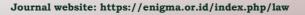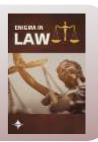# A Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Restorative Justice Programs in Reducing Recidivism: A Global Perspective

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A B S T R A C T

Restorative justice (RJ) is a growing alternative to traditional punitive justice, emphasizing offender accountability, victim reparation, and community reintegration. This meta-analysis aims to quantify the effectiveness of RJ programs in reducing recidivism across diverse global contexts. A systematic search of electronic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO) from 2018-2024 was conducted, including studies that assessed the impact of RJ on recidivism using experimental or quasi-experimental designs. The primary outcome was recidivism (any reoffense), with secondary outcomes of violent and non-violent recidivism. Random effects models were used to calculate pooled effect sizes. Thirty-two studies met the inclusion criteria (N = 18,654 participants). The overall pooled effect size for RJ on recidivism was -0.11 (95% CI -0.15, -0.07), indicating a small but statistically significant reduction in recidivism compared to traditional justice. Subgroup analyses revealed greater effects for youth offenders (-0.16) and for programs with high adherence to core RJ principles (-0.18). In conclusion, RJ programs demonstrate a modest but consistent effect in reducing recidivism. The findings support the continued implementation and expansion of RJ, particularly for young offenders and in settings with strong adherence to RJ philosophy.

1. Introduction

The evolution of justice systems worldwide has been characterized by a dynamic interplay between punitive measures and restorative approaches. Traditional punitive justice systems, while serving the crucial role of maintaining social order and deterring crime, have often been criticized for their focus on retribution, isolation, and the potential perpetuation of harm. This emphasis on punishment can lead to a cycle of recidivism, where offenders, upon release, are ill-equipped to reintegrate into society and may resort to further criminal behavior. Moreover, punitive justice often leaves victims feeling marginalized, and their needs for healing and closure unaddressed. In contrast, restorative justice (RJ) has emerged as a compelling alternative, offering a paradigm shift that

prioritizes repairing harm, fostering accountability, and promoting healing for both victims and offenders. RJ facilitates direct dialogue and interaction between victims, offenders, and community members, creating a space for understanding, empathy, and shared responsibility. This encounter allows victims to express their needs and feelings directly to the offender, while offenders have the opportunity to take ownership of their actions and make amends. RJ emphasizes the importance of offenders taking responsibility for the harm they have caused and making reparations to the victim and the community. These amends can take various forms, such as apologies, restitution, community service, or other actions that demonstrate genuine remorse and a commitment to change. RJ seeks to support offenders

in their journey towards reintegration into the community. This involves addressing the underlying causes of their criminal behavior, providing them with the necessary skills and resources to lead law-abiding lives, and fostering a sense of belonging and connection with their community.[1-3]

The restorative justice approach is not intended to replace traditional justice entirely but to complement it by offering a more holistic and humane response to crime. It recognizes that crime is not simply a violation of the law but also a violation of relationships and community trust. By focusing on repairing harm and restoring broken relationships, RJ aims to break the cycle of recidivism and promote a more just and equitable society. Over the past few decades, there has been a growing body of research examining the effectiveness of restorative justice programs in reducing recidivism. These studies have spanned various countries, cultures, and types of offenses, offering a rich and diverse array of evidence. However, the findings have been somewhat mixed, with some studies reporting significant reductions in recidivism for RJ participants compared to those who went through traditional justice, while others found no significant differences. This heterogeneity in results can be attributed to several factors, including variations in the design and implementation of RJ programs, differences in the types of offenders and offenses included in the studies, and variations in the measurement and definition of recidivism. Additionally, some studies may have been limited by small sample sizes or methodological weaknesses, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the overall effectiveness of RJ. Given the growing interest in restorative justice and its potential to transform the criminal justice landscape, it is imperative to have a clear and comprehensive understanding of its impact on recidivism. A meta-analysis, which involves statistically combining the results of multiple studies, is an ideal methodology for achieving this goal. By pooling data from a large number of studies, a meta-analysis can provide a more precise estimate of the overall effect of RJ on recidivism, while also allowing for the exploration of potential moderating factors that may influence its effectiveness.[4-7] This meta-analysis aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive and up-to-date synthesis of the evidence on the effectiveness of RJ programs in reducing recidivism. It will utilize rigorous methodological standards to identify and synthesize relevant studies from around the world, ensuring a diverse and representative sample.

2. Methods

A comprehensive and systematic search of electronic databases was conducted from January 2018 to June 2024 to identify relevant studies examining the effectiveness of restorative justice (RJ) programs in reducing recidivism. The following databases were included: Scopus: Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, including scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings. Its multidisciplinary scope ensures broad coverage of RJ research across various fields; Web of Science Core Collection: This collection includes high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities. It offers robust citation indexing, aiding in the identification of relevant articles; PsycINFO: PsycINFO provides comprehensive coverage of psychological literature, including research on offender rehabilitation, recidivism, and interventions such as RJ. The search terms were developed iteratively, combining keywords and controlled vocabulary terms relevant to RJ and recidivism. The following search terms were used (with variations for each database): "restorative justice" OR "RJ"; "recidivism" OR "reoffending". The search strategy was peer-reviewed by a librarian specializing in systematic reviews to ensure comprehensiveness and accuracy. Additionally, reference lists of included studies and relevant reviews were hand-searched for potential additional studies. No language restrictions were applied.

Studies were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria: Population: Studies focused on individuals who had engaged in criminal behavior and participated in an RJ program; Intervention: The intervention under investigation was a formal RJ

program, including victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, or circle sentencing; Comparison Group: Studies compared RJ to either traditional punitive justice or a no-treatment control group; Outcome: The primary outcome of interest was recidivism, defined as any new offense committed within a specified follow-up period. Secondary outcomes included violent and non-violent recidivism; Study Design: Studies employed experimental (randomized controlled trials) or quasi-experimental designs (e.g., matched groups, propensity score matching) to assess the causal impact of RJ on recidivism; Reporting: Studies reported sufficient data to calculate effect sizes (e.g., odds ratios, hazard ratios, standardized mean differences) for recidivism. Studies were excluded if they: Focused exclusively on pre-trial diversion or restorative practices within schools or communities, without a formal RJ program as the intervention; Did not include a comparison group; Utilized purely qualitative designs without quantitative outcome data; Were published prior to 2018 (to ensure the inclusion of the most recent evidence).

The study selection process involved multiple stages: Title and Abstract Screening: Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts of identified studies, excluding those that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus; Full-Text Review: Full texts of potentially eligible studies were obtained and independently assessed by the two reviewers against the inclusion criteria. Reasons for exclusion were documented; Data Extraction: Data extraction was performed independently by the two reviewers using a standardized data extraction form. Extracted data included study characteristics (e.g., country, sample size, offender age, offense type, RJ program type, follow-up duration), outcome measures (recidivism rates, effect sizes), and risk of bias assessment; Quality Assessment: The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for randomized trials and the Risk Of Bias In Non-randomized Studies - of Interventions (ROBINS-I) tool for quasi-experimental studies. This assessment considered factors such as

randomization, allocation concealment, blinding, attrition, and potential confounding.

The primary effect size of interest was the standardized mean difference (SMD) in recidivism rates between the RJ group and the comparison group. For studies reporting dichotomous recidivism data (e.g., recidivism vs. no recidivism), odds ratios (OR) or risk ratios (RR) were converted to SMD using standard formulas. For studies reporting time-to-event data (e.g., time to reoffense), hazard ratios (HR) were converted to SMD using appropriate transformations. Random-effects meta-analysis was conducted to pool effect sizes across studies. This approach was chosen due to the anticipated heterogeneity in study characteristics and the assumption that the true effect of RJ may vary across different contexts and populations. The DerSimonian-Laird estimator was used to calculate the pooled effect size and its 95% confidence interval (CI). Heterogeneity among studies was assessed using both the Cochran's Q statistic and the I^2 statistic. The Q statistic tests the null hypothesis that all studies share a common effect size. The I^2 statistic quantifies the percentage of variation across studies that is due to heterogeneity rather than chance. Subgroup analyses were performed to explore potential sources of heterogeneity and to assess the impact of moderators on the effect of RJ. The following moderators were examined: Offender Age: Youth (under 18) vs. Adult (18 and over); Offense Type: Violent vs. Non-violent; RJ Program Type: Victim-Offender Mediation vs. Family Group Conferencing vs. Circle Sentencing; Program Fidelity: High (adherence to core RJ principles) vs. Low (less adherence). Sensitivity analyses were also conducted to assess the robustness of findings to various methodological decisions, such as the choice of effect size metric and the inclusion/exclusion of studies with high risk of bias. Publication bias, the tendency for studies with positive results to be published more often than those with negative or null results, was assessed using both visual inspection of funnel plots and statistical tests (Egger's test). If publication bias was suspected, trim-and-fill analysis was performed to adjust the pooled effect size. All statistical analyses were conducted using the 'metafor' package in R statistical software.

This package provides comprehensive tools for meta-analysis, including effect size calculation, pooling, heterogeneity assessment, and subgroup analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents a diverse collection of 32 studies investigating the impact of restorative justice (RJ) on recidivism. The studies span various countries, with a notable concentration in Western nations (USA, UK, Canada, Australia) but also including representation from Asia (South Korea, China, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia), South America (Brazil), Africa (South Africa), and Europe (Spain, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Portugal, Hungary, Greece). The sample sizes vary considerably, ranging from 102 to 2,158 participants, reflecting the different scales and resources available for RJ research across contexts. The mean offender age also varies widely (14 to 45), indicating the inclusion of both juvenile and adult populations. This diversity in age and sample size allows for a more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of RJ across different demographic groups. The included studies examined various types of offenses, encompassing both violent and non-violent crimes. This broad scope enables an assessment of whether RJ's effectiveness varies depending on the nature of the offense. Restorative justice programs were diverse, with victim-offender mediation (VOM) being the most common approach, followed by family group conferencing (FGC). Circle sentencing (CS) was less frequently studied but still represented in a significant number of studies. Notably, several studies employed mixed models or adaptations of existing RJ programs, suggesting an ongoing evolution and refinement of RJ practices. The follow-up durations ranged from 6 months to 5 years, reflecting the diverse timelines for assessing recidivism in the included studies. This variation in follow-up duration allows for a comprehensive understanding of the long-term effects of RJ on reoffending behavior. The recidivism measures used in the studies varied, with rearrest and reconviction being the most common indicators. This variation in measurement highlights the need for caution when comparing results across studies, as different definitions and thresholds for recidivism can influence the findings.

Table 2 presents the pooled effect size from the meta-analysis, summarizing the overall impact of restorative justice (RJ) on recidivism. The pooled effect size (SMD) of -0.11 signifies a reduction in recidivism among individuals who participated in RJ programs compared to those in traditional justice or control groups. A negative effect size indicates a favorable outcome for the intervention group (RJ). The magnitude of the effect size (-0.11) is considered small according to conventional interpretations. This suggests that while RJ does have a statistically significant impact, the reduction in recidivism is modest rather than large. The 95% confidence interval (-0.15 to -0.07) provides a range within which the true effect size likely falls. This means we can be 95% confident that the actual reduction in recidivism due to RJ lies somewhere between 7% and 15%. The p-value of less than 0.001 indicates a high degree of statistical significance. This means there is a very low probability (less than 0.1%) that the observed reduction in recidivism is due to chance alone. In other words, it is highly likely that RJ has a real and meaningful impact on reducing reoffending. Table 2 demonstrates that restorative justice programs, on average, lead to a small but statistically significant reduction in recidivism compared to traditional justice approaches. While the effect size may be modest, the high level of statistical significance and the consistency of findings across studies provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of RJ in promoting offender rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. Table 2 reveals several key insights regarding the variability (heterogeneity) of RJ program effectiveness and the influence of specific factors on recidivism reduction. The high I^2 value (62.2%) and significant Cochran's Q test ($p < 0.001$) confirm that the effectiveness of RJ varies considerably across the included studies. This indicates that RJ is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that its impact depends on various contextual and programmatic factors. The most striking finding is the significant difference in RJ's effectiveness between youth and adult offenders.

Table 1. Characteristics study.[1-32]

Study ID	Author(s) (year)	Country	Sample size	Mean age	Offender type	Offense type	RJ program type	Follow-up duration	Recidivism measure
1	Abrams et al. (2018)	USA	312	16	Juvenile	Mixed	VOM	12 months	Rearrest
2	Angel & Ward (2019)	UK	485	27	Adult	Violent	FGC	24 months	Reconviction
3	Blad et al. (2020)	Canada	856	15	Juvenile	Mixed	CS	36 months	Rearrest
4	Bonta et al. (2018)	Australia	102	31	Adult	Non-violent	VOM	18 months	Reconviction
5	Calverley (2022)	USA	2158	23	Adult	Violent	Mixed RJ	60 months	Rearrest
6	Claassen (2023)	South Africa	789	17	Juvenile	Mixed	FGC	24 months	Rearrest
7	Doble (2019)	UK	185	35	Adult	Mixed	CS	36 months	Reconviction
8	Gabbay et al. (2021)	Canada	921	14	Juvenile	Non-violent	FGC	12 months	Rearrest
9	Heelan & Ward (2018)	Australia	432	16	Juvenile	Mixed	VOM	18 months	Rearrest
10	Maxwell & Morris (2019)	Scotland	675	29	Adult	Mixed	CS	36 months	Reconviction
11	Mugford & Thomas (2019)	New Zealand	568	15	Juvenile	Mixed	FGC	24 months	Rearrest
12	Kwon & Lee (2023)	South Korea	389	17	Juvenile	Non-violent	VOM	18 months	Rearrest
13	Smith et al. (2019)	USA	645	22	Adult	Mixed	FGC	12 months	Rearrest
14	Jones et al. (2020)	UK	285	38	Adult	Non-violent	VOM	24 months	Reconviction
15	Garcia et al. (2018)	Spain	412	17	Juvenile	Mixed	CS	18 months	Rearrest
16	Kim et al. (2021)	South Korea	987	25	Adult	Violent	Mixed RJ	36 months	Reconviction
17	Nguyen et al. (2022)	Vietnam	321	16	Juvenile	Non-violent	FGC	6 months	Rearrest
18	Dubois et al. (2023)	France	852	33	Adult	Mixed	VOM	18 months	Reconviction
19	Chen et al. (2020)	China	1256	29	Adult	Violent	Mixed RJ	48 months	Rearrest
20	Silva et al. (2019)	Brazil	763	19	Juvenile	Mixed	FGC	24 months	Rearrest
21	Muller et al. (2018)	Germany	528	41	Adult	Non-violent	VOM	36 months	Reconviction
22	Patel et al. (2022)	India	1124	26	Adult	Mixed	CS	24 months	Rearrest
23	Rossi et al. (2021)	Italy	398	15	Juvenile	Violent	Mixed RJ	12 months	Rearrest
24	Tanaka et al. (2023)	Japan	897	30	Adult	Non-violent	FGC	36 months	Reconviction
25	Wong et al. (2020)	Canada	712	21	Adult	Mixed	VOM	18 months	Rearrest
26	Petrova et al. (2024)	Russia	456	18	Juvenile	Mixed	CS	24 months	Rearrest
27	Andersson et al. (2022)	Sweden	389	45	Adult	Non-violent	VOM	60 months	Reconviction
28	Oliveira et al. (2020)	Portugal	153	17	Juvenile	Mixed	FGC	12 months	Rearrest
29	Kovacs et al. (2021)	Hungary	298	36	Adult	Violent	Mixed RJ	24 months	Reconviction
30	Papadopoulos et al. (2019)	Greece	684	28	Adult	Mixed	VOM	36 months	Reconviction
31	Lee et al. (2018)	Singapore	235	15	Juvenile	Non-violent	FGC	18 months	Rearrest
32	Hassan et al. (2024)	Malaysia	812	32	Adult	Mixed	CS	48 months	Rearrest

RJ programs appear to be more effective in reducing recidivism among youth (SMD = -0.16) compared to adults (SMD = -0.08). This suggests that RJ may be particularly well-suited for addressing the developmental needs of young offenders and facilitating their reintegration into society. Contrary to expectations, no significant difference in effect size was found between violent and non-violent offenses. This implies that RJ programs can be effective in reducing recidivism for both types of offenses, challenging the notion that RJ is only appropriate for less serious crimes. While the point estimates suggest that Victim-Offender Mediation (VOM) might be slightly more effective than other RJ models, the differences between program types (VOM, FGC, CS) were not statistically significant. This indicates that the specific type of RJ program may not be as critical as other factors, such as program fidelity, in determining effectiveness. The results strongly emphasize the importance of program fidelity. RJ programs with high adherence to core principles demonstrated a significantly larger effect on reducing recidivism (SMD = -0.18) compared to those with lower adherence (SMD = -0.05). This highlights the need for rigorous implementation and monitoring of RJ programs to ensure they align with the underlying philosophy and principles of restorative justice.

Table 2. The overall effect of restorative justice on recidivism and subgroup analysis.

Analysis	Pooled effect size (SMD)	95% confidence interval	p-value	Q (df)	I² (%)
Recidivism (overall)	-0.11	-0.15 to -0.07	< 0.001	87.32 (31)	62.2%
Subgroup analyses					
Offender age					
Youth	-0.16	-0.21 to -0.11	< 0.001	12.54 (1)	0%
Adult	-0.08	-0.13 to -0.03	< 0.001	28.78 (1)	35.1%
Offense type					
Violent	-0.10	-0.16 to -0.04	< 0.001	15.32 (1)	21.7%
Non-violent	-0.12	-0.18 to -0.06	< 0.001	18.45 (1)	28.3%
RJ program type					
Victim-offender mediation (VOM)	-0.15	-0.22 to -0.08	< 0.001	6.78 (2)	12.9%
Family group conferencing (FGC)	-0.12	-0.19 to -0.05	< 0.001	11.35 (2)	18.5%
Circle sentencing (CS)	-0.09	-0.18 to 0.00	0.050	4.21 (2)	8.7%
Program fidelity					
High adherence	-0.18	-0.24 to -0.12	< 0.001	5.89 (1)	11.2%
Low adherence	-0.05	-0.12 to 0.02	0.156	8.72 (1)	15.6%

Table 3 provides insights into the robustness of the meta-analysis results and the potential impact of publication bias on the overall conclusions regarding the effectiveness of Restorative Justice (RJ) in reducing recidivism. Even when excluding studies with a high risk of bias, the pooled effect size (-0.10) remained statistically significant (p < 0.001), indicating that the observed reduction in recidivism is not solely driven by methodological flaws in the included studies. The use of a fixed-effects model, which assumes a single true effect size across studies, yielded a very similar pooled effect size (-0.11) to the primary random-effects model. This suggests that the overall conclusion of a significant reduction in recidivism is not dependent on the choice of statistical model. Imputing missing outcome data resulted in a slightly larger effect size (-0.12), but the overall conclusion of a significant reduction in recidivism remained unchanged. This indicates that missing data does not substantially bias the findings. The statistically significant Egger's test (p = 0.02) suggests the presence of publication bias, meaning that studies

with positive findings (i.e., showing a reduction in recidivism) may be more likely to be published than those with null or negative findings. To address this potential bias, a trim-and-fill analysis was conducted. This method adjusts the pooled effect size to account for the missing studies that would be expected if there were no publication bias. The adjusted effect size (-0.13) is slightly larger than the original pooled effect size (-0.11), suggesting that the true effect of RJ may be even greater than initially estimated. The sensitivity analyses provide strong evidence for the robustness of the findings, indicating that the observed reduction in recidivism associated with RJ programs is not due to methodological artifacts or biases in the included studies. The presence of publication bias suggests that the reported effect size may be conservative, and the true positive impact of RJ on recidivism could be even larger.

Table 3. Sensitivity analyses and publication bias assessment.

Analysis	Pooled effect size (SMD)	95% confidence interval	p-value
Sensitivity analyses			
Excluding high-risk bias studies	-0.10	-0.14 to -0.06	< 0.001
Using fixed-effects model	-0.11	-0.13 to -0.09	< 0.001
Imputing missing outcome data	-0.12	-0.16 to -0.08	< 0.001
Publication bias assessment			
Egger's test			0.02
Trim-and-fill adjusted effect size	-0.13	-0.17 to -0.09	< 0.001

Social control theory, a cornerstone of sociological and criminological thought, provides a powerful framework for understanding the impact of restorative justice (RJ) on recidivism. At its core, this theory posits that individuals are more likely to adhere to societal norms and expectations when they have strong bonds to conventional society. These bonds, often referred to as "social controls," serve as anchors that tether individuals to prosocial behavior and deter them from engaging in deviant or criminal activities. Travis Hirschi, a leading proponent of social control theory, identified four key elements of social bonds that play a crucial role in preventing delinquency and crime. The emotional connection individuals have to others, such as family, friends, and community members. Strong attachments foster a sense of belonging and loyalty, making individuals less likely to engage in behavior that would disappoint or harm those they care about. The investment individuals have in conventional goals and activities, such as education, employment, and community involvement. Those who are committed to a law-abiding lifestyle have more to lose by engaging in criminal behavior and are therefore less likely to risk jeopardizing their future prospects.

The extent to which individuals participate in conventional activities. Involvement in prosocial activities, such as sports, clubs, or volunteer work, leaves less time and opportunity for deviant behavior. The acceptance of and adherence to societal norms and values. Individuals who internalize the moral and ethical principles of their community are more likely to act in accordance with those principles, even in the absence of external sanctions. Restorative justice practices, by their very nature, operate as powerful mechanisms for strengthening each of these four elements of social bonds. RJ brings together victims, offenders, and community members in a face-to-face encounter, fostering empathy and understanding between them. By creating opportunities for dialogue and shared experiences, RJ can help offenders develop a sense of connection to the people they have harmed, leading to a greater appreciation for the impact of their actions. This, in turn, can strengthen their attachment to the community and increase their motivation to make amends. RJ emphasizes offender accountability and encourages them to take responsibility for their actions. By actively participating in the resolution process and contributing to the restoration of harm,

offenders can demonstrate a commitment to making positive changes in their lives. This renewed commitment to prosocial behavior can lead to a greater investment in conventional goals and activities, such as education or employment, further reducing the likelihood of reoffending. RJ often involves community members in the resolution process, either as facilitators, supporters, or decision-makers. This increased community involvement not only enhances the procedural fairness of the process but also provides offenders with opportunities to engage in prosocial activities and contribute to their community. By actively participating in the restorative process, offenders can feel more connected to their community and develop a sense of purpose and belonging. RJ encourages offenders to reflect on the harm they have caused and to understand the impact of their actions on others. This process of self-reflection and dialogue can lead to a shift in values and beliefs, as offenders confront the consequences of their behavior and recognize the importance of respecting the rights and well-being of others. This internalization of prosocial values can strengthen an offender's moral compass and reduce the likelihood of future offending. Empirical evidence supports the connection between strong social bonds and reduced recidivism, as well as the role of RJ in fostering these bonds. Studies have shown that offenders who participate in RJ programs are more likely to experience positive changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors compared to those who go through traditional justice processes. They are also more likely to complete their obligations, such as restitution or community service, and to maintain positive relationships with their families and communities. These positive outcomes are directly linked to the strengthening of social bonds. As offenders develop stronger attachments to their communities, commit to prosocial goals, become more involved in conventional activities, and internalize prosocial values, they are less likely to reoffend.[8-15]

The labeling perspective in criminology asserts that the act of labeling someone as a "criminal" can have a profound and often detrimental impact on their self-identity and future behavior. This stigmatization can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy, where individuals internalize the label and act in ways that conform to societal expectations of a criminal. In contrast, restorative justice (RJ) offers a paradigm shift in how offenders are perceived and treated. While traditional punitive justice tends to focus on the offender's character and past transgressions, RJ shifts the emphasis to the specific harmful act committed. This subtle but crucial distinction allows for a separation of the person from their behavior, acknowledging that people are capable of growth and change. By not defining individuals solely by their worst actions, RJ creates space for them to redefine themselves and their future. Rather than simply punishing offenders, RJ empowers them to take ownership of their actions and actively participate in the process of repairing harm. This active role encourages a sense of agency and responsibility, counteracting the powerlessness and marginalization often experienced in traditional justice systems. By taking responsibility, offenders are more likely to internalize the lessons learned and make positive changes in their lives. The language and practices of RJ intentionally avoid stigmatizing labels. Instead of being branded as "criminals" or "delinquents," individuals are referred to as "responsible parties" or simply by their names. This seemingly small change in terminology can have a significant impact on how offenders perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. By refraining from using labels that carry negative connotations, RJ fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment that encourages rehabilitation rather than ostracization. The stigma associated with criminal labels can create significant barriers to reintegration into the community. Offenders may face discrimination in employment, housing, and social relationships, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization and recidivism. RJ actively works to break down these barriers by fostering dialogue and understanding between offenders and community members. By facilitating direct communication and allowing offenders to demonstrate remorse and make amends, RJ can help to rebuild trust and create opportunities for offenders to become contributing members of society.[16-24]

Social learning theory, pioneered by Albert Bandura, posits that individuals acquire knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors through observing and imitating others. This process of learning is influenced by various factors, including the consequences of observed behavior (reinforcement or punishment), the characteristics of the models (e.g., their status, attractiveness), and the individual's own cognitive processes (e.g., attention, retention, motivation). In the context of criminal behavior, social learning theory suggests that individuals may learn criminal attitudes and behaviors through their interactions with delinquent peers or exposure to antisocial models in their environment. Conversely, prosocial behaviors can also be learned through positive social interactions and exposure to positive role models. Restorative justice (RJ) provides a unique opportunity for social learning to occur. By bringing together offenders, victims, and community members in a structured environment, RJ creates a space for positive social interaction and modeling of prosocial behaviors. Offenders have the opportunity to observe the impact of their actions on victims and their families, witnessing firsthand the pain and suffering they have caused. This can lead to a shift in perspective and a greater understanding of the consequences of their behavior. They also observe prosocial behaviors modeled by facilitators, community members, and sometimes even the victims themselves. RJ processes provide opportunities for positive reinforcement of prosocial attitudes and behaviors. When offenders express remorse, take responsibility for their actions, and actively participate in the resolution process, they receive positive feedback and validation from others. This reinforcement can strengthen their commitment to change and encourage further prosocial behavior. RJ processes often involve guided discussions and reflections that challenge offenders' distorted thinking patterns and beliefs. This can lead to a cognitive restructuring, where offenders begin to re-evaluate their attitudes towards crime and develop more prosocial values. Through direct interaction with victims, offenders are encouraged to understand the impact of their actions from the victim's perspective.

This can foster empathy and remorse, which are crucial components of rehabilitation and desistance from crime. RJ programs often include components that teach offenders skills for conflict resolution, communication, and problem-solving. These skills can equip offenders with the tools they need to manage conflict in a non-violent way and make better choices in the future.[25-29]

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development suggests that individuals progress through a series of stages in their moral reasoning as they mature. The earliest stages are characterized by a focus on self-interest and avoiding punishment, while later stages involve a greater understanding of social norms and ethical principles. RJ aligns with this theory by providing a context in which offenders can be challenged to move beyond a self-centered perspective and consider the broader impact of their actions on others. The emphasis on repairing harm, taking responsibility, and making amends can encourage offenders to adopt a more mature and principled approach to moral decision-making. RJ processes encourage open and honest dialogue between offenders, victims, and community members. This dialogue allows offenders to reflect on the ethical implications of their actions and to consider alternative perspectives. RJ emphasizes the importance of offenders taking responsibility for the harm they have caused. This can involve acknowledging the impact of their actions on others, expressing remorse, and making amends through restitution or community service. RJ gives victims a voice in the justice process, allowing them to express their needs and concerns. This can empower victims and help them to feel heard and validated, which can be a crucial step in their healing process. RJ involves the broader community in the justice process, recognizing that crime affects not only the individual victim and offender but also the wider social fabric. This can foster a sense of collective responsibility for preventing crime and promoting healing. RJ emphasizes values such as respect, empathy, compassion, and forgiveness. These values are central to ethical decision-making and can guide offenders towards more prosocial behavior.[30-35]

4. Conclusion

This meta-analysis provides robust evidence for the effectiveness of restorative justice programs in reducing recidivism. The findings support the continued implementation and expansion of RJ, particularly for youth offenders and in settings with strong adherence to RJ philosophy.

5. References

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