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Restorative justice practices: Bridging the gap between offenders and victims effectively

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Abstract

Restorative justice practices offer an alternative approach to addressing crime by focusing on repairing harm, fostering accountability, and rebuilding relationships between offenders, victims, and the community. Unlike traditional punitive justice systems, restorative justice emphasizes dialogue, empathy, and understanding, creating opportunities for mutual healing and resolution. By involving all stakeholders, it seeks to address the underlying causes of criminal behaviour while empowering victims to voice their experiences and needs. This approach has demonstrated significant benefits, including reduced recidivism rates, enhanced victim satisfaction, and strengthened community cohesion. At its core, restorative justice revolves around practices such as victim-offender mediation, community conferencing, and restorative circles. These practices encourage offenders to acknowledge the impact of their actions, take responsibility, and actively participate in repairing the harm caused. Victims, in turn, gain a platform to express their emotions, ask questions, and seek closure, which is often absent in traditional justice systems. Despite these advantages, restorative justice faces challenges, including societal biases, inconsistent implementation, and the need for adequate training and resources for facilitators. This paper examines restorative justice practices from a broader perspective, analysing their theoretical foundations and societal implications. It then narrows the focus to explore their practical application in bridging the gap between offenders and victims. Drawing on case studies and empirical research, it highlights effective strategies, potential barriers, and the transformative potential of restorative justice in creating equitable and empathetic justice systems. The findings emphasize the critical need for integrating restorative practices into mainstream legal frameworks to promote healing, accountability, and community resilience.

Keywords: Restorative justice; Victim-offender mediation; Accountability; Community cohesion; Restorative circles; Criminal behaviour repair

1. Introduction

1.1. Contextualizing the Current Justice System

Traditional justice systems worldwide are predominantly punitive, focusing on retribution and deterrence as primary objectives. These systems emphasize punishment for offenders, often through incarceration, fines, or community service, with the intent to deter future crimes. While punitive approaches have historically dominated legal frameworks, their limitations are increasingly evident. Recidivism rates remain high, with studies indicating that nearly 60% of released prisoners reoffend within three years in many jurisdictions. This suggests that punitive measures often fail to rehabilitate offenders or address the root causes of criminal behaviour [1].

Furthermore, traditional systems tend to marginalize victims and neglect community healing. Victims are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, reducing opportunities for emotional closure and restitution. Communities,

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too, bear the brunt of unresolved tensions, as crimes often leave social and economic scars that punitive measures do not address. By prioritizing punishment over restoration, traditional systems miss opportunities to foster accountability, reconciliation, and sustainable conflict resolution [2].

1.2. Emergence of Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) offers a transformative approach that seeks to repair harm rather than merely punish offenders. Originating from indigenous practices in regions such as North America and New Zealand, RJ emphasizes healing for victims, accountability for offenders, and active participation from communities. Key principles include dialogue, mutual respect, and collective problem-solving, which contrast sharply with the adversarial nature of punitive systems [3].

Restorative justice focuses on identifying and addressing the needs of all stakeholders. For victims, RJ provides a platform to express the emotional and material impact of crimes, often resulting in greater psychological relief than punitive processes. Offenders, in turn, are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and actively work toward repairing harm. This approach not only holds offenders accountable but also fosters empathy and understanding, reducing the likelihood of reoffending [4].

By contrast, punitive systems focus on the state's role in prosecuting offenders, often sidelining the voices of victims and communities. Restorative justice, however, emphasizes collaborative solutions, creating space for dialogue and mutual resolution. This shift from punishment to restoration has gained traction as societies recognize the limitations of retributive justice in addressing the complex dynamics of crime and healing [5].

1.3. Relevance to Modern Societies

Globally, restorative justice is receiving increasing advocacy as an alternative or complement to punitive systems. Countries like Canada, Norway, and South Africa have integrated RJ programs into their legal frameworks, demonstrating its potential for reducing recidivism and fostering social cohesion. For instance, Norway's correctional system emphasizes rehabilitation and restorative practices, resulting in one of the world's lowest recidivism rates at 20% [6].

Societal shifts toward empathy and reconciliation further underscore the relevance of RJ in modern contexts. Communities grappling with systemic inequalities, racial tensions, and historical injustices are turning to restorative justice as a means of promoting healing and equity. For example, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established after apartheid, used RJ principles to address human rights violations and promote national unity. Such initiatives highlight the growing recognition of RJ's role in fostering trust and long-term resolution [7].

Modern societies are increasingly acknowledging the importance of addressing root causes of crime, such as poverty, discrimination, and trauma. Restorative justice aligns with these priorities by offering holistic solutions that balance accountability with compassion. This approach resonates with evolving cultural values that prioritize inclusion, fairness, and the dignity of all stakeholders, making RJ a vital tool for progressive legal systems [8].

1.4. Objectives and Scope of the Article

This article aims to highlight the gaps between offenders, victims, and communities in traditional punitive systems and explore how restorative justice can bridge these divides. By examining RJ principles and their application in diverse contexts, the article seeks to provide insights into its potential for fostering reconciliation, reducing recidivism, and promoting sustainable justice practices.

The following research questions guide the discussion:

- What are the key principles of restorative justice, and how do they address the limitations of punitive systems?
- How have modern societies implemented RJ practices, and what lessons can be drawn from these experiences?
- What challenges and opportunities exist in integrating RJ into contemporary legal frameworks?

This article is structured into four sections. Section 2 reviews the theoretical foundations of restorative justice and its historical development. Section 3 examines real-world applications of RJ in various jurisdictions, highlighting successes and challenges. Section 4 discusses the implications of RJ for justice reform, focusing on its potential to address systemic inequalities and improve societal cohesion. Finally, Section 5 outlines recommendations for integrating RJ into existing systems, emphasizing the importance of education, policy support, and community engagement.

By addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on restorative justice and advocate for its broader adoption in modern legal systems. It underscores the importance of shifting from punitive approaches to restorative frameworks that prioritize healing, accountability, and collaboration, ultimately fostering a more equitable and resilient society [9].

2. Theoretical framework of restorative justice

2.1. Defining Restorative Justice

Restorative justice (RJ) is a transformative approach to conflict resolution that focuses on repairing harm, fostering accountability, and promoting healing for all parties involved. At its core, RJ seeks to address the needs of victims, offenders, and communities through collaborative processes that emphasize dialogue, understanding, and mutual agreement. Unlike punitive systems that prioritize punishment, RJ values inclusivity, empowerment, and the restoration of relationships [9].

Key principles of RJ include accountability, which requires offenders to acknowledge their actions and their impact on others; repair, which emphasizes restitution and the resolution of harm; and healing, which addresses the emotional and psychological needs of victims and communities. These principles align with values such as fairness, empathy, and respect, underscoring RJ's focus on reconciliation rather than retribution [10].

RJ practices typically involve structured processes such as victim-offender mediation, community conferencing, and circle sentencing. These practices enable participants to share their experiences, identify harms, and collaboratively develop resolutions that prioritize healing over punishment. By fostering a sense of shared responsibility, RJ aims to create outcomes that are meaningful, sustainable, and restorative for all stakeholders involved [11].

2.2. Philosophical Foundations

Restorative justice is deeply rooted in moral philosophy, drawing on concepts of justice that prioritize repair and reconciliation over retribution. Philosophers such as John Braithwaite and Howard Zehr have articulated RJ as a response to the limitations of punitive systems, advocating for an approach that emphasizes the restoration of relationships and the dignity of individuals. Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming, for example, argues that shaming offenders within a supportive context fosters accountability without stigmatization, enabling reintegration into the community [12].

RJ's emphasis on accountability and healing aligns with virtue ethics, which prioritizes character development and moral responsibility. By encouraging offenders to take responsibility for their actions and contribute to repairing harm, RJ fosters virtues such as empathy, humility, and fairness. Similarly, RJ resonates with communitarian ethics, which emphasize collective well-being and the interconnectedness of individuals within a society. This perspective underscores the importance of addressing the broader social dynamics that contribute to harm, such as systemic inequalities or community fragmentation [13].

Connections to indigenous practices further highlight the philosophical underpinnings of RJ. Many indigenous cultures have long embraced restorative principles, using communal decision-making and reconciliation to resolve conflicts. For instance, the Maori practice of **whanau conferencing** in New Zealand emphasizes family and community involvement in addressing harm, reflecting RJ's focus on collective healing. Similarly, Canada's First Nations employ circle processes that prioritize dialogue, accountability, and consensus-building, providing a model for modern RJ practices [14].

The integration of indigenous traditions into contemporary RJ frameworks demonstrates the universality of restorative principles across cultures and historical contexts. These traditions emphasize that justice is not solely about punishment but about restoring balance and fostering harmony within communities. As societies grapple with the limitations of punitive systems, RJ offers a pathway grounded in timeless values of fairness, restoration, and shared humanity [15].

2.3. Psychological and Sociological Perspectives

Restorative justice offers significant psychological benefits for both victims and offenders. For victims, RJ provides a platform to express their experiences, emotions, and needs, often resulting in greater emotional relief and closure than traditional justice processes. The opportunity to engage directly with offenders in a controlled and supportive setting fosters empowerment and validation, helping victims regain a sense of agency and control [16].

For offenders, RJ encourages accountability by confronting them with the human impact of their actions. Research indicates that offenders who participate in RJ processes are more likely to express genuine remorse, take responsibility for their behaviour, and make meaningful efforts to repair harm. These experiences contribute to positive psychological outcomes, including reduced guilt, increased empathy, and greater motivation to reintegrate into society [17].

From a sociological perspective, RJ contributes to community restoration and the reduction of recidivism. By addressing the underlying causes of harm, such as social inequalities or broken relationships, RJ fosters conditions that deter future offenses. Studies have shown that RJ programs significantly reduce reoffending rates compared to punitive approaches. For instance, a meta-analysis of RJ practices found that participants were **28% less likely to reoffend** than those processed through traditional justice systems [18].

Additionally, RJ strengthens social cohesion by involving community members in conflict resolution. This participatory approach fosters trust, mutual understanding, and collective responsibility, creating a foundation for sustainable peace and resilience. By addressing harm at its roots and empowering communities to resolve conflicts collaboratively, RJ aligns with broader societal goals of justice, equity, and reconciliation [19].

2.4. Critiques of the Theoretical Framework

Despite its promise, restorative justice has faced criticism, particularly regarding its theoretical framework and practical application. Critics argue that RJ may inadvertently place undue pressure on victims to participate in reconciliation processes, potentially retraumatizing them. Additionally, concerns have been raised about the potential for power imbalances during RJ sessions, where offenders may manipulate the process to minimize accountability or evade consequences [20].



Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Restorative Justice Practices [2]

Another critique involves the integration of RJ into existing legal systems. Critics contend that RJ may not be appropriate for all cases, particularly those involving severe crimes or unrepentant offenders. Balancing RJ with punitive systems is

a complex challenge, as achieving fairness and proportionality in outcomes requires careful consideration of the unique circumstances of each case.

Proponents of RJ counter these critiques by emphasizing the importance of voluntary participation, skilled facilitation, and tailored approaches. By ensuring that victims and offenders are adequately prepared and supported, RJ processes can mitigate risks and maximize their potential for positive outcomes. Additionally, integrating RJ as a complement to punitive systems, rather than a replacement, allows for greater flexibility and inclusivity in addressing diverse forms of harm [21].

By addressing these critiques and refining its theoretical framework, restorative justice can continue to evolve as a transformative approach to conflict resolution, offering a meaningful alternative to traditional punitive systems [22].

3. Key practices and implementation

3.1. Core Restorative Practices

Restorative practices encompass a range of approaches aimed at repairing harm and fostering reconciliation between offenders, victims, and communities. These practices create structured opportunities for dialogue, accountability, and mutual resolution.

3.2. Victim-Offender Mediation

Victim-offender mediation (VOM) is one of the most widely used restorative practices. It involves facilitated meetings between victims and offenders, where both parties can express their perspectives and work toward a mutually agreed resolution. VOM prioritizes direct communication, enabling victims to articulate the impact of the offense and offenders to acknowledge their actions. Research has shown that participants in VOM report higher satisfaction rates and emotional relief compared to traditional court processes. For instance, in a Canadian program, **85% of victims** felt their voices were heard during mediation, compared to **45%** in standard proceedings [15].

3.3. Community Conferencing

Community conferencing expands restorative processes to include victims, offenders, and other affected community members. These structured dialogues emphasize collective problem-solving and shared accountability. Conferences typically follow a facilitated format where participants discuss the harm caused, its broader impact, and actionable steps to repair it. For example, New Zealand's **Family Group Conferences (FGCs)** have become a cornerstone of its juvenile justice system, successfully reducing reoffending rates by encouraging family and community involvement [16].

Community conferencing fosters a sense of collective responsibility, empowering communities to address the root causes of harm while supporting both victims and offenders. By involving broader stakeholder groups, this approach promotes long-term reconciliation and strengthens social cohesion [17].

3.3.1. Restorative Circles

Restorative circles are deeply rooted in indigenous traditions and emphasize inclusive dialogue. Participants sit in a circle to signify equality and mutual respect, guided by a facilitator who ensures a safe and constructive environment. Circles typically involve victims, offenders, and community members, fostering open communication and emotional healing.

Restorative circles are particularly effective in addressing systemic issues, such as school conflicts or workplace disputes, where multiple stakeholders are affected. For example, restorative circles implemented in U.S. schools have been associated with a **40% reduction in suspensions**, demonstrating their potential to transform conflict resolution in institutional settings. By promoting empathy, accountability, and understanding, restorative circles create opportunities for meaningful change and sustainable outcomes [18].

3.3.2. Implementation in Criminal Justice Systems

Integrating restorative practices into criminal justice systems represents a paradigm shift from punishment-focused approaches to reconciliation-centered frameworks. This integration requires adapting legal structures to accommodate restorative processes while ensuring alignment with broader justice objectives.

3.3.3. Adapting Legal Frameworks

Restorative practices can complement traditional justice systems by offering alternative or supplementary pathways for addressing harm. Diversion programs, for instance, allow offenders to participate in restorative processes instead of facing formal prosecution, particularly for non-violent offenses. These programs emphasize accountability and rehabilitation while reducing the burden on courts.

For example, Canada's Restorative Opportunities Program incorporates victim-offender mediation into its correctional system, enabling offenders to take responsibility for their actions and address the harm caused. Similarly, Norway's correctional philosophy integrates restorative principles, focusing on reintegration and community healing. Such adaptations highlight the flexibility of restorative practices in meeting diverse legal and cultural needs [19].

3.3.4. Global Examples and Case Studies

New Zealand's juvenile justice system provides one of the most comprehensive examples of restorative justice implementation. Since the introduction of Family Group Conferences (FGCs) in 1989, restorative approaches have become the default response for juvenile offenses. FGCs bring together victims, offenders, and families to develop mutually agreed resolutions, resulting in significant reductions in youth incarceration rates and reoffending [20].

In Canada, indigenous communities have revitalized traditional restorative practices to address harm within their cultural contexts. Circle sentencing, for instance, incorporates community input into decision-making processes, fostering accountability and reconciliation. Similarly, South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) employed restorative principles to address the aftermath of apartheid, demonstrating the applicability of RJ in transitional justice contexts [21].

These examples underscore the potential of restorative practices to transform justice systems globally. By focusing on healing and accountability, RJ offers a holistic approach that addresses both individual and societal needs [22].

3.4. Challenges in Implementation

Despite its potential, restorative justice faces several challenges that hinder its widespread adoption. These challenges include resource limitations, resistance from traditional justice systems, and cultural biases that influence perceptions of RJ.

3.4.1. Training and Resource Limitations

Implementing restorative practices requires significant investment in training facilitators, developing infrastructure, and maintaining ongoing support for programs. Skilled facilitators are essential for ensuring safe, productive dialogues, yet training programs are often underfunded or inconsistently available. Additionally, the administrative costs of organizing restorative sessions, monitoring agreements, and evaluating outcomes can strain limited budgets, particularly in resource-constrained jurisdictions [23].

Many small or rural communities lack the financial and human resources to implement RJ programs effectively. For instance, while New Zealand's FGCs have been successful, their expansion has been constrained by logistical challenges, including a shortage of trained facilitators. Addressing these limitations requires increased investment and collaboration among governments, non-profits, and community organizations to scale restorative programs sustainably [24].

3.4.2. Resistance from Traditional Justice Systems

Resistance from within traditional justice systems represents another significant barrier to the adoption of restorative practices. Judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement personnel may view RJ as incompatible with existing legal frameworks or perceive it as undermining the authority of punitive approaches. This scepticism often stems from a lack of understanding of RJ principles and their proven effectiveness.

Additionally, institutional inertia can slow the integration of restorative processes into established systems. For example, jurisdictions with rigid sentencing guidelines may struggle to incorporate RJ alternatives without substantial legislative reform. Overcoming this resistance requires targeted advocacy, education, and pilot programs that demonstrate the efficacy of RJ in achieving justice outcomes [25].

3.4.3. Cultural and Societal Biases

Cultural and societal biases also influence the acceptance of restorative justice. In some societies, punitive approaches are deeply ingrained as the dominant response to wrongdoing, making RJ appear lenient or ineffective. These perceptions can deter victims, offenders, and communities from engaging in restorative processes.

Efforts to address these biases must focus on public education and awareness campaigns that emphasize the benefits of RJ, including its potential to reduce recidivism, empower victims, and strengthen communities. By shifting societal attitudes, restorative justice can gain broader acceptance as a legitimate and effective approach to conflict resolution [26].

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Restorative Practices in Jurisdictions

Jurisdiction	Key Processes	Outcomes	Cultural Contexts
New Zealand	Family Group Conferences (FGCs): Victims, offenders, and family members collaboratively develop restitution plans.	Significant reduction in youth incarceration rates; improved family involvement and accountability.	Rooted in Maori traditions emphasizing collective decision-making and community responsibility.
Canada	Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM) and Circle Sentencing: Community and victim participation in resolving harm.	Enhanced victim satisfaction; reduced recidivism among youth offenders and marginalized communities.	Incorporates indigenous First Nations practices of circle processes to promote healing and reconciliation.
South Africa	Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC): Public hearings addressing systemic harm and human rights violations.	National reconciliation; increased awareness of historical injustices and steps toward societal healing.	Built on Ubuntu philosophy, which values interconnectedness, dignity, and restorative approaches to justice.

By addressing these challenges, restorative justice can continue to evolve as a practical and impactful approach within diverse legal and social systems. With adequate resources, stakeholder collaboration, and cultural adaptation, RJ has the potential to transform how societies address harm and achieve justice [27].

4. Bridging the gap between offenders and victims

4.1. Understanding the Offender's Perspective

Restorative justice (RJ) emphasizes understanding the root causes of offending behaviour to foster meaningful rehabilitation and reduce recidivism. Offenders often engage in criminal activities due to a combination of individual, social, and systemic factors. These may include socioeconomic disadvantages, lack of education, substance abuse, or exposure to trauma and violence. Understanding these underlying causes is essential for addressing the broader context of harm and preventing reoffending [26].

RJ processes encourage offenders to take accountability for their actions by confronting the impact of their behaviour on victims and communities. Accountability in RJ goes beyond mere admission of guilt; it requires offenders to actively participate in repairing the harm caused. For example, this may involve restitution, apologies, or community service, all of which contribute to personal growth and a renewed sense of responsibility [27].

Personal growth is a key outcome of RJ, as offenders are given the opportunity to reflect on their actions and make amends. Research shows that offenders who participate in RJ programs often report increased empathy for their victims, greater self-awareness, and a stronger commitment to change. These factors significantly reduce the likelihood of reoffending, highlighting the transformative potential of RJ for offenders [28].

By focusing on accountability and personal growth, RJ offers a pathway for offenders to reintegrate into society as constructive members. This approach not only benefits offenders but also contributes to broader societal goals of safety, justice, and reconciliation [29].

4.2. Victim-Centered Approaches

Victim-centered approaches in RJ prioritize the emotional and psychological well-being of those harmed by criminal behaviour. Unlike punitive systems that often marginalize victims, RJ provides a supportive framework for addressing their needs and facilitating healing.

One of the primary benefits of RJ for victims is the opportunity to share their experiences in a safe and structured environment. Victims can articulate the impact of the offense, express their emotions, and ask questions directly to offenders. This process fosters a sense of validation and empowerment, as victims regain control over their narrative and participate actively in the resolution process [30].

RJ also addresses victims' psychological needs by promoting emotional closure and reducing feelings of fear, anger, or helplessness. Studies indicate that victims who participate in RJ programs report higher levels of satisfaction and reduced post-traumatic stress compared to those who engage solely with traditional justice systems. For instance, a study in Canada found that **78% of victims** involved in RJ processes felt that their emotional needs were adequately addressed, compared to **46%** in punitive systems [31].

By centering the needs of victims, RJ not only facilitates individual healing but also strengthens social trust and community cohesion. This victim-centered focus is essential for fostering long-term reconciliation and justice [32].

4.3. Facilitating Dialogue and Reconciliation

Facilitating dialogue between victims and offenders is a cornerstone of RJ, requiring skilled mediators and facilitators to guide the process effectively. Mediators play a critical role in creating a safe and neutral space where participants can engage in open, honest, and respectful communication.

Skilled facilitators employ various techniques to foster meaningful dialogue. These include active listening, reframing negative statements, and ensuring that all parties have equal opportunities to express themselves. Facilitators also help participants identify common goals, such as understanding the harm caused, agreeing on restitution measures, and rebuilding trust [33].

Best practices for fostering meaningful dialogue emphasize the importance of preparation. Both victims and offenders must be adequately prepared for the emotional and psychological demands of the process. Pre-session meetings with facilitators help participants articulate their needs, clarify expectations, and build confidence in the RJ framework.

The use of structured dialogue formats, such as restorative circles or victim-offender mediation sessions, further enhances the quality of interactions. These formats encourage empathy, accountability, and mutual understanding, paving the way for effective reconciliation. By facilitating constructive dialogue, RJ processes create opportunities for healing, restitution, and transformation [34].

4.4. Case Studies of Successful Restorative Justice Outcomes

RJ has demonstrated remarkable success across diverse contexts, including juvenile justice, domestic violence, and theft cases. These case studies highlight the transformative potential of RJ for fostering accountability, healing, and social cohesion.

4.4.1. Juvenile Justice

In New Zealand, the introduction of Family Group Conferences (FGCs) as part of the juvenile justice system has significantly reduced youth incarceration rates. FGCs bring together victims, offenders, and their families to collaboratively address the harm caused and develop restitution plans. Research indicates that juvenile offenders who participate in FGCs are **30% less likely to reoffend** compared to those processed through traditional court systems. This approach emphasizes accountability and reintegration, promoting positive outcomes for young offenders and their communities [35].

4.4.2. Domestic Violence

In Canada, RJ programs have been successfully implemented in cases of domestic violence, focusing on addressing the needs of both victims and offenders. One notable program involved victim-offender mediation sessions where the victim expressed her experiences and the offender took responsibility for his actions. The process resulted in a comprehensive agreement, including counseling for the offender and support services for the victim. Follow-up evaluations showed improved emotional well-being for the victim and a commitment to behavioural change by the offender [36].

4.4.3. Theft Cases

In the United States, a community-based RJ program addressed a series of theft cases involving repeat offenders. Through restorative circles, offenders met with their victims to discuss the impact of their actions and develop restitution agreements. One offender, who had stolen electronics from a local business, worked with the victim to repay the financial losses and volunteered at the store as part of his restitution plan. This process not only resolved the immediate harm but also fostered a sense of accountability and trust between the offender and the community [37].

These case studies illustrate the versatility of RJ in addressing various forms of harm, demonstrating its potential to transform justice systems and promote sustainable reconciliation [38].

4.5. Measuring Success: Bridging the Gap Effectively

Evaluating the success of RJ programs requires a comprehensive approach that considers both qualitative and quantitative metrics. Key indicators of success include reduced recidivism rates, victim satisfaction, and the fulfillment of restitution agreements.

Reduced recidivism is one of the most widely recognized measures of RJ effectiveness. Studies consistently show that participants in RJ programs are significantly less likely to reoffend compared to those processed through traditional justice systems. For example, a meta-analysis of RJ practices found that reoffending rates decreased by an average of **23%** among participants [39].

Victim satisfaction is another critical metric, reflecting the extent to which RJ processes address victims' emotional and psychological needs. Surveys indicate that victims who engage in RJ report higher levels of satisfaction and emotional relief compared to those in adversarial court systems. Additionally, the successful completion of restitution agreements demonstrates offenders' accountability and commitment to repairing harm [40].



Figure 2 Victim-Offender Interaction Model in Restorative Justice [8]

By bridging the gap between victims and offenders, RJ fosters meaningful reconciliation and long-term healing. These outcomes underscore the importance of investing in RJ programs and integrating them into broader justice frameworks [41].

5. Impact on communities and society

5.1. Community Involvement in Restorative Justice

Community involvement is a cornerstone of restorative justice (RJ), emphasizing collective responsibility for resolving harm and fostering reconciliation. Community members serve as mediators, supporters, and facilitators, ensuring that RJ processes are inclusive and address the broader social context of conflict. By participating in RJ sessions, community members contribute unique perspectives, helping both victims and offenders understand the wider impact of harmful behaviour [34].

The role of the community extends beyond mediation to include providing emotional and practical support to victims and offenders. For victims, community involvement creates a sense of solidarity and validation, reinforcing that they are not alone in their experience. For offenders, community members offer guidance, mentorship, and resources to aid in rehabilitation and reintegration. This dual support system promotes accountability while mitigating the isolation often associated with traditional punitive systems [35].

Strengthening community bonds is another key outcome of RJ. Collective resolution processes, such as restorative circles or community conferencing, foster trust, empathy, and collaboration among participants. For example, a U.S.-based program addressing school conflicts found that RJ practices reduced suspensions by **38%** while improving relationships between students, teachers, and parents. These results demonstrate how RJ strengthens social cohesion and empowers communities to address conflicts constructively [36].

By involving communities in RJ processes, stakeholders create a shared commitment to healing and justice. This collective approach ensures that resolutions are not only meaningful to individuals but also beneficial to the broader community, laying the foundation for long-term harmony and resilience [37].

5.2. Reducing Recidivism and Promoting Rehabilitation

Reducing recidivism is a primary objective of restorative justice, with significant evidence demonstrating its effectiveness compared to traditional punitive systems. Recidivism rates among RJ participants are consistently lower, reflecting the transformative impact of restorative practices on offenders. For example, a meta-analysis of RJ programs found that participants were **27% less likely to reoffend** compared to those who underwent conventional judicial processes [38].

The success of RJ in reducing recidivism lies in its focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. RJ processes encourage offenders to acknowledge the harm caused by their actions, fostering empathy and self-reflection. These experiences often lead to greater motivation for personal change, as offenders develop a deeper understanding of the consequences of their behaviour. For instance, offenders who participated in victim-offender mediation programs reported increased remorse and a stronger commitment to avoiding future harm [39].

Restorative practices also address the root causes of offending behaviour, such as socioeconomic challenges, substance abuse, or unresolved trauma. By identifying and addressing these underlying factors, RJ promotes long-term rehabilitation and reduces the likelihood of reoffending. Community support and follow-up mechanisms further enhance rehabilitation efforts, ensuring that offenders have access to resources and guidance as they reintegrate into society [40].

The effectiveness of RJ in promoting rehabilitation is evident across diverse contexts. In juvenile justice, for example, restorative approaches have been associated with improved educational outcomes and reduced delinquency. Similarly, in cases involving non-violent offenses, RJ has provided offenders with opportunities to repair harm and rebuild trust, fostering sustainable behavioural change. By reducing recidivism and promoting rehabilitation, RJ contributes to safer communities and more effective justice systems [41].

5.3. Broader Societal Benefits

The broader societal benefits of restorative justice extend beyond individual cases, driving cultural shifts toward empathy, understanding, and inclusion. RJ challenges adversarial approaches to conflict resolution, emphasizing dialogue and collaboration over punishment. This cultural shift fosters greater awareness of the interconnectedness of individuals and the importance of addressing harm in ways that prioritize healing and reconciliation [42].

One of the most significant societal benefits of RJ is its potential to promote social equity and inclusion. Traditional justice systems often disproportionately affect marginalized communities, perpetuating systemic inequalities. By contrast, RJ emphasizes fairness, accountability, and shared responsibility, creating opportunities to address these disparities. For example, indigenous communities in Canada have integrated traditional restorative practices into justice systems, empowering marginalized populations to reclaim agency and resolve conflicts within their cultural frameworks [43].

Promoting inclusion through RJ also involves addressing systemic injustices that contribute to crime. RJ programs often highlight the socioeconomic and structural factors that underlie harmful behaviour, fostering dialogue about the need for systemic change. This approach aligns with broader social movements advocating for justice reform, equity, and human rights. By addressing harm at its roots, RJ contributes to a more just and equitable society [44].

Table 2 Comparison of Recidivism Rates: Traditional vs. Restorative Approaches

Approach	Description	Recidivism Rate (%)	Key Observations
Traditional Justice	Punitive measures such as incarceration, fines, or probation.	50–60%	High rates of reoffending due to lack of focus on offender accountability, victim engagement, or support.
Restorative Justice	Practices like victim-offender mediation, community conferencing, and restitution.	20–30%	Significant reduction in reoffending due to emphasis on accountability, empathy, and community healing.
Juvenile Offenders	Traditional vs. RJ specifically for youth offenses.	Traditional: 40–50% RJ: 15–25%	RJ demonstrates greater effectiveness for youth by focusing on rehabilitation and family involvement.
Severe Offenses	Cases involving serious crimes like assault or theft.	Traditional: 60% RJ: 30%	RJ shows promise even for severe cases, fostering accountability and providing victims with closure.

The cultural and societal benefits of RJ underscore its relevance in modern justice systems. By fostering empathy, inclusion, and equity, RJ not only resolves individual conflicts but also strengthens the social fabric, creating a foundation for sustainable peace and resilience [45].

6. Policy and legislative perspectives

6.1. Current Legal Frameworks Supporting Restorative Justice

Globally, restorative justice (RJ) has been integrated into various legal frameworks, highlighting its growing recognition as an effective approach to conflict resolution. Countries such as New Zealand, Canada, and South Africa have developed comprehensive RJ policies that emphasize reconciliation, community involvement, and victim-centered approaches. For example, New Zealand's **Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989** institutionalized Family Group Conferences (FGCs) as a core component of its juvenile justice system, demonstrating the feasibility of embedding RJ into mainstream legal frameworks [42].

Similarly, Canada's **Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA)** incorporates RJ principles by prioritizing diversion programs and alternative measures for young offenders. These programs enable youth to take accountability for their actions while avoiding the negative consequences of formal prosecution. South Africa's **Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)** represents another landmark example, applying RJ principles to address the societal harms caused by apartheid. These frameworks highlight RJ's potential to transform both individual and systemic approaches to justice [43].

However, significant gaps remain in legislative support for RJ. In many jurisdictions, RJ programs operate on a pilot or discretionary basis rather than being fully integrated into the justice system. This limited scope restricts accessibility and perpetuates inconsistencies in implementation. Furthermore, existing policies often lack clear guidelines for integrating RJ into cases involving severe offenses, creating uncertainty about its applicability and effectiveness. Addressing these gaps requires stronger legislative commitments and the development of standardized protocols to ensure the equitable application of RJ principles across diverse contexts [44].

6.2. Policy Recommendations for Integration

Integrating restorative justice into mainstream legal systems requires targeted policy interventions that address existing gaps and promote inclusivity. One key strategy is the development of comprehensive legislative frameworks that institutionalize RJ at all levels of the justice system. These frameworks should establish clear criteria for the use of RJ, outline procedural safeguards, and allocate resources to support program implementation. For example, mandating the use of RJ in juvenile and non-violent offenses can enhance its accessibility while ensuring consistency in its application [45].

Enhancing inclusivity is another critical component of RJ integration. Policymakers must ensure that RJ programs are accessible to marginalized populations, who often face systemic barriers within traditional justice systems. This can be achieved by tailoring RJ processes to address the unique cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic needs of diverse communities. For instance, indigenous communities in Canada have successfully revitalized traditional practices, such as circle sentencing, within contemporary RJ frameworks, demonstrating the importance of cultural adaptation [46].

Training and capacity building are essential for ensuring the sustainability of RJ programs. Investments in training facilitators, mediators, and legal professionals can enhance the quality and effectiveness of RJ processes. Additionally, incorporating RJ principles into law school curricula and professional development programs can foster a broader understanding of its value within the legal community.

Finally, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are critical for assessing the impact of RJ programs and identifying areas for improvement. Developing standardized metrics for evaluating outcomes, such as recidivism rates, victim satisfaction, and community impact, can provide evidence to inform policy decisions and advocate for the broader adoption of RJ practices [47].

6.3. Role of Advocacy and Stakeholder Engagement

Advocacy and stakeholder engagement are vital for building support and awareness for restorative justice. Policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and community leaders play critical roles in promoting RJ as a viable alternative or complement to traditional justice systems.

Policymakers can champion RJ by incorporating its principles into national and local legal frameworks, ensuring adequate funding for program implementation, and supporting public awareness campaigns. For example, in New Zealand, sustained advocacy from policymakers and practitioners led to the institutionalization of Family Group Conferences, which are now central to the country's juvenile justice system [48].

NGOs and community organizations also play a crucial role in advancing RJ. These entities often serve as facilitators of RJ programs, providing expertise, training, and resources to support implementation. Additionally, NGOs can act as intermediaries between communities and governments, advocating for policies that reflect the needs and priorities of those most affected by harm and conflict. For instance, organizations such as the **Restorative Justice Council** in the UK have been instrumental in raising awareness about RJ and promoting its adoption across various sectors [49].

Community leaders, including educators, religious figures, and grassroots organizers, are essential for fostering trust and participation in RJ processes. Their involvement ensures that RJ practices are grounded in local contexts and responsive to community dynamics. Engaging these leaders in dialogue about the benefits of RJ can help dispel misconceptions and build public confidence in its effectiveness.



Figure 3 Roadmap for Policy Integration of Restorative Justice

Building awareness and support for RJ requires collaborative efforts across multiple stakeholders. By fostering partnerships among policymakers, NGOs, and communities, RJ can gain the momentum needed to become a mainstream approach to justice, promoting healing, accountability, and reconciliation on a broader scale [50].

7. Challenges and future directions

7.1. Challenges to Mainstream Adoption

Despite its growing recognition, restorative justice (RJ) faces significant challenges to mainstream adoption. One primary obstacle is societal resistance to non-punitive measures. Many individuals, influenced by traditional views of justice, equate punishment with accountability and deterrence. RJ's emphasis on dialogue, empathy, and reconciliation is often perceived as lenient or ineffective, particularly in cases involving severe offenses. Public scepticism can deter policymakers from prioritizing RJ initiatives, fearing backlash or accusations of undermining public safety. This cultural resistance underscores the need for broader education and awareness campaigns to shift societal perceptions of justice [48].

Resource constraints represent another significant challenge to mainstreaming RJ. Implementing RJ programs requires substantial investment in training facilitators, developing infrastructure, and maintaining ongoing support systems. Many jurisdictions, especially those with limited budgets, struggle to allocate resources for RJ, prioritizing traditional punitive approaches instead. For example, rural or underserved communities often lack access to trained mediators or restorative facilities, limiting the reach and impact of RJ initiatives [49].

Scalability poses additional challenges, as RJ programs are often designed for small-scale or pilot implementation. Scaling RJ to broader populations requires adapting its processes to diverse contexts while maintaining the quality and integrity of its principles. Ensuring consistency and effectiveness across large systems, such as national justice frameworks or educational institutions, is a complex task that demands careful planning and substantial resources [50].

7.2. Addressing the Challenges

Overcoming these challenges requires innovative solutions that address societal resistance, resource constraints, and scalability. Public education and awareness campaigns are essential for fostering a cultural shift toward restorative practices. These campaigns can highlight the benefits of RJ, such as reduced recidivism, victim satisfaction, and community healing, using data and success stories to build public trust. Engaging influential stakeholders, such as policymakers, educators, and community leaders, can further amplify the message and create momentum for change [51].

Resource constraints can be mitigated through partnerships between governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private entities. Collaborative funding models can pool resources to support RJ programs, while grants and subsidies can incentivize the adoption of restorative practices in underserved areas. Additionally, training programs can be standardized and decentralized, enabling local communities to develop their own RJ capacities with guidance and support from national or international organizations [52].

Technology plays a crucial role in expanding access to RJ. Virtual mediation platforms, for instance, enable participants to engage in restorative processes remotely, reducing logistical barriers and costs. Digital tools can also facilitate training and certification programs for mediators, providing scalable solutions to meet the growing demand for skilled practitioners. Furthermore, data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) can enhance the evaluation and monitoring of RJ programs, ensuring their effectiveness and scalability [53].

Innovative RJ models tailored to specific contexts can also address scalability challenges. For example, integrating RJ principles into school disciplinary systems or workplace conflict resolution frameworks allows for broader implementation while maintaining flexibility. These tailored approaches demonstrate the adaptability of RJ and its potential to address harm in diverse settings [54].

7.3. Future Research Directions

While restorative justice has gained significant attention, several gaps in empirical research limit its widespread application and refinement. One critical area for exploration is the long-term impact of RJ on recidivism and community dynamics. While existing studies highlight its short-term benefits, longitudinal research is needed to evaluate the sustainability of these outcomes over time and across different populations [55].

Another promising area for research is the integration of technology into RJ practices. Investigating the effectiveness of virtual mediation platforms, AI-driven analysis of dialogue patterns, and other digital tools can provide insights into how technology can enhance accessibility and efficiency. Additionally, examining the intersection of RJ with systemic inequalities, such as racial or socioeconomic disparities, can inform more inclusive and equitable restorative practices [56].

Finally, comparative studies across jurisdictions can identify best practices and innovative approaches to RJ implementation. By analysing successful models in diverse cultural and legal contexts, researchers can develop frameworks that address common challenges while respecting local values and traditions. These studies will be instrumental in advancing RJ as a global paradigm for justice reform [57].

8. Conclusion

8.1. Summary of Key Insights

Restorative justice (RJ) represents a profound shift in how societies address harm, emphasizing repair, accountability, and healing over punishment. The theoretical foundations of RJ highlight its focus on relationships, advocating for justice that prioritizes the needs of victims, offenders, and communities. By fostering dialogue and understanding, RJ addresses the root causes of harm, creating pathways for reconciliation and meaningful resolution. These principles distinguish RJ from traditional punitive systems, offering an alternative that emphasizes empathy, collaboration, and shared responsibility.

In practice, RJ has demonstrated remarkable versatility across various contexts, from juvenile justice to workplace conflicts. Victim-offender mediation, community conferencing, and restorative circles exemplify its practical application, providing structured processes that foster accountability and healing. These approaches empower victims to articulate their experiences, while offenders are encouraged to take responsibility for their actions and work toward restitution. Evidence of reduced recidivism rates and increased victim satisfaction underscores the effectiveness of RJ in achieving sustainable outcomes.

From a societal perspective, RJ contributes to broader cultural shifts toward equity and inclusion. By addressing systemic inequalities and fostering community cohesion, RJ aligns with the evolving values of modern societies. It challenges adversarial approaches to justice, advocating for solutions that prioritize healing over retribution. This transformative potential positions RJ as a cornerstone of progressive justice reform, offering a holistic framework that bridges the gap between offenders and victims while addressing the needs of communities.

Bridging this gap remains central to RJ's vision. By facilitating direct communication and mutual understanding, RJ processes humanize both victims and offenders, fostering empathy and accountability. This relational approach not only repairs individual harm but also strengthens the social fabric, creating a foundation for long-term peace and resilience. The insights gained from theoretical exploration and practical application demonstrate RJ's capacity to transform justice systems and promote a more compassionate, equitable society.

8.2. Closing Thoughts

Restorative justice stands at a pivotal juncture, with its principles and practices gaining recognition as effective alternatives to punitive approaches. However, its full potential can only be realized through collective action by policymakers, practitioners, and communities. Policymakers must champion RJ by integrating it into legal frameworks, ensuring that it is accessible to diverse populations and adequately funded. This commitment requires a paradigm shift, viewing justice not merely as punishment but as an opportunity for healing, accountability, and transformation. Practitioners, including mediators, facilitators, and educators, play a vital role in advancing RJ. Their expertise ensures the integrity of restorative processes, enabling participants to engage in meaningful dialogue and achieve constructive outcomes. Investing in training and capacity building is essential to equip practitioners with the skills needed to navigate complex cases and foster trust among stakeholders. Additionally, sharing best practices and lessons learned across jurisdictions can enhance the consistency and effectiveness of RJ programs.

Communities also have a crucial role to play in supporting RJ. By embracing restorative principles, communities can create environments that prioritize empathy, collaboration, and collective well-being. Grassroots initiatives, such as school-based RJ programs or neighbourhood restorative circles, demonstrate the power of community-led solutions in addressing harm and fostering reconciliation. Engaging community members in dialogue about the benefits of RJ can build broader support, shifting societal attitudes toward justice and conflict resolution.

The vision for RJ's future is one of inclusivity, equity, and global reach. As more societies recognize the limitations of punitive systems, RJ offers a framework for addressing harm in ways that prioritize healing and accountability. Its potential to reduce recidivism, empower victims, and strengthen communities underscores its relevance in addressing contemporary challenges. However, realizing this vision requires sustained commitment, collaboration, and innovation. In the coming decades, RJ has the potential to transform justice systems worldwide, creating pathways for reconciliation and resilience. By embracing its principles and practices, societies can move toward a future where justice is defined not by punishment but by the restoration of relationships and the dignity of all individuals involved. This collective journey requires the active participation of all stakeholders, united by a shared commitment to justice, equity, and compassion.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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