

Why Community Service Should Not Be A Punishment

Forcing criminals to clean up communities denigrates civic contribution

By [Eric Liu @ericpliu](#) June 12, 2012



1. Dennis Rodman, a former Miss USA, an embezzling cop in Virginia, a Rutgers bully whose [clandestine](#) videos led to the suicide of a gay roommate. What do they have in common? They're among the many Americans who, in just the last few weeks, have been required by courts of law to perform community service.
2. Community service is a commonplace substitute for jail—[thousands](#) each year are sentenced to service or compelled to do it as a condition of probation. If we take note of it at all, it's because of the spectacle of a [celebrity](#) like Chris Brown or Lindsay Lohan cleaning up litter, or in some cases the outrageous mismatch of punishment to crime: *All that guy got was community service?* But what we never seem to think is this: Why should community service even be a form of punishment?
3. I understand the origins of the practice. Community service is part of a theory of [restorative](#) or rehabilitative justice and the few [studies](#) on the subject suggest that criminals sentenced to service rather than simple jail time have slightly lower [recidivism](#) rates.
4. But put aside the question of effectiveness. The real issue is what this practice does to service itself. It broadcasts an image of community work as unpleasant and to be avoided – something that in fact must be compelled. By making service a lesser and often laughable form of punishment, we utterly degrade it.
5. It's as if the public is of two completely different minds about service. Middling menace to society? Go help the community. Idealistic young citizen who wants to contribute? Go help the community. Dharun Ravi, the convicted Rutgers bully, was required to complete 300 hours of service. Meanwhile, on other [campuses](#), students now can earn honorific “service cords” at graduation if they've completed – you guessed it – 300 hours of service. It's hard to make sense of this.
6. The moral philosopher Michael Sandel writes that incentives often end up yielding even less of the desired behavior than their absence. He gives the example of an experiment

where lawyers were reluctant to serve the poor at a reduced rate of \$30 an hour, yet happily did so for free. Putting a price on some things debases them profoundly.

7. Making something a punishment can do the same. It's another form of incentive-rigging. Imagine if we required *voting* as a form of punishment for low-grade criminals. That seems not just strange but corrosive, even sacrilegious. Civic responsibility – being a grown-up who contributes and doesn't just take – should be neither bought with carrots nor used as a stick.

8. What we need instead is a set of **cultural norms that** holds service as separate from incentives. Tens of [millions](#) of Americans clean up parks, work in soup kitchens, and scrub graffiti voluntarily because it gives them purpose, happiness, friends, [health](#). Even as the practice of service-as-punishment has become commonplace, volunteerism rates have [held steady](#). Next week thousands of citizens will gather for the national [Points of Light](#) conference to celebrate the volunteerism movement.

9. But if we truly want to honor all those who show up for community, let's change criminal law so that service no longer has any stigma. There are other ways for lawbreakers to pay their debts to society, and for courts to mete out low-grade punishment. Service is too important to be a get-out-of-jail card.

Read more: <http://ideas.time.com/2012/06/12/why-community-service-should-not-be-a-punishment/#ixzz2fepDL1qZ>

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