

Is Community Service an Effective Punishment?

Community service orders (CSOs) are available for both State and Commonwealth criminal offences.

Under the [Crimes \(Sentencing and Procedure\) Act](#), they can involve up to 500 hours of work in the community.

The kind of work you are given will depend on what is available in your community and what you are best suited to.

They are relatively recent category of penalty, having grown in usage since their introduction in the 1960s.

The types of offences punishable by CSOs have rapidly expanded over the past two decades or so.

Currently, in order to be eligible for a CSO you must have committed a crime that is punishable by a prison sentence, and you must not be considered a risk to the community.

They can also be given as punishment for unpaid fines.

You may have seen that international celebrities including Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan in the United States, and Boy George in the United Kingdom, have been required to perform community service.

But have you ever wondered just how effective community service is, and whether it is just a lenient punishment that achieves very little?

How does it compare to sending people to prison?

Research has shown that prison is not very effective in terms of deterring people from committing new crimes.

Not only that, according to an [Australian Institute of](#)

[Criminology study](#), community service is far more economical than imprisonment, which is very expensive.

Community Service works as a punishment by depriving a person of their time and liberty.

And in terms of rehabilitation, CSOs are often successful in helping young offenders rehabilitate and integrate back into society.

The programs give young people the chance to build connections with business and people in their community.

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that community service is more effective than another kind of punishment, according to one 2013 [Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research study](#) (BOCSAR).

The BOCSAR study compared the reoffending rates of defendants given good behaviour bonds to those given CSOs.

Those who are given CSOs were found to have a slightly lower rate of reoffending than those who received given a bond – yet more than six times the amount of people received bonds than CSOs.

The number of CSOs has been decreasing since 1994, and the prevalence of good behaviour bonds has been rising.

The Director of BOSCAR, Don Weatherburn, believes that although the difference in reoffending rates may be small, the difference is probably larger than what the figures suggest.

This is because not all those who reoffended are caught, as much crime goes undetected or unsolved.

This means that large differences in the rates of offending can still only show a small percentage difference in the reoffending habits of those who received a CSO versus a good behaviour bond.

CSOs are not a slap on the wrist: they come with a criminal record and breaches are treated very seriously.

In fact, any breach can lead to the CSO being revoked and a sentence of imprisonment being imposed.

And if an offence is committed during a CSO, the fact that the offender was on CSO at the time will be treated as an aggravating factor – which could lead to a harsher sentence than would normally be imposed.

To learn more about other criminal penalties, offences and information about the criminal justice system, visit our regularly updated [blog](#).