



Research Summary



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IMPROVING RESTORATIVE JUSTICE PRACTICES

Question: Can psychologists contribute to improving the effectiveness of restorative justice practices?

Background: Restorative justice is an approach to crime that involves all affected parties (i.e., victim(s), offender(s), community) with the goal of attempting to repair the harm caused.

Currently restorative justice practices are very diverse, using a variety of models applied to various crimes at different stages of the criminal justice process. Many restorative justice programs are relatively new and are continually seeking ways to improve upon meeting the needs of victims, offenders and the community. Sharing across disciplines that focus on changing human behaviour can be fruitful and may ultimately benefit everyone.

Method: Psychology is the study of human behaviour and therefore has much to offer the field of restorative justice. Specifically, those who work in the area of criminal justice or correctional psychology work closely with offenders, victims and the community in situations of crime, conflict, and/or trauma, which is comparable to how restorative justice practitioners work. A review was undertaken to identify various areas where psychology could contribute to the field of restorative justice.

Answer: Psychologists possess knowledge, expertise and skills that could contribute to enhancing restorative justice practices. Three specific areas identified were program development, program evaluation and research, and program effectiveness.

Although all three areas are important, the latter could potentially have the largest impact on restorative justice practices. In terms of enhancing program effectiveness, psychology could contribute through its knowledge of assessment and treatment. Both of these areas are dominant in the psychology literature. For example, Canada is the world leader in terms of risk assessment of offenders. Psychologists could assist in assessing the risk levels of offenders entering restorative justice programs. This would allow facilitators of these programs to have knowledge of the offender's likelihood to revictimize someone. Furthermore, psychologists also work with victims and are able to assess whether those who have experienced trauma are ready to benefit from a restorative justice intervention.

Treatment is the second area where psychologists can assist, ensuring that restorative justice practices are in line with what is known about effective correctional treatment. For example, it is well-established that adherence to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity will result in higher levels of treatment effectiveness.

Programs that match the level of service to the risk level of the client (i.e., the risk principle), target need areas that are directly related to criminal behaviour (i.e., the need principle), and deliver cognitive-behavioural treatment (i.e., the responsivity principle) are much more effective than programs that do not adhere to these principles.

Ultimately, the principles of effective correctional treatment for offenders and restorative justice attempt to accomplish the same tasks. Both endeavour to effectively meet the needs of the offender, the victim(s), and the community towards decreasing the likelihood of future criminal activity by the offender and prevent future harm.

Restorative justice can be seen as a form of treatment, and therefore can benefit from these treatment principles. Research has found that restorative justice can have an effect of reducing recidivism by up to 12%. Offender treatment programs that adhere to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity have been found to have effects of reducing recidivism up to 35%.

Policy Implications:

1. The disciplines of psychology and restorative justice both possess important knowledge, skills and expertise; a partnership could lead to improvements in effective restorative justice practice.
2. Introducing offender risk assessment to restorative justice programs in cases of serious crime can enhance measures to reduce revictimization.
3. The principles of risk, need and responsivity are well-established in the offender treatment literature; therefore, incorporating these principles into restorative justice practices is likely to further decrease offender recidivism.

Source: Ruge, T. (2008). Restorative justice: What role can psychologists play? In G. Bourgon, R. K. Hanson, J. D. Pozzulo, K. Morton-Bourgon, & C. Tanasichuk (Eds.), *The Proceedings of the 2007 North American Correctional and Criminal Justice Psychology Conference* (pp. 175-178; User Report 2008-02). Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

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