



Research Summary



RESTORATIVE JUSTICE'S IMPACT ON PARTICIPANT HEALTH

Question: Is restorative justice good for participants' health?

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

Research on restorative justice has found many positive benefits, such as high levels of participant satisfaction, decreased fear for victims, and reduced recidivism for offenders. Research has also suggested that restorative justice processes may have positive impacts on a participant's overall well-being.

Restorative justice advocates and practitioners also report that participants "feel better" after a restorative justice process, but what exactly does this mean? Despite references made to improved participant well-being, few studies specifically examine the impact of these processes on participants' psychological and physical health using specific indicators.

A review of the literature on the *psychological* effects of restorative justice shows that "psychological" has been interpreted diversely. For example, some researchers examine the change in victims' trauma symptoms, decreases in levels of

fear, reduced desire for revenge, while others explore elements of forgiveness and indicators that tap into aspects of possible re-victimization.

For offenders specifically, there has been substantially less research on the psychological benefits of restorative justice, apart from some recent work examining the development of guilt, shame and empathy, and changes in optimism, self-efficacy and hope.

Research on restorative justice's impact on *physical* health is sparse; however, there is general literature showing that victimization and the resulting stress can affect an individual's physical health.

Method: A study examining two areas that contribute to an individual's overall "wellness" (i.e., physical and psychological health) was conducted. Using information collected from two restorative justice programs, changes in psychological and physical health in 92 participants (50 victims and 42 offenders) were measured. Two scales, a physical health scale and a psychological health scale, were administered to participants prior to the restorative justice process and following completion of the program. The physical health scale included items such as sleeping, eating, exercise, alcohol and drug use, and the psychological health scale asked questions

on safety, fear, anger, shame, anxiousness, self-esteem, depression, etc.

Answer: The majority of victims and offenders experienced positive changes in both physical and psychological health from pre-program to post-program.

Positive change was noted on all psychological health items and decreases in the total score of the psychological health scale were noted for 84.8% of participants. For many of those who did not show a decrease, it was because they entered the program with low scores at commencement (meaning few problems).

There was also positive change on the physical health indicators for those participants (victims and offenders) reporting physical problems. However, over 40% of participants reported no problems in this area at the start of the program.

Results of this study support previous preliminary research that suggests the restorative justice process has a positive impact on participants' psychological and, at least to some degree, on physical health.

Policy Implications:

1. Restorative justice has psychological and physical health benefits for victims. This humanizing and participatory option should be further explored to better meet the needs of victims.
2. Participation in restorative justice also results in improved physical and psychological health for offenders, which may ultimately decrease their likelihood of reoffending.
3. Restorative justice's approach to resolving crime results in healthier participants, both psychologically and physically. In turn, participants have an increased likelihood of returning as healthy and productive members of society. Ultimately, this may lead to a safer and healthier community.

Source: Rugge, T. & Scott, T-L. (2009). *Restorative Justice's Impact on Participants' Psychological and Physical Health*. User Report 2009-03. Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

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