

Overwhelming support for restorative justice among the public

Polling carried out by Ipsos Mori on behalf of the Restorative Justice Council (RJC) has found overwhelming support for the principles of restorative justice (RJ) from members of the public, particularly those who have been victims of crime themselves. The polling was commissioned to understand public awareness, confidence and demand for RJ.¹

The key findings of the polling show that the public have an appetite for restorative justice, with two thirds supporting the principles behind it and almost two thirds being willing to take part. However, the polling also shows demand outstripping provision with a lack of availability meaning that very few victims are offered the chance to participate in restorative processes.

Popularity of restorative justice

Seventy-five per cent of those polled agreed with the statement 'Victims of crime should have the right, if they want to, to meet the offender and tell them the impact of the crime', while only 15 per cent disagreed. This demonstrates the overwhelming support that the principles of restorative justice have among members of the public. The polling also found that victims of crime are significantly more likely to support RJ, with 84 per cent agreeing with the above statement compared to only 71 per cent of non-victims. This implies that personal experience of being a victim of crime can lead to a greater understanding of the need for RJ and the benefits it can bring to other victims.

When looking more closely at the reasons those members of the public did not support the statement, it was found that most did so out of concern for the victim or a lack of knowledge of what the process would involve. Of the 15 per cent of respondents who disagreed with the statement above, the main reasons reported were because they felt it would not help the victim (35 per cent) or because they did not know what would be involved (23 per cent). This demonstrates the need to continue to educate the public on the benefits of RJ to victims of crime.

It's interesting to note that only 14 per cent of respondents did not support RJ because they felt it was too soft on offenders and only six per cent because they felt that offenders were taking part for personal gain. As this was a question asked only of the 15 per cent of those polled who did not support the idea of RJ, this amounts to only three per cent of overall respondents who did not support RJ for these kinds of negative reasons.

Public willingness to take part

Almost three quarters of respondents indicated they would be willing to take part in a restorative justice activity, with 74 per cent willing to meet for at least some types of offences, including 40 per cent who would take part for any or most types of offences. Only 20 per cent of people felt they would not like to take part for any type of offence. People were asked which factors were more likely to make them agree to a meeting. The most popular answers were:

- If they could be assured it was a safe process.
- If they did not have to meet face to face.
- The option of having friends and family present to support them.

¹ In October 2013, questions were placed on the Ipsos MORI Omnibus (Capibus), the regular Ipsos MORI survey among the general public. A nationally representative quota sample of 1843 adults (aged 15 and over) was interviewed throughout Great Britain by Ipsos MORI interviewers. Since 2007, interviews have been conducted face-to-face, in respondents' homes, using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing). Fieldwork for this wave of the survey was conducted between 11 and 17 October 2013.

Knowledge of restorative justice

Despite being a popular idea, the polling showed a widespread lack of knowledge of what RJ involves and of the term itself. Only 22 per cent of respondents had heard the term restorative justice. However, when those conducting the polling prompted respondents with explanations of the term, many had some knowledge of the concept.

Availability of restorative justice

The polling also highlighted the lack of availability of RJ to victims of crime. Of those whose case was successfully prosecuted, 69 per cent were not offered any form of RJ. Those who were offered some form of RJ were offered:

- The opportunity to meet the offender – two per cent.
- The opportunity to be written to by the offender – two per cent.
- The opportunity to speak to the offender over the phone or by video link – two per cent.
- The opportunity for someone else to meet the offender to put across their viewpoint – three per cent.
- The opportunity for someone else to meet with them to put across the offender's viewpoint – three per cent.

This highlights the need to improve availability of RJ to victims of crime. Last year's funding announcement of £29 million for PCCs to increase RJ provision will help to improve availability but this polling highlights just how little RJ is being practiced and the need for a greater effort to increase the take-up of RJ processes.

Reasons for a lack of availability

The polling also looked at barriers to more RJ being used providing an insight into how to drive take-up of RJ. Polling found that some organisations have inaccurate views on what RJ involves and feel it is not appropriate for their service (for example, some responders inaccurately believed that RJ was not suitable for serious offences). The polling also looked at organisations using RJ and asked them what barriers there were to them increasing their use of restorative practices:

- Victim engagement tends to be the chief barrier to conducting more restorative justice, with many victims being unwilling to take part. This shows the need for more information on the benefits of RJ for victims to become more widely known.
- The time it takes to go through the restorative justice process.
- Senior leadership is critical to the expansion of restorative justice, with budget holders needing to be on board.
- Political will for restorative justice was also deemed crucial.

Organisations were also asked what would help the quality, capacity and implementation of RJ within their organisations. Popular answers (among others) were:

- Ring fenced funds.
- Greater commitment from government.
- Provision of information and education about restorative justice.
- Greater commitment from senior leadership.