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**Restorative Justice Conferences as an Early Response to  
Young Offenders: Final Report on the Indianapolis  
Experiment**

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**Technical Report**

**“Preventing Juvenile Crime: Evaluating Restorative Justice Conferences  
as an Innovative Response to Juvenile Crime”\***

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## **Restorative Justice Conferences as an Early Response to Young Offenders**

The highly publicized and disturbing series of school shootings and homicides in a number of communities across the United States have focused public and policymaker attention on the issues of youth violence and school safety. As important as these issues are, they tend to divert attention away from an additional challenge for juvenile justice officials, delinquency committed by very young children. In 1997, over 250,000 youths under the age of 13 were arrested (Snyder and Sickmund, 1999). Prior research has shown that children entering juvenile court at such young ages are at very high risk for continued offending. For example, approximately 60 percent of youths ages 10-12 who are referred to juvenile court are subsequently returned to court. For those youths referred to court a second time, the odds increase to over 80 percent that they will be returned to court at a later date (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995: 158). Yet, because these youths have typically not committed a particularly serious or violent offense, and because children this young have not usually accumulated a long prior record, they typically do not receive a great deal of attention by juvenile justice officials. Given the high likelihood of re-offending, however, failure to develop and implement effective early interventions for very young offending youths may be misguided.

One potential form of early intervention involves the use of restorative justice conferences. Restorative justice conferences, sometimes referred to as family group conferences, have become quite common in Australia and New Zealand and are increasingly utilized throughout the world (Thames Valley Police, 1999). Although used in some jurisdictions for a wide variety of offenses, including adult offending, restorative justice conferences may be particularly appropriate for very young offenders. Advocates argue that they offer a meaningful response to youthful offending without consuming significant court resources.

### **The Challenge Very Young Offenders Pose for Juvenile Justice Systems**

Thirty years ago a Presidential Commission Report (Lemert, 1967) criticized the nation's juvenile courts for what was labeled the "one minute hour." The heavy volume of cases was forcing courts to spend approximately one minute on juvenile cases rather than to take the time for careful assessment and linkage to services as the juvenile courts were intended to do. Since that time the volume of cases has increased dramatically without a corresponding increase in resources. The rising tide of juvenile arrests has forced courts into what Lawrence Sherman<sup>1</sup> has described as a "triage" system of conserving scarce resources for the most serious cases. Juvenile offenders are often given many "bites of the apple" whereby their cases are dismissed or placed on probation supervision with overworked probation officers until the time they have accumulated a long history of arrests or committed a particularly heinous offense (Bernard, 1992). Critics of the system warn that this fails to hold youths accountable for their offenses and sends the message that the offense was "no big deal."

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication. The author and Professor Sherman collaborated on a grant proposal in the early stages of this project. His thinking is undoubtedly reflected in this document.

The system is also one in which offenders and their parents play a largely passive role and victims are typically excluded. The reasons that someone has for committing a crime are unimportant and restitution to victims and the community affected by the crime is not a primary concern (Van Ness, 1996). Community service is sometimes utilized as reparation but often the service is done for someone who was not directly affected by the crime (Van Ness, 1996).

The use of restorative justice conferences is an attempt to address these shortcomings. As part of a balanced and restorative justice model (Bazemore and Umbreit, 1994; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1998), conferences attempt to hold youths accountable, involve and meet the needs of victims, and build a community of support around the youth.

### **Restorative Justice Conferencing**

In a restorative justice conference, the offending youth, the victim, and the supporters of both offender and victim are brought together with a trained facilitator for a conference to discuss the incident and the harm brought to the victim and to the group of supporters. The conference provides an opportunity for the victim to explain how they have been harmed and to ask questions of the offending youth. The supporters of the group are also provided an opportunity to describe how they have been affected by the incident. The conference ends with a reparation agreement in which all the participants reach an agreement for how the youth can make amends to the victim. This will typically include an apology and often some type of restitution to the victim. Sometimes the group will agree to community service or to other actions by the youth such as improved school attendance, completion of homework, or chores at home or school.

Advocates of restorative justice conferences point to many potential benefits. Conferences are expected to better address the emotional needs and tangible losses of victims. Youths are held accountable for their misdeeds. Conferences are also intended to provide an opportunity for youths to learn how their offending has negatively affected others. The conference also provides an opportunity to create a supportive community around the offending youth.

Theoretically, restorative justice conferences are hypothesized to have an effect based on principles of control, deterrence, and reintegrative shaming theory. From a control perspective, youths are “controlled” from involvement in delinquency to the extent that they are socialized to believe in the moral legitimacy of the law and to the extent that they have strong bonds to family and conventional institutions (Hirschi, 1969). If, as advocates contend, conferences provide a learning opportunity wherein the harm caused by offending is directly communicated to the youth and where bonds to conventional others are strengthened, conferences become part of the socialization process that builds stakes in conformity. From a deterrence perspective, to the extent that conferences hold youth’s accountable and impose consequences, more so than is likely to occur to similarly situated youths in the traditional juvenile justice system, then the conferences raise the costs of offending relative to the benefits.

John Braithwaite (1989) has built on these insights in developing a theory of reintegrative shaming. Braithwaite argues that people are generally deterred from committing crime by two informal forms of social control. First, by their fear of social disapproval and second, by their conscience. He posits that punishment or reparations imposed by parents, other relatives, friends, or other individuals important to the offender are more effective than those imposed by a legal institution. For most people, fear of being shamed by those they care about is the major deterrent to committing crime. This is because the opinions of family and friends mean more than that of an unknown criminal justice authority.

Additionally, Braithwaite predicts that conferences may be more effective than traditional courts because they include the direct participation of the supporters of both victims and youthful offenders. By including these supporters, youths can be held responsible in the context of a community of care. In such a setting, youths can be held accountable for their acts without being condemned as people (see also Sherman, 1993). According to reintegrative shaming theorists, this combination of accountability and respect is key to keeping the offender within the community (Braithwaite, 1993).

To date, research is supportive of the positive effects of restorative justice conferences but still too limited to provide definitive answers. Two formal experiments have been conducted. The first, involving police-run conferences in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, found high levels of victim satisfaction and some evidence of a reduction in re-offending for person offenses (but not property offenses; see McCold and Wachtel, 1998). The second, the Reintegrative Shaming Experiment (RISE) has also reported high levels of victim satisfaction and has shown positive attitudinal changes on the part of offenders (Strang et al., 1999). The impact on future offending remains under investigation. Other research has reported declines in re-offending (as well as high levels of victim satisfaction) but has not been based on rigorous research designs (see the review by the Thames Valley Police, 1999; Moore and O'Connell, 1994).

### **The Indianapolis Restorative Justice Experiment**

In 1996, the Hudson Institute, a public policy research organization located in Indianapolis, began to work with the Police Department, Sheriff's Department, juvenile court, prosecutor's office, and the Mayor on a project to utilize Australian-style restorative justice conferences as an alternative response to juvenile offending. Encouraged by research from other jurisdictions yet wanting to have relatively clear answers about the effects of conferences, Juvenile Court Judge James Payne and Marion County Prosecutor Scott Newman agreed to work with the research team on implementing an experimental design. As described below, the experiment was initiated in September 1997. This report presents what we refer to as the Stage One results of an ongoing experiment.

## **Method**

### **Program Eligibility**

Indianapolis justice officials believed that the appropriate starting point for utilizing Restorative Justice Conferences was with young, first-time offenders. This was considered most appropriate because such youths were not seen as posing an immediate risk to the community but also because these officials recognized the need to identify more effective early interventions. The hope was that conferences might provide a more effective tool to prevent youths from becoming too deeply entrenched in delinquent behaviors.

Consequently, the criteria for program eligibility for the first phase of the Indianapolis experiment included:

- 1) no older than 14 years of age
- 2) a first-time offender (no prior adjudications)
- 3) not have committed a serious, violent offense
- 4) no other pending charges
- 5) admit responsibility for the offense<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of the age criterion, these are essentially the same criteria for all of the court's diversion programs. If deemed eligible, the offender is diverted from court and charges are not filed, pending successful completion of the assigned diversion program.

The formal implementation of the Restorative Justice Experiment began on September 1, 1997. Court intake officers screened youths for eligibility. If eligible, the youths were assigned through a random assignment procedure. Specifically, when the intake officer determined that a youthful offender met eligibility criteria for placement into the program, the officer was instructed to draw an envelope from a stack prepared by the research team. The envelope contained only two possible responses: "Yes" or "No." If the intake officer selected a "yes" then the youth was assigned to the Restorative Justice Program and the case was turned over to the County Coordinator. In contrast, a "no" selection indicated normal processing and the youth was assigned to one of the other 23 diversion programs.

### **Youth Participant Characteristics**

From September 1, 1997 through September 30, 1999, 458 youthful offenders participated in the Restorative Justice Conferencing Experiment. Of these, 232 were assigned to the Restorative Justice group, while the remaining 226 comprised the "control group." Tables 1 through 3 provide descriptive characteristics of both groups of youths.

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<sup>2</sup> Restorative justice conferences are not fact-finding hearings. If a youth challenges the allegations, the matter should proceed to court. This criterion also seeks to prevent "re-victimization" of the victim that could occur in a setting whereby the alleged offender does not take responsibility for the act.

**Table 1 Race Breakdown-- Restorative Justice/Control Group Participants\***

Race	Restorative Justice		Control Group		Row Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Non-White**	135	58	143	63	278	61
White Only	97	42	83	37	180	39
Column Totals	232	100	226	100	458	100

\* Chi-square comparison not significant

\*\*Given there were only three Hispanics and one self-identified (other categorized respondent), these four cases were grouped in the non-white category.

Table 1 reports the racial composition of the restorative justice and control group. The control group included slightly more non-white youths (63%) than did the restorative justice group (58%), though the differences were not statistically significant. These percentages are consistent with the general population of Indianapolis adjudicated delinquents in 1998, which consisted of 62% non-white offenders (Marion County Juvenile Probation Annual Report, 1999).

**Table 2 Gender Breakdown--Restorative Justice/Control Group Participants\***

Gender	Restorative Justice		Control Group		Row Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Male	159	68	129	57	288	63
Female	73	32	97	43	170	37
Column Totals	232	100	226	100	458	100

\*Chi-square significant  $\leq .05$

In terms of gender, given that approximately sixty-five percent of adjudicated juveniles in Marion County last year were male, the finding that 63 percent of the experimental sample was male suggests it is a representative sample (see Table 2). There were, however, more males in the restorative justice group (68%) than in the control group (57%). In early analyses we were concerned about the overrepresentation of males in the restorative justice group. As the sample size has increased, however, the relative distribution has become more even between the two groups suggesting that the randomization process is "smoothing out" the initial uneven distribution.

The median age for both groups was 13.0. The age breakdowns of the restorative justice and control groups were quite similar with approximately one-third age 14, just over one-quarter age 13, and approximately 40 percent ages 12 and younger. It is these young age groups that prior research has suggested have high rates of re-offending (Snyder and Sickmund, 1995).

Table 3 reports the frequency of primary offenses for both the restorative justice and control groups. As indicated in the Table, conversion (shoplifting) was the most frequently committed offense followed by battery, theft, and criminal mischief. The control group included slightly more shoplifting cases whereas the restorative justice group included more theft charges. Combining the two categories produces quite

equivalent groups, however. Battery, or assault, charges comprised one-quarter of both samples.

**Table 3 Primary Offense Committed By Restorative Justice/Control Group Participants**

Primary Offense	Restorative Justice		Control Group		Row Totals	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Conversion	84	36	105	46	189	41
Battery	59	25	56	25	115	25
Theft	36	16	22	10	58	13
Criminal Mischief	26	11	17	8	43	9
Disorderly Conduct	14	6	18	8	32	7
Trespass	7	3	5	2	12	3
Other	5	2	3	1	8	2
Intimidation	1	.4	0	0	1	.2
Column Totals	232	100	226	100	458	100

## Measures

This study employs both process and outcome measures. These include observations of conferences conducted by trained researchers using an observational checklist, interviews with offending youths, their parents or guardians, and victims, and checks of court records to determine whether youths have been re-arrested for subsequent offenses.

## Results

### Observations of Conferences

One set of measures was obtained through the observation of restorative justice conferences. Specifically, we examined the length of proceeding, role of conference coordinator, involvement of offender, youth supporter, victim, and victim supporter, expressions of shame, apology, and acceptance of offender, and elements included in the reparation agreement. Since September 1, 1997, 182 conferences had been conducted. Among these, 157 conferences (86%) have been observed by one of fifteen trained observers.

***Length of Proceeding.*** Restorative justice conferences involving the offending youth, victim and respective supporter(s) had an average duration of 43 minutes. Additionally, the reintegration ceremony averaged 10 minutes from the close of the conference.

***Role of Conference Coordinator.*** Generally, the results suggest that conference coordinators followed the principles of restorative justice conferencing. Observers noted that the coordinator maintained a distinction between the youth (valued member of community) and his/her behavior (condemning the act). Coordinators would bring the discussion back to the incident and they rarely lectured the youth. Coordinators also

were seen as doing an effective job eliciting the involvement of all conference participants.

***Involvement of Offender, Victim, and Supporters.*** Observers reported that all the participants tended to display respect toward the offending youth. In a large majority of conferences the youth was also seen as conveying respect toward the victim. In approximately 22 percent of conferences the observer did not believe the offending youth was respectful toward the victim.

In nearly all the conferences, the group expressed disapproval of the act. In over 80 percent of the conferences observers reported the youth apologized to the victim and in half the conferences the youth apologized to his/her own supporters. Observers also reported that youths expressed remorse (76%) and understood the injury or harm they had caused (66%). Over 80 percent of the conferences appeared to include the victim and the group forgiving the youth and in three-quarters of the conferences the observer reported a strong sense of reintegration at the conference close.

In all the conferences all the participants signed the reparation agreement. Observers reported that victims appeared to be satisfied in over 80 percent of the conferences and three-quarters of the conferences were judged by observers to be positive. Observers also reported that in over 80 percent of the conferences someone was appointed to hold the youth accountable to the terms of the reparation agreement. Thus, rather than have a court official monitor the agreement someone from the community of support volunteered to hold the youth accountable. This person was then contacted by the Marion County Restorative Justice Coordinator to verify completion of the agreement.

***Elements of Reparation Agreement.*** Apology was the most common element of agreements (62%), though to some extent this under-represents the frequency of apologies because many conferences had already witnessed an apology and it may not have been written into the formal agreement. Other common elements included monetary restitution to the victim, personal service, and community service. Over half the conferences included other elements. These were typically activities that the group tailored to the specific circumstances. Examples include imposing a nightly curfew, improving grades or school attendance, or participating in afterschool programs.

### **Post-Conference/Diversion Surveys**

A significant part of this study is to assess how victims, offenders, and respective supporters felt about restorative justice conferencing as an alternative to traditional court-ordered programs. The goal was to collect data on participant's attitudes and beliefs about how their cases were handled, as well as their sense of justice.

Initially, there were delays in implementing the interview procedures. Consequently, the sample size for the interviews is smaller than for the total sample of conference and



control group cases.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the results presented from the interviews come principally from cases occurring during late 1998 and 1999. Given the small sample size, we report descriptive findings without assessing the statistical significance of the findings. More detailed assessments will be included in the second stage of this project.

**Satisfaction.** Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the way the case was handled. The most significant difference was for victims. Over 90 percent of victims in conferenced cases either strongly agreed or agreed that they were satisfied. This compared to 68 percent of the victims in the control group. There were few differences for either youths or parents. Overall, high levels of satisfaction were expressed with control group youths and parents slightly more likely to express satisfaction. This may indicate the extra demands (time, accountability) placed on youths and parents in the conferences (see Figure 1).

The next item asked participants whether they would recommend the program to a friend involved in a similar situation. Again, the most significant difference between the groups was for victims. Nearly all the victims involved in conferences (98%) said they would recommend this approach compared to one-quarter of the victims in the control group. Youths involved in conferences were also more likely to say they would recommend this approach (85% compared to 38%). There were no differences among parents (see Figure 1).

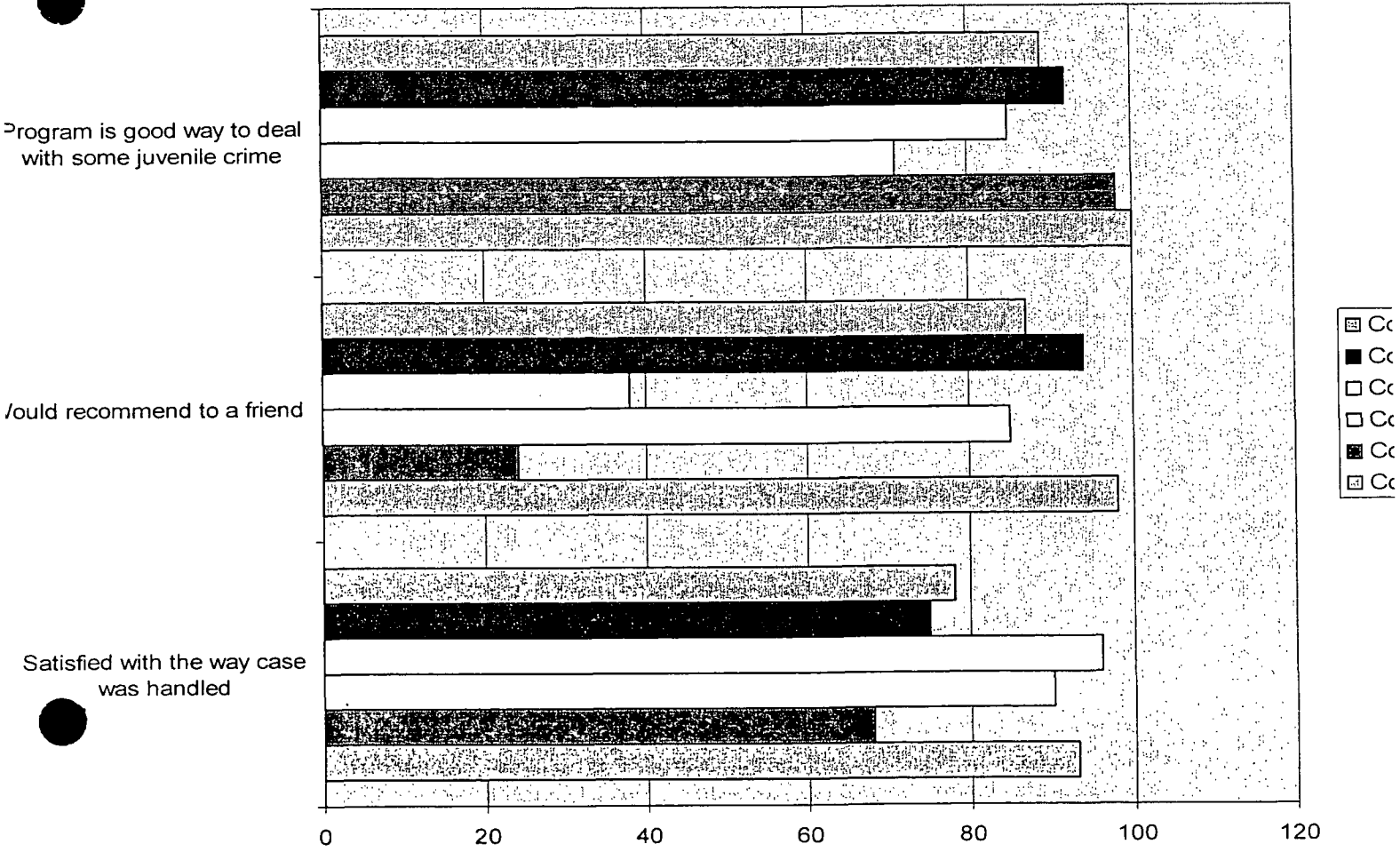
Another indication of satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, is whether the participants would recommend discontinuing the program. Most of the participants would not recommend stopping either conferences or the control group programs. Conference participants, however, were most likely to endorse continuing the program. For example, none of the victims involved in conferences agreed they should be discontinued. Just over one-fifth of the control group victims agreed the program should be stopped. Nineteen percent of youths in conferences recommended discontinuing the program compared to 36 percent in the control group. Seventeen percent of conference parents compared to 25 percent of control group parents recommended stopping the program.

The final overall indicator of satisfaction asked participants whether the program is a good way to deal with some kinds of juvenile crime. Here, both conferences and the other court programs received strong endorsements. For victims and parents, there was not much difference between conference and control group participants. Among youths, control group participants were more likely to state they agreed with the question (see Figure 1).

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<sup>3</sup> Conference victims (N=42); control group victims (N=50); conference youths (N=52); control group youths (N=47); conference parents (N=52); control group parents (N=47).

Figure 1 Reported Satisfaction (%)



***Perceptions of Respect and Involvement.*** Participants in both conferences and the control group programs all felt they were treated with respect. There were no real differences among treatment or control groups for victims, youths, or parents (see Figure 2).

None of the victims involved in conferences reported that they felt they were pushed around. Approximately one-fifth of youths and 15 percent of parents in conferences felt pushed around but this was lower than that reported by youths and parents in the control group.

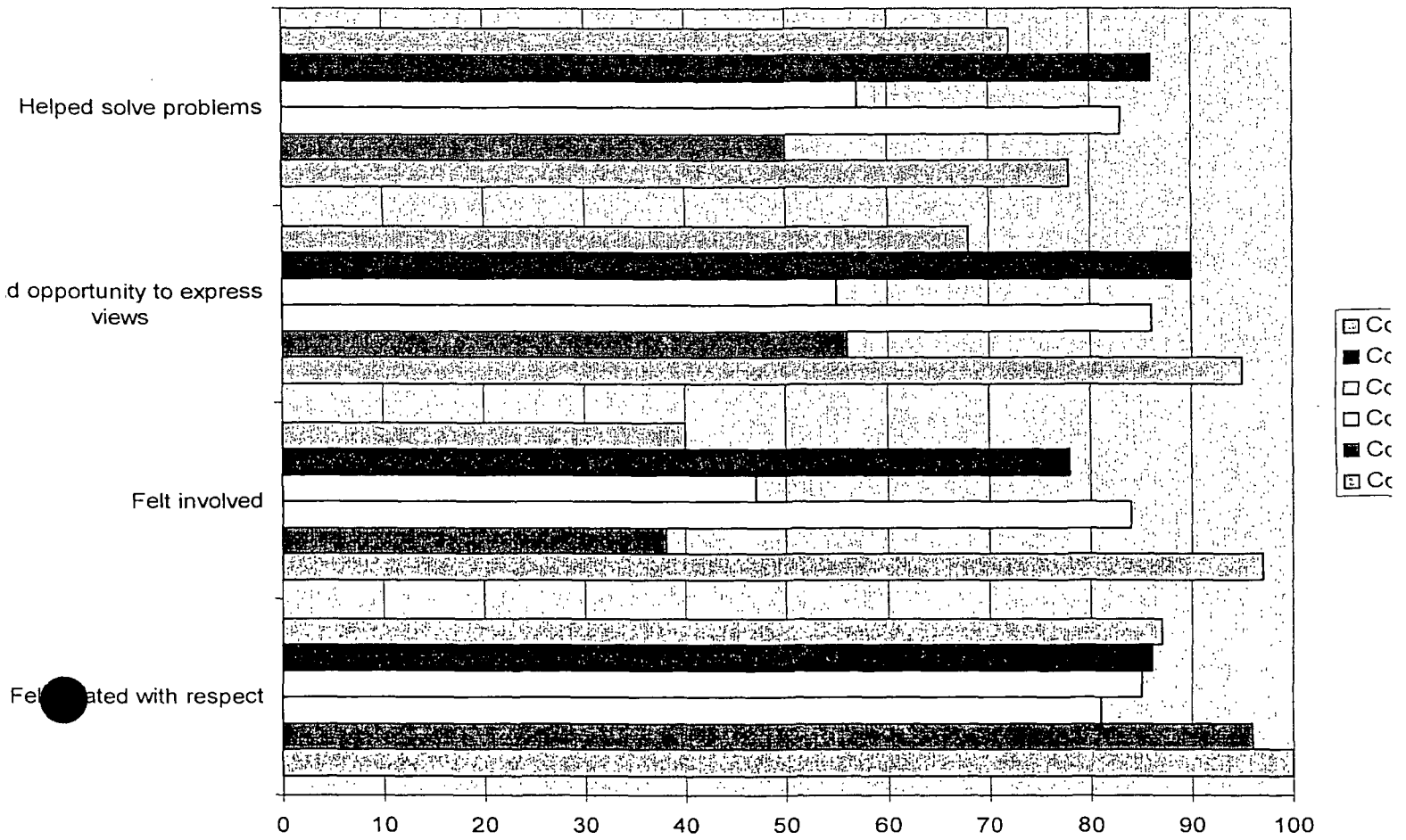
There were, however, differences when asked whether they felt involved in the process. The very principles of conferences are built on the participation of the affected parties and the results indicate these principles are being achieved. Nearly all the conference victims (97%) agreed they were involved. This compared to 38 percent of the control group victims. Youths involved in conferences were also much more likely than control group youths to feel they were involved (84% and 47%, respectively). Nearly 80 percent of conference parents felt involved compared to 40 percent of parents in the control group (see Figure 2).

Participants in conferences were also more likely to report that they had the opportunity to express their views. For victims, 95 percent of the conference victims agreed they had this opportunity compared to 56 percent of victims in the control group. For youths, 86 percent of conferenced youths felt they had the opportunity to express their views compared to 55 percent of those in the control group. Finally, for parents the comparable figures were 90 and 68 percent for conference and control group members, respectively (see Figure 2).

***Perception of Outcomes.*** Large majorities of participants in both conferences and the control group reported that they believed the outcome in the case was fair. Victims involved in conferences were more likely to describe the outcome as lenient than were their control group counterparts (36% and 14%, respectively). Conferenced youths were slightly less likely to describe the outcome as lenient whereas conference parents were somewhat more likely to describe the outcome as lenient.

Conference participants were more likely to report that the program had helped to solve problems. Over three-quarters of conference victims reported this compared to one-half of control group victims. Over 80 percent of conferenced youths and parents reported that problems were solved. This compared to 58 and 72 percent of control group youths and parents (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Reported involvement, respect, problem solving (%)



## Program Completion and Re-Arrest

Observations of conferences suggest that they were implemented in a fashion consistent with restorative justice philosophy and principles. The interview data suggest that conferences better addressed the needs of victims than was the case with many other programs. Parents and youths reported high levels of participation and involvement in the process. Yet, for many policymakers the fundamental question is the impact on future offending. In this case, recidivism rates of restorative justice conference participants can be compared to those youths that were eligible for, but not assigned to, the restorative justice program (i.e., the control group). Recidivism is operationalized as whether the youth was re-arrested after the initial arrest that brought the youth to the juvenile justice system. Recidivism analysis was conducted for both groups at six- and twelve-month intervals.

**Program Completion.** Table 4 presents findings on the completion rates of diversion programs for restorative justice participants and those assigned to the control group. As suggested by these findings, youths participating in restorative justice conferences demonstrated a significantly higher completion rate than youths in the control group who may be assigned to any of the other 23 diversion programs (83% versus 58%, respectively).

The majority of youths within the restorative justice group (N=11) who failed to complete the conference were re-arrested prior to attending the conference. In contrast, control group participants largely failed to complete the assigned diversion program due to juvenile waiver from the program (N=23).

**6-Month Recidivism Analysis.** Table 4 also presents the results of the six-month re-arrest rate for the total sample of cases that have reached the six-month stage. The restorative justice group had fewer recidivists than the control group by a margin of 13.5 percent. This represents a 40 percent reduction in re-arrest and is a statistically significant difference (chi-square statistically significant  $\leq .01$ ).

We also compared the re-arrest rates for youths that successfully completed either the restorative justice program or the control group program. In effect, this limits the comparison to those youths that successfully completed the "treatment." This is a conservative test of the restorative justice program because, as noted above, restorative justice youths completed their assigned program at a much higher rate than did youths in the control group. Thus, presumably the group of restorative justice program completers included a larger portion of "higher-risk" youths than was the case with the control group (where larger numbers of higher risk youths did not complete the diversion program). Yet, here too we see a significant reduction in the re-arrest rates (12.3% compared to 22.7% for restorative justice and control group youths, respectively). This represents a 46 percent reduction in the recidivism rate and is statistically significant (chi-square statistically significant  $\leq .05$ ).

***12-Month Recidivism Analysis.*** Just over 30 percent (30.1%) of the youths participating in the restorative justice program were re-arrested at 12 months. This compares to 42.3 percent of the youths in the control group and represents a 29 percent reduction in recidivism (chi-square statistically significant = .025).

When we examine re-arrest rates for only those youths who successfully completed the program, the pattern is consistent but the results have not achieved statistical significance. Specifically, 23.2 of youths that successfully completed the restorative justice program were re-arrested at 12 months. This compares to 29 percent of the youths that successfully completed the diversion program.

The lack of statistical significance is likely due to two factors. First, these cases represent the earliest cases in the experiment. During this early period implementation problems often led to delay in scheduling conferences. Second, the number of successfully completed cases, particularly among the control group, is significantly smaller thus raising the issue of sufficient statistical power. We will continue to monitor these findings to test whether the 12-month re-arrest comparison of youths who successfully completed the program achieves statistical significance with a sufficient sample size.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in subsequent stages of the project we will consider issues such as the length of time between program completion and re-arrest and the seriousness of subsequent offending.

**Table 4 Program Completion and Re-arrest Rates**

	Percent	N	P value
Program Completion			
Restorative Justice	82.6	167	.000
Control	57.7	168	
Re-arrest at 6 months (full sample)			
Restorative Justice	20.4	167	.005
Control	33.9	168	
Re-arrest at 6 months (completed program)			
Restorative Justice	12.3	138	.036
Control	22.7	97	
Re-arrest at 12 months (full sample)			
Restorative Justice	30.1	156	.025
Control	42.3	156	
Re-arrest at 12 months (completed program)			
Restorative Justice	23.2	125	.330
Control	29.0	93	

***Sub-group Comparisons.*** In the second stage of this project we will examine carefully whether the conferences seem to have more of an effect on particular types of cases or for some groups of youths. At this point in the study, the sample sizes become quite small when the treatment and control groups are divided by characteristics such as offense, gender, and race. We therefore do not provide these breakdowns in the present report. We have, however, examined the results for three sets of variables: offense, gender, and race.

In terms of offense we have compared youths arrested for property offenses with youths arrested for person offenses. Property offenders had lower re-arrest rates than did person offenders but the reductions in re-arrest for youths attending conferences were consistent for both groups of offenses.

In terms of gender, both males and females attending conferences witnessed a reduction in re-arrest. The decline for females was larger, however, than was the decline for males.

There were no racial differences in terms of re-arrest for either conferenced youths or those in the control groups. The reduction in re-arrest for youths attending conferences was consistent for white and non-white youths.

Thus, the effects described for conferences appear to be consistent for youths varying by offense, gender, and race. The results should be considered preliminary, however, until further analyses with larger sample sizes can verify these findings.

## **Summary and Conclusions**

Recent years have witnessed considerable interest in restorative justice approaches and in conferences in particular. The current research, coupled with prior studies, provides support for continued development and experimentation with the use of restorative justice conferences.

One of the basic findings is that conferences can be successfully implemented in an urban, U.S. setting. Over 80 percent of the youths referred to a conference are attending conferences and successfully completing the terms of the reparation agreement. For Indianapolis, this compared very favorably with other court-related diversion programs.

Trained observers reported that conferences appeared to be implemented according to restorative justice principles such as inclusion of affected parties, respect, and problem solving. Victims received apologies and other mutually agreed to actions were included in the agreements. These characteristics translated into victims reporting high levels of satisfaction.

Interesting patterns emerge in the interview data. Overall, there appears to be reasonably high levels of satisfaction among participants in conferences and in other court-ordered



programs (control group programs). Thus, the Indianapolis program does not involve a comparison of restorative justice programs to court-ordered programs that are perceived as failing.

The conference approach does appear to make a positive difference for victims. Victims were more satisfied with how their case was handled, much more likely to recommend the conference approach to a friend, and felt that they were treated with respect. Consistent with the principles of restorative justice, victims participating in conferences were much more likely to report they were involved in the process and that they had the opportunity to express their views.

For youths and parents, on many items there were no differences with control group participants. On the items considered to be at the core of the restorative justice approach, however, there were significant differences. Conference participants, youths and parents alike, were more likely to feel involved; to have had a say in the matter, and to have had problems solved than were control group participants.

In terms of re-offending, the results are also promising. For both the total sample, and for youths successfully completing their diversion programs, youths attending conferences were significantly less likely to be re-arrested six months after the initial incident. Similar findings were observed at 12 months for the total sample.

In subsequent stages of this project we seek to confirm these initial results with larger samples. Additionally, larger samples will allow us to address theoretical questions by relating survey findings from offending youths, parents, and victims to re-offending rates. Larger samples will also allow us to more thoroughly examine the results for different subgroups (e.g., differences by gender, race, age, and offense type). Additionally, we plan to address the issue of the police role as conference facilitator. Does it make a difference, for victims or for youths, if the facilitator is a uniformed police officer or a civilian? Finally, we hope to extend the experiment to a broader range of offenses and for youths with prior experience in the court. This will allow us to test whether these initial promising results are generalizable to more serious youth offenders.

Consistent with prior research, the Indianapolis results suggest that restorative justice conferences do better address the needs of many victims of youth offending. Additionally, these results suggest that conferences hold promise as an early intervention with young, first-time, juvenile offenders. Given the high rate of re-offending among very young children who enter juvenile court, these findings are encouraging and suggest continued experimentation and assessment of the restorative justice conference approach.

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