VORP

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program

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We are frequently asked if any research is being done on VORP. Locally we have been gathering statistics that will be available for research but have not done a formal research project. As you may know, we are one program of about 32 currently operating in the USA. The Mennonite Central Committee Office of Criminal Justice and the PACT Institute of Justice provide consultation and resources to emerging VORPs but each new VORP is autonomous and implements the VORP idea in a way that fits their community. Some clearly view their program as a "ministry of reconciliation" offered by chruches and church individuals to victims and offenders in need. Others view VORP more as a restitution program or a social service that is a more humanized way of dealing with appropriate crime situtations but unrelated to the church and a "ministry of reconciliation." The Fresno VORP is clearly a "ministry of reconciliation." We believe that when victims and offenders move from a hostile attitude to a reconciling attitude, God has been at work. We believe that this is a taste of what it is like to reconcile with God. I think that the following research is valuable and worth sharing but it does not ask some of the questions that we would like to ask.

The following article appeared in the Spring 1985 edition of the VORP Network News which is produced by the PACT Institute of Justice.

VORP RESEARCH STUDY COMPLETED

In recent years the field of criminal justice has struggled with questions of how to involve meaningfully the victim in the criminal justice process, how to re-enforce offender accountability for crimes committed, and how to develop alternative punishments permitting less reliance on traditional institutional approaches. One response, certainly not the only, to these questions has been the emergence of victim-offender reconciliation programs. Originally conceived and implemented in Kitchener, Ontario and replicated in Elkhart, Indiana in 1978, the development and proliferation of these programs has spread to fifteen states and four countries. The research project, which began in January 1984, was the first attempt in this country to evaluate the Victim Offender Reconciliation Program approach. Principal Investigator was Dr. Robert Coates, Director of Research at the PACT Institute of Justice. John Gehm was Research Associate. The project was funded by the Florence V. Burden Foundation.

The study looked at VORP programs at four Indiana sites -- Porter County, Elkhart County, Monroe County, and Hoosier Hills (serving a four-county area in southern Indiana) -- and one site in Ohio -- Allen County. The project attemptedto focus on six central questions: 1.) Who participates in the VORP process and why? 2.) How does the VORP process function? 3.) How do the "consumers" of VORP evaluate it? 4.) What are the immediate outcomes of the VORP process? 5.) To what extent does VORP function as as alternative to incarceration? 6.) What contextual issues influence the development of and shape of VORP in local communities?

The research, which was exploratory in nature, emphasized both providing

2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, California 93612 • (209) 291-1120

an accurate picture of how the VORP approach is experienced by participants and providing a data base useful for making judgements about future program modifications. The project generated seven data sets in order to answer the questions posed. Those samples included open-ended interviews with victims who had participated in VORP meetings, telephone interviews with victims refusing to participate in VORP, interviews with criminal justice officials, interviews with program staff and VORP mediators, observations of VORP meetings, and a statistical sample comprised of offenders who had participated in VORP in 1983 matched with a sample group of offenders who had not been referred. Offenders were matched according to gender, race, juvenile/adult, prior conviction (yes/no), prior incarceration (yes/no) and most serious current charge for which convicted. VORP program and court records were used to generate this sample.

The next issue of the VORP Network News will be devoted to a discussion of the research, including an assesment of program implications. (The complete 45-page final report, "Victim Meets Offender: An Evaluation of Victim-Offender Reconciliation Programs" can be ordered through the Institute of Justice. The cost is $3.00, postpaid.) Here we highlight briefly some of the findings and implications drawn from the report.

HUMANIZING JUSTICE For those who participate in VORP, being responded to as persons, victim or offender, is probably seen as the greatest strength of the program. Even those victims who initially became involved in VORP to recoup their losses left the process feeling that they had been dealt with fairly and with dignity.

OFFENDER ACCOUNTABILITY Most of the offenders interviewed took the VORP process seriously and seem to have a better sense that what they did hurt people and required a response.

VICTIM PARTICIPATION Victims and criminal justice officials alike seem to place a great value on the extent to which VORP includes victims. Many victims indicated that their view of the justice system had improved knowing that such programs exist. A byproduct of victim involvement in VORP is the broadening of public support for these kinds of approaches to crime and justice.

RESTITUTION For those who participate in face-to-face meetings completion of restitution is quite high. Furthermore, the majority of victims believe that at least between restitution and insurance their financial losses have been fully recovered. Some victims remain concerned about who is in charge of monitoring the payment schedules.

PUNISHMENT It seems clear that offenders experience VORP as punishment and that many victims view it as a form of legitimate punishment in which they have an opportunity to participate. It is equally clear that it is not regarded as severe a punishment as incarceration. One of the pressing tasks facing criminal justice today is to come up with creative alternative punishments that hold the offender accountable while not incurring the substantial costs and negative consequences of incarceration.

ALTERNATIVE TO INCARCERATION There is some evidence to suggest that VORP in conjunction with some local jail time, is being used as an alternative to state incarceration. Average days served by VORP offenders is considerably less than for non-VORP offenders. The potential for using VORP along with other sanctions as a way of reducing reliance on incarceration is apparent. These creative sentencing "packages" appear to offer considerable cost savings to local jurisdictions.

The report concludes that "VORP appears to be a useful means for involving victims in the criminal justice process. The VORP process encourages personal accountability on the part of the offender while breaking down stereotypes of both offenders and victims. To the extent that it is desirable to personalize crime and justice, the VORP approach has much to offer."
If you would like to order the complete report, please send $3.00 with your request and we will send a copy to you.

Of the VORP programs listed in the National Directory, the Fresno VORP was listed as one of the VORPs receiving the most referrals. This has been possible because of your generous support, both through volunteer mediators and your financial support.

Last month I shared that we had to have referrals held up for two weeks in order to give us time to catch up. We did catch up and are receiving referrals again at a steady rate.

We are glad to report that already 12 persons have signed up for the volunteer training which is scheduled to begin July 11. This will certainly increase our capability. Financially we are always tight but are paying the bills and able to meet the needs of many victims and offenders due to your generous financial contributions. If you are not giving on a regular basis, please consider us. If you need further information, let us know. If you would like to share VORP with others in your church, please let us know and we will be glad to make a presentation.

Shalom.
Ron Claassen