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The Effectiveness of Restorative Justice in the Juvenile Justice System: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of restorative justice (RJ) practices within the juvenile justice system through a comparative analysis of various jurisdictions implementing RJ alongside or instead of traditional punitive approaches. Restorative justice emphasizes repairing harm through dialogue, accountability and community engagement, offering an alternative to incarceration and formal adjudication. This research investigates how RJ influences recidivism rates, victim satisfaction, offender rehabilitation and community involvement in contrast to conventional justice models. Using qualitative and quantitative data from countries such as New Zealand, Canada, the United States and select European nations, the study highlights best practices and challenges in implementation. The findings reveal that jurisdictions with integrated RJ programs report lower recidivism, higher victim-offender reconciliation and improved youth outcomes. However, limitations such as inconsistent policy application, lack of trained facilitators and varying levels of stakeholder buy-in affect the overall impact. This comparative analysis suggests that while restorative justice is not a universal remedy, it holds significant promise in transforming juvenile justice into a more rehabilitative and socially constructive process. The study concludes with policy recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and scalability of RJ practices globally.

Keywords: Restorative Justice, Juvenile Justice System, Recidivism, Rehabilitation, Comparative Analysis.

Introduction

Restorative justice is a progressive and human-centered approach to addressing crime that shifts the focus from punishment to healing. It is grounded in the belief that crime is not just a violation of the law, but a harm done to individuals, relationships and the community. At its core, restorative justice seeks to repair this harm by actively involving all stakeholders victims, offenders and community members in a collaborative process. Key principles of restorative justice include accountability, reparation, reconciliation and reintegration. Offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions,



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understand the impact of their behavior and make amends directly to those affected. Victims are given a voice and a chance to express how the offense has impacted them, while communities are engaged to support both parties in the healing process. This model stands in stark contrast to traditional retributive systems that prioritize punishment over understanding and resolution (Simangunsong, 2025).

The juvenile justice system, specifically designed to deal with young offenders, has historically evolved to balance public safety with the unique developmental needs of adolescents. Unlike the adult criminal justice system, the juvenile justice system is intended not merely to punish, but to rehabilitate and guide youth toward becoming responsible and productive members of society. Its goals often include providing interventions that address the root causes of delinquent behavior, ensuring the protection of the community, holding juveniles accountable in developmentally appropriate ways and promoting positive behavioral change. Over the years, however, critics have argued that despite its rehabilitative intentions, the juvenile justice system frequently mirrors the punitive nature of adult criminal courts. This has led to negative outcomes such as high recidivism rates, limited educational and vocational support and poor mental health outcomes for youth (Jagota & Kaur, 2024).

In light of these challenges, restorative justice has emerged as a compelling alternative or complementary approach within the juvenile justice framework. Rather than treating young offenders as inherently criminal or irredeemable, restorative practices view them as capable of change and growth. These practices are particularly relevant for juveniles, who are still in critical stages of emotional, psychological and social development. Restorative justice aligns with contemporary understandings of adolescent behavior and brain development, which recognize that youth are more likely than adults to engage in risk-taking and impulsive actions but are also more responsive to intervention and behavioral correction. By fostering empathy, encouraging meaningful dialogue and facilitating community support, restorative justice practices can significantly contribute to the personal development and positive transformation of young offenders.

The process typically involves facilitated meetings such as victim-offender dialogues, family group conferences, or community panels, where the young person acknowledges the harm caused and works with others to determine appropriate ways to make amends. Such approaches not only address the harm more directly and personally than formal court proceedings but also contribute to a greater sense of closure and satisfaction for victims. Importantly, restorative justice recognizes the role of the community in both the origin and resolution of crime. Communities are not only seen as passive environments affected by crime but as active participants in the process of healing and reintegration (Raghavendra, 2024).

Implementing restorative justice within the juvenile system can lead to multiple positive outcomes. These include reduced rates of recidivism, improved relationships between young offenders and their families or communities, increased victim satisfaction and cost-effective alternatives to incarceration. In many jurisdictions where restorative practices have been adopted, results have shown that such programs can outperform traditional justice responses in key areas such as reducing repeat offenses and fostering social reintegration. Furthermore, restorative justice provides an opportunity to address issues of racial and social disparities that are often prevalent in juvenile systems. By focusing on individualized responses and culturally relevant practices, restorative justice offers a more equitable framework for addressing juvenile delinquency.

Nevertheless, the integration of restorative justice into existing systems is not without its challenges. Differences in legal frameworks, resource limitations, lack of trained



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facilitators and varying levels of institutional support can impact the success and consistency of restorative initiatives. Moreover, not all offenses or offenders may be suitable for such interventions and careful screening and support mechanisms are essential to ensure that the process remains voluntary, safe and effective for all involved (Nazim et al., 2024).

Despite these obstacles, the growing body of evidence and practical experience underscores the value of restorative justice as a transformative tool within the juvenile justice system. It moves beyond the narrow confines of punishment and control, promoting a justice that is more aligned with principles of human dignity, empathy and social accountability. By encouraging offenders to make amends, empowering victims and involving communities, restorative justice lays the foundation for a more just, compassionate and constructive response to juvenile crime.

In this context, the central argument of this research is that restorative justice is an effective approach within the juvenile justice system, as it not only promotes rehabilitation and personal accountability but also fosters reintegration of young offenders into society. Through a comparative analysis of jurisdictions that have adopted restorative practices, this study will explore how such approaches can enhance the overall effectiveness of juvenile justice, reduce reoffending and contribute to healthier and more resilient communities (Vashishth & Dudeja, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of restorative justice within the juvenile justice system is deeply rooted in a set of interconnected theories and models that prioritize healing, accountability and community engagement over punishment. Unlike traditional justice models that are largely retributive in nature focusing on determining guilt and administering penalties restorative justice theories emphasize the social dimensions of crime and the need to address the harm caused to victims, offenders and the broader community. These theories argue that justice is best achieved not through isolation and punishment, but through processes that actively involve all affected parties in dialogue, decision-making and repair. Within the juvenile justice context, where developmental immaturity and the potential for positive change are especially relevant, these theories offer a particularly compelling alternative to punitive systems (Shami, Asghar, & Ashraf, 2025).

One of the most influential theoretical underpinnings of restorative justice is the **communicative theory of justice**, which views crime as a breakdown in relationships rather than merely a legal transgression. This theory highlights the importance of communication between victims, offenders and communities to address the emotional and social impact of the offense. By creating space for dialogue and mutual understanding, restorative justice allows young offenders to comprehend the real-life consequences of their actions and fosters empathy, remorse and responsibility. Similarly, **relational theory** supports the idea that individuals are deeply embedded in social networks and that crime disrupts not only individual lives but the relationships that sustain community well-being. These theoretical perspectives emphasize that the restoration of these relationships is essential for genuine justice (Shami, Khaled, et al., 2025).

Several models have emerged from these theoretical foundations, each with practical applications in juvenile justice settings. Prominent among them are **victim-offender mediation (VOM)**, **family group conferencing (FGC)** and **restorative circles**. In VOM, the victim and the young offender meet face-to-face in a safe, structured environment facilitated by a trained mediator. This allows for open dialogue, expression of feelings and negotiation of a mutually agreed-upon plan for making amends. Family



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group conferencing expands this model by including the families of both the victim and the offender, as well as community members, in the restorative process. This approach is particularly well-suited to juvenile cases, as it acknowledges the significant role that families and communities play in shaping youth behavior. Restorative circles, often used in schools and community programs, involve broader participation and are designed to build consensus and restore harmony through collective dialogue and shared decision-making (Shami, Asghar, & Haider, 2025).

Central to all restorative justice theories and models are three key principles: **reparation**, **reconciliation** and **reintegration**. These principles are not only theoretical concepts but are operationalized in restorative practices to guide the behavior of participants and shape the outcomes of the process.

Reparation refers to the process of repairing the harm caused by the offense. It goes beyond symbolic gestures to involve tangible actions taken by the offender to address the impact of their behavior. This might include apologizing to the victim, performing community service, paying restitution, or engaging in activities that contribute positively to society. Reparation emphasizes the importance of making things right and restoring a sense of justice from the perspective of the victim and the community. In juvenile cases, this process also serves a developmental purpose, helping young offenders understand the consequences of their actions and encouraging them to take meaningful responsibility. Rather than simply serving a sentence, the offender is actively involved in making amends, which fosters moral growth and accountability (Manzoor et al., 2025).

Reconciliation is the principle that aims to rebuild trust and restore relationships between victims, offenders and communities. While not always possible or appropriate in every case, reconciliation provides a space for emotional healing, forgiveness and mutual understanding. For victims, reconciliation can offer validation and closure, as well as the opportunity to voice their experiences and needs. For juvenile offenders, the process of facing those they have harmed and listening to the impact of their actions can be transformative. It humanizes the victim and disrupts the often impersonal nature of conventional justice proceedings. Reconciliation is not necessarily about forgetting the harm, but about recognizing shared humanity and working toward a more peaceful resolution. In community settings, reconciliation also encourages solidarity and a collective sense of responsibility for addressing the root causes of crime, such as poverty, inequality and lack of support for at-risk youth (Asghar et al., 2025).

Reintegration is a particularly critical principle in the juvenile justice system. It focuses on the successful return of the offender to the community as a contributing and accepted member. Traditional justice systems often stigmatize young offenders, making it difficult for them to reintegrate after detention or formal proceedings. This can lead to further marginalization, increased likelihood of reoffending and disrupted social and educational development. In contrast, restorative justice emphasizes reintegration as an active process that includes community support, mentorship, education and opportunities for meaningful participation. Programs designed around this principle often include counseling, peer support groups, skill-building activities and follow-up monitoring. Reintegration reflects the belief that young people are capable of change and that their future should not be defined solely by their past mistakes. By focusing on their strengths and potential, restorative justice facilitates a pathway back into society that supports long-term rehabilitation and reduces recidivism (Azhar et al., 2025).

Together, these three principles form the backbone of restorative justice theory and practice. They are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a holistic framework for responding to juvenile crime. Reparation addresses the tangible consequences of the



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offense, reconciliation restores emotional and relational balance and reintegration ensures that the young offender is given the opportunity to move forward constructively. This triad is especially powerful when applied to juveniles, who are in formative stages of identity development and are more responsive to rehabilitative interventions.

The theoretical framework of restorative justice offers a comprehensive and humanistic lens through which to view juvenile justice. Grounded in communicative and relational theories and implemented through models such as mediation and conferencing, restorative justice prioritizes healing over punishment. By embracing the principles of reparation, reconciliation and reintegration, this approach offers not only a more just response to youth crime but also a more hopeful and transformative one that recognizes the capacity for growth, change and redemption in every young person (Samuels IV, 2025).

Comparative Analysis of Restorative Justice Programs

Restorative justice programs have gained significant traction across different jurisdictions as an alternative or complement to the traditional punitive approach, particularly within the juvenile justice system. These programs are rooted in principles of accountability, dialogue and healing and aim to address the needs of victims, offenders and communities alike. Although restorative justice is not a one-size-fits-all model, several distinct approaches have emerged and been implemented in various countries. Among the most prominent are **Family Group Conferencing (FGC)**, **Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM)** and **Restorative Circles**. While each model shares common goals such as reparation, reconciliation and reintegration they differ in structure, stakeholder involvement and cultural context. A comparative analysis of these models offers valuable insight into their relative effectiveness in reducing recidivism, increasing victim satisfaction and promoting offender rehabilitation (Okta, 2025).

Family Group Conferencing is a restorative justice model that originated in New Zealand and has since been adopted in countries like Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. In this model, the offender, victim and their respective family members or support networks come together in a facilitated meeting. The aim is to openly discuss the offense, its impact and collaboratively develop a plan for reparation that is acceptable to all parties. What makes FGC particularly effective for juveniles is the involvement of family members, who play a crucial role in both supporting the young person and holding them accountable. This community-based approach empowers families and encourages collective responsibility, which is often more meaningful to youth than court-imposed penalties. FGCs have shown success in creating lasting outcomes, especially in indigenous and collectivist communities where familial ties and communal decision-making are culturally embedded (Kusmayadi et al., 2025).

Victim-Offender Mediation is another widely implemented restorative model, especially prominent in the United States, Germany and several Nordic countries. This model involves a structured, face-to-face meeting between the victim and the offender, facilitated by a trained mediator. The setting is intentionally neutral and safe, allowing both parties to express their feelings, ask questions and agree on steps toward reparation. VOM offers a unique opportunity for victims to have their voices heard and for offenders to see the human impact of their actions, often for the first time. This can foster genuine remorse and a sense of moral responsibility in the offender. In juvenile cases, the mediation process can be particularly impactful because it creates space for reflection, emotional development and moral learning elements that are often underdeveloped in traditional punitive systems (Prima et al., 2025).

Restorative Circles, also known as peacemaking circles, have been practiced in



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indigenous communities for generations and have been increasingly adapted in countries like Canada and the United States. Restorative circles involve a broader group of participants, including victims, offenders, family members, community representatives and support persons. Unlike the linear structure of court proceedings, circles operate in a democratic and egalitarian format, where everyone has a chance to speak and contribute. The aim is to collectively understand the root causes of the offense, its impact and to formulate a reparative plan with community involvement. For juveniles, restorative circles can be particularly effective as they provide a supportive environment where youth are not judged in isolation but understood within their social and personal context. The communal nature of the circle fosters empathy, reduces feelings of alienation and strengthens ties between the youth and their community (Zhuo & Zhong, 2025).

When comparing these models in terms of **recidivism rates**, research consistently shows that participation in restorative justice programs correlates with lower reoffending rates compared to traditional juvenile justice processes. In jurisdictions where FGC is widely practiced, such as New Zealand, studies have shown that youth who complete conferencing are significantly less likely to reoffend. Similarly, VOM programs in the U.S. have reported notable reductions in recidivism among participating juveniles. Restorative circles, although less widespread, also demonstrate promising outcomes in reducing repeat offenses, particularly when embedded in community-based support structures. The common factor across all models appears to be the personal engagement of the offender in the justice process, which contrasts sharply with the often impersonal nature of court proceedings. By fostering accountability and personal growth, restorative models address the underlying behaviors and social conditions contributing to delinquency.

In terms of **victim satisfaction**, restorative justice programs generally outperform traditional justice mechanisms. Victims involved in VOM and FGC often report higher levels of satisfaction because they are given a platform to voice their concerns, receive apologies and influence the reparative outcomes. These programs provide a sense of closure and validation that is rarely achieved through conventional court trials. Victims often appreciate the opportunity to ask questions, express emotions and participate in a process that acknowledges their suffering. In restorative circles, the inclusive and participatory nature of the discussion allows victims to feel supported by the community and engaged in a meaningful way. Across jurisdictions, surveys consistently indicate that victims who engage in restorative processes are more likely to feel that justice was served, even when the offender avoids formal punishment (Pei, 2025).

Regarding **offender rehabilitation**, restorative justice programs excel in promoting positive behavioral change, particularly in juvenile offenders. The focus on empathy, personal accountability and making amends provides youth with practical and emotional tools for growth. FGCs help reintegrate young offenders by engaging their family and community in the process, offering a network of support that is often lacking in punitive systems. VOM encourages juveniles to reflect deeply on their actions and the pain they have caused, which can lead to genuine remorse and commitment to change. Restorative circles, through their collective dialogue and emphasis on relationship-building, allow offenders to feel supported rather than shamed, which increases the likelihood of successful reintegration. In many jurisdictions, youth who participate in restorative programs report greater feelings of self-worth, improved family relationships and stronger community connections all of which are key indicators of rehabilitation.

While the structure and implementation of restorative justice programs vary across jurisdictions, the underlying principles and outcomes remain consistent. Family Group



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Conferencing, Victim-Offender Mediation and Restorative Circles each offer unique advantages in addressing juvenile crime through collaborative, empathetic and reparative processes. Comparative evidence suggests that these models are not only effective in reducing recidivism but also in promoting victim satisfaction and fostering meaningful rehabilitation among young offenders. By focusing on healing rather than punishment, restorative justice presents a compelling and transformative alternative for juvenile justice systems worldwide (Philona & Awaludin, 2025).

Effectiveness of Restorative Justice in the Juvenile Justice System

Restorative justice has emerged as a promising and transformative approach to juvenile justice, offering an alternative to traditional punitive measures that often fail to address the underlying causes of youth offending. At its core, restorative justice is designed to repair harm, foster accountability and reintegrate young offenders into society as constructive members. Rather than emphasizing punishment, this model encourages dialogue, responsibility and reconciliation, making it particularly suited to addressing juvenile delinquency. The effectiveness of restorative justice in the juvenile justice system can be measured through several key indicators: reduced recidivism rates, improved rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders and increased victim satisfaction. However, despite its many advantages, restorative justice is not without challenges. Issues related to implementation, as well as cultural and socio-economic disparities, can influence how effective these programs are across different contexts (Ismail et al., 2025).

One of the most compelling benefits of restorative justice for young offenders is its **potential to reduce recidivism**. Numerous studies across various jurisdictions have demonstrated that juveniles who participate in restorative justice programs are significantly less likely to reoffend compared to those who undergo traditional justice processes. This reduction in reoffending can be attributed to several factors inherent to restorative practices. First, restorative justice encourages young offenders to confront the real human impact of their actions, often for the first time. This direct interaction with victims or affected community members promotes empathy and a deeper understanding of the consequences of their behavior. Second, because these programs are non-adversarial and voluntary, young offenders are more likely to engage genuinely in the process, take responsibility for their actions and work toward making amends. Unlike punitive measures, which may stigmatize and alienate youth, restorative justice focuses on personal growth and behavior change. In doing so, it breaks the cycle of crime by addressing root causes and equipping youth with the tools to make better decisions (Rismana et al., 2025).

In addition to reducing recidivism, restorative justice has proven effective in **promoting the rehabilitation and reintegration** of young offenders. Rehabilitation, in this context, refers not just to behavioral change but also to the emotional, psychological and social development of the individual. Restorative practices, such as victim-offender mediation and family group conferencing, create a structured and supportive environment in which youth can reflect on their actions, receive constructive feedback and develop a sense of accountability. These processes often involve families, schools and community members, which enhances the youth's support network and contributes to more holistic reintegration efforts. Moreover, restorative justice programs frequently include elements such as community service, educational initiatives, or counseling, which further assist in the rehabilitation process. The emphasis on reintegration rather than exclusion ensures that youth are not cut off from society but are instead given the opportunity to reconnect, rebuild trust and contribute positively to their communities (Alicea & Hobbs Dr, 2025).



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Another important measure of effectiveness is **victim satisfaction**, which tends to be significantly higher in restorative justice processes compared to traditional court proceedings. Many victims of juvenile crime report feeling marginalized and unheard within the conventional justice system. In contrast, restorative justice offers victims an active role in the process. They are given a voice to express how the offense affected them, ask questions and participate in shaping the outcomes. This involvement not only empowers victims but also promotes emotional healing and closure. Being able to engage directly with the offender, hear an apology and receive reparation can be a powerful step toward overcoming trauma. Studies have shown that victims who participate in restorative justice processes report higher levels of satisfaction, fairness and confidence in the justice system. Importantly, the collaborative nature of restorative justice helps restore a sense of control and dignity to those harmed, which is often absent in traditional court processes (Kumar, 2025).

Despite these significant benefits, restorative justice faces **implementation challenges** within the juvenile justice system. One of the primary barriers is the lack of consistent policy and legislative support across jurisdictions. While some countries have fully integrated restorative practices into their juvenile justice frameworks, others treat them as pilot programs or supplementary interventions. This inconsistency can lead to fragmented or uneven implementation. Additionally, there is often a shortage of trained facilitators and mediators who can effectively conduct restorative sessions. Without skilled professionals, the quality and integrity of the process can suffer, potentially undermining its effectiveness. Another challenge is the reluctance of some legal professionals and stakeholders to embrace restorative justice, often due to a lack of understanding or trust in its outcomes. Overcoming these institutional and attitudinal barriers requires sustained training, education and policy advocacy.

Cultural and socio-economic factors also play a significant role in determining the success of restorative justice programs. In diverse societies, cultural norms can influence perceptions of justice, accountability and conflict resolution. For instance, in some cultures, public acknowledgment of wrongdoing may bring shame not only to the individual but also to the family or community, making participation in restorative processes more difficult. On the other hand, many indigenous and collectivist cultures have traditional practices that closely align with restorative principles, such as community reconciliation and healing circles. In these contexts, restorative justice may be more readily accepted and effective. Socio-economic disparities can also impact program access and outcomes. Youth from marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds may face additional challenges such as lack of parental involvement, limited educational opportunities, or exposure to violence and poverty factors that can hinder full participation in restorative programs. Furthermore, under-resourced communities may lack the infrastructure, funding and trained personnel needed to support sustainable restorative justice initiatives (Hutapea & Sharon, 2025).

Restorative justice has demonstrated strong potential to improve outcomes in the juvenile justice system. It effectively reduces recidivism, promotes meaningful rehabilitation and reintegration of young offenders and increases victim satisfaction by involving all stakeholders in a participatory, empathetic process. However, the full potential of restorative justice can only be realized when challenges related to implementation, cultural dynamics and socio-economic inequality are addressed. Investing in training, expanding program accessibility and tailoring restorative practices to reflect local contexts are critical steps toward ensuring these programs achieve lasting impact. As more jurisdictions continue to explore and adopt restorative models, the juvenile justice



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system stands to benefit from a more humane, constructive and community-centered approach to youth offending (Ahmad et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of restorative justice in the juvenile justice system has highlighted the significant benefits and potential of restorative practices in addressing youth offending. Across various jurisdictions and models such as Family Group Conferencing, Victim-Offender Mediation and Restorative Circles restorative justice has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in promoting accountability, repairing harm and fostering rehabilitation. Key findings indicate that restorative justice programs can lead to reduced recidivism rates among young offenders, greater victim satisfaction and more meaningful opportunities for offender reintegration into society. By involving victims, families and communities in the justice process, restorative approaches offer a more holistic and empathetic response to juvenile crime compared to traditional punitive systems.

However, while restorative justice holds great promise, its success depends on effective implementation. To maximize the impact and sustainability of restorative programs, several key recommendations are proposed. First, **training and capacity building** are essential. Practitioners, facilitators and justice system stakeholders must be equipped with the necessary skills, cultural competence and understanding of restorative principles to conduct meaningful interventions. Governments and institutions should invest in standardized training and professional development to ensure consistent and high-quality practice.

Second, **community engagement** is critical. Restorative justice thrives in environments where communities are actively involved and informed. Awareness campaigns, community partnerships and school-based initiatives can help foster public trust and support for restorative practices. Engaging families and local leaders strengthens the social fabric that underpins successful reintegration and long-term behavioral change in youth.

Finally, robust **monitoring and evaluation** mechanisms must be established to assess program effectiveness, identify gaps and ensure accountability. Data on outcomes such as recidivism, victim satisfaction and participant experiences should be systematically collected and analyzed. This evidence base can guide continuous improvement, inform policy decisions and promote broader adoption of restorative justice approaches.

Restorative justice represents a constructive, compassionate and evidence-based alternative to traditional juvenile justice systems. By prioritizing healing over punishment and community involvement over isolation, it aligns with the developmental needs of youth and the broader goals of justice. With proper investment in training, community engagement and evaluation, restorative justice can become a cornerstone of a more effective and humane juvenile justice system.

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