

# Community Justice: What's in It For You?

Community justice programs are collaborative processes that engage those harmed by crime and deliver justice by addressing the unique needs of each party affected by a crime. They give a voice to victims, communities, and offenders, providing understanding and encouraging the healing process. Community justice programs move away from a one-size-fits-all justice system to one in which communities develop their own solutions to crime, based on local needs. They create relationships that strengthen community. Great strides toward a better justice system can be made when there is an understanding of crime, when communities work together, and when the needs of those harmed are met.

## Everyone Benefits From Community Justice

Community justice practices reduce future crime, thereby increasing community safety and decreasing the number of cases processed by our overburdened justice system. As cases are diverted, justice professionals can channel freed resources to more effectively address crime.

Community justice practices repair the harm caused by crime. Victims and communities have the opportunity to work with the offender to determine a restitution agreement that is appropriate and satisfactory. Restitution is commonly paid to victims and communities at a greater rate than cases processed through traditional systems, repairing the harm caused by crime, rebuilding communities, and promoting greater satisfaction with the justice system for all parties.

### Victims

- Victims become clients of the justice system rather than witnesses or complainants.
- Victims are offered choices regarding their case, helping return a sense of control over their lives.
- Victims have the right to receive information and give input and to obtain restitution and protection.
- Victims have an active role in the justice process.

### Community

- The local community plays an active role in the justice process.
- Community members are empowered to resolve their public safety issues.
- Restorative practices allow for reparation to the community as well as the victim.

### Elected Officials

- Restorative practices are a tool that can effectively address community safety issues.
- Restorative practices address problems in the current justice system and can lead to the creation of a justice system with which people are more satisfied.
- Restorative practices give people what they want: victim reparation and offender rehabilitation.

### Prosecutors and Judiciary

- Victims' needs and rights are addressed, increasing victim satisfaction with the criminal justice system.
- Many restorative processes divert cases from court, saving valuable and scarce court resources.

### Law Enforcement

- Victims and community are actively involved, returning a sense of control that results in less fear.
- Communities take a larger role in public safety, allowing law enforcement to stretch limited resources and further contribute to a sense of safety.

### Offenders

- Offenders perceive restorative justice processes as fairer than traditional processes.
- They better understand the harm they have caused by committing a crime, and they develop empathy.
- Criminal records may be avoided.
- The offender has a chance to be seen as a person with deficiencies that need to be addressed to avoid future crime.

### What Is Community Justice?

Community justice is known by different names, including restorative justice, balanced and restorative justice (BARJ), and restorative community justice. It is an alternative way to look at the criminal justice system. Crime is viewed as an offense against the community, which includes the victim and the offender, rather than against the state. Community justice focuses on repairing the harm to victims, communities, and offenders that occurs when a crime is committed.

## What Does the Research Say?

Numerous studies show the success of community justice programs.

**Recidivism Decreases.** For example, a study of a victim-offender mediation program in Oregon found that 80% of the youth processed through the program did not recidivate during a one-year follow-up period, while 58% of the comparison group did not reoffend during a year of follow-up.

**Satisfaction With the Criminal Justice System Increases.** For example, in an Indianapolis-based study, over 90% of victims participating in family group conferencing reported satisfaction with how their cases were handled, compared to 68% of victims in a control sample. There were similar outcomes for offenders and parents.

**Restitution Paid to the Victim Increases.** For example, a study of victim-offender mediation in six California counties showed a staggering increase in average obligated restitution paid. The increases ranged from +95% in Sonoma to +1,000% in Los Angeles County.



## Case Study in Community Justice

Joe was a prosecutor. He was also a victim of crime. After months of searching for “lost” items, he realized that Bobby, his teenage neighbor, was burglarizing his home. Knowing the juvenile justice system, he carefully considered his next steps. Joe could call the police, they would arrest Bobby, Bobby would go to court and most likely plead not guilty, and Joe probably would not be repaid for the lost items. Beyond that, the process would destroy his relationship with his neighbors and ultimately brand Bobby as a criminal in the eyes of the community.

Joe decided that this was not the best way to handle his situation. Fortunately, he was aware of restorative group conferencing through his work in the juvenile court. At the conference, Bobby, Bobby’s family, Joe, Joe’s family, community members, and others met to discuss the crime and determine the best way to repair the harm. Everyone in the group was allowed to tell his or her story and express their feelings about the crime and how it affected them. Bobby acknowledged his guilt and apologized for the harm he had caused. Joe expressed his wishes for reparation and the group agreed. The stolen items could not be replaced, but Joe felt that he would be adequately repaid if Bobby helped him build a fence. Bobby’s father volunteered to help as well. The group also agreed that Bobby would repair the damage to the community by keeping a graffiti-prone structure clean for six months.

What was the outcome? The fence was built and the structure was kept clean long after the agreement was fulfilled. Joe was adequately repaid for the crime and satisfied that the young person would not further burglarize his home. The community was repaid with a cleaner neighborhood and a stronger sense of control over crime. Bobby took responsibility for his crime and learned the value of community pride as well as the consequences of crime. Relationships and the community were strengthened.

The California Community Justice Project is dedicated to the support of community justice programs and practices in California. For more information on community justice or the California Community Justice Project, please contact us.

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## What’s in It for Me?



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