Research on Restorative Justice Practices

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Introduction

This research brief is the first in a series of reports on the concept, application and effectiveness of restorative justice practices in criminal and juvenile justice. It describes the overall premise of restorative justice, defines the prominent restorative justice approaches being used in the justice system today, and summarizes findings from contemporary synthesis research on the effectiveness of restorative justice in reducing recidivism and promoting other positive outcomes for offenders and victims. Future reports in the series will take deeper dives into real-world applications of restorative justice as well as research findings on the effectiveness of specific restorative justice approaches.

Information presented in this research brief is intended to promote a more in-depth and up-to-date understanding of restorative justice and its effectiveness. Given the growing interest in offender diversion and alternatives to incarceration across the country, information on restorative justice practices and research arguably has value for a wide audience, including policy makers, program developers and researchers. Indeed, the use of restorative justice, the types of practices found in the field and the stages of the justice system in which restorative practices are used have expanded significantly in recent years. The knowledge base about the effectiveness of restorative justice has become more robust, too.

Information on the various restorative justice practices that are now available, how they are used in criminal and juvenile justice, and the empirical evidence on their effectiveness can help policy makers and program developers identify and adopt restorative practices that help meet the need for effective, non-traditional ways to hold offenders accountable while also addressing the needs of victims. The information also can help researchers identify pressing needs for future inquiry, particularly with regard to specific restorative justice applications and their effectiveness across a range of victim, offender and system outcomes.

What is Restorative Justice?

Restorative justice practices in the criminal and juvenile justice systems are based on the premise that crime is a violation of people and of interpersonal relationships and therefore it is important to remedy the harm caused by a criminal act (Przybylski, 2008; Latimer et al., 2001). “To be fully accountable, offenders need to acknowledge their behavior was harmful to others and take action to repair that harm to the fullest extent possible” (Przybylski, 2008, p. 72). Restorative justice approaches provide a mechanism for doing so through processes such as:

- Victim-offender mediation
- Victim-offender dialogue
- Restorative justice conferencing
- Reparative boards
- Victim impact panels
- Peacemaking circles
- Apology banks

History of Restorative Justice

While many of the values and principles of restorative justice can be traced to indigenous cultures (Umbreit & Greenwood, 2000), restorative justice practice in the justice system arguably first emerged in 1974 in Canada in a vandalism case in Kitchener, Ontario (Wright & Galaway, 1989). Often referred to as the Kitchener Experiment, the perpetrators of the crime...
were required to meet with their victims and pay restitution, rather than undergo traditional court processing. Over the next two decades, a number of small scale, experimental programs modeled on the Kitchener Experiment were implemented in jurisdictions both in Canada and the U.S., primarily for use with first-time offenders involved in minor crimes. By the mid-1990s, the American Bar Association had endorsed the practice of victim-offender mediation (Umbreit & Greenwood, 2000), and the National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) had published a report titled Restorative Community Justice: A Call to Action, both of which promoted the expansion of restorative justice practices in justice and other settings (Armour, n.d.).

It is important to note that the emergence of the restorative justice movement coincided with the emergence and growth of the victim's rights movement (Armour, n.d.), and particularly the call for greater involvement of victims in justice system processes. As the U.S. Department of Justice, Office for Victims of Crime’s (OVC) 2000 report focused on the restorative practice of victim-offender mediation stated: “It seeks more balanced and effective juvenile and criminal justice systems that recognize the need to involve and serve victims and victimized communities” (Umbreit & Greenwood, 2000, p. IX). Current federal regulations allow for OVC funding to be used to support restorative justice programs. Ultimately, each state administering agency (SAA) maintains the discretion to determine what restorative justice activities it wishes to fund and has the responsibility of monitoring and overseeing the program (See 28 C.F.R. 94.120(g)).

Indeed, the victim-centered approach that characterizes restorative justice can help better meet the needs of victims and strengthen ties between the offender and others – including the community – thereby promoting desistance from crime for participating offenders and increased satisfaction with the justice system for participating victims.

While restorative justice programs have been in existence for decades, their use has expanded significantly in recent years. As a mechanism for repairing harm, addressing the needs of victims and communities, and promoting offender accountability and desistance from crime, restorative justice has grown from an experimental practice in the 1970s to a valuable component of criminal and juvenile practice in virtually every state today (González, 2020). “From 1990 to 2000, for example, only fourteen state laws codified the term restorative justice” (González, 2020, p. 1029). By 2015, at least 34 states had passed legislation promoting the use of restorative justice practices in their juvenile or adult criminal justice systems (Sliva & Lambert 2015). By 2019, forty-five states had “codified restorative justice into statutory or regulatory law” (Gonzales, 2020, p. 1031). As jurisdictions across the U.S. continue to look for diversion practices and alternatives to incarceration that hold offenders accountable, meet the needs of victims, and promote public safety, restorative justice practices are likely to become even more mainstream than they are today.

Originally used primarily in the juvenile justice system with first time offenders accused of minor crimes, restorative justice programs are now increasingly being used in the adult criminal justice system as a diversion from prosecution or alternative to incarceration for more serious offenders. Since restorative justice practices focus on the restoration of harms rather than on punishment or retribution, they provide a mechanism for holding offenders accountable while reducing reliance on incarceration and the potential for the negative collateral consequences that can accompany a criminal conviction or time behind bars.

Restorative justice practices also are being used as a supplement to conventional offender processing, even with offenders convicted of serious crimes. Victim-offender dialog, for example, is being used post-conviction – typically in prison settings – with offenders convicted of crimes such as murder or serious assault. These types of restorative justice applications are always victim-initiated and require the involvement of specialized facilitators. Experimental approaches have also recently emerged in domestic violence and child welfare settings. Indeed, a range of restorative justice applications are now being used not only in the justice system, but also in school and community settings (Armour, n.d.).

The next section of this report describes the most common restorative justice applications being used in criminal and juvenile justice today, including victim-offender mediation, victim-offender dialogue, restorative justice conferencing, reparative boards, victim impact panels, peacemaking circles, and apology banks. It is important to note that for each of these applications, participation is completely voluntary for victims, but not always so for offenders.
Common Applications Being Used in Criminal and Juvenile Justice

Victim-Offender Mediation

Victim-offender mediation (VOM) programs provide victims of property crimes the opportunity to "meet offenders in a safe, structured setting and engage in a mediated discussion of the crime" (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001, p. 2).

The goal is “to hold offenders directly accountable while providing important support and assistance to victims. With the assistance of trained mediators, the victims are able to let the offenders know how the crime affected them, receive answers to their questions, and be directly involved in developing a restitution plan that holds the offenders financially accountable for the losses they caused. The offenders are directly responsible for their behavior and therefore must learn the full impact of what they did and develop a plan for making amends, to the degree possible, to the persons they violated. Offenders' failure to complete the restitution agreement results in further court-imposed consequences.” (Umbreit & Greenwood, 2000).

VOM often focuses on material restitution as opposed to emotional restoration or reconciliation (Umbreit et al., 1994). Supporters are involved for some VOM meetings, but these meetings might only include the victim, offender, and mediator (Strang et al., 2013).

Victim-Offender Dialogue

While much of the literature uses the terms Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM) and Victim-Offender Dialogue (VOD) interchangeably, they differ in key ways. Unlike VOM, VOD is geared towards corrections-based victim services, and it may be used with victimizations involving crimes of severe violence. VOD is a confidential process, initiated only by crime victims, consisting of a one-time direct dialogue between the victim and the offender overseen by experienced facilitators. VOD is designed to restore a victim's sense of choice and control (Crocker et al., n.d., p. 4).

VOD can be appropriate for a number of violent crimes and violations — so long as the methodology is strongly victim-centered, and the facilitator is correctly and completely trained in facilitating such cases (JUST Alternatives website, 2020). Cases of murder, sexual assault, kidnapping, armed robbery, manslaughter, and other such deeply traumatizing crimes are among the many that have been successfully facilitated. Cases in which the offender acted in severely psychopathic or sadistic ways require facilitators with special training, as do cases involving domestic assault, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation.

Another key difference between VOD and VOM is that agreement or reconciliation is not sought out unless middle ground is explicitly what the victim desires. Victim-Centered VOD is intended to provide victims/survivors with a chance to be fully and directly heard by the offender. If they fully and sincerely wish to forgive or reconcile with the offender in some way, facilitators can help enable that possibility, but properly trained VOD facilitators never initiate or impose any sort of expectations about forgiveness or reconciliation (Crocker et al., n.d.).

Restorative Justice Conferencing

Restorative justice conferencing, also called family group conferencing, involves the community of people most affected by the crime—the victim and the offender and the family, friends, and key supporters of both—in deciding the resolution of a criminal or delinquent act (Umbreit, 2000). The facilitator contacts the victim and offender to explain the process and invite them to the conference; the facilitator also asks them to identify key members of their support systems who will be invited to participate as well. Participation by all involved is voluntary. The offender must admit to the offense to participate. The parties affected are brought together by a trained facilitator to discuss how they and others have been harmed by the offense and how that harm might be repaired.

The conference typically begins with the offender describing the incident, followed by each participant describing the impact of the incident on his or her life. Through these narrations, the offender is faced with the human impact of his or her behavior on the victim, on those close to the victim, and on the offender’s own family and friends. The victim has the opportunity to express feelings and ask questions about the offense. All participants may contribute to the process of determining how the offender might best repair the harm he or she has caused. “The session ends with
participants signing an agreement outlining their expectations and commitments" (Umbreit, 2000, p.2).

Reparative Boards

Reparative boards, often referred to as community reparative boards, are a practice used primarily with offenders convicted of nonviolent and minor offenses. Boards are typically "composed of a small group of citizens, prepared for their function by intensive training, who conduct public, face-to-face meetings with offenders ordered by the court to participate" (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2000, p. 3). Board members develop proposed sanctions which are then discussed with and approved by the offender. "After a designated time period, the board then delivers a report to the court regarding offender progress toward fulfilling these sanctions" (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2000, p. 3).

Victim Impact Panels

Victim impact panels provide a forum for crime victims to tell a group of offenders about the impact of the crime on their lives and on the lives of their families, friends, and neighbors. Panels typically involve three or four victim speakers, each of whom spends about 15 minutes telling their story in a nonjudgmental, non-blaming manner. The offenders of the victim presenters are not present. While some time is usually dedicated to questions and answers, the purpose of the panel is for the victims to speak, rather than for the victims and offenders to engage in a dialogue. Victim impact panels were first initiated in 1982 by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

As a result of positive feedback from both victims and offenders who have participated in drunk driving panels, this strategy has been used with other crimes such as property crimes, physical assault, domestic violence, child abuse, elder abuse, and homicide (the survivors serve as panelists). Attendance by offenders at a panel is often court-ordered in juvenile and criminal cases, either at diversion or accompanying a probation sentence. Panels have also been used in prison and jail settings, with parolees, and in treatment programs, defensive driving schools, and youth education programs.

Victim service organizations either implement the program for the court, or work in collaboration with justice personnel to conduct panels. Whatever the structure, victim service agencies are usually best prepared to perform the critically important role of screening victims to ensure they are sufficiently healed from their victimization experience not to be re-traumatized by participating in the panel.

Peacemaking Circles

Circles have a wide array of uses and purposes both in and out of the criminal and juvenile justice systems. They can be used as a practice in schools and communities for building relationships and changing community cultures as well as a community-directed process, conducted in partnership with the justice system, to develop consensus on an appropriate plan that addresses the concerns of all those affected by a crime. Talking circles, peacemaking circles, or healing circles, as they are variously called, are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of indigenous people (Umbreit, 2003). In North America, they are widely used among the First Nations people of Canada and among the many tribes of Native Americans in the U.S. Healing circles take a variety of forms (Mehl-Madrona, 2010), but most basically, members sit in a circle to consider a problem or a question.

Circles use traditional circle ritual and structure to involve the victim, victim supporters, the offender, offender supporters, justice personnel, police, and all interested community members. Within the circle, people can speak from the heart in a shared search for understanding of the event, and together identify the steps necessary to assist in healing all affected parties and prevent future crimes.

Circles are used for adult and juvenile offenders with a variety of offenses and have been used in both rural and urban settings. Specifics of the circle process vary from community to community and are designed locally to fit community needs and culture. Circles are facilitated by a trained keeper. Because communities vary in health and in their capacity to deal constructively with conflict, a sufficient amount of training must be completed before using circles as a way of resolving conflict.

Apology Banks

Apology banks are systems that facilitate victims of crime voluntarily receiving apology letters from “the convicted defendant in their case who is in a state prison or on community supervision” (Pavelka & Sey-
These systems can help victims wondering if their offenders have taken responsibility for the crime and/or have a desire to express regret for the impact of their actions. Unlike the other restorative justice practices described in this report, apology banks do not involve direct contact between crime victims and offenders or facilitate a dialogue between them (Pavelka & Seymour 2019).

Research on the Effectiveness of Restorative Justice

Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of restorative justice comes from two broad categories of research: single studies and synthesis research. In this context, single studies are discrete, individual evaluations of one or more restorative justice program or practice implementations. Each single study is conducted separately from the rest. Synthesis research is fundamentally different. It attempts to examine all or many single studies on the effectiveness of restorative justice or a particular type of restorative justice application (e.g., victim-offender mediation) to arrive at an overall, generalizable conclusion about effectiveness.

Contemporary synthesis research is typically carried out using a process known in the research community as a systematic review. A systematic review uses a pre-established protocol to 1) identify numerous single studies on the topic of interest; 2) assess each study’s methodology and scientific rigor; 3) guide decision making about which studies will be included in the review; and 4) synthesize findings from all single studies included in the review to arrive at an overall conclusion about the program’s effectiveness. “Properly executed, a systematic review produces a comprehensive summary of the scientific evidence on a particular topic, such as whether or not an intervention is effective in reducing recidivism” (Przybylski, 2008, p. 13).

Today, systematic reviews typically incorporate a statistical procedure called meta-analysis to synthesize findings from multiple studies in an objective and quantitative manner. “In practice, meta-analysis combines the results of many evaluations into one large study with many subjects. This is important, because single studies based on a small number of subjects can produce distorted findings about a program’s effectiveness” (Przybylski, 2008, pp. 13-14). In addition, meta-analysis focuses on the direction and magnitude of effects found across studies, and it produces a summary statistic called the average effect size. This statistic essentially indicates in a quantitative manner whether and to what degree the intervention is effective at producing a particular outcome, such as reducing recidivism.

Several systematic reviews (including meta-analyses) examining the effectiveness of restorative justice practices have been conducted in recent years. The key characteristics of these studies, and the findings these studies produced for both victim and offender outcomes are presented below.

Findings from Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

Synthesis research on restorative justice programs began to emerge in the late 1990s and early 2000s. For example, Nugent and his colleagues reviewed the recidivism reduction results of four studies of victim-offender mediation (VOM) programs for juvenile offenders conducted in the 1990s (Nugent et al., 1999). Overall, the four studies produced a combined sample of 619 juvenile offenders who participated in a VOM program and 679 who did not. The researchers found that participation in VOM reduced recidivism by 32%. Based on a 1-year follow-up period, VOM partic-

¹ “Methodological quality considerations are a standard feature of most systematic reviews, and review protocols commonly exclude studies from further analysis that fail to reach a specified standard of scientific rigor” (Przybylski, 2008; p. 13). Single studies included in the analysis may also be weighted based on their research design and other factors reflecting scientific rigor.

² By pooling the original studies, meta-analysis counteracts a common methodological problem in evaluation research — small sample size — thereby helping the analyst draw more accurate and generalizable conclusions about an intervention’s effects” (Przybylski, 2008; pp. 13-14). See, for example, Lipsey (2002).

³ An effect size can be calculated in a number of ways. See, for example, Lipsey and Wilson (2001). The odds-ratio effect size is commonly calculated when the outcome of interest is measured dichotomously. The mean difference effect size is commonly calculated when the outcome of interest is measured continuously.
participants had a recidivism rate of 19% compared to 28% for their comparison group counterparts.

A 2005 meta-analysis of 19 studies involving 11,950 juvenile offenders conducted by Bradshaw and Roseborough also found that restorative justice practices reduced recidivism for participating offenders. The studies in the meta-analysis focused on victim-offender mediation and family group conferencing programs, and the researchers found that they contributed to a 26% reduction in recidivism for participating juvenile offenders (Bradshaw & Roseborough, 2005).

A second meta-analysis was published in 2005 by Latimer et al., and included 22 studies that examined the effectiveness of 35 restorative justice programs that met the following definition: “a voluntary, community-based response to criminal behavior that attempts to bring together the victim, the offender, and the community, in an effort to address the harm caused by the criminal behavior” (Latimer et al., 2005, p. 131). The researchers found that offenders who participated in restorative processes had significantly lower recidivism rates, higher restitution compliance rates, and higher levels of satisfaction with the process compared to their counterparts who experienced traditional justice system processing. Victims who participated in restorative processes also were more satisfied compared to those who participated in the traditional justice system.

A 2006 meta-analysis by Bonta et al. examined 39 studies assessing the recidivism reduction effects of a range of restorative justice practices, “broadly defined as any intervention that attempts to repair the harm caused by the offender to the victim or the community” (Bonta et al., 2006, p. 113). These included victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, community forums, and court-imposed restitution or community service programs. Roughly 6 out of 10 programs in the analysis included elements of victim-offender mediation or reconciliation, while about 8 out of 10 programs included elements of restitution and community service. Only 25% included elements of family group conferencing. Offenders participating in these programs were mostly low-risk male youth. Across the 39 studies, 75% of the total sample consisted of juveniles and 25% consisted of adults.

Overall, the researchers found that the restorative justice practices in the analysis reduced recidivism on average by 7%. A notable aspect of the study was an analysis of factors that mediated program success, including the program setting and the risk level of the participant offender. Key findings included:

- Programs operating in a non-coercive environment and that attempt to involve victims and community members had the largest recidivism reduction effects. Additionally, there was evidence to suggest that restorative justice programs delivered in coercive environments (i.e., court-ordered) had no impact on recidivism.

- Restorative justice programs appear to be more effective at reducing recidivism for low-risk offenders than for high-risk offenders. If restorative practices are used with high-risk offenders, treatment may be required in conjunction with restorative practices to achieve reductions in recidivism (Bonta et al., 2006).

Strang and her colleagues’ systematic review and meta-analysis of ten independent evaluations of restorative justice conferencing is particularly noteworthy because of both its methods and findings (Strang et al., 2013).

All ten studies included in the analysis were randomized control trials. The ten studies produced an overall sample of 1,879 offenders and 734 victims, all of whom consented to participate in the restorative justice conferencing program prior to random assignment. While all 10 studies focused on restorative justice conferencing, there were variations in program focus and setting (Strang et al., 2013). For example, some of the conferencing programs studied were offered as an alternative to prosecution, while others were a supplement to prosecution, including programs used post-sentencing, in probation, and in prison settings. There also were variations regarding the crime type targeted by the program and age of offender eligible for the program. Programs in the analysis targeted both juvenile and adult offenders, and both property and violent crime. Recidivism outcomes for offenders and several outcomes for victims were examined as part of the analysis. The study also included a cost-benefit component.

Findings indicated that restorative justice conferencing reduced subsequent convictions for offender participants two years post-random assignment from
7%–45% (Strang et al., 2013). Only minor differences in effects were found between adult and juvenile offenders. Slightly larger recidivism reductions were found for adults compared to juveniles, contradicting a belief held by many that restorative justice is more appropriate for juvenile offenders.

Positive outcomes also were found for several measures of victim impact, including victims’ satisfaction with the handling of their cases; material restoration; emotional restoration, and the reduction of post-traumatic stress symptoms.

The researchers also estimated that the programs studied produced “eight times more benefit in costs of crimes prevented than the cost of delivering restorative justice” (Strang et al., 2013, p.2). These findings led Strang and her colleagues to conclude that “on average, restorative justice cause a modest but highly cost-effective reduction in repeat offending, with substantial benefits for victims” (Strang et al., 2013).

Findings from another systematic review published in 2013 by Livingstone, et al. that also focused on restorative justice conferencing contradicted those from the Strang et al. analysis, but the results from this review should be interpreted with caution because they are based on outcomes from only four studies, and each had methodological shortcomings (Livingstone et al., 2013). They reviewed four evaluations of restorative justice conferencing programs that included an overall sample of 1,447 young offenders, ages 7 to 21. The researchers found that restorative justice conferencing had no greater effects on offender recidivism or victim satisfaction with the process, nor on the recognition of wrongdoing by the offending youth who participated in these programs than traditional court processing. Again, these results should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of studies in the analysis and their quality. While all four studies in the analysis were randomized control trials (RCTs), each suffered high levels of attrition and were subject to selection bias not only due to the voluntary nature of participation but also because offenders entered the programs at police discretion and the process underlying these police decisions was unknown (Livingstone et al., 2013).

Wong et al.’s subsequent meta-analysis published in 2016 continued to demonstrate the promise of restorative justice, while also shedding light on certain factors that moderated program results (Wong et al., 2016). The analysis examined recidivism outcomes drawn from 21 independent evaluations of restorative justice diversion programs producing an overall sample of 5,209 treatment group participants and 13,049 comparison group youth, each predominantly 12 to 18 years of age. The study was designed “to provide a comprehensive quantitative synthesis of restorative diversion programs for youth, consider strategies that are most effective in reducing recidivism, and identify which variables play a role in moderating outcome effects” (Wong et al., 2016, p. 4).

Overall, Wong and her colleagues found a statistically significant overall log odds ratio of 0.248, suggesting that restorative diversion programs reduced recidivism for youth participants. The researchers also found substantial heterogeneity in the outcomes of the programs studied. The type of research design employed as well as the study’s sample size and racial/ethnic composition were found to moderate recidivism reduction effects. Studies employing more rigorous research designs found weaker recidivism reduction effects.

The researchers identified “only one characteristic of treatment that had an influence on the effects reported in evaluation studies: ethnic composition of the sample” (Wong, et al., 2016, p. 14). Restorative justice diversion programs “serving a predominantly Caucasian sample of at-risk youths” produced a significant recidivism reduction effect, while those "serving samples that were predominantly ethnic minorities or a mix" (Wong, et al., 2016, p. 14) did not. While it is difficult to determine whether these outcome differences were the result of the program or external factors, the study’s findings underscore the importance of conducting research on factors that moderate the success of these programs.

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4 In one study, a new arrest was used as the outcome measure rather than a new conviction.

5 "Effect sizes were calculated as log odds ratios (ORs). An OR compares two groups in terms of the relative odds of an event—in this case, a measure of crime such as arrest, contact with police, or a new offense. ORs are centered on 1 (rather than zero), with 1 indicating no relationship between treatment and outcome—in other words, recidivism is equally likely to occur in both groups. Studies were coded such that values... greater than 1 indicate a beneficial effect of treatment (i.e., treatment group participants are less likely to recidivate)" (Wong, J. et al. [2016], p. 6).
Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that “restorative approaches are a promising way to combat recidivism among youth and should continue to be implemented and evaluated” (Wong, et al., 2016, p. 15). However, findings from their moderator analyses make it difficult to draw a straightforward conclusion about restorative justice, indicating a need for more restorative justice research using rigorous research designs. Studies of restorative justice programs that target youths of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and that document important program (e.g., parent involvement) and methodological factors (e.g., length of follow-up) that attenuate restorative justice effects are particularly needed.

Most recently, in 2017, Wilson et al. conducted a meta-analysis based on 60 studies involving 84 distinct evaluations that examined the effectiveness of restorative justice principles in juvenile justice (Wilson et al., 2017). The analysis included “programs that are solely based on restorative justice principles, as well as programs that implemented one or more restorative justice feature” (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 5). Overall, the programs in the analysis were very diverse with the majority involving “some form of meeting between the youth who committed the delinquent act and a victim or other community representative” (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 5).

More than half (56%) of the studies in the analysis assessed programs that are “explicitly” restorative in nature (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 56). Most involved victim-offender conferencing, with a smaller percentage involving family group conferencing, arbitration/mediation, impact panels or reparative boards, or circle sentencing. The rest of the studies in the analysis examined programs “consistent in some way with a restorative justice principle” (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 56), including restitution, teen court, and cautioning/diversion programs, as well as those providing more than one type of restorative practice.

The meta-analysis examined an array of outcomes for offenders (youth aged 18 or under) and victim program participants. These include recidivism reduction, restitution compliance and other reparation of harms for offenders; participant satisfaction and perceptions of fairness for both victims and offenders; and juvenile justice system costs. Only RCTs and quasi-experiments exhibiting general treatment and comparison group equivalency were included in the analysis. Overall effects were examined along with effects for various program types.

Similar to the recidivism reduction findings from the Wong et al. meta-analysis, Wilson and colleagues found a statistically significant recidivism reduction mean difference effect size of 0.23 overall, suggesting that youths who participated in restorative justice programs had lower rates of recidivism compared with youths who went through traditional court processing (Wilson et al., 2017). However, these results were less robust in the studies using random assignment. The researchers also found that offenders participating in restorative justice programs had “less supportive attitudes toward delinquent behaviors,” (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 38) higher levels of satisfaction with the process, and perceptions that the outcome of their case was fairer than their traditional court processing counterparts had.

Findings regarding recidivism reduction varied across program types. Cautioning and diversion programs were found to have the largest recidivism reduction effects. While the results for these program types were based on only four studies, Wilson and colleagues concluded that “(t)he evidence suggests that cautioning and diversion are effective alternatives to more formal processing of youth engaged in delinquent behavior” (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 32). Promising, but inconclusive findings regarding recidivism reduction were reported for victim-offender conferencing, family group conferen-

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6 For example, studies with a comparison group consisting of offenders who refused to participate in the program were excluded from the analysis.

7 As noted earlier, an effect size can be calculated in a number of ways. While an odds-ratio effect size is commonly calculated when the outcome of interest is measured dichotomously (e.g., yes/no), a mean difference effect size is commonly calculated when the outcome of interest is measured continuously (e.g., age).

8 Both program types are diversionary in nature. Cautioning programs typically involve a formal caution of the offender by the police, with subsequent diversion from further juvenile justice system processing.
ence, and programs providing more than one type of restorative justice practice. The recidivism reduction effects found for arbitration/mediation, impact panels and reparative boards, circle sentencing, restitution, and teen court programs were small and not statistically significant, though the evidence regarding these programs also was too equivocal to support a definitive conclusion regarding recidivism reduction effects. Another finding worth noting is that conferencing and mediation programs that included a pre-conference or pre-mediation meeting had better recidivism reduction outcomes than those that lacked this program element.

Victims participating in the restorative justice programs analyzed also were found to experience a number of benefits. Overall, victims had improved perceptions of fairness and improved attitudes toward the juvenile participant, including a greater willingness to provide forgiveness to the juvenile offender. Victims also were more likely to feel that the overall outcome of the program was just, and they were more satisfied with restorative justice programs than traditional approaches to juvenile justice (Wilson et al., 2017). These positive victim outcomes, however, were attenuated when study quality was taken into account, with the most rigorous studies in the analysis producing the least positive effects. No improvements in the emotional well-being of victims were found overall.

Overall, Wilson and his colleagues concluded that the evidence concerning restorative justice is generally positive and promising, and that “continued use of these programs and practices is warranted, but that more high quality, preferably RCTs that have been registered with a trial registry, need to be conducted before stronger inferences can be drawn” Wilson et al., 2017, p. 39). They went on to state:

These findings provide important support for many of the essential principles of restorative justice, primarily the centrality of the victim throughout the process, as well as a greater sense of satisfaction and fairness compared to traditional approaches. These findings also lend credence to restorative justice as a mechanism capable of achieving goals of the juvenile justice system, primarily prosocial youth development, and the restoration of victims (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 39).

**Summary**

Restorative justice practices take many different forms in the criminal and juvenile justice systems. They help to address the desire to do more than simply punish offenders for crimes committed and to do more to address the needs of the victim. These practices have a primary focus on the victim but have been shown to have positive results for offenders as well.

Synthesis research on restorative justice practices has focused on two primary sets of outcomes: recidivism for offenders and outcomes for victims such as satisfaction and restoration. Results are promising for both, regardless of whether the program targets juvenile or adult offenders, or low-level or serious (even violent) crimes.

These findings, however, may be attenuated by programmatic and methodological factors, such as program type and setting, and the scientific rigor of the evaluations included in the synthesis research. Indeed, positive victim and offender outcomes observed to date tend to be characterized by heterogeneity across program types, and positive outcomes for victims and offenders tend to be less robust when only the most scientifically rigorous studies are examined. Additionally, self-selection bias is always a factor when examining the effectiveness of these practices — that is, offenders who voluntarily agree to participate in the programs are potentially already less likely to reoffend.

Findings from the recent meta-analyses conducted by Wong et al. and Wilson et al. are particularly compelling, as they have led the U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (NIJ) and Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) to identify restorative justice programs for juveniles as a promising practice in their respective registries of evidence-based programs, NIJ’s CrimeSolutions.Gov and OJJDP’s Model Programs Guide. Based on the evidence, restorative justice programs for juveniles were acknowledged to have a positive impact on crime and delinquency, compliance with restitution and fine payments, offender reparations for the harm caused by the offense, and victims’ perception of fairness of the justice system (CrimeSolutions.Gov website, 2020).

While synthesis research on restorative justice practices has produced promising findings to date, more research and evaluation are needed to examine how and
why restorative justice practices are effective. Special attention to the implementation of such practices is needed to further establish best practices across all applications. Additional research is particularly needed for applications outside of victim-offender mediation and restorative justice conferencing. Furthermore, long-term victim and offender outcomes and cost-effectiveness should be integrated into more studies in this area.

As jurisdictions across the U.S. continue to look for non-traditional ways to hold offenders accountable, meet the needs of victims, and promote public safety, the demand for trustworthy research and information on effective restorative justice applications will only increase. This research brief attempts to help meet that demand by describing the overall premise of restorative justice, defining the prominent restorative justice applications being used in the justice system today, and summarizing findings from synthesis research on the effectiveness of restorative justice in reducing recidivism and promoting other positive outcomes for victims and offenders. Future briefs in this series will take deeper dives into real-world applications of restorative justice as well as research findings on the effectiveness of specific restorative justice approaches.

References


