



# Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research, and Training  
University of Minnesota College of Education & Human Development School of Social Work

In Collaboration with the Restorative Justice Initiative, Marquette University Law School, Milwaukee WI.

## **Restorative Justice:** *For Victims, Communities, and Offenders*

At a time when most criminal justice systems throughout the world continue to be overburdened and driven by very costly policies of punishment that offer little to victims of crime, restorative justice offers a fundamentally different roadmap, a different way of understanding and responding to crime. Crime is understood as a wound within the community and justice requires accountability and healing for all affected, not just ever-increasing costly punishment with few positive outcomes.

Restorative justice is a victim-centered response to crime that provides opportunities for those most directly affected by crime - the victim, the offender, their families, and representatives of the community - to be directly involved in responding to the harm caused by the crime, through mediation and dialogue whenever possible. Restorative justice is based upon values which emphasize the importance of providing opportunities for more active family and community involvement in the process of: offering support and assistance to crime victims; holding offenders directly accountable to the people and communities they have violated; restoring the emotional and material losses of victims (to the degree possible); providing a range of opportunities for dialogue and problem solving among interested crime victims, offenders, families, and other support persons; offering offenders opportunities for competency development and reintegration into productive community life; and strengthening public safety through community building. In many respects, restorative justice is “going back to the future,” attempting to reclaim many old-fashioned values and practices within many cultures and integrate that wisdom with the best of what we have learned from the modern system of juvenile and criminal justice.

From its humble beginnings in Canada and the United States during the 1970s, restorative justice today is a social movement in the global community with policies and practices known to be developing throughout the United States and Canada. Restorative justice is also developing in many other parts of the world, including numerous European countries, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Liberia, Rwanda, Japan, and Central and South America, Israel, and Turkey. Today, restorative justice is truly an international movement, with endorsements from the United Nations and the European Union.

The principles of restorative justice draw upon the wisdom of many indigenous cultures from throughout the world, such as: the peacemaking and talking circle process among Native American culture within the United States and First Nation culture in Canada; the Native Hawaiian practice of Hoho-pono; the Palestinian process of Sulha; and Palava huts in the West African nation of Liberia. All of these and other indigenous practices have many characteristics of restorative justice and healing.

The most widely used and research-based expressions of restorative justice involve dialogue among victims and offenders, along with support people, that focuses on gaining a greater understanding of the impact of the crime on the lives of those affected and developing a plan to repair the harm to the greatest extent possible. Restorative justice dialogue is offered in a growing number of communities through programs such as victim offender mediation, community conferencing, family group conferencing, or peacemaking circles.

Specific examples of restorative justice in criminal and juvenile justice settings include: crime repair crews, victim intervention programs, family group conferencing, community conferencing, victim offender mediation and dialogue, peacemaking circles, victim panels that speak to offenders, sentencing circles, community reparative boards before which offenders appear, offender competency development programs, victim empathy classes for offenders, victim directed and citizen involved community service by the offender, community-based support groups for crime victims, and, community-based support groups for offenders. As the oldest and most widely developed expression of restorative justice, with more than four decades of experience and numerous studies in more than 7 countries, victim offender mediation/conferencing and dialogue programs currently work with many thousands of cases annually through hundreds of programs throughout North America and Europe, as well as in a small but growing number of communities in Asia, Africa, and the Mideast.

Research has found restorative justice programs to be effective in working with nearly all types of property crimes and minor assaults. Numerous studies have found high levels of victim and offender satisfaction with the process and outcome, greater likelihood of successful restitution completion by the offender, reduced fear among victims, and reduced frequency and severity of further criminal behavior. Restorative justice through victim offender dialogue has also been found to have a positive impact in crimes of severe violence, requiring far more preparation of the involved parties.

Restorative justice is not simply a technique or a series of programs. It is an entirely different way of dealing with crime and conflict in our communities and nations. Restorative justice has important implications for large-scale systemic change as exemplified in numerous state and local jurisdictions in the U.S., in Canada, in New Zealand, and numerous European countries.

As Professors Howard Zehr and Harry Mika have pointed out, we are working toward restorative justice when we: focus on the harms of wrongdoing more than the rules that have been broken; show equal concern and commitment to victims and offenders, involving both in the process of justice; work toward the restoration of victims, empowering them and responding to their needs as they see them; support offenders while encouraging them to understand, accept and carry out their obligations; recognize that while obligations may be difficult for offenders, they should not be intended as harms and they must be achievable; provide opportunities for dialogue, direct or indirect, between victims and offenders as appropriate; involve and empower the affected community through the justice process, and increase their capacity to recognize and respond to community bases of crime; encourage collaboration and reintegration rather than coercion and isolation; give attention to the unintended consequences of our actions and programs; show respect to all parties including victims, offenders, justice colleagues.

## **CASE EXAMPLE**

### *Baltimore, Maryland*

The Community Conferencing Center, a community-based non-profit organization, represents one of the largest restorative justice programs in the country. In a city of 637,400 people, with 68% being people of color, the Community Conferencing Center receives referrals from primarily police officers, but also from courts, schools, and the community. Those who participate in restorative justice dialogue through a community conference are diverted from the formal juvenile or criminal justice system. In a recent year 451 cases were referred, representing 1,185 youth, including 1,121 minority youth. A total of 1,640 people participated in 604 conferences. Agreements to resolve the conflict were reached in 98% of the cases. Young offenders who participated in a community conference with their victim and others from the community were 60% less likely to re-offend.