

Research Summary

An Evaluation of the Long-term Impact of Restorative Justice Programming for Juvenile Offenders

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This study examines the long term impact of referral to restorative justice processing versus court referral for juvenile offenders. It examines several outcome measures, including the likelihood of new official contacts with the police, number of later official contacts, and seriousness of later official contacts. The sample consists of 330 youth referred to the Clay County Restorative Justice program (n=164) or traditional juvenile court processing (n=166) between 2000 and 2003. Demographic and offending data were gathered from restorative justice files and computerized official records (CSTS). Recidivism data were collected in 2005, allowing for an examination of offending outcomes up to four years post referral for some youth.

The voluntary nature of restorative justice (for both victims and offenders) produces a problem for researchers in selecting the appropriate comparison group for outcome analyses because offenders who complete restorative justice programming may differ (e.g. motivation) from those who do not and from those who are processed traditionally (a form of selection bias). We addressed this issue by examining groups based on the program they were referred to, regardless of whether they actually received that program. In other words, all youth referred to restorative justice during the time period are retained in our treatment group, whether they completed the restorative justice programming or not. This decision means that our study is a conservative test of the impact of restorative justice processing, however it is important to note that all youth in our restorative justice referred sample experienced at least the initial in-person meeting with restorative justice personnel in which the crime and its impact are discussed.

Initial examination of the demographic and offending history information revealed several differences between our groups. Youth referred to traditional juvenile court processing were significantly older, more likely to have prior official contact, had more prior official contacts, more likely to be referred for a current “persons” offense and less likely to come from the small urban area of the county than youth referred to restorative justice processing. These group differences were statistically controlled for in our analyses of re-offending outcomes.

The outcome analysis incorporated multivariate statistical methods to examine the impact of restorative justice referral, while controlling for initial group differences on factors like demographics (e.g., age) and offense history. Specifically, we examined the impact of restorative justice referral (vs. traditional juvenile court referral) while controlling for age at referral, race, gender, residence in Moorhead vs. rural parts of the county, number of prior police contacts, and current offense type (e.g., other, property, persons). Each outcome measure (prevalence of new offense, number of later official contacts, and seriousness of later offending behavior) was measured at five follow-up periods: six months post referral, and one, two, three and four years post referral.

Does referral to restorative justice processing (vs. traditional juvenile court) impact likelihood of reoffense?

The dependent variable in this analysis is whether the youth experienced any new official contact during the follow-up period. Our statistical analyses indicated that youth referred to restorative justice processing were significantly less likely to experience new official contacts than youth referred to traditional juvenile court processing, controlling for demographic and offending history factors. The difference in likelihood of new offending remained statistically significant up to three years post referral. Youth referred to restorative justice processing were also less likely to have re-offended four years post referral, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Does referral to restorative justice processing (vs. traditional juvenile court) impact the number of later official contacts?

The dependent variable in this analysis is the number of later official contacts experienced during the follow-up period. Our analysis indicated that youth referred to restorative justice processing experienced significantly fewer later official contacts, controlling for demographic and offending history factors. The difference in number of later contacts remained statistically significant up to three years post referral. Youth referred to restorative justice processing also experienced fewer later official contacts up to four years post referral, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Does referral to restorative justice processing (vs. traditional juvenile court) impact the seriousness of later official contacts?

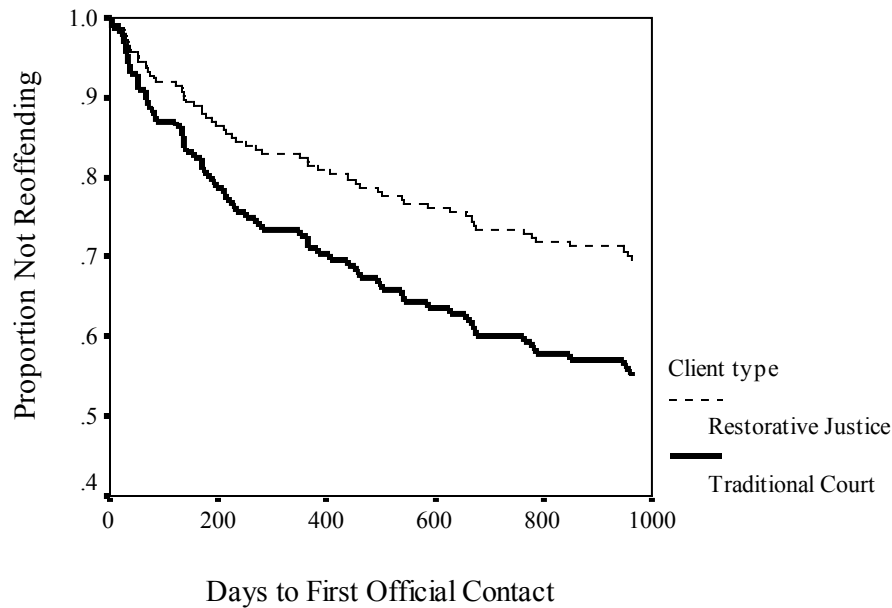
The dependent variable in this analysis is the most serious later official contact the youth experienced during the follow-up period (none, other, property, person-crimes). Our analyses revealed that the behavior of youth referred to restorative justice processing was significantly less serious than that of youth referred to traditional court processing, controlling for demographic and offending history factors. The difference in seriousness of later contacts remains statistically significant up to three years post referral. Youth referred to restorative justice processing also exhibited less serious later behavior up to four years post referral, but this difference was not statistically significant.

Survival Analysis

We also conducted a series of “survival” analyses which calculates survival probabilities (likelihood of remaining offense-free) over uneven follow-up periods. These analyses revealed that youth referred to restorative justice processing reoffend at a slower rate (last longer before re-offending) than do those referred to traditional juvenile court processing, controlling for demographic factors and offending history. Once again, the differences remain statistically significant up to three years post referral. The relationship between restorative justice referral and reoffending over time is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1.

Survival Proportions up to Three Years Post Referral



Summary

Our analysis indicates that youth referred to restorative justice processing experience significantly better outcomes than youth referred to traditional court processing up to three years post referral.

Specifically, youth referred to restorative justice processing are less likely than those processed in traditional juvenile court to reoffend up to three years after being referred to the Restorative Justice program. These juveniles also experience fewer new offenses and exhibit less serious later offending behavior, controlling for demographic and offense history factors.

Referral to restorative justice remains a predictor of better outcomes at four years post referral, but these differences are not statistically significant. The lack of significant findings at four years post referral may be due to the small sample size used in this follow-up period (only 50 RJ and 56 court referred youth were followed through the full four years).

The results of our study indicate that restorative justice is a viable alternative to traditional court processing.