

Female offenders in Restorative Justice Conferences

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Abstract

The use of restorative justice looks set to increase over the coming years. There is general academic consensus that restorative justice performs highly in terms of victim satisfaction and Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) have demonstrated that it can significantly reduce the reoffending of those offenders who take part. However, much of the evidence is based on research with male offenders. This report examines the experiences of female offenders (women and girls) in restorative justice conferences, through a literature review of the available evidence and then through interviews with restorative justice practitioners who have worked with both male and female offenders.

The interviews with practitioners focused on the following questions:

- ? Do restorative justice practitioners treat male and female offenders differently?
- ? What types of cases involving female offenders go to conference?
- ? Do practitioners notice any differences between male and female offenders in terms of how they react to the restorative justice process?
- ? Are there risks with female offenders that practitioners think should be given particular consideration?

Findings

- More research is required before there is a true understanding of the implications gender has for restorative justice. As the literature review demonstrated, the existing evidence is limited and based on small-scale samples.
- This research report has found some evidence to suggest that restorative justice can be effective with female offenders, but that there are certain precautions that practitioners should take. In particular they should be aware of issues and vulnerabilities that are more likely to be present with female offenders.
- In many cases there may be very positive benefits for female offenders who participate in conferences even when these vulnerabilities are present. However there are obviously cases in which restorative justice can go wrong and female offenders can potentially be adversely affected by a conference.
- By understanding more about female offenders in restorative justice conferences, practitioners can better protect against adverse consequences whilst ensuring a greater number of successful conferences are delivered.

Recommendations

- Community based Women's Centres should work closely with restorative justice practitioners to facilitate restorative justice conferences with women offenders accessing these services.
- Greater investment is required to establish restorative justice projects within the women's custodial estate, including provision to evaluate these projects to reveal more about best practice both in terms of delivery and achieving positive outcomes, and any practical implementation barriers that might be faced by other establishments.
- Future publications from the Ministry of Justice on 'working with women offenders' should include guidance in relation to restorative justice.
- Further research should be undertaken to understand the impact of restorative justice on female offenders, particularly focussing on:
 - ▶ Whether female offenders are under-represented in restorative justice;
 - ▶ The approach restorative justice practitioners should take with female offenders;
 - ▶ Whether female offenders are more likely to physically display emotion and whether this affects conferences;
 - ▶ Whether female offenders are more reluctant to engage in restorative justice;
 - ▶ Whether the risk assessment process is right for female offenders; and
 - ▶ Whether restorative justice should be prioritised for women offenders.