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County Probation: A Service-Learning and Community Engagement Project for Criminology

Introduction

Our group focused on understanding the role of the probation office in the criminal justice system and in society. We were fortunate enough to work with the Union County Probation Office where we focused on adult probation, juvenile probation, and treatment court. We focused specifically on how it works, the effects of probation on society, and the differences between juvenile and adult probation. Much of what we learned through our participation at the Union County Probation Office relates to topics we covered in class discussions, debates, and in the textbook readings, making this a very worthwhile experience for our learning.

One of our major topics of discussion was how and why people commit crimes. When working with the probation office, the impact of family and education were two key areas that we saw overlap between what the officers mentioned and what we discussed in class (Siegel, 2016). Family relations are known to be a strong predictor of future criminal activities because the environmental and societal impacts of being surrounded by crime during critical periods of development are pervasive. The impact of family was highlighted in class after we watched a clip from *The Wire*, in which we discussed that kids who grow up around crime and with a family that is involved in criminal activities are much more likely to commit crime. All three of the probation divisions we specialized in conducted intake interviews that asked in-depth

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questions about family backgrounds. Asking question about family status is essential due to the impact that family stress and divorce can, with the strain on finding proper supervision, and the relation between divorce and economic hardships (Siegel, 2016). Another thing that was highlighted in the intake interviews was the importance of education. Juvenile probation officers make it a priority to make sure kids go to school. This is also seen in treatment court services, such as the Union County Resource Center, which offers GED classes, parenting workshops, and assistance with job search and preparation.

Setting

The Union County Probation Office has a very clear mission that is tailored to the specific needs of the clients they serve. Their goal is to ensure legal accountability of individuals under their supervision through giving direction, coordinating goals, using community based resources, and administering the given penalties of the client. In order to accomplish this, the probation office team is filled with employees who want the best for the offenders assigned to them. In order to best serve the specialized needs for their clients, the Probation Office is divided into the three divisions: adult probation, juvenile probation, and drug/treatment court. Each of these departments is designed to help people who have gotten into trouble and to steer them away from reoffending. The juvenile probation department focused on therapeutic ways to keeping individuals under the age of 18 out of trouble. From speaking with Naaman Morris, one of the juvenile probation officers, it is clear that, over time, there has been a transition from punishing juveniles to rehabilitating them. The same thing is starting to begin with adult probation at Union County. Although adults on probation have a much higher risk of being punished for missing meetings with their probation officer, failing drug tests, breaking the law, etc., there has been a slight transition to focusing on helping the adults instead of just punishing them. This is essential because in many prison environments around the United States, the emphasis has shifted from a rehabilitation system to a retributive system because it is believed that punishment will deter the criminal behavior performed.

With regards to treatment court, a retributive system does not work for substance offenders whose brains have been rewired to make them unable to control their urges. This increases the likelihood that they will simply resort back to their old criminal behaviors after being released from prison. As a result, the Union County Treatment Court is a very strict and highly structured program that focuses on rehabilitating people in hopes of avoiding future contacts with the criminal justice system. The participants must be non-violent offenders who use illicit substances and/or drive under the influence of drugs or alcohol. These individuals are able to receive a combination of drug/alcohol treatment and support services through strict supervision of the

Treatment Court Judge in order to overcome their addictions. The Drug Court and the DUI Court enrolled its first participants on July 2, 2008 and January 13, 2010, respectively. In addition, a new program called the Accelerated Treatment Court began earlier this year and consists of only two phases as opposed to the typical three phases. These programs are unique because they represent a much closer working union between treatment and the criminal justice program than what is traditionally seen in criminal courts. After completing a series of phases with various structured requirements, the participants are invited to attend a graduation ceremony in which they receive a certificate of completion. The overarching objective of this is to congratulate the participants, help them acknowledge the disciplinary work they put forth in getting to this point, and motivate them to continue on their successes and ultimately become productive members of society by remaining drug/alcohol free and avoiding any future criminal behavior. Since the program began in 2008, roughly 80% have graduated from the program while the other 20% were removed from the program due to failure to comply with the program rules and regulations. In September 2012, the Treatment Court program received its state accreditation and is the 4th county in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to achieve such recognition.

For adult probation, the goal is to help the clients who come in and to only use imprisonment as a last resort when guidelines have not been adequately followed. The Probation Office as we know it today was formed as part of the general rehabilitative penal system. The rehabilitative penal system model was created to positively impact sentencing and to make it a more individualized process that would do more than just assign punishments arbitrarily and impersonally (Bunzel, 1995). Over the years, probation officers have become increasingly involved in the legal system and have become integral parts of the sentencing processes. As we observed at Union County Probation, the officers are responsible for writing the minimum sentencing guidelines for their cases, conducting pre-sentencing investigative interviews and writing the corresponding reports that are used by the judge to determine the appropriate sentence.

Evolving Roles

The evolving role of probation officers in the justice system and the degree to which they get to know their clients has created the analogy of probation officers being akin to social workers (Logan, 2003). Modern day probation officers are in charge of obtaining the information in the pre-sentencing investigative interviews that encompass an individual's entire life (Logan, 2003). The questions asked during the interview probe into the nature of the crime in question that was committed, but also about the individual's entire life and personal relationships. This allows probation officers to gain an insight into people and to create a narrative for the judge that will help the judge make the most accurate and informed decision about an individual's sentencing and future. While pre-sentencing investigative reports (PSIR) have been criticized for not having

a statistically significant impact on sentencing, what we observed at Union County showed that these reports are substantial for understanding the person behind a crime that was committed (Kingsnorth, 1999). As we have talked about in class, it is very easy to reduce a crime to just the act that was committed instead of trying to understand the motivations of the person.

While working at the probation office, it is clear that treatment has become the main concern over punishment. Craig Schwalbe and Tina Maschi did a study in an effort to find any patterns that could predict the most common forms of probation. The main result of the study, which was also reflected while working with the probation officers, was the importance of treatment over punishment (Maschi, 2012). When looking at a case, there is a feeling of urgency by officers to provide treatment and solve issues before they become lasting problems, especially for juvenile. The change in treatment over punishment is seen in a variety of new forms of probation and an increase in individualized case plans. Until around the 1950s, the juvenile probation system had been unchanged. During the 1950s, controversy arose, and confidence in the juvenile court began to diminish. People began to believe that juveniles were not receiving proper protection whereas adults were. Higher courts and other critics wanted to begin adultification within the juvenile court system (Bolin and Applegate, 2015). This may come as a shock because many people believe the juvenile court system is adequate. When speaking with Mr. Lizardi, he made it clear that the adult probation system is beginning to conform to more of the ways of the juvenile probation system, primarily in the aspect of treatment over punishment. When asking Mr. Morris about his probation policy, he agreed to a change in style over his twenty years working there. Earlier in his career they often sent juveniles to boot camps and other reform groups which proved to be a waste of money and time. Compared to the beneficial therapy and community service/involvement that goes on today, these laborious mechanisms were simply ineffective and ended up doing more harm than good to the juveniles.

In another study by Sarah Vidal and Jennifer Skeem, the effects of abuse, ethnicity, and psychopathy on the decision for varying supervision strategies were explored (Vidal and Skeem, 2007). The results showed that juveniles with a mental illness or disorder as well as those with a history of abuse are given a treatment plan that is much more individualized. Race did not seem to play a factor in any extent (Vidal and Skeem, 2007). This is congruent with another study done by Craig Schwalbe and Tina Maschi that examined the impact of trauma and abuse on a child. Both studies suggest that being aware of the trauma and history of abuse can help probation officers focus on a treatment-oriented plan. More importantly, it is best if a probation officer can repulse this trauma and provide therapy and treatment without any interference. Mr.

Morris reiterated this concept when he described the intake process of a juvenile and the many interviews that occur not only with the individual but with the family, friends, school and any other associations that may have relevant information to help complete the picture that is the juvenile's life.

Treatment court is a more recent development in the criminal justice system; however, there have been several studies performed that suggest its positive impact on recidivism (Jewell, Bush). In an unprecedented longitudinal study sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), data from a primarily pre-plea adult drug court in Portland, Oregon was used to track 6,500 offenders who participated in the Multnomah County Drug Court between 1991 and 2001. It was found that in a two-year follow-up period, the felony re-arrest decreased from 40 percent before the drug court to 12 percent after the drug court in one county and from 50 percent to 35 percent in another county (Leukefeld, Gullotta, Gregrich, 2011). The characteristics of the Union County Treatment Court program run parallel with those of the Multnomah County Drug Court, and both organizations aim at rehabilitation and reduced drug dependence in lieu of prison. While the Union County program is still relatively new and consequently difficult to track its successes, there have been no participants re-sentenced to State Prison after completion of the program.

Bridging Gaps

In order to ensure the success of a convicted individual, it is essential for the probation and community correction officers to help bridge the gap between their clients and the community in which they live in. This requires the officers to enforce the court order while also working towards rehabilitation by assisting the problems that may originate with the criminal behavior (Tiger, 2012). After observing the work of the officers and coordinators in the Union County Probation Office, it became clear how difficult it can be at times to play both the surveillance and therapeutic roles in an involuntary client's recovery. There may be instances when certain clients are unwilling to get help or to utilize the resources provided to them due to their disgruntled and/or rebellious tendencies. Regardless of how uncommitted their clients may be, though, the workers in Union County consistently aim at empowering their clients to embrace their services with a motivation to learn and to convince them of their freedom of choice when at times they may feel restricted or controlled. This offender-officer relationship is essential because oftentimes the officers are the only positive role models that offenders have (Higgins, 2008). One of the things that makes the Union County Treatment Court unique is its use of two required probation contacts. This is similar to a sponsorship program in which their contacts assist the participants on a person level with sobriety, personal problems, and any other obstacles that may get in the way of their progress through the program. Having a person to report to

provides clients more means to achieve their long-term goals, and having someone point out where they go wrong when they would otherwise not take accountability is vital to recognizing the clients' faults.

Professional and Personal Impact

Our semester long project with Union County Probation impacted our sociological imagination in a multitude of ways. The first influence it had on our group was the ability to think from the perspective of a member of the justice system. Viewing Probation from the lense of a probation officer shows the level of commitment required to assist people in their caseload. The Union County team remains committed to their clients and maintains a close watch on them in order to ensure that they are making ample attempts at reforming their lives while also keeping in mind their individual needs, characteristics, and tendencies. This expanded our sociological imagination because most media outlets and public perceptions view probation officers as people that are looking to ruin the lives of the people they serve and are looking to send people back to prison. However, this project showed us first-hand the diligent work officers put forth in order to improve the lives of their clients. For instance, many of the conversations between the officers and their clients involved finding suitable jobs and housing in order to improve their day to day lives. The interactions we had while working alongside members of the probation office made us gain a substantial amount of respect for the officers and wish there was a way that more information about their work could be positively presented to the public.

Another way our sociological imagination was impacted was through our interactions with many of the people who are in probation. These people are almost all looking to have a better life and place themselves in a position to succeed. Our imagination changed as many of them were looking to pursue careers, help their families live suitable lives, and rebuild any broken ties they had as a result of their actions. These changes are able to be made through interactions with the probation staff who dedicate their time to reforming productive members of society.

When we completed readings for class lectures and discussions, we oftentimes noticed that our background and knowledge on probation had an impact on the provocative questions we formulated. We began to consider how rehabilitation and surveillance can relate to a variety of different criminal behaviors compared to those traditionally portrayed in the media. Our sociological imagination when conducting the readings paved the way for in-depth and meaningful conversations with all the probation officers we worked with. It was interesting to see how our course content related to their occupations and daily operations as well as their input towards our discussion questions based on their professional experiences.

Our team learned how important probation is in the criminal justice system, as well as how broad the implications and responsibilities are. The probation officers are personally involved in the cases they work with and know intimate details about the lives of the people they supervise. Going into the project, we were unclear as a group how probation differed from parole and the general role that probation played in the prison system. Through working at the probation office and doing our own independent research, we learned that the goal of probation is to intervene with a person and help him/her get back on track in lieu of incarceration. Parole, meanwhile, is the mandatory supervision that takes place after being released from incarceration until the maximum sentence assigned has been reached.

Conclusion

With the help of our participation and observations, we also began to understand the incredible impact that probation can have for an individual, at least for those willing to take the help that probation has to offer. Probation is not only supervision but also an organization that provides opportunities for people to make important changes to their life. Probation officers are willing to work with individuals to help them become positive productive members of society. Seeing this first-hand made us realize how much the work completed by probation officers is relationship-driven. With regards to Treatment Court, all of the officers, coordinators, judge, community agencies, and participants themselves work together in order to determine specialized needs, requirements, and necessary sanctions. This relationship is essential because rehabilitation needs are dictated by many factors and each participant must be looked at like an individual case in order to provide appropriate treatment. Additionally, the offender-officer relationship helps the offenders become accountable for their actions by influencing them to reflect upon their past behaviors. When an offender is not accountable for his/her actions and consequently blames his/her actions, such as relapse, on others, the individual is failing to fully understand their negative impact on the surrounding community. As a result, probation officers tend to have a negative reputation by the public. This project helped us notice how inaccurate that connotation of probation officers is and how much of a vital role they play in ensuring the safe, positive societies we are fortunate to live in.

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