

# Examining the Effectiveness of Restorative Justice

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## Introduction

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of existing literature regarding the effectiveness of restorative justice (RJ). A mixed-methods study was conducted to determine what factors influence the effectiveness and success of the RJ process. The term “effective” has been operationalized to mean resulting in the reduction of recidivism rates. The intention of this research project was to provide an informative report in the field of law enforcement and public safety. This study sought to answer the research question: is restorative justice effective at reducing recidivism rates, and if so, how?

## Background

The criminal justice system in Canada is plagued with systemic issues of overincarceration, recidivism, racism, and the effects of the criminalization of mental illness. Often those who suffer most from these systemic issues are the most vulnerable and marginalized by Canadian society (Perry, 2016). There have been countless pleas from the public and criminal justice professionals that change is needed to the Canadian criminal justice system. One recommendation from the Department of Justice is to increase the availability and the use of RJ (Department of Justice Canada, 2019).

## Methods

This research project was conducted using the pragmatic approach, as the premise of this worldview is to understand the consequences of actions in the real world and determine practical solutions (Creswell, 2014). An explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was used to examine secondary literature. The researcher collected quantitative data from studies regarding recidivism rates for RJ participants. Then proceeded to collect qualitative data to explain the recidivism results in greater detail. A search of peer-reviewed journals, academic books and government databases was completed. Key search terms included restorative justice, offender, victim, recidivism rates, reoffending, effect, reduce, victim satisfaction, success, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The primary resources used to find articles were EBSCO, Google, and Google Scholar databases. Articles were selected if they included the abovementioned criteria. Additionally, the search was limited to peer-reviewed articles, available in full text, and published between 1995 and 2020.

## Results

After reviewing the literature, several themes were identified: the use of RJ effectively reduces recidivism rates, overall satisfaction is higher, victim involvement is vital, and challenges of net widening. Research consistently indicated that the use of RJ resulted in the reduction of reoffending. Consequently, RJ was more effective at reducing recidivism for more serious crimes but less effective at reducing recidivism when used with youth or for minor crimes, such as property/theft related offences. RJ participants reported greater feelings of satisfaction than those who went through the traditional justice system process. The most commonly stated reason for victim involvement is their ability to actively participate in the process. Several research studies indicated that net widening presents a challenge to the RJ process.

## Discussion

This research is important as all themes discussed contribute to the effectiveness and success of RJ. Studies showed that the use of RJ resulted in a reduction of reoffending, predominantly for crimes that were more serious or personal. Interestingly, conferences that produced a greater emotional response were said to have a more significant effect on recidivism (Sherman et al., 2015). Furthermore, if reoffending did occur, it was more often for a less serious offence. Participants frequently reported a greater sense of satisfaction over the traditional justice process. Some keys to satisfaction for victims were feeling prepared, ready to face and interact with the offender, having the ability to ask questions, finally getting answers, and receiving an apology. As for offenders, the ability to connect with people, having a chance to pay back victims, and avoiding court were the most important. For members of the community, keys to their satisfaction were understanding the root causes of crime and having a role in the restoration process (Armstrong, 2012). Participants identified the most common reason for victim involvement is their increased ability to participate in the process compared to the traditional justice process. Victims reported the increased participation allowed them to feel in control and empowered, contributing to a higher feeling of satisfaction (Armstrong, 2012). Net widening was reported to be a consistent challenge for the use of RJ. Research indicates that using RJ for minor offences, especially for youth, can result in more youth either under supervision or officially charged. Thankfully, researchers believe that this can be adequately addressed through increased training and policy changes (Hackler, 2004).

## Conclusions

The significance of this research project is underlining the need for change in the Canadian criminal justice system. To create a fair, efficient, and compassionate justice system, while meeting all Canadians’ needs and expectations. The Department of Justice Report (2019) proposed that increased use and availability of RJ could assist with these much-needed changes. After completing this mixed-methods literature review, it was determined that the use of RJ is effective at reducing recidivism rates, especially for crimes that are more serious or personal in nature and for which the RJ conference resulted in a highly emotional conversation. Further research is needed to determine the suitability of RJ in cases that are severe, extremely personal in nature or involve a power imbalance. Additionally, increased public education is necessary to ensure that all members of Canadian society know their rights regarding the availability of RJ.

## References

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