**Executive Summary**

The Collaborative Justice Project (CJP) is a demonstration project running in the Ottawa area that employs a restorative justice approach in cases of serious crime. The CJP introduces a process that runs parallel to the legal justice system; a process that is designed to offer individual support to victims, assist the accused in taking responsibility for the harm caused, and provide parties with an opportunity to work together towards an appropriate resolution proposal. Criteria for acceptance into the program were as follows: (1) the crime was serious in nature, (2) at least one victim was interested in receiving assistance, and (3) the accused has accepted responsibility by entering a guilty plea and has indicated a desire to make amends. The CJP’s program goal is to empower individuals affected by crime to achieve satisfying justice through a restorative approach.

The goals of this evaluation were threefold: (1) to determine whether a restorative approach can be applied in cases of serious crime at the pre-sentence stage of the criminal justice system, (2) to determine whether the CJP successfully met its mandate and program goals, and (3) to expand the empirical base regarding restorative justice research.

The evaluation sample consisted of CJP clients and a matched comparison group of offenders and victims. Specific outcome measures that were examined included whether program goals were met, whether clients’ needs were met, whether clients were satisfied with the restorative approach compared to the traditional criminal justice system, and whether participation by offenders reduced their likelihood of re-offending. A quasi-experimental repeated-measures design was utilized.

The total sample of 288 evaluation participants consisted of 65 offenders and 112 victims in the CJP group and 40 offenders and 71 victims in the control group. Offenders were matched on gender, offence type, age and risk level. The majority of victims were in their thirties and forties, whereas offenders were younger, in their twenties. Most victims and offenders were Caucasian and employed. Over half of the offenders who participated in the CJP were first time offenders, with the majority of offenders being of low to medium risk. The crimes that were committed by these offenders were serious in nature, with three-quarters being person-based offences.

The evaluation examined four research areas: (1) client characteristics, (2) program activities, (3) program impacts, and (4) value-added. An examination of client characteristics revealed that client needs were diverse in nature, but there were commonalities between victims and offenders. Needs expressed by victims included the need to obtain information about the offence, hear the offenders’ explanation, and communicate the impact the crime had on them. Offenders wanted to apologize, attempt to repair the harm caused, and provide an explanation for their criminal behaviour. Interestingly, only half of the cases resulted in a victim-offender meeting, suggesting a meeting was not always necessary for client needs to be met.

Assessing client characteristics also included examining attitudes, victim fear levels and offender remorse and accountability. The majority of victims who participated in the CJP felt that the court process was not always fair and just, a significant difference when compared with control group victims. There were no differences in fear levels between the two groups. The majority of CJP offenders were accountable and remorseful for their criminal behaviour, which was not surprising given that this was a criterion for acceptance into the program.

This evaluation examined various process elements. Most cases were referred from Judicial Pre-Trials, with the remainder being referred by defence lawyers, Crown attorneys, judges or others. CJP cases took approximately eight months to process. Reparation plans/agreements involved activities such as performing community service, providing restitution, attending treatment, attending school and maintaining employment. The court accepted the majority of agreements at the time of sentencing, though in most cases the judge added additional elements. Although most offenders were facing imprisonment at the commencement of the CJP, few received a custodial term at sentencing.

Pre-program to post-program participant change was examined to assess program impacts. There was little change over the course of the program, evidenced by no significant changes in offender remorse, victim fear levels, attitudes towards the criminal justice system and opinions of the importance of restorative goals.

To assess the added value of a restorative approach, CJP participants were compared to individuals who were processed through the traditional criminal justice system. The major difference between the two groups was in terms of client satisfaction. CJP participants were far more satisfied than control group participants. Offender recidivism rates were examined, and results suggested that the CJP had a small positive effect on recidivism, with CJP offenders re-offending at a lower rate than control group offenders over a three-year follow-up.

In conclusion, this evaluation found that a restorative approach can be successfully applied to cases of serious crime at the pre-sentence stage. Although additional research is needed to further explore many of the findings from this evaluation, results indicated that the program goal of empowering individuals affected by crime to achieve satisfying justice was attained.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada. Correspondence concerning this report should be addressed to:

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