Question: Can psychologists contribute to improving the effectiveness of restorative justice practices?

Answer: Psychologists possess knowledge, expertise and skills that could contribute to enhancing restorative justice practices. Three specific areas identified were program development, program evaluation and research, and program effectiveness.

Although all three areas are important, the latter could potentially have the largest impact on restorative justice practices. In terms of enhancing program effectiveness, psychology could contribute through its knowledge of assessment and treatment. Both of these areas are dominant in the psychology literature. For example, Canada is the world leader in terms of risk assessment of offenders. Psychologists could assist in assessing the risk levels of offenders entering restorative justice programs. This would allow facilitators of these programs to have knowledge of the offender’s likelihood to revictimize someone. Furthermore, psychologists also work with victims and are able to assess whether those who have experienced trauma are ready to benefit from a restorative justice intervention.

Treatment is the second area where psychologists can assist, ensuring that restorative justice practices are in line with what is known about effective correctional treatment. For example, it is well-established that adherence to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity will result in higher levels of treatment effectiveness.
Programs that match the level of service to the risk level of the client (i.e., the risk principle), target need areas that are directly related to criminal behaviour (i.e., the need principle), and deliver cognitive-behavioural treatment (i.e., the responsivity principle) are much more effective than programs that do not adhere to these principles.

Ultimately, the principles of effective correctional treatment for offenders and restorative justice attempt to accomplish the same tasks. Both endeavour to effectively meet the needs of the offender, the victim(s), and the community towards decreasing the likelihood of future criminal activity by the offender and prevent future harm.

Restorative justice can be seen as a form of treatment, and therefore can benefit from these treatment principles. Research has found that restorative justice can have an effect of reducing recidivism by up to 12%. Offender treatment programs that adhere to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity have been found to have effects of reducing recidivism up to 35%.

**Policy Implications:**

1. The disciplines of psychology and restorative justice both possess important knowledge, skills and expertise; a partnership could lead to improvements in effective restorative justice practice.
2. Introducing offender risk assessment to restorative justice programs in cases of serious crime can enhance measures to reduce revictimization.
3. The principles of risk, need and responsivity are well-established in the offender treatment literature; therefore, incorporating these principles into restorative justice practices is likely to further decrease offender recidivism.


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**For further information:**

Tanya Rugge, Ph.D.
Corrections Research
Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
Phone: 613-991-2826 Fax: 613-990-8295
E-mail: Tanya.Rugge@ps.gc.ca

Also available on Public Safety Canada's website at: www.publicsafety.gc.ca