

Crime-Impact Awareness Groups (or 'Victim/Offender Groups')

The text below is from Marian Liebmann and Stephanie Braithwaite, "Restorative Justice In Custodial Settings, Report for the Restorative Justice Working Group in Northern Ireland" , 1999.

"Victim/Offender Groups" are groups in which victims of crime and offenders meet, where the victims have suffered similar crimes (but not the actual crimes) to those perpetrated by the offenders. The groups described here are in strict chronological order, as initiatives in one country influenced others. . . .

An exceptionally well designed, controlled and evaluated project was that at Rochester Youth Custody Centre (now an adult prison) by Gilles Launay (Launay 1985; Launay 1987; Launay and Murray 1989) The offenders concerned were aged between 15-21, convicted of burglary offences, and had a long history of offending. The victims were selected by Victim Support and the local Crime Prevention Office, and were often victims of unsolved burglaries. Offences of commercial and domestic burglaries were separated, as were the victims accordingly. The process consisted of three sessions, attended by victims, offenders, organisers, Victim Support and police representatives (to support their referrals). At the first session, victims described their reactions and feelings about being burgled to give offenders some understanding of their distress. The offenders then had to accept the responsibility for their crimes and the effects it had on such victims. It was significant that in this type of group, offenders would discuss their views and feelings, whereas if victim's rights group representatives gave the victims view - very little discussion took place. The second and third session involved role plays and exercises which served to cement the relationships between victims and offenders. They could enact a mediation/reparation meeting where a victim and his own offender tried to agree a reparation contract; they were then asked to reverse roles, which was difficult for them. They acted as a team to help some of the difficulties that arose, and it was often difficult to part at the end of the session.

For a discussion of some of the issues that arose, see Launay and Murray (1989). The evaluation was well done and involved questionnaires before and after, and attitude scales for both victims and offenders so that changes could be measured (Launay and Murray 1989). Some of the findings are reported below:

- Victims rated themselves as less anxious and angry after meetings, and rated burglars more positively, friendly and likeable.
- Offenders rated victims more positively afterwards, and had a better understanding of victims' attitudes and the impact of burglary on them.

In Manitoba, Newfoundland and Saskatchewan, face to face meetings took place, based on the British VOIC programme. Each prison followed the VOIC outline of three meetings, but Newfoundland added a fourth meeting to include a judge and prison system officials. The Face to Face programme asked groups of offenders to meet with random groups of victims to deal with the impact of the crime in more general terms than is normally the case when offenders meet their actual victims, as in the VORP model. (Zehr 1994) Sawatsky (1988) evaluated the Manitoba programme and found that "the telling of personal stories had a way of bringing about an identification with the inmate and an understanding of his feelings even though the circumstances were somewhat different from their own." Victims also reported that it was helpful to learn of the broken lives experienced by many offenders. Loewen (1989) who evaluated the Newfoundland programme, suggested specific qualities for people interested in similar programmes: "Those willing to tackle a problem such as this must be prepared to ground themselves



in a reconciliatory philosophy which lays the footing for Face to Face. This restorative framework, coupled with time, energy and administrative supports necessary for its implementation, are critical to the accomplishment of the stated goals and objectives.”

Mark Bitel (1991) described the victim/offender workshop at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining NY: “The victim/offender workshops offer a forum for dialogue between offenders and surrogate victims of crime, or their family members in the case of homicide. The groups are loosely facilitated by two volunteer psychologists. We have secured funds to pay the victim’s transportation to the prison and we provide a simple lunch. Prior to the victims coming into the prison, the offenders undergo a period of readiness to help them understand victim issues and to orient them about what to expect. The meetings have proved to be very successful and transforming for both victims and offenders. Offenders are encouraged to accept responsibility for their actions and to become sensitive to crime from the victim’s perspective - particularly the domino effects set into motion following the crime. Meanwhile, victims are offered insight into crime which may help them to protect themselves from future victimisation and to learn the reality of what prison does and does not achieve. Often it allows victims for the first time to feel that they are getting a chance to participate in the criminal justice system rather than being used by it. Both groups report that often for the first time they are able to see the humanity in the other.

The aim of the workshops is to create a safe space for healing and growth. We believe that the combination of therapy and job skills training will address the moral and economic deficits that play a large role in crime. Ultimately, it is our hope that the restorative justice program will reduce recidivism and serve as a bridge back to the community”.

Avon Probation Service held a series of weekly group sessions in HMP Bristol for offenders who had held up banks and post offices with guns. One of these sessions was a meeting with victims of robbery, and was filmed by the BBC for the programme Crime Limited (BBC 1992).

In Graterford State Correctional Institution in Pennsylvania, there was a three- phase programme run by volunteers, designed to encourage offender accountability and to assist the prison by promoting good public relations and a cost-free programme. Offenders were serving sentences for serious offences including murder (Zehr 1994).

The first two phases consisted of weekly sessions to help inmates understand the effects of crime on victims and take responsibility for their actions. In the second phase, the group followed different tracks on alternate weeks. In one track, the offenders met and interacted with actual crime victims (not involved in their own cases). On the other weeks, they worked on a letter to their own victims, or the victim’s survivors in the case of murder. In the third phase, these letters were put on deposit with a co-operating victim assistance program. They attempted to contact the victims and survivors to let them know the letter was available, if they wished to receive it. Exchanges of letters or actual encounters were then facilitated between the victim and the offender, if the victims/survivors wished to do so.

The project was evaluated by Hall (1993). He found that Phase One was a successful period of awareness of crime’s impacts and emotional sensitivity and growth. While recognising the pain of revisiting one’s crime and the difficulty of sharing personal feelings, often never before disclosed, the men felt the process was a powerful one whose value outweighed its difficulties for them. Group solidarity seemed to support the participants as evidenced by greater willingness for self-disclosure and mutual respect and the preservation of confidentiality. The evaluation also stated “the name of the program suggests the goal of bringing [victims and offenders] together in some way to assist both in the interest of restorative rather than retributive justice and to enhance the healing process



of those impacted directly by the crime. We recognise the fact that because individuals differ not only in how they cope with the trauma of crime but also in the time needed to reach each stage in the process, it is quite possible that a victim may not be ready for a reconciliation at the same time that the offender needs to express remorse, or ever". (Hall 1993).

At Washington State Reformatory in 1997-98, a pilot study took place to explore ways in which a restorative justice model may be practically applied in a custodial setting. The goals of the project included: to provide a safe environment for inmates to make amends for their crimes and for victims to heal; to facilitate constructive communication between groups; and to encourage participants to develop creative ways of thinking about justice and strategies for dealing with crime.

The project consisted of the development, implementation and evaluation of three sequential courses on Restorative Justice, involving victims, offenders and citizens as participants. The first two courses were ten weeks long each, and dealt with issues such as: what is Restorative Justice? how can you repair the harm to victims? is it possible with violent crimes? what does it mean for offenders to be held accountable for their crimes? what can they do in prison to repair the damage? what does the public want of their offenders? The sessions moved on to more concrete solutions as the second course came to an end. The third course was 12 weeks long and involved more criminal justice officials, while covering similar issues to the previous ones. Methods of covering these issues are fully detailed in Helfgott (1998).

The participants were 27 offenders, serving sentences from five years to life without parole, and having spent between three and 33 years in prison. 20 were convicted of murder, three of whom were also convicted of rape, three of attempted murder, two of multiple robberies, one of burglary and one of drug offences. The victims, 18 in all, consisted of five family members of murder victims, six victims of rape or sexual assault, one family member of a kidnap/rape victim, one victim of aggravated assault, three of burglary and one of domestic violence. The time since the offence ranged from six months to 43 years. 15 citizens also took part.

A detailed evaluation was done (Helfgott 1998) and a few of the findings are mentioned below:

- 81% of offenders felt that if such seminars were offered on a regular basis, it would have a positive impact on prison subculture.
- Most offenders had rarely, if ever, recounted their crimes while in prison and they wanted to do so.
- The terms 'responsibility' and 'accountability' became more real for offenders.
- Victims felt it had been a healing experience and they found it easier to discuss the gruesome details of the offence with offenders than with members of their family or friends.
- 100% of citizens felt it had been a positive experience.
- Citizens had a more realistic and reasonable understanding of victims.
- Victims had less fear of re-victimisation and felt less ashamed.
- Victims had a greater willingness to accept murderers as neighbours.
- Citizens had a greater awareness of how they could help victims and offenders.
- A number of victims and offenders said they would be willing now to meet their actual victim or offender
- There was agreement that victims and citizens should play a greater role in the justice process and that the existing criminal justice system needed an overhaul.

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