully implemented. However, if the people who were rearrested are terminated from the program—whether for new arrests or for noncompliance—the program systematically reports the terminations to the court through CCSS.

Accountability. The offenders in the study group who completed the program have been held accountable for the actions that led to their placement in CSSP. The program also has taken the first step toward holding accountable those who failed to complete it. CSSP has declared the 45 offenders in this category (10 who never reported, 3 who were terminated for new arrests, and 32 who were terminated for absconding, resigning, or performing poorly) delinquent to the court through CCSS. Table 7, showing responses to CCSSP’s terminations, indicates that, at this early stage in the process, 15 of the 45 offenders have been resentenced for their failure in the program. Fourteen of them received jail terms consistent with those promised by the original sentencing judge, and one—terminated for inadequate attendance—was resentenced to a drug treatment program.

All of the offenders who were rearrested face processing on the new charges. Those who were terminated from the program also face resentencing for the termination. For example, two of the three offenders terminated for new arrests are among those who have been resentenced for their termination (for 9 and 6 months) and they also await processing on the new charges. The third, rearrested on a robbery charge, faces resentencing for the termination and is in pretrial detention for the new charge. For the 11 rearrested offenders who completed the program, however, it is not clear whether the original sentencing judges were informed of the arrests before the offenders completed the program.

Table 7. Court Response to Termination^a

	Reason for Termination			
	Never Showed	Inadequate Performance or Resignation	Inadequate Attendance	Arrest on New Charge
Bench warrant issued	5	-	12	-
Restored to calendar	2	-	5	-
Detained	-	-	-	1
Resentenced	3	2	8	2
Response unknown	-	-	5	-
Total Terminated	10	2	30	3

^a The two offenders rejected at intake are excluded.

Measuring Supervision: Compliance Efforts, Attendance, and Duration of Supervision

Compliance. The Compliance Unit maintains contact with participants through telephone calls and home visits. On average, participants who completed the program received 14 telephone calls and those who were terminated received 17 (Table 8). There was much greater variance in home visits: Those who were terminated were visited about twice as frequently as those who completed the program. Those who completed logged an average of 7 unauthorized absences, compared to 17 for those who were terminated.

Table 8. Compliance Efforts, Attendance, and Program Performance

	Group Completing N=99	Group Terminated N=35
Mean number of phone calls received	14	17
Mean number of home visits received	3	6
Mean number of authorized absences	1	1
Mean number of unauthorized absences	7	17
Five-day evaluation	81%	0%
Rated outstanding or good	19%	100%
Rated fair or poor	(N=63)	(N=11)

Analyses showed a strong positive association between the number of unauthorized absences and the number of home visits. Together, these findings show that poor attendance is highly associated with termination, and that compliance staff respond to people who are likely to fail with phone calls and, especially, home visits.

After participants complete five and ten workdays in the program, CSSP staff evaluate them in five areas (work performed; behavior at the work site; and attitudes toward supervisor, community service, and other participants). The five and ten day evaluations do not necessarily occur on the fifth or tenth workday for each participant, but should take place soon thereafter. These data were not available on the entire sample either because people left the program before the evaluations took place, or because the information was not recorded in time for our analyses. However, all participants for whom data are available and who were eventually terminated were given unfavorable ratings after the five-day mark, while about four-fifths of those completing received favorable ratings. In addition to identifying individuals at risk of failure, the ratings are used as eligibility criteria for future admission to CSSP.

Days in Attendance. While participants who completed and those who did not spent about the same number of days under supervision, the former had much better attendance rates. As Table 9 indicates, the average participant who completed the program worked 13 of 21 days under supervision and was absent eight days or 38 percent of this time. By contrast, the average participant who was terminated worked only four of 22 days under supervision and was absent 18 days (82 percent of the time). These rates of absenteeism for people completing and people terminated are statistically similar for people who received the shorter sentences (Model A) and people who received the longer sentences (Model B).

Table 9. Duration of Supervision by Completion Status

	Group Completing	Group Terminated	
		Rule Violations ^a	New Arrests
Mean number of authorized absences	1	1	0
Mean number of unauthorized absences	7	18	7
Mean number of days in attendance	13	4	6
Number in Group	99	32	3

^a This category includes inadequate attendance, inadequate performance, and resignation.

How do Offenders, Staff, and the Community Perceive CSSP?

Perception of Program Functioning. In addition to collecting objective information, we elicited opinions of the program. We used three subscales of a standardized measure—the Community Oriented Program Environment Scale (COPEs)—to assess the program’s social climate. The scales measure views of the program’s order, degree of control over participants, and clarity of mission. Twelve staff members and 23 participants completed the measure. Staff members and offenders had similarly favorable views, showing mean scores slightly above the midpoint on each scale.

Benefits of Community Service. The group completing CSSP logged 8,220 hours of community service, which, based on the minimum wage, has a value of \$42,333. Most of the work involved carpentry (building bookcases) and janitorial maintenance (painting, floor waxing, and graffiti removal). Even though they were not allowed to select their work, most of the people with whom we spoke said that they were interested in the labor and that it matched their skills.

We spoke to eight representatives of community agencies receiving the work. They all had positive views both of the program and the offenders. None reported victimization and all wanted the program expanded. CSSP identifies reparation as a central goal of the program, and the representatives acknowledged and appreciated the reparative value of the work. They said that they enjoyed being correctional agents in the criminal justice system, that their organizations gained from involvement in CSSP, and that the program was a sensible punishment for people with histories of nonviolent offending.

CSSP is not designed as treatment. Nonetheless, participants said that they benefited from the program. Slightly more than 90 percent of those interviewed after a week in the program said that it was designed to help them. Almost 95 percent said that the program helped them to become more responsible, accountable, and law-abiding and to develop a mindset for conventional work. Most said that the work made them feel better about themselves and enabled them to compensate for wrongful acts. CSSP administrators have no illusions about the capacity of a short-term community service program to reform offenders. However, it is evident that, at least in the short-term, most participants respond favorably to program requirements.

What Factors Relating to the Program and Participants are Associated with Completion?

We performed statistical analyses of all the data on the study group to identify factors associated with completion and termination. Completion status was the outcome variable for these analyses. Three sets of variables were included in the analyses: participant background characteristics, criminal history and current case information, and experience in the program.

Participant Background Factors. Using both program-recorded data on the 134 offenders who entered CSSP and information obtained in interviews with the smaller group, these analyses considered several factors, including demographics, education, employment, substance abuse, and medical and mental health.

The analyses found that employment status at the time people were screened by CCSS for placement and self-reported drug dependency were the only factors that played a significant role in completion. Compared to those who completed the program, people who failed were 19 percent more likely to be unemployed and 20 percent more likely to report that they were drug-dependent when they entered the program. Although both factors were statistically related to completion, the magnitude of the relationship is small by research standards.

We tested for a range of other variables, none of which played a significant role in program completion: duration of longest held job, a reported need for vocational assistance, annual income, age, gender, ethnicity, length at current residence, reported mental health problems, chronic medical problems, and conflict in social relationships.

Current Case Information. Prosecutors' sentence offer before the discharge to CSSP and judges' promised sanctions upon violation of the CD lend more insight into completion and termination. As the findings in Table 10 show, participants who were initially offered jail terms of greater than two months were more likely to be terminated than those offered terms of two months or less. Similarly, people who were promised longer terms of incarceration were terminated more frequently than those promised shorter terms. People promised more than four months were terminated at a slightly greater rate than those promised between two and four months, and at a much greater rate than those promised less than two months. All three who were terminated due to rearrest received the longest promised term.

The decisions of prosecutors and judges play a role in completion status, while other court processing information—such as offense type and number of hours of community service ordered—and measures of criminal history did not. People who completed the program and those who were terminated did not differ on any criminal history measures,

including the number of prior arrests, time spent incarcerated as a youth, misdemeanor and felony convictions, the number and length of prior terms of incarceration, and number of days since last conviction. Nor did the two groups differ on current case information. People arraigned on felony-level offenses were not terminated at a greater rate than those arraigned on misdemeanors. Conviction charge, days of community service ordered, and number of days detained were also equivalent for the two groups.

Table 10. Participant and Program Factors Associated with Completion

Current Case Information	Percent Completing	Percent Terminated		
Sentence Offer ^a	85%	16%	100%	N=71
Two months or less in	63%	37%	100%	N=60
More than two months in jail or prison				
Promised Sentence if Violated ^b	95%	5%	100%	N=22
Less than 2 months in jail	71%	29%	100%	N=17
Between 2 and 4 months in jail	69%	31%	100%	N=91
More than 4 months in jail				
Program Performance Information				
Five-Day Evaluation ^c				N=51
Outstanding or Good	100%	0%	100%	N=23
Fair or Poor	52%	48%	100%	
	Group Completing	Group Terminated		
Unauthorized Absences ^d		17		
Mean	7 (N=98)	(N=34)		
Home Visits ^e		6		
Mean	3 (N=98)	(N=34)		

^a Excludes one person who was offered an unspecified jail term followed by probation; includes in the category 2 months or less in jail two people who received a conditional discharge offer to CSSP; $\chi^2=7.736$, $p < .01$, Cramer's $V=.243$.

^b $\chi^2=6.416$, $p < .05$, Cramer's $V=.222$. ^c $\chi^2=28.650$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V=.622$. ^d $t=-6.717$, $p < .001$, $r=.490$. ^e $t=-3.595$, $p < .001$, $r=.366$.

The findings seem to contradict the increasingly cited notion that "coercion works." Threats of dire legal consequences for failure did not have the effect of increasing compliance and retention; in fact, more severe promised sentences and plea offers were factors in termination. Second, they suggest that prosecutors and judges make judgments that are more accurate than official criminal records in predicting whether an offender will complete the program. Judges and attorneys may use factors that do not appear in the record to make assessments and identify offenders who present greater risk (and, in turn, to make more severe offers and promise more severe sentences). These factors could include, for example, in the case of prosecutors, prior experience with a defendant, and demeanor in the courtroom, attitude toward criminal responsibility, or the presence of family members in the case of judges. It may also be that failure is simply a reaction to the more punitive court process—a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, offenders who receive more punitive first plea offers and more punitive threats for violation may internalize these formal reactions and respond negatively. We will revisit these issues in future analyses.

Program Performance Information. The program-specific information proved most useful for understanding completion. The most significant factor is the five-day evaluation, followed by the number of unauthorized absences and the number of home visits by compliance staff.

Among all the data available, the five-day site evaluation was the most helpful for distinguishing between the group completing and the group terminated. As Table 10 indicates, all people receiving favorable evaluations sometime after five workdays at CSSP completed the program, but almost half of those who received unfavorable evaluations were terminated. All of those terminated received poor evaluation scores. According to the evaluations, all people terminated had unfavorable attitudes toward the work, their supervisor, and other participants, poor work performance, and unacceptable behavior at the host (work) sites.

Offenders who were terminated also accumulated significantly more unauthorized absences. And, there is a strong connection between poor performance evaluations and absenteeism. People receiving fair/poor evaluations who completed may have been on the verge of termination based on the average number of days they were absent from the program (17), which is the same as the average for those who terminated. As mentioned earlier, data show that as the number of absences increased, so did home visits. This indicates that the program has good enforcement strategies in place. The performance evaluation identifies people early on who are likely to accumulate absences and who eventually terminate. CSSP uses these evaluations and the number of absences to direct supervision. This analysis suggests that CSSP could explore additional ways to use this early evaluation to increase compliance.

Other variables that we considered did not account for completion: the borough, type of work, offenders' stated opinions about the proper aim of corrections, the severity of the sanction, the amount and type of assistance received, program functioning, and program goals.

Conclusion

This study shows that CSSP is supervising the type of offenders it was designed to supervise: adult, repeat misdemeanants. The program achieved a higher rate of completion than required, although the offenders now have longer criminal histories than offenders supervised in the past. The program has reported all those who failed to complete to the court, initiating the process of offender accountability. However, the system of tracking and reporting rearrests to the court is not yet fully implemented. Interviews revealed that staff members, offenders, and representatives of organizations that receive work from CSSP have positive views of the program. Our analysis of factors related to completion shows that the program's own management tools—the five-day evaluation, the recording of attendance, and home visits—are most helpful for understanding whether or not offenders will complete the program.

Appendix

Information on 21 Offenders Entering CSSP After February 18, 1998

Background Characteristics (n=21)^a

	Value
Demographics, Education, Employment	
Gender	48%
Male	52%
Female	
Age, Mean	34
Marital Status	30%
Married/Common Law	70%
Not Married	
Ethnicity	57%
African American	33%
Hispanic	10%
White/Other	
Educational Level	50%
Less than High School	35%
High school diploma/GED	15%
Some College/College Grad	
Unemployed Prior to Admission	80%
Medical, Psychiatric, Family Problems	

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Bothered by chronic medical problem(s)	43%
Experienced emotional abuse in lifetime	29%
Experienced physical abuse in lifetime	10%
Experienced sexual abuse in lifetime	5%
Experienced serious depression in lifetime	67%
Is considerably or extremely troubled by family problems	19%
Is considerably or extremely troubled by social problems	33%
Is considerably or extremely troubled by psychological problems	28%
Substance Abuse History	
Prior admission to drug treatment	26%
Used heroin, cocaine past 30 days	21%
Reports real need for alcohol treatment	5%
Reports real need for drug treatment	43%

^a Based self reported data from participant interviews with Vera staff.

Current Case and Criminal History Information (n=21) ^a

	Value
Court Case Information	
Highest Arraignment Charge Level	5%
Felony (C)	95%
Misdemeanor	
DA's Sentence Offer	45%
<=2 months in jail	55%
>2 months in jail	
Promised Sentence if Violated	24%
<=2 months in jail	19%
3-8 months in jail	57%
9-12 months in jail	
Days of Community Service Ordered	57%
Model A (10 days)	43%
Model B (15 days)	
Criminal History	
Prior arrests	17
Median	100%
% with 5 or more	86%
% with 10 or more	33%
% with 20 or more	
Prior misdemeanor convictions	11
Median	

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% with 5 or more	86%
% with 10 or more	62%
Prior felony convictions	1
Median	48%
% with none	10%
% with 1	24%
% with 2 or more	
Total prior convictions	14
Median	86%
% with 5 or more	71%
% with 10 or more	

^a Arrest data were collected through a review of CSSP participant case files. All other data were provided by CJA.