Strang et al. (2013) undertook a systematic review of Restorative Justice Conferencing, and the associated effects on offender recidivism and victim satisfaction. They concluded that there is “clear and compelling” evidence that restorative justice conferencing reduces future rates of offending amongst offenders who consent to participate in it. The effect is relatively modest but the cost effectiveness of restorative justice conferencing warrants its wider use. We summarise this systematic review below.

What is it?

Restorative justice as a broad approach emerged in the 1970s, from studies of indigenous communities in Canada and New Zealand, and religious communities in North America (see Zehr, 2005). A restorative justice conference brings together the victim(s) and the perpetrator(s) of a crime. A trained facilitator runs the conference, which takes the form of a face-to-face meeting. This format provides an opportunity for victims to describe the hurt done to them, and gives offenders the chance to understand the effect that their actions have had, and to take responsibility for their crimes. Both parties are encouraged to reach agreement on the best way to repair the harm that the crime caused. Whilst participation is voluntarily, restorative justice conferencing can be included in Rehabilitation Activity Requirements under the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014.
Should it work?

Restorative justice takes a needs based approach to issues of crime and harm and shifts the focus from the criminal justice system to justice as a social and community-based process. It acknowledges the fact that many victims seek reparation rather than retribution from the justice process (Braithwaite, 2004). For the harm caused by a crime to heal, it is important to address the emotional needs of the victim rather than simply offer material reparation. The needs of the offender and of the wider community can also be addressed in this process, and in theory, all parties can experience closure from the experience, allowing them to move forward in their lives. Whilst lacking a singular theoretical basis, restorative justice is broadly supported by a range of theories which consider among other things the role of labelling, 're-integrative shaming', and social networks in the process of justice (Braithwaite, 2004).

Does it work?

A systematic review conducted in 2013 concluded that restorative justice conferences provide a 'modest but highly cost-effective reduction in repeat offending, with substantial benefits for victims' (Strang et al., 2013: 2). The main benefits of the conferences include:

- Lower levels of trauma for victims
- Reduced fear of the offender among victims
- Increased victim satisfaction with the criminal justice system
- Reduced costs to the criminal justice system

The review found that offenders who participated in restorative justice conferences were significantly less likely to reoffend over the subsequent 2 years compared with those who did not participate. The effect varied depending on the type of crime; so for instance there was a significant positive effect for violent offenders, but not for property crime offenders. The effect of conferencing on victim satisfaction was consistently higher for victims assigned to Restorative Justice Conferences than for those cases were dealt with through conventional criminal justice processes. Participation in an RJC was also found to reduce future offending among offenders.

In the forest plot below, all but one of the studies of restorative justice conferencing (shown along each row) reports an effect size (represented by the white box) that is less than 1. This shows that the odds of reoffending are lower in the treatment group (i.e. those participating in restorative justice conferences) than in the control group (those who did not participate). In fact, the average effect (represented by the diamond) across the 10 studies reviewed is Odds Ratio 0.755 [0.64, 0.89] which indicates that the odds of reoffending are 7.5% lower amongst those who
participated in restorative justice conferences than those who did not. This is a statistically significant effect because the confidence intervals (represented by the orange bar) do not cross 1.

How strong is the evidence?

The systematic review is based on 10 randomised controlled trials of restorative justice conferencing in the UK, USA and Australia. Only trials that required the consent of the offender prior to randomisation and reported data that enabled the calculation of an intention-to-treat effect were included.
Is it worth it?

A cost-effectiveness estimate for the seven experiments conducted in the United Kingdom found significant savings across all sites, with a ratio of 8 times more benefit in terms of costs of crimes prevented than the cost of delivering restorative justice conferencing. Savings in London for instance were equal to £14 saved for every pound spent on this approach (Strang et al., 2013).

Can it be implemented?

None of the studies reviewed mentioned problems with implementation.

What's missing from the evidence?

Restorative justice conferencing has been shown to be effective at reducing levels of reoffending amongst offenders who consent to be involved, but there is no evidence for those who have participated but may have been compelled to consent. Likewise, whilst there is significant evidence that participation in a restorative justice conference reduced offending, the review does not describe in detail how participation reduced offending, or the impact of the process on individual offenders.

References

