

**Effectiveness of Restorative Justice Programs**  
**Literature Review by Ethan Hazzard-Watkins**  
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**Overview**

Extensive evidence supports the effectiveness of Restorative Justice (RJ) interventions such as Victim-Offender Dialogue, group conferencing, circle processes, Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA), and Reparative Boards as community responses to crime. RJ is used in the adult criminal legal system, in the juvenile legal system, in schools, in organizations, and elsewhere; this review is limited to its use in the criminal legal system for participants of varied ages. Effectiveness is generally defined as encompassing a decrease in reoffending (including longer time to first re-offense, lesser seriousness of re-offense, and fewer subsequent offenses); participant satisfaction with the process; and community support for, satisfaction with, and increased feelings of safety due to RJ programs. RJ has been studied extensively and found to be effective in each of these measures across locations, cultures, types of restorative practice, and seriousness of offenses. RJ can therefore be considered an evidence-based practice for responding to crime (Umbreit, Coates, & Vos, 2007).

**Recidivism**

Restorative programs, especially those including offenders (or “responsible parties”) and victims (“harmed parties”) in face-to-face conferences, are shown to significantly and consistently reduce recidivism for both juveniles and adults and to be very cost-effective methods for doing so (Kuo, Longmire, & Cuvelier, 2010; Latimer, Dowden, & Muise, 2005; Sherman, Strang, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, & Ariel, 2015; Strang, Sherman, Mayo-Wilson, Woods, & Ariel, 2013; Umbreit et al., 2007).

Vermont offers a restorative justice process called “Reparative Probation” where responsible parties meet with a panel of trained community volunteers to identify harms caused by their actions and find ways to make amends. Reparative panels are most often used for misdemeanor crimes such as Disorderly Conduct, Petit Larceny, Simple Assault, and some motor vehicle offenses. An analysis of Vermont data on over 9000 probationers sentenced in 1998-2000 found that participation in reparative panel significantly decreased the likelihood of reoffending over a

12 year time period. The effect was consistent across offense type, gender, age, and other factors (Humphrey, Burford, & Dye, 2012).

In addition, face-to-face restorative dialogue involving responsible and harmed parties, supportive third parties, and trained facilitators is found to have significant benefits when used with repeat offenders and in cases of serious offenses, such as violent or personal property crimes (Sherman, Strang, Barnes, et al., 2015, p. 502). Research suggests RJ should be expanded for use in such cases because it reduces reoffending, reduces psychological distress for harmed parties, and is much more cost-effective than more punitive approaches (Sherman, Strang, Barnes, et al., 2015; Wood & Suzuki, 2016).

### **Participant satisfaction**

Participation in restorative programs by harmed parties provides “clear benefits in both short- and long-term measures, including less prevalence of post-traumatic stress symptoms” (Sherman, Strang, Barnes, et al., 2015, p. 502; Strang et al., 2013). Extensive research documents that victims and offenders report high degrees of satisfaction and feelings of fairness with RJ processes as well as increased completion of restitution or other activities to repair harm (Kuo et al., 2010; Umbreit et al., 2007). RJ programs are more effective than traditional criminal justice programs at meeting these goals (Latimer et al., 2005). Participants in restorative programs report rates of satisfaction with the process and impressions of fairness that are consistently over 70% and often as high as 90% positive; these results hold for a range of types of interventions and across sites, cultures, and ages (Umbreit et al., 2007).

### **Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA)**

COSAs are a Restorative Justice intervention to support people who are reentering the community after incarceration. COSAs in Vermont include trained volunteers, a staff reentry coordinator, and a formerly incarcerated person, or “core member” who meet together weekly for one year. Research on COSAs has found that they decrease the likelihood and seriousness of re-offending (Bates, Williams, Wilson, & Wilson, 2014; Duwe, 2013; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009; Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, 2007), are a cost effective

intervention (Duwe, 2013), and have profoundly positive psychological and relational effects for both volunteers and core members (Fox, 2013; Fox 2017).

## **Limitations**

Scholars note several challenges with research on RJ programs. Because these programs are usually voluntary, there may be significant self-selection bias among the people who choose to participate. It is very difficult to conduct randomized controlled trials, although researchers attempt to address this with matched samples and statistical analysis. Elliott and Zajac (2015) note that many of the evaluations of COSAs use such small sample sizes that they cannot show the results to be statistically significant. The variation within programs broadly labeled “restorative” makes it challenging to identify which practices specifically contribute to the effects documented in the literature (Latimer et al., 2005; Parker, Bush, & Harris, 2014). Nevertheless, the effects reported above are broadly consistent in the literature over several decades and across a wide variety of locations and program types.

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