

Restorative justice conferencing

Repairing harm through facilitated meetings between offenders, victims and others affected by the offence.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction	 Strong	 Moderate	 Moderate	 Strong	 Low

Focus of the intervention

A restorative justice (RJ) conference is a planned face-to-face meeting between a victim and offender who has committed a crime against that person.

Other people also affected by the offence (for example, family or community members) may also attend.

RJ conferences are run by a trained facilitator.

RJ conferences aim to give the victim, offenders and others the chance to:

- discuss the consequences of the offence
- agree on how the offenders should repair the harm they have caused (for example, an apology or financial reparations)

RJ conferencing may be voluntary or court-ordered (if the offender and victim agree to participate). It can replace a custodial sentence or follow a period of imprisonment.

RJ conferences are also known as family group or diversionary conferences and transformative justice.

Victim-offender mediation is similar in content and aim. It involves bringing the victim and offender together, but not necessarily family and community members.

This narrative is primarily based on one systematic review including a meta-analysis of 10 studies. Of these 10 studies, seven were in the UK, two in Australia and one in the USA.

A second review covering four studies provided additional evidence in relation to the mechanism and implementation. Two of these studies were carried out in the USA and two in Australia.

- [See also victim-offender mediation.](#)
- [See also our restorative justice evidence briefing.](#)

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that RJ conferencing has reduced crime.

The overall evidence is taken from Review one (based on 10 studies), which covers results from the USA, UK and Australia.

When analysing the overall effect size, the review found that the offenders who participated in RJ conferences were significantly less likely to reoffend over two years than those who did not participate. The percentage differences associated with the 10 studies range from 7% to 45% fewer repeat convictions or arrests.

When assessing the effect sizes for different types of crime, the review found that RJ conferencing led to significantly fewer violent crimes. However, for property crimes there was no significant difference in reoffending rates between those who participated in RJ conferences and those who did not.

The review also found that RJ conferencing was more effective when used to supplement – rather than replace – traditional criminal justice procedures, such as prison.

There was a significant reduction in reoffending when used in addition to traditional sanctions, but no difference in reoffending when used on its own.

There were a number of non-crime outcomes measured by the review. Victims who had participated in a RJ conference were significantly more likely to feel that they had received a sincere apology from the offender, and significantly less likely to desire revenge against the offender, than those who had not.

Seven studies from the UK found that victims were significantly more likely to feel more secure and were more likely to say that they felt satisfied with the process and that it was fair.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The review had a well-designed search strategy and paid attention to various possible influences on the effect size by using appropriate statistical tests. However, it did not take into account the potential effects of publication bias.

A possible limitation of some of the primary studies within the review was the level of attrition of participants (both offenders and victims).

Mechanism – how does it work?

Both reviews suggest mechanisms through which RJ conferencing may reduce reoffending.

Review two suggests that by making the offender meet the victim face to face, it may reduce the offender's ability to justify their crimes and deny the impact that the crimes have upon the victim.

RJ conferencing may also offer a remedial opportunity for moral development for those offenders who have had limited exposure to constructive moral experiences.

The review authors suggest that offenders may feel that RJ conferencing is fairer and more collaborative than the usual criminal justice process, which leaves them more satisfied. By perceiving their treatment to be fair, the legitimacy of the process may be enhanced for the offender, potentially encouraging voluntary compliance.

RJ conferencing may allow the offender to take responsibility for their actions and express genuine remorse for wrongdoing – a process that allows easier reintegration back into the community.

It may also help to reduce the negative stigmatisation often associated with more traditional sanctions and therefore allows the offender to have better self-perception.

The emphasis of RJ conferencing is also on showing disapproval of offending rather than the offender, with less emphasis put on shaming the offender and more on reintegration.

Review one states that there is no single causal theory that fully describes the manner in which RJ conferencing might reduce reoffending. It notes that one theory of collective effervescence highlights the intense emotions at RJ conferences that can change behaviour in the aftermath, much like a religious service that reaffirms commitment to obey certain moral imperatives.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

Review one noted a number of potential moderators, including the use of RJ conferences for juvenile offenders compared to adults.

It found that RJ conferencing worked slightly but not significantly better for adult offenders than juveniles.

As stated in the effect section above, it was also discovered that while statistically significant reductions in reoffending for those who committed violent crime were seen, there was no significant reduction amongst those who had committed property crimes.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

Review one gave an in-depth account of the steps required when implementing a RJ conference, noting the roles that the offender, victim and facilitator would have to fulfil.

- Firstly, the facilitator has a one-on-one discussion with the offenders and victims separately about what an RJ conference is, how it works, and asks whether they consent to participate.
- The facilitator then schedules a conference at the victim's convenience.

- Participants (including victim, offender, supporters and facilitator) then sit in a circle in a private space with the door closed, in settings ranging from police stations to prisons to community centres or schools.
- Participants are then introduced in terms of how they are emotionally connected to the crime being discussed.
- The discussion begins by asking the offender to describe the crime they committed. Victims and other participants are then invited to describe the harm the crime has caused.
- Once the harm has been described, all participants are invited to suggest how the harm may be repaired. Once consensus is reached, this agreement is written up by the facilitator and signed by the offender.
- Finally, the agreement is then filed with a court, police unit or other institutional mechanism for encouraging compliance by the offender with the agreement.

Review two noted that RJ conferences can last between 30 and 90 minutes, and that the focus of the conference is not to determine guilt or innocence but to consider an appropriate plan of action to move forward.

These plans generally include one or more of the following:

- an apology to the victim
- reparation or restitution to the victim or community
- work or service to the community
- restrictions on conduct
- treatment (for example, to help overcome an addiction)

The plan may be tailored towards the needs and the age of the person, with juveniles treated accordingly.

The RJ conference may be court-ordered or recommended instead of court proceedings.

For ethical reasons, it is essential that participation in a RJ conference is voluntary by both offenders and victims.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

Review one presented cost-benefit analysis of different schemes, where cost information was reported in the primary studies.

Overall, it suggested that RJ conferencing was cost-effective. However, there were some differences across locations. RJ conferencing was most cost effective in London, where they saved £14 for every £1 spent. In Thames Valley £2 was saved for every £1 spent, and in Northumbria £1.20 was saved for every £1 spent.

The costs saved through reduced reoffending were based on Home Office figures for the cost of crimes.

The start-up costs of RJ conferencing may vary more than the costs of running the initiative, so the authors state that it is arguably more appropriate to focus on the running costs.

General considerations

Due to the voluntary nature of participation in RJC programs, there is an inherent self-selection bias that makes interpretation of results difficult.

Summary

Overall, the evidence suggests that RJ conferencing has reduced crime.

There was shown to be a significant reduction in reoffending among offenders who had committed violent crimes, but there was no significant difference amongst those who committed property crimes.

The initiative was found to work best when implemented as a supplement to the traditional criminal justice sanctions rather than as a replacement.

RJ conferencing was found to be cost effective in all areas where this information was available, with the largest savings in London where £14 was saved for every £1 spent.

Reviews

Review one

Quality of evidence			
Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
Low	Moderate	Strong	Low

Reference

- Strang, H., Sherman, L.W., Mayo-Wilson, E., Woods, D. and Ariel, B. (2013) '[Restorative Justice Conferencing \(RJC\) Using Face-to-Face Meetings of Offenders and Victims: Effects on Offender Recidivism and Victim Satisfaction. A Systematic Review](#)', Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2013:12 DOI: 10.4073/csr.2013.12

Review two

Quality of evidence			
Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
Moderate	No information	Moderate	No information

Reference

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Livingstone, N., Macdonald, G. and Carr, N. (2013) '[**Restorative justice conferencing for reducing recidivism in young offenders \(aged 7 to 21\)**](#)', Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 2013, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD008898. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD008898.pub2

Summary prepared by

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