

The Impact of Family Group Conferencing on Juvenile Recidivism for Property Crimes:
Exploring Racial and Gender Disparities

by

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ABSTRACT

RHIANNON M. THOMAS. The impact of family group conferencing on juvenile recidivism. (Under the direction of DR. MAISHA COOPER)

This thesis examines the effectiveness of family group conferencing (FGC) in reducing recidivism among youth involved in property crimes, focusing on the influence of race and gender, particularly for non-White youth and female youth. Through a cross-tabulations approach, the study analyzes recidivism data and quantitative insights from law enforcement to explore the intersection of demographic factors and restorative outcomes. Disparities exist within recidivism, shaped by systemic factors and practitioner biases, with non-White and female youth experiencing unique challenges. The study serves as an exploratory analysis into whether FGC is an effective tool for combatting recidivism when it comes to property juvenile offenders.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Juvenile delinquency is a significant societal issue that often results in a cycle of reoffending, contributing to the long-term challenges faced by young offenders and their communities (Edmunds, et al., 2018). One long-term challenge is that juvenile “deviancy is strongly linked to adult criminality” (Ozkan, 2016). Traditional justice systems, which focus primarily on punitive measures, may not adequately address the root causes of delinquency or promote meaningful rehabilitation. As a result, many juveniles reenter the justice system after their initial offense, highlighting the need for alternative approaches that focus on restoration, accountability, and personal growth (Nellis, 2015). Importantly, juvenile delinquents who have faced punishment in residential facilities, often experience increased rates of recidivism. “Between 70% and 80% of juveniles who have been in residential correction programs are subsequently rearrested within a three-year period” and “research indicates that incarceration of juveniles generally is ineffective in reducing recidivism and may maintain, or even increase, levels of engagement in antisocial behavior and criminal activity” (Lambie & Randell, 2013).

Restorative community conferencing (RCC) has emerged as one such alternative, grounded in the principles of restorative justice. Conferencing is often seen as more suited to young offenders, with outcomes like apologies, restitution, or community service being more likely to gain community approval (Livingstone, et. al., 2013). RCC is an umbrella term for many different forms of restorative justice: victim-offender mediation, community, family group conferencing, and circle sentencing.

The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of RCC on recidivism rates among juvenile offenders. Specifically, it seeks to determine whether participation in RCC significantly

reduces the likelihood of reoffending compared to more traditional justice approaches. Through this research, the study will provide valuable insights into how restorative justice practices, particularly restorative community conferencing, can promote lasting behavioral change, potentially offering a more effective solution for addressing juvenile crime.

1.1 Current Study

This study examines the effectiveness of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as a restorative justice intervention for reducing recidivism among young offenders involved in property crimes. By comparing recidivism rates across three treatment groups—control, FGC, and other treatment methods—this research aims to assess whether FGC can serve as a viable alternative to traditional criminal justice approaches. Additionally, the study explores the role of gender and racial differences in the outcomes of FGC. Specifically, it investigates whether FGC has a varying impact on recidivism rates for male versus female offenders, as well as for White and non-White youth, as well intersectionality analysis.

This research adopts an exploratory approach due to the limited academic focus on the application of restorative justice in cases involving property crimes, particularly when compared to the more extensively studied domain of violent offenses. While restorative justice has been widely examined in contexts where emotional harm is central, there remains a significant gap in understanding how restorative justice processes generate outcomes in relation to non-violent, material offenses. An exploratory analysis allows for a flexible, open-ended examination of this under-researched area. Through this analysis, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into juvenile justice reform, particularly in relation to restorative practices and their potential to address disparities within the justice system.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Background

Restorative justice is “a theory of justice that emphasizes the harm caused by criminal behavior” (Justice Department, 2010). Restorative justice is a sharp contrast to punitive punishments of the traditional justice system. The Justice Department (2010) set out to identify restorative justice consisting of three parts: identifying steps in order to repair harm, involving stakeholders, and transforming the traditional relationship between community and government. Restorative justice emphasizes the importance of involving all affected parties (ie., victims, offenders, community members) in a non adversarial process. Restorative justice intends to foster offender accountability and target victim needs.

Rodriguez (2007) focuses upon the outcome of restorative justice on juvenile delinquents. Unlike the retributive approach in adult criminal justice, restorative justice aligns more closely with the philosophy of juvenile courts, focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration (Bazemore & Umbreit, 1994, 1995). Despite positive outcomes and studies, restorative justice remains under-utilized in the United States. Various restorative justice programs have emerged, each offering a unique structure for community involvement and victim-offender interaction. Common forms of restorative justice include community reparative boards, family group conferencing, and circle sentencing (Bazemore & Griffiths, 1997). Community engagement is crucial in restorative justice (Rodriguez, 2007). Rather than viewing their role as punitive, community members are seen as facilitators of reintegration, supporting offenders in acquiring counseling, educational resources, or vocational training (“Bazemore”, 1992).

Langdon (2015) explains community conferencing as a restorative justice practice that enables individuals involved in conflict or wrongdoing to collaboratively resolve issues by

addressing the emotional and social impacts of the offense. Watchel (1997) notes that the success of community conferencing stems from providing an environment that encourages positive emotional expression while reducing negative affect. The emotional transformation inherent in community conferencing is explained primarily through two theoretical perspectives - affect theory, initially developed by Tomkins (1962) and later expanded by Nathanson (1988), and the theory of reintegrative shaming proposed by Braithwaite (1989).

2.2 Family Group Conferencing

Umbreit (1999) outlines the concept of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as a restorative justice approach that involves the community members most affected by a crime—namely the victim, the offender, and their families or key supporters—in determining the resolution of criminal or delinquent acts. The process is voluntary for all parties, with the offender required to admit to the offense to participate. A trained facilitator explains the process to the victim and offender, inviting them to identify key supporters for the conference.

During the conference, the offender first describes the incident, followed by participants sharing the personal impact of the crime. This allows the offender to confront the human consequences of their actions on the victim, their own family, and others involved. The victim is then given the opportunity to express their feelings, ask questions, and identify desired outcomes. Together, all participants collaborate on how the offender can repair the harm caused, culminating in an agreement outlining their mutual expectations and commitments.

As Family Group Conferencing (FGC) continues to develop in North America, Umbreit (1999) outlines key principles to ensure it remains a restorative justice intervention. One key recommendation is that the process should be grounded in restorative justice values, prioritizing

accountability, healing, and community involvement. Additionally, FGC sessions initiated by public agencies like the police should be co-facilitated by a trained community member to ensure that the process remains community-centered. Facilitators should be skilled in mediation, conflict resolution, and understanding the needs of both victims and offenders.

Another critical aspect is the victim's experience: the process should be conducted in a victim-sensitive manner, offering victims the flexibility to choose when and where the meeting takes place, as well as the opportunity to speak first. Victims should also be fully informed of both the potential benefits and risks, ensuring they are not pressured into participating. Lastly, pre-conference preparation is emphasized to help participants feel safe and supported, fostering an open and constructive dialogue.

2.3 Impact of Restorative Justice

Conferencing is typically organized around three stages: discussion of the event, exploring the emotional impact, and developing a written agreement to repair harm and prevent recurrence (Abramson, 2014). This process allows for an emotional shift, for example, an apology from the offender serves as a crucial turning point (Wachtel, 1997). The Baltimore Model of conferencing uses a scripted sequence of questions, which serves as a guide for facilitating transformations among participants. Although there is debate over using scripted prompts (Zehr, 1990), proponents argue that they help with direction of emotional flow.

Restorative justice (RJ) conferencing has emerged as an effective approach to addressing harm caused by criminal acts, fostering a process in which the offender, victim, and community work together to resolve the aftermath and implications of the offense. These programs provide an environment valuable to offender reintegration and offer victims a sense of safety as they

return to their daily lives, thereby contributing to community cohesion (Stickle, Connell, Wilson, & Gottfredson, 2008). RJ's focus on negotiation, mediation, victim empowerment, and reparation contrasts with retributive philosophies in the criminal justice system, aligning more closely with the rehabilitative goals traditionally associated with juvenile courts (Rodriguez, 2007). According to Zehr (1990), the RJ model views crime as a violation of people and relationships rather than solely a breach of law, thus emphasizing the importance of repairing harm through a process that includes victims, offenders, and the community (Zehr, 1990).

Although RJ programs vary widely, the core elements include allowing all affected parties to participate in discussions about the offense and its consequences, as well as providing offenders with opportunities to acknowledge their actions and make amends, while victims receive validation and redress (Restorative Justice Consortium, 2006). Notably, Australia and New Zealand have integrated RJ conferencing into their justice systems as early intervention measures, which are now increasingly adopted worldwide (McGarrell, 2001). During RJ conferences, trained facilitators guide the interaction between offenders, victims, and supporters to address the incident's impact and work toward a reparation agreement, often involving apologies and community service (McGarrell, 2001; Tyler et al., 2007).

Studies have demonstrated RJ's effectiveness, particularly for juvenile offenses. For instance, Sherman et al. (2000) found that RJ conferences for juvenile violent crimes reduced reoffending rates by about 38 per 100 offenders per year. In Maricopa County, Arizona, Rodriguez (2007) compared RJ and traditional court outcomes, finding that RJ participants, particularly girls and those with minimal criminal records, had lower recidivism rates than court-processed juveniles. Additionally, McGarrell (2001) emphasized the importance of early intervention for young offenders, demonstrating through the Indianapolis Restorative Justice

Experiment that RJ conferences not only resulted in high satisfaction rates among participants but also yielded lower recidivism rates than traditional court processing, especially for female offenders.

Ferdinand and McDermott (2002) argue that a more nuanced approach to criminal justice, differentiating sentencing and treatment based on offenders' needs and offenses, can improve rehabilitation outcomes. They suggest that varying approaches, such as reintegrative shaming, secure custody, or psychological guidance, could benefit a range of offenders. As RJ conferences continue to show positive results in multiple settings, they represent a promising alternative for reducing recidivism and fostering a rehabilitative approach within the justice system.

Research has revealed that youth referred to RJ programs were less likely to have later police contacts, experienced fewer subsequent legal encounters, and exhibited less serious offending behavior in comparison to those who went through conventional justice processes (Wood et al., 2022). These findings highlight the value of RJ in promoting more constructive behavioral change, as opposed to punitive approaches that may not address the root causes of delinquency. By fostering accountability, empathy, and rehabilitation, RJ programs provide a holistic approach that appears to be more effective in reducing recidivism, particularly in the long-term trajectory of juvenile offenders (Bergseth & Bouffard, 2007).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

Labeling theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism, offers valuable insights into the process by which individuals come to be defined as deviant and the subsequent consequences of such labels. According to Murray (2017), the concept of symbolic interactionism was first coined

by Herbert Blumer in 1969, who drew from the works of various social philosophers like George Herbert Mead, W.I. Thomas, and William James. Symbolic interactionism suggests that social reality is not a static entity but a dynamic process continuously shaped by social interactions. As individuals engage with one another, they create shared meanings and understandings through symbols and language, which ultimately influence their behavior and the way they view themselves and others (Blumer, 1969).

One of the central tenets of labeling theory is the idea that societal labels, particularly those that define individuals as "deviant," play a significant role in shaping their identity and future behavior. This perspective is grounded in the belief that individuals internalize the labels they are assigned, which can then lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Thomas & Thomas, 1928). For example, when a youth is labeled as a "troublemaker" by authority figures, this label can become internalized, leading the individual to adopt a deviant identity. This process is described by Mead (1934) as "role-taking," where individuals view themselves from the perspective of others and adjust their behavior accordingly.

The concept of the "looking glass self," as introduced by Cooley (1902), underscores how one's sense of self is shaped by the perceptions and judgments of others, such as family members and peers. Through this process, individuals come to form identities that reflect how they are seen by those around them. In the case of deviant labels, the labeling process can lead to the reinforcement of deviant behavior, as individuals internalize these labels and align their actions with their perceived identity (Matsueda, 1992).

The implications of labeling theory are particularly relevant for understanding the development of criminal identities and recidivism. By examining the way in which societal

labels affect the behavior of offenders, particularly in the context of juvenile justice, labeling theory highlights the importance of how individuals are treated by authority figures and the broader society. The impact of labels on recidivism and identity formation, has informed restorative justice practices, including Family Group Conferencing (FGC), which seeks to avoid stigmatizing labels and instead focuses on rehabilitation and reintegration.

Braithwaite (1989) coined the theory of reintegrative shaming which involves constructive feedback, where the offender's actions are denounced while their potential for positive community re-engagement is reinforced. This is opposite to the theory of stigmatizing shame which isolates the offender. In the context of community conferencing, reintegrative shaming allows offenders to take responsibility for their actions while receiving community support (Langdon, 2015). Offenders are given the opportunity to regain trust and rebuild social ties (Barton, 2000).

The literature on juvenile delinquency theories shows how Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory integrates control, subcultural, learning, and labeling perspectives. His theory argues that reintegrative shaming effectively deters crime by fostering cultural commitments to positive reintegration rather than stigmatization, which often amplifies deviance (Braithwaite, 1989). This approach has shown promise in reducing juvenile crimes, such as school bullying, where shame acknowledgment reduces bullying likelihood (Ahmed & Braithwaite, 2004), and in various RJ conference programs, which have achieved high victim satisfaction and reduced recidivism rates (McCold & Wachtel, 1998; Sherman et al., 2000).

Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming aligns closely with restorative justice practices, particularly Family Group Conferencing (FGC), as it emphasizes the importance of

acknowledging wrongdoing while maintaining the offender's potential for reintegration into the community (Langdon, 2015). Unlike stigmatizing shame, which isolates offenders and perpetuates deviance, reintegrative shaming within FGC provides a supportive environment where offenders can take responsibility for their actions and receive constructive feedback. This approach encourages offenders to rebuild trust and social ties with both victims and the broader community, thus reducing the likelihood of future offenses. The literature suggests that reintegrative shaming effectively integrates various criminological theories by focusing on positive social reintegration, which is central to the goals of restorative justice and FGC programs.

As previously mentioned, the current study analyzes racial and gender differences in the effect of FGC on recidivism. This line of thought is guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT) which emerged from both legal and feminist scholarship. CRT is grounded in a set of key assumptions that shape its approach to understanding oppression. These assumptions posit that systems of oppression—such as race, gender, sex, and class—are not isolated phenomena, but rather are interrelated and intersectional. This means that while it is possible to discuss race, gender, or class independently, the true impact of these systems are more likely to be understood by examining their intersectionality and how they are woven together within social structures and institutions (Coates et al., 2024). Intersectionality is a foundational concept in CRT, acknowledging that various forms of oppression do not operate in isolation, but rather reinforce and compound one another.

This interconnectedness is evident in the experiences of marginalized groups, where race, gender, and class intersect to produce complex social realities. As William J. Wilson (1980) articulates, race is a key determinant of many outcomes in society, particularly with regard to

social and economic inequalities. For instance, although women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds experience high poverty rates, it is women of color—specifically American Indians, Blacks, and Latinas—that face disproportionately high rates of poverty. While Latinas make up only 18.1 percent of the total female population in the United States, they account for over a quarter of all women living in poverty. This intersectional understanding of race, gender, and class is crucial for grasping the full scope of inequality and its enduring impact on marginalized communities.

In the context of restorative justice (RJ) and Family Group Conferencing (FGC), CRT's intersectional framework can help better understand and address the unique challenges faced by marginalized groups in their interactions with the justice system. RJ practices like FGC emphasize dialogue, empathy, and community involvement, offering an alternative to traditional punitive measures. However, these practices must be critically examined to ensure they do not unintentionally reproduce the same structural inequalities that exist in the broader justice system. By acknowledging how race, gender, and class intersect, RJ processes—such as those used in FGC—can become more attuned to the nuanced experiences of offenders and victims from marginalized communities.

For example, FGC brings together not only the offender and victim but also their families and communities, facilitating a process that can challenge negative labels and foster reintegration into society. However, if this process does not fully account for the intersectional experiences of individuals, such as the compounded impact of racism and gender discrimination, it could fail to address the unique needs of participants from marginalized backgrounds. CRT encourages restorative justice practitioners to recognize these complexities and ensure that restorative practices do not perpetuate existing disparities but instead work to reduce them.

CRT's emphasis on intersectionality encourages RJ practices like FGC to be more inclusive and responsive to the lived experiences of those who are most affected by social inequalities. By acknowledging how systems of oppression intersect, practitioners can better design interventions that are culturally relevant, sensitive to power imbalances, and capable of promoting true healing and reintegration for all participants. In this way, CRT offers a critical lens through which restorative justice processes can be refined to support marginalized groups in ways that are equitable and meaningful.

The theories discussed, labeling theory, symbolic interactionism, reintegrative shaming, and critical race theory (CRT), are connected, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of social behavior, deviance, and restorative justice practices like Family Group Conferencing (FGC). Labeling theory, rooted in symbolic interactionism, emphasizes the powerful role societal labels play in shaping individual identity and behavior, with labels such as "deviant" often leading to self-fulfilling prophecies. This process is influenced by the emotional dynamics highlighted in affect theory, which examines how emotions like shame and anger drive behavior and social interactions. Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming theory aligns with restorative justice practices, which seek to repair harm and reintegrate offenders into society rather than stigmatize them, emphasizing emotional healing and social connection. Critical race theory adds depth to this framework by focusing on how intersecting social identities, such as race, shape individuals' experiences within the justice system. These theories collectively underscore the importance of understanding the social contexts and emotional dynamics that influence the labeling process and the effectiveness of restorative justice interventions, highlighting the need for approaches that acknowledge and address power imbalances and promote genuine healing and reintegration.

2.5 Race and Gender as Risk Factors for Recidivism

The intersection of race and gender plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of individuals within the criminal justice system, particularly regarding recidivism. Research consistently demonstrates that racial minorities, especially Black and Hispanic individuals, are disproportionately represented in arrest, conviction, and incarceration rates, and these disparities extend to the likelihood of reoffending. For instance, racial minorities face systemic disadvantages that increase the risk of recidivism, including biased sentencing and lack of access to rehabilitation (Pettit & Gutierrez, 2018). Gender also intersects with these dynamics, as men generally have higher recidivism rates, but women, especially women of color, experience unique challenges, including economic instability and lack of gender-sensitive programming (Hattery & Smith, 2019). Understanding these factors is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address the root causes of criminal behavior and improve rehabilitation outcomes for marginalized groups (Henry, 2020).

Miller, et al., (2022) set out a study to examine the extent to which static factors added validity to dynamic factors within criminogenic risk assessments. Miller's study examined the predictive validity of the YLS/CMI risk scores (total, dynamic, and static) for White and Black youth, focusing on their contribution to predicting recidivism. Minority youth, particularly Black youth, are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system, including in arrests for violent crimes. For example, in 2003, Black youth accounted for 45% of all juvenile arrests for violent crimes, despite making up only 16% of the juvenile population (Snyder, 2005). This racial disparity is also evident in self-reported delinquency data, where non-White youth show higher rates of offending compared to White youth (Piquero & Buka, 2002). Although numerous

studies have documented racial inequalities in the juvenile justice system (Redding & Arrigo, 2005), there is limited research on race-specific risk factors contributing to these disparities.

The study by Chauhan et al. (2009) explored how neighborhood disadvantage and exposure to violence serve as risk factors for recidivism among female juvenile offenders, and whether these factors' effects differ by race. The study specifically investigated whether racial differences exist in the prevalence of neighborhood disadvantage and exposure to violence, how these factors correlate with recidivism, and whether the impact of these risk factors varies for Black and White female juvenile offenders. This study showed that neighborhood characteristics significantly influenced recidivism, especially for Black juvenile females. Chauhan et al., suggests developing risk models that are tailored to specific racial groups should be explored further.

The experiences of betrayal trauma, particularly childhood sexual abuse and adolescent sexual assault, are significant factors contributing to justice-involved girls' involvement in the criminal justice system (Kerig, 2018). These forms of sexual victimization have particularly severe consequences for girls' physical and mental health, influencing behaviors such as aggression, substance abuse, self-harm, running away, and risky sexual activity, all of which increase their risk of criminal justice involvement (Feiring et al., 2013; Trickett et al., 2011). Additionally, such victimization often leads to survival crimes, including drug dealing, theft, and commercial sexual activity, particularly among girls who have fled abusive homes (Belknap & Holsinger, 2006). Research has suggested that girls are more likely than boys to be arrested for maladaptive behaviors stemming from attempts to cope with victimization (Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004; Kerig, 2018).

Moreover, maltreatment and victimization in the home have direct relationships with girls' justice involvement. When girls are arrested for violent offenses, their incidents are often characterized by aggression toward family members, particularly mothers, and often involve low-level, mutually combative interactions (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014; Snyder, 2005). These incidents, despite their mutuality, often lead to police arrests instead of referrals to social services, especially given the influence of parents' complaints and mandatory arrest policies (Acoca, 1998; Lederman & Brown, 2000). Such policies have led to a phenomenon known as "upcriming," where minor family conflicts escalate into criminal charges, particularly assault charges, against girls (Chesney-Lind & Belknap, 2004). Thus, strained parental relationships and polyvictimization play a pivotal role in girls' involvement in the justice system, as these interactions often serve as catalysts for arrests (Williams et al., 2005).

The constructs of "justice involvement" and "recidivism" are gendered, as girls' pathways into the juvenile justice system differ from those of boys. While the rates of arrests for violent crimes have increased among girls, they are still more likely to enter the system due to nonviolent, low-level offenses (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Despite recent federal policies discouraging the detention of youth for status offenses, acts that are illegal only because they are committed by minors, these offenses remain a significant entry point into the justice system for many girls (Schwartz & Steffensmeier, 2012). Additionally, girls are disproportionately at risk of progressing deeper into the justice system through repeated charges that do not involve new offenses but rather "technical offenses," such as violating court orders, probation terms, or disposition plans (Felson & Feld, 2009). Addressing recidivism among girls thus requires focused attention on both the initial offenses that bring them into contact with the system and the technical violations that perpetuate their involvement.

2.6 Race, Gender, and Restorative Justice

The intersection of race and restorative justice highlights the potential of restorative practices to address racial inequities in conflict resolution and justice systems. Albrecht's (2010) research in Norway and Finland demonstrates that restorative justice offers a viable alternative for migrant minorities by simplifying legal processes, accommodating diverse needs, and mitigating the financial barriers inherent in traditional justice systems. Her findings suggest that restorative approaches, as socially integrative tools, enhance intercultural understanding and tolerance, fostering coexistence among diverse groups.

Conventional legal systems perpetuate White-centric frameworks that fail to adequately serve minority victims. Restorative justice, provides culturally sensitive alternatives, allowing victims to disclose issues within the safety of their communities while avoiding systemic racism and punitive state interventions. Coker's (1999) study of Navajo Peacemaking corroborates these findings, emphasizing the healing and transformative potential of restorative practices.

The overarching consensus among scholars, including Jenkins (2006) and Schiff (2013), is that restorative justice provides a framework rooted in community and cultural values, offering a counter-narrative to the exclusionary practices of formal justice systems. Whether in criminal justice, schools, or domestic violence cases, restorative justice holds promise as a mechanism for addressing systemic racial inequities, building trust, and promoting social cohesion.

Exploring gender and restorative justice highlights the necessity of recognizing the complex needs and circumstances that underpin women's offending. Research consistently shows that women's lawbreaking often occurs within the context of trauma, coercive relationships, mental health challenges, and socioeconomic struggles (Barberet, 2014; Gelsthorpe

et al., 2007). Restorative justice, with its focus on accepting responsibility and providing restitution (Tyler et al., 2007), offers potential as a gender-responsive approach. However, its effectiveness for women depends significantly on whether it adequately acknowledges the contextual factors shaping their offending behavior.

Critics, such as Rungay (2004), have challenged the notion that women use victimization narratives to minimize accountability. Empirical findings counter this, revealing that women often emphasize their responsibility despite acknowledging traumatic contexts. These insights underscore the importance of creating restorative spaces where women can contextualize their behavior without fear of being dismissed as deflecting blame.

Nevertheless, the implementation of restorative justice for women remains inconsistent. Conferences that allowed women to safely share their backgrounds were perceived as more meaningful, while those that did not were deemed less effective. Practitioners' approaches varied widely, with some emphasizing the need to explore contextual factors and others focusing solely on remorse and accountability. Such variability mirrors broader definitional and practice inconsistencies in the restorative justice field (Daly, 2016).

Despite these challenges, restorative justice holds promise for addressing gendered dimensions of crime and victimization. It provides an opportunity for women to articulate their experiences, which can be empowering and meaningful if properly facilitated (Verrecchia, 2009). Achieving this requires a commitment to gender-aware practices that recognize the victimization–offending continuum and offer appropriate support for women to share their narratives. Without such consistency, the transformative potential of restorative justice for women offenders risks being undermined.

Advocates suggest restorative justice (RJ) aligns well with the needs of young female offenders, as it emphasizes emotional expression, dignity, and participation (Alder, 2000). Research shows many girls feel deep shame about their offenses and seek opportunities to express regret (Gaarder & Hesselton, 2012). The blurred boundaries between victimization and offending in girls' lives (Gilfus, 1992) are often overlooked in traditional legal processes but are acknowledged in RJ practices.

Evidence supports RJ's benefits for juveniles, with studies showing lower recidivism rates compared to traditional court interventions (Strang, 2001). Girls, in particular, may benefit more from RJ than boys. For example, Baffour (2006) found family group conferencing reduced recidivism more significantly for female offenders. Similarly, Rodriguez (2007) reported lower reoffending rates among girls participating in RJ compared to those in traditional programs.

However, some findings complicate these claims. Daly (2008) noted that girls often challenged RJ processes more than boys, particularly in peer-assault cases, which led to revictimization and resistance. Effective RJ practices for girls may require additional preparation and moral engagement (Daly, 2006).

2.7 Restorative Justice and Crime Types

Public perceptions of restorative justice (RJ) have become a significant focus in criminological research (Chen & Einat, 2015). While RJ offers a constructive alternative to punitive measures (Daly, 2017), policymakers often hesitate to fully support it due to fears of appearing lenient on crime (Roberts & Stalans, 2004). Research suggests that the success of RJ relies on public, victim, and offender buy-in (Moss et al., 2018), yet negative attitudes may restrict its application to minor offenses (Hoyle & Rosenblatt, 2016; Weimann-Saks et al., 2022).

Studies indicate that attitudes toward RJ vary based on offense type, often used as a proxy for severity (Gromet & Darley, 2006). Support tends to decrease as perceived offense severity increases, with crimes like violent and sexual offenses eliciting stronger traditional, punitive justice preferences (Warr, 1989; Carlsmith et al., 2002).

Weimann-Saks et al. (2022) highlight that public support for RJ is significantly lower for sexual and violent offenses compared to property crimes. Their study emphasizes the role of incremental beliefs—the perception that offenders can change—in shaping attitudes toward RJ. Participants who viewed offenders as capable of change were more likely to support RJ, underscoring the importance of addressing perceptions of offender malleability.

Additionally, fear of crime influences attitudes toward RJ, with heightened fear often linked to support for punitive measures (Costelloe et al., 2009; Langworthy & Whitehead, 1986). However, findings on this relationship remain inconsistent (McCorkle, 1993). Future research should continue exploring how offense types and incremental beliefs shape public attitudes, as these factors are crucial for expanding RJ's application across diverse offenses.

Some scholars suggest that restorative justice programs work better for violent offenders. Stewart et al. (2018) explored the impact of the Restorative Opportunities (RO) program on serious offenders, most of whom were convicted of violent crimes like homicide, manslaughter, and sexual offenses. The study found that RO was particularly effective for high-risk individuals, especially when sessions occurred post-release in the community rather than during incarceration., while the program didn't significantly reduce recidivism, it was associated with fewer returns to custody and may still offer benefits such as promoting accountability and

reconciliation. Notably, participants with face-to-face meetings post-release had significantly fewer revocations than those who didn't.

The study also noted the possibility of selection bias, as more prosocial individuals may have been more inclined to participate since the selection was not randomized (Stewart et al., 2018). Therefore, future research is needed to confirm the program's effectiveness across broader populations. Though this study focused on violent offenders, there is support for its potential broad application, including in property crime contexts.

Observed positive outcomes following community-based participation in restorative justice programs may have been influenced by a selection bias, where offenders with a more prosocial orientation were more likely to volunteer for or agree to participate in the mediation sessions. Thus, while the results are promising, additional investigation is necessary to confirm the effectiveness of the RO program across different contexts and populations.

Another researcher, Bonett et al. (2020) found that group conferencing significantly reduced recidivism among higher-risk youth, with a 26% reduction in repeat offenses upon referral and a 40% reduction after completing the conference. An unexpected result was that reduced recidivism was most strongly associated with the attendance of secondary victims, rather than the primary victim, challenging the belief that primary victim involvement is key. While family presence was linked to lower recidivism for violent offenses, it was associated with higher property crime recidivism, reflecting the complex role of family in youth offending. The study also emphasized the importance of considering individual characteristics, as factors like prior criminal involvement and non-compliance predicted recidivism.

Such literature focuses on violent crimes, whilst minimal focuses solely on the impact on property crimes. In the context of property crimes, FGC offers an expanded approach to restorative justice. FGC and other processes, such as victim-offender mediation (VOM), share common goals, such as allowing victims to express the emotional impact of the crime, providing offenders an opportunity to explain their actions, and facilitating some form of reparation. FGC takes a broader approach, particularly in its application to juvenile offenders who have committed property crimes. FGC includes a larger group of participants, such as family members of both the victim and the offender as well as members of the community, which can enhance the collective responsibility for addressing the harm caused by the offense (Umbreit, 2000).

FGC is particularly effective for juvenile offenders in property crimes, where the family's involvement is critical in addressing the underlying issues contributing to delinquency. The process not only focuses on the victim and offender but also emphasizes the role of the offender's family in their rehabilitation and accountability (Umbreit, 2000). By engaging a larger circle of stakeholders, FGC promotes a community-based approach to justice that can lead to greater emotional healing for victims and a stronger reintegration process for offenders.

The inclusion of public officials as facilitators such as police officers, means professional facilitation which allows for a more structured and directive process, with facilitators playing a more active role in guiding the discussion and ensuring that all voices are heard (Umbreit, 2000). Additionally, FGC's emphasis on the involvement of secondary victims, such as the offender's family, ensures a more comprehensive understanding of the crime's effects.

In terms of victim satisfaction, victims of property crimes are more likely to express an interest in mediation than those who have been victims of personal crimes (Wemmers & Canuto,

2002). Wemmers & Canuto noted that 70% of property victims who participated in conferencing said that they were pleased, compared to 42% of those victims who experienced the court system.

In restorative justice practices, violent crimes are viewed as more victims direct benefiting from restorative interventions compared to property crimes (Sherman et al., 2007). Violent crimes, such as assault, tend to create significant psychological and physical impacts on victims, and restorative justice offers a space for victims to process their experiences and offenders to take accountability. As a result, much of the restorative justice literature and practice focuses on these types of crimes, as they often involve a more immediate and severe sense of harm that can be addressed through victim-offender dialogue.

However, even though property crimes may not carry the same level of immediate personal harm as violent crimes, they still have significant consequences for victims, including feelings of violation. Restorative justice offers an opportunity to address these feelings, as well as provide a mechanism for offenders to take accountability and make amends. In the case of property crimes, the focus is often on repairing the material harm, rebuilding trust, and preventing recidivism, which can have long-term benefits for everyone involved, victims, offenders, and society.

Therefore, while restorative justice has been more widely applied and studied in the context of violent crimes, there is a need to explore its potential in property crimes contexts as well, given its capacity to facilitate meaningful resolutions for victims and encourage offenders to repair the harm caused by their actions.

2.8 Empirical Literature on Juvenile Offenders

Bergseth and Bouffard (2007) examined the long-term effects of restorative justice programs on juvenile offenders, providing strong evidence for the effectiveness of RJ interventions in reducing recidivism. In this study, 164 youth were referred to the RJ system. On average, the age of those in the study was approximately fifteen years old, with a majority of the sample being white males. The youth were also split based upon whether they resided in urban or rural areas, prior juvenile contacts, and their kind of offense (property, persons, or other). The primary variables were their follow-up of up to four years. Their study found that, with few exceptions, juveniles referred to RJ programs experienced significantly better outcomes compared to those processed through traditional juvenile court. These positive results were consistently observed over a follow-up period of up to “three years”, suggesting that the impact of RJ on reducing reoffending can be sustained in the long term (Bergseth & Bouffard, 2007, pg. 440).

Bouffard, Cooper, and Bergseth (2017) examined the effectiveness of restorative justice (RJ) interventions on recidivism among juvenile offenders, highlighting the significant impact of these programs in reducing reoffending rates. The study found that participation in RJ programs led to a “56% decrease” in the likelihood of rearrest, demonstrating the potential of restorative practices to address delinquent behavior more effectively than traditional punitive measures (Bouffard, et al., 2017, pg. 469). This finding aligns with the broader literature on restorative justice, which suggests that such interventions promote accountability, empathy, and reconciliation, all of which contribute to reduced recidivism (Bouffard, et al., 2017).

Bouffard et al.'s (2017) research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting RJ as a viable alternative to traditional justice approaches, particularly for juvenile offenders. Their findings highlight the need for tailored interventions that take into account an offender's

risk profile, ensuring that restorative justice practices are applied where they can have the greatest impact. Some studies, like those by Umbreit (1994), found lower recidivism rates among juvenile participants compared to traditional correctional programs. Meta-analyses conducted by Latimer, Dowden, & Muise (2005) reveal that restorative justice programs, especially victim-offender mediation and conferencing, outperform traditional correctional approaches for juveniles.

The use of restorative practices such as family group conferencing (FGC) has shown potential in reducing recidivism, particularly among first-time offenders. McGarrell and Hipple (2007) examined the effectiveness of FGC in Indianapolis, where nearly 800 first-time juvenile offenders were randomly assigned to either family group conferencing or standard court diversion programs. Their study found that youths who participated in FGC were significantly less likely to re-offend, especially during the 3 to 8 months following their initial offense. The research highlighted the value of involving family members in the justice process, as FGC creates a supportive environment that encourages accountability and rehabilitation. This aligns with other restorative justice literature, which emphasizes the benefits of community and family involvement in reducing youth recidivism (Bazemore & Umbreit, 1995; Jeynes, 2007). Overall, McGarrell and Hipple's (2007) study suggests that FGC is an effective intervention for first-time juvenile offenders and supports its continued use as an alternative to traditional punitive measures.

Focusing on alternatives to incarceration for juvenile offenders can be greatly beneficial for their growth and development (Lambie & Randell, 2013). Particularly, FGC has shown benefits in reducing juvenile recidivism due to the emphasis on rehabilitation opposed to strict

punishment (McGarrell & Hipple, 2007). Overall, restorative justice measures, especially family group conferencing can open doors for juvenile offenders practicing accountability and grow in themselves.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

***Research Question 1:** What is the effectiveness of family group conferencing in reducing recidivism for youth involved in property crimes?*

***Hypothesis 1:** FGC will reduce recidivism for youth involved in property crimes.*

***Research Question 2:** How do racial and gender differences, particularly among non-White youth and female youth, influence the likelihood of recidivism following participation in family group conferencing for property crimes?*

***Hypothesis 2:** Female youth will demonstrate less recidivism following FGC compared to their male counterparts.*

***Hypothesis 3:** Non-White youth will experience less reduction in recidivism compared to White youth following FGC.*

***Hypothesis 4:** Non-White female youth will have lower recidivism following FGC than their non-White male counterparts.*

3.2 Data

This study uses data from the Bethlehem [Pennsylvania] Police Family Group Conferencing Project, 1993–1997 (ICPSR 2679), created by Paul McCold and Benjamin Wachtel. The project evaluated family group conferencing (FGC) as a restorative policing practice, focusing on young, first-time offenders. FGC aimed to divert offenders from court by

involving them, their families, and victims in a collaborative process to address harm and determine reparative actions.

The study examined 292 juveniles who committed 215 crimes, dividing them into three groups: the conference group, assigned to diversionary FGC; the control group, assigned to formal adjudication; and the decline group, for cases where participation was refused or the offender denied responsibility (McCold & Wachtel, 2006). Those in the FGC and control groups were randomly assigned with those who declined participation in the conference group went through alternative treatment methods. The Bethlehem Police Department and Community Service Foundation conducted the study, with 64 conferences held between 1995 and 1997 with a 3 year follow-up period^b. Conferences were voluntary, and offenders unwilling to participate were processed through traditional criminal justice channels.

Data collection included surveys of victims, offenders, and offenders' parents, conducted two weeks after case resolution, and disposition and recidivism data from police and magistrate databases (McCold & Wachtel, 2006). Additionally, Bethlehem Police Department officers completed attitudinal surveys before and after the program to assess organizational changes. Key variables include offender demographics, offense details, recidivism outcomes, and perceptions of fairness and accountability (McCold & Wachtel, 2006).

This dataset provides comprehensive information to analyze the impact of FGC on recidivism and its effectiveness compared to traditional justice processes. The study's randomized design and longitudinal data support robust statistical analyses to inform restorative justice policy (McCold & Wachtel, 2006).

Data Cleaning Process

Initial data cleaning took place using the SPSS software. After downloading the data set, any irrelevant data such as weight or height was cut. Next, outliers and errors were searched for utilizing descriptive statistics. No irregularities were discovered. Moving forward, variables for gender, ethnicity, recidivism, crime type, and FGC received were recoded. The data types for each variable were verified, ensuring they matched the correct format (numeric). Recidivism was coded as rearrest or not. The data set was then adjusted to only include property crimes, the focus of this study. Gender and race were computed to allow for an intersectional analysis.

3.3 Demographics

For this study, the focus is on property crimes, with an emphasis on racial and gender differences, specifically among Black youth and female youth. The dataset from the Bethlehem [Pennsylvania] Police Family Group Conferencing Project, 1993–1997 (ICPSR 2679), provides detailed offender demographics, including gender and ethnicity, offering a comprehensive view of participant characteristics.

The sample consisted of 292 young, first-time offenders, making it possible to examine how demographic factors influence outcomes such as recidivism rates and perceptions of justice. These 292 offenders committed a total of 215 crimes. Therefore, the amount of property crimes was 140 whilst the amount of property offenders was 181. The property crime subset includes 181 cases involving offenses such as retail theft and trespass. The dataset includes information on offenders assigned to diversionary family group conferencing, formal adjudication, or traditional processing due to declining participation in FGC.

This study will pay particular attention to the experiences and outcomes of non-White youth and female youth within the property crime sample. This focus enables a nuanced analysis

of potential disparities in treatment and outcomes, contributing to a better understanding of how restorative justice practices address or perpetuate racial and gender inequities in the criminal justice system.

Table 1: Property Offender Subsample Characteristics (n = 181)

Variables	Frequency	Percent
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>	(n)	(%)
White	80	44.2%
NonWhite	101	55.8%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	110	60.8%
Female	71	39.2%
<i>Treatment Group</i>		
Control	68	37.6%
Conference	56	30.9%
Decline	57	31.5%

3.4 Measures

Dependent Variables

The dependent variable for each hypothesis will be overall recidivism, specifically focusing on property crime-involved youth, Black youth, and female youth. Recidivism will be measured by whether individuals were rearrested, with the variable coded as a binary indicator of rearrest (1) or no rearrest (0). This coding will allow for an analysis of recidivism patterns within these specific groups, providing insight into the likelihood of reoffending based on demographic factors.

Independent Variables

This study utilized four independent variables in the analysis. The first variable is participation in Family Group Conferencing (FGC), which indicates whether the youth took part in this restorative justice process. The second and third variables are the gender and race of the youth. Gender is coded as 1 for male and 2 for female. Race is dichotomized, with 1 representing White youth and 0 representing all non-White youth. These variables are included to explore their potential influence on the outcomes of the study, considering demographic factors alongside participation in FGC. For the fourth and final hypothesis, race and gender were combined to represent non-White females, non-White males, White females, and White males.

3.5 Methodology

The objective of this study is to determine how FGC impacts recidivism for youth overall involved in property crimes, for female youth involved in property crimes, and for non-White youth involved in property crimes. Cross-tabulations were conducted for each hypothesis and Chi-Square tests were used to determine how strong the relationship was between each independent variable and the dependent variable, rearrest.

The first hypothesis proposes that FGC will lead to lower reoffending among youth involved in property crimes, with FGC participation as the independent variable and rearrest as the dependent variable. The second hypothesis suggests that female youth will have lower recidivism than males after FGC, based on theories about gender differences in offending and rehabilitation. The third hypothesis predicts that non-White youth will show a smaller decrease in recidivism compared to White youth after FGC, reflecting concerns about racial bias within the justice system. Finally, the fourth hypothesis predicts that non-White female youth will recidivate less than non-White male youth following FGC.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

4.1 Cross-Tabulation Models

Cross-tabulations (crosstabs) were used to examine the relationships between the key categorical variables, such as participation in Family Group Conferencing (FGC), gender, race, and recidivism. By employing crosstabs, exploration of how these variables interact with each other was possible and whether certain patterns or trends emerge across different groups. For example, crosstabs helped reveal whether participation in FGC was associated with a lower likelihood of recidivism, and if there were any significant differences in recidivism between male and female youth, or between White and non-White youth. This method allowed for a clear presentation of how categorical variables relate to one another, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing youth recidivism.

Although crosstab analysis was helpful in visualizing potential patterns, the results indicated no statistical significance ($p > .05$, using Cramér's V). This suggests that, based on the data, there is no strong association between the variables and recidivism outcomes. Despite the observed patterns, the lack of statistical significance indicates that these relationships may not be meaningful or reliable enough to draw firm conclusions about the impact of FGC, gender, or race on recidivism in this sample.

Table 2: Cross-Tabulations, Recorded Rearrest, Overall Property

RECORDED REARREST	Not Rearrested	Rearrested	Total
Control	79.4%	20.6%	100%
Family Group Conferencing (FGC)	71.4%	28.6%	100%
Other Treatment	70.2%	29.8%	100%
Total	74.0%	26.0%	100%

*Cramér's $V = 0.096$ * $p < .05$*

Crosstabulation results showed no significant differences in recidivism rates between the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) group, the control group, and other treatment approaches. Among youth in the study, 20.6% of those in the control group were rearrested, compared to 28.6% in the FGC group and 29.8% in the Other Treatment group. While the FGC group exhibited a slightly higher rate of rearrest, these differences were minor and not statistically significant.

To further assess the relationship between treatment type and recidivism within the property crime sample (n = 181), a Chi-Square test was performed. The Pearson Chi-Square value was 1.662 with 2 degrees of freedom, resulting in a p-value of .436. As this exceeds the standard significance threshold of .05, the analysis confirms no statistically significant association between treatment type and recidivism outcomes in this sample.

Table 3: Cross-Tabulations, Recorded Rearrest, White v. Non-White (n = 181)

RECORDED REARREST	WHITE	NONWHITE	TOTAL
Not Rearrested			
Control	78.1%	80.6%	79.4%
Family Group Conferencing (FGC)	76.9%	66.7%	71.4%
Other Treatment	77.3%	65.7%	70.2%
Total Not Rearrested	77.5%	71.3%	74.0%
Rearrested			
Control	21.9%	19.4%	20.6%
Family Group Conferencing (FGC)	23.1%	33.3%	28.6%
Other Treatment	22.7%	34.3%	29.8%
Total Rearrested	22.5%	28.7%	26.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Cramér's V = 0.096 * $p < .05$

The crosstabulation analysis exploring the relationship between recorded rearrest, treatment group (Control, Family Group Conferencing, and Other Treatment), and race (White vs. Non-White) revealed some variation in recidivism patterns. Among Non-White youth, 80.6%

in the control group were not rearrested, compared to 66.7% in the FGC group and 65.7% in the Other Treatment group. Rearrest rates were notably higher in the treatment groups, with 33.3% and 34.3% of Non-White youth being rearrested in the FGC and Other Treatment groups, respectively. In comparison, rearrest rates among White youth were slightly lower across all groups: 78.1% in the control group avoided rearrest, along with 76.9% in the FGC group and 77.3% in the Other Treatment group. Corresponding rearrest rates were 23.1% for the FGC group and 22.7% for the Other Treatment group.

While these figures suggest minor differences in recidivism across racial and treatment groups, statistical analysis did not support these differences as significant. A Chi-Square test showed that the relationship between rearrest and race was not statistically significant, with p-values of .308 for Non-White youth, .994 for White youth, and .436 for the overall sample—all well above the .05 threshold. Additionally, Cramér's V indicated a negligible correlation. These results suggest that in this study, neither race nor treatment type, including FGC, had a statistically significant impact on recidivism outcomes.

Table 4: Cross-Tabulations, Recorded Rearrest, Male v. Female (n = 181)

RECORDED REARREST	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Not Rearrested			
Control	72.7%	91.7%	79.4%
Family Group Conferencing (FGC)	63.3%	80.8%	71.4%
Other Treatment	63.9%	81.0%	70.2%
Total Not Rearrested	67.3%	84.5%	74.0%
Rearrested			
Control	27.3%	8.3%	20.6%
Family Group Conferencing (FGC)	36.7%	19.2%	28.6%
Other Treatment	36.1%	19.0%	29.8%
Total Rearrested	32.7%	15.5%	26.0%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Cramér's V = 0.096 * $p < .05$

Crosstabulation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between recorded rearrest, treatment group (Control, Family Group Conferencing, and Other Treatment), and gender. Among male youth, 72.7% in the control group were not rearrested, compared to 63.3% in the FGC group and 63.9% in the Other Treatment group. Rearrest rates were 36.7% and 36.1% in the FGC and Other Treatment groups, respectively. Female youth showed lower rates of recidivism overall: 91.7% in the control group, 80.8% in the FGC group, and 81.0% in the Other Treatment group were not rearrested. Corresponding rearrest rates were 8.3%, 19.2%, and 19.0%.

Despite observable differences in recidivism between male and female participants and across treatment groups, statistical testing did not find these differences to be significant. Chi-Square tests yielded p-values of .609 for males, .492 for females, and .436 for the total sample; all above the .05 threshold. Similarly, Cramér's V indicated a negligible association. These results suggest that gender and treatment type, including FGC, did not significantly influence rearrest outcomes in this study.

Table 5: Cross-Tabulations, Recorded Rearrest (Not/Yes), Intersectionality (n = 181)

Treatment	Gender	Rearrest	Nonwhite	White
Control	Male	Not	34.4%	65.6%
		Yes	50.0%	50.0%
		Total	38.6%	61.4%
	Female	Not	63.6%	36.4%
		Yes	50.0%	50.0%
		Total	62.5%	37.5%
	Total	Not	46.3%	53.7%
		Yes	50.0%	50.0%
		Total	47.1%	52.9%
Conference	Male	Not	52.6%	47.4%
		Yes	36.4%	63.6%
		Total	46.7%	53.3%
	Female	Not	47.6%	52.4%
		Yes	40.0%	60.0%
		Total	46.2%	53.8%
	Total	Not	50.0%	50.0%
		Yes	37.5%	62.5%
		Total	46.4%	53.6%
Decline	Male	Not	30.4%	69.6%
		Yes	23.1%	76.9%
		Total	27.8%	72.2%
	Female	Not	58.8%	41.2%
		Yes	50.0%	50.0%
		Total	57.1%	42.9%
	Total	Not	42.5%	57.5%
		Yes	29.4%	70.6%
		Total	38.6%	61.4%
Total	Male	Not	37.8%	62.2%
		Yes	36.1%	63.9%
		Total	37.3%	62.7%
	Female	Not	56.7%	43.3%
		Yes	45.5%	54.5%
		Total	54.9%	45.1%
	Total	Not	46.3%	53.7%
		Yes	38.3%	61.7%
		Total	44.2%	55.8%

Cramér's V = 0.096 * $p < .05$

Cross-tabulation analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between recorded rearrest, group (Control, FGC, and other), gender, and race (non-White and White). Among male youth, those in the control group had a rearrest rate of 50.0% for both non-White and White

participants. In the FGC group, 36.4% of non-White males and 62.6% of White males were rearrested. Within the other treatment group, 23.1% of non-White males and 76.9% of White males were rearrested.

Female youth overall exhibited lower rearrest, although statistically insignificant. In the control group, 50.0% of both non-White and White females were rearrested. In the FGC group, 40.0% of non-White females and 60.0% of White females were rearrested. Finally, in terms of the other group, non-White and White females had equal rearrests of 50.0%.

When focusing specifically on non-White participants, differences in rearrest outcomes between female and male youth emerge across treatment conditions. In the FGC group specifically, non-White females had a slightly higher rearrest of 40.0% compared to non-White males, where 23.1% experienced a rearrest. Non-White males generally had lower rearrests than non-White females in the FGC and other groups but had equivalent outcomes in the control group. However, given that none of these differences reached statistical significance, they should be interpreted cautiously.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Primary Findings

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) on recidivism among youth involved in property crimes. While the analysis did not find statistically significant differences for most comparisons, there are several observations worth noting.

In examining the overall recidivism across the three groups—control, FGC, and other treatment—there was no statistically significant difference in recidivism. Among those in the control group, 79.4% were not rearrested, compared to 71.4% in the FGC group, and 70.2% in the other treatment group. This suggests that FGC participants had slightly higher instances of rearrest, which might imply that the FGC approach was not as effective as the control group in preventing recidivism. However, the difference in rearrest between the groups was minimal, and the statistical analysis did not yield a significant result (Cramér's $V = 0.096$, $p = 0.436$). Due to a randomized design, those who took part in FGC are unlikely to differ from those who participated in the control group.

When looking at recidivism by gender, the analysis revealed some differences, however not statistically significant, between male and female youth in each group. Male youth across all groups had higher rearrests compared to female youth. Specifically, 27.3% of males in the control group were rearrested, compared to 8.3% of females. In the FGC group, 36.7% of males were rearrested, compared to 19.2% of females. Similarly, in the other treatment group, 36.1% of males were rearrested, compared to 19.0% of females. These differences suggest that FGC might have a somewhat minimally stronger impact on reducing recidivism among female youth

compared to male youth, though again, the lack of statistical significance (Cramér's $V = 0.096$, $p = 0.436$) prevents definitive conclusions. The gender differences observed here may warrant further exploration in future studies with larger sample sizes to determine whether FGC could be more effective for one gender over the other.

The analysis also examined recidivism by race, comparing White and Non-White youth. Among White youth, the control group had the lowest recidivism rate, with 21.9% rearrested, compared to 23.1% in the FGC group and 22.7% in the other treatment group. Conversely, Non-White youth showed higher recidivism across the FGC and other groups, with 19.4% rearrested in the control group, 33.3% rearrested in the FGC group, and 34.3% rearrested in the other treatment group. While these findings indicate a trend where Non-White youth may have higher recidivism than White youth, the differences were again not statistically significant (Cramér's $V = 0.436$, $p = 0.436$). This suggests that race did not play a significant role in the effectiveness of FGC in reducing recidivism for property crimes. Nonetheless, the higher recidivism among Non-White youth in the FGC group could indicate that FGC might be less effective for this subgroup, but the lack of statistical significance requires caution when interpreting these results.

Examining by intersectionality of race and gender, revealed nuanced differences in rearrest outcomes. Among non-White males, rearrest rates were 50.0% in the control group, 36.4% in the FGC group, and 23.1% in the other group, suggesting the greatest reduction in rearrest occurred in the other treatment group. In contrast, non-White females had rearrests of 50.0% in the control group, 40.0% in the FGC group, and 50.0% in the other group. Examining non-White females individually, FGC had an impact, although statistically insignificant, on recidivism. Although literature point towards potential disparities in how effective treatments are for different racial and gender subgroups, statistical analysis did not support a significant

association (Cramér's V values ranged from 0.060 to 0.143, all with p -values well above the .05 threshold). These findings are interesting given that, when not viewed through an intersectional lens, females overall exhibited lower recidivism compared to males across all treatment groups, suggesting that gender alone may offer some protective effect, an effect that appears to shift or diminish when race is also considered. These findings highlight possible gendered racial disparities in treatment impact but suggest that observed differences in rearrest should be interpreted cautiously, given their lack of statistical significance.

Though not statistically significant, the data is suggesting that those part of FGC did not have better outcomes than those in the control group. Race and gender were originally looked at individually, but in line with CRT, race and gender were examined to see if there was a compounding effect on their intersection. The offenders in this sample did not necessarily fare better in FGC than in other groups.

5.2 Limitations

Study Design and Sampling

While the study provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as a restorative policing practice, there are several limitations in its design and sampling that should be considered when interpreting the results.

The study used a relatively small sample size, with only 181 property offenders. This limited sample may have reduced the statistical power to detect meaningful differences between the treatment groups and the control group, particularly when examining more granular variables like gender or race. The study was also conducted in a single location, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania,

which limits its generalizability to other regions or broader populations. This geographical restriction means that the findings may not be applicable to youth offenders in different communities or under varying policing practices.

Lastly, the study was conducted over a two-year period, with data collection from 1995 to 1997. The relatively short follow-up period and the timing of the study may not fully capture long-term effects of FGC on recidivism or behavioral change, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about the lasting impact of restorative justice practices.

Given these limitations, future studies should aim to use larger, more diverse samples, ensure random assignment to treatment groups, and extend the follow-up period to better understand the potential of FGC in reducing recidivism.

Ethical Limitations

In addition to the design and sampling limitations, several ethical concerns should be considered when evaluating the study's findings and implications.

One of the primary ethical issues is the voluntary nature of participation in the Family Group Conferencing (FGC). Whilst a randomized design was utilized to assign youth to conference or control (traditional processes), youth were allowed to decline participation in FGC and enter the decline (or other) group. While voluntary participation is essential for respecting the autonomy of the participants, it can also lead to ethical concerns about coercion or undue influence, particularly if participants feel pressure to participate due to social or familial expectations. Youth offenders and their families may have been reluctant to decline participation, even if they had reservations about the process, for fear of being perceived negatively by the

justice system. This could introduce ethical dilemmas around informed consent, particularly if participants felt they were not fully informed about the potential consequences or benefits of participating in the conference.

Another ethical limitation arises from the potential for the justice system's involvement in decision-making. The study involved the Bethlehem Police Department and local magistrates in the recruitment and selection process for FGC, which raises questions about the fairness and impartiality of the process. If offenders were aware that their case would be processed differently based on their willingness to participate in FGC, this could create an ethical conflict of interest, as they may feel compelled to participate in FGC, if it was offered to them in the randomized design, to avoid more severe penalties or to gain favor in the eyes of authorities. Theoretically, those who participated in FGC are more likely to be motivated to change. But due to these ethical concerns, there are limitations on this assumption.

Further, the study collected data from minors, which inherently involves ethical considerations related to the protection of vulnerable populations. The involvement of both offenders and their parents in the study raises concerns about ensuring appropriate informed consent, as parents may have had a significant influence on whether their child participated in FGC. While parental consent is often required for minors, ensuring that both the child and parent fully understand the study's purpose and potential risks is vital for maintaining ethical standards in research. The possibility of coercion or misunderstanding in obtaining informed consent from both parties is an ethical limitation of the study.

Lastly, the study's use of a single, specific restorative justice practice—FGC—also raises ethical questions about its applicability to all cases and participants. Restorative justice

interventions, such as FGC, may not be suitable for all offenders, especially those who have experienced significant trauma or who are at risk of further harm from engaging with victims or their families. There may have been ethical concerns regarding whether FGC was the most appropriate intervention for all participants, especially if they were not given a choice to opt for other treatment options that might have been more suited to their needs.

In future research on restorative justice practices, it is crucial to ensure that participants' rights and well-being are prioritized, with clear safeguards in place to protect vulnerable individuals from potential harm. Ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and appropriate treatment choices must remain central to the design and implementation of such studies.

5.3 Policy Implications

Despite no statistically significant differences in recidivism across groups, FGC may still offer important benefits, particularly in terms of cost-effectiveness compared to traditional justice processes.

Evidence suggests that restorative justice has the potential to significantly reduce the costs relating to criminal justice (Shapland et al., 2008). Sherman and Strang (2007) discovered that if only one out of every fifty restorative conferences prevented someone serving one year in custody, then that would cover the costs of all fifty conferences. In a UK study, it was determined that for every 1 British pound spent on restorative conferencing, the criminal justice system overall would save 8 British pounds (Shapland et al., 2008).

By reducing the need for court proceedings, detention, and long-term supervision, restorative programs can lower expenses for the justice system. In addition, when these programs do successfully reduce recidivism, they help minimize the long-term societal costs associated with reoffending, such as repeated incarceration and victimization.

There are potential benefits of family and community involvement in the rehabilitation of young offenders. FGC specifically engages families and victims in the justice process, fostering a supportive environment for behavioral change. Policymakers could consider integrating such practices into existing diversionary or incarceration programs aimed at young offenders, particularly those involved in property crimes. This family-oriented approach may be especially effective in addressing the underlying social and familial factors that contribute to criminal behavior, offering a holistic alternative to traditional court procedures.

5.4 Direction for Future Research

While this study offers important insights into the use of FGC as a restorative justice intervention for youth involved in property crimes, the findings suggest that FGC may not be effective in reducing recidivism. Nevertheless, the study highlights several areas that warrant further investigation. Given the limitations of the current research, including a limited sample size and lack of statistically significant differences, future studies can build upon these findings to more fully evaluate the long-term impacts of FGC and refine its role within the justice system.

One critical area for future research is the need for longitudinal studies that track outcomes over an extended period. Wachtel & McCold's study focused on short-term recidivism, approximately three years, but understanding whether FGC has any lasting effects on behavior

beyond the immediate post-intervention period is essential. Long-term data could help determine whether FGC has delayed impacts not captured by shorter follow-up windows.

Another important direction for future research is increasing sample sizes and enhancing participant diversity. The relatively small sample in this study limits the generalizability of the findings. Expanding future studies to include a larger and more diverse group of youth would allow researchers to better assess whether FGC's effectiveness varies based on demographic factors such as age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Future work could also explore whether characteristics such as prior criminal history or family structure influence FGC outcomes.

Additionally, the role of family dynamics in shaping the success of FGC interventions remains underexplored. Future studies could examine whether FGC is more effective among youth from strong, supportive family backgrounds, or whether the process itself helps to repair strained familial relationships. Similarly, the role of broader community involvement in enhancing FGC outcomes deserves further exploration.

Although the current study raises concerns about FGC's effectiveness in reducing youth recidivism, it underscores the need for continued research to better understand the conditions under which restorative justice interventions may succeed. Through longitudinal analyses, larger and more representative samples, and a deeper investigation of individual and contextual factors, future research can help develop more targeted and equitable strategies for rehabilitating young offenders and reducing recidivism.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the effectiveness of Family Group Conferencing (FGC) as a restorative justice practice in reducing recidivism among young offenders involved in property crimes. The results, though not statistically significant across all groups, suggested that FGC was not effective as an intervention. While the findings regarding recidivism were insignificant, they indicate that FGC may not impact property offenders on its own. Future research and programs with emphasis on family involvement, accountability, and community support may provide a different approach to addressing youth crime.

Despite the limitations of the study, including its small sample size and short follow-up period, the research contributes to the growing body of literature on restorative justice and provides important insights into the potential problems and benefits of incorporating restorative practices like FGC into the criminal justice system. The findings suggest that while FGC may not directly impact recidivism for property offenders but is in need of further research to draw conclusions from more statistically significant results.

In addition to the results of FGC in reducing recidivism in this sample, the study also points to several important areas for future research. Longitudinal studies, larger and more diverse samples, and comparisons with other restorative justice practices could provide more robust evidence of FGC's long-term effectiveness. Moreover, exploring the mediating factors that contribute to successful outcomes, such as family dynamics, gender, and cultural competence, will be crucial in understanding how to best implement and tailor FGC programs to different youth populations.

Ultimately, for this sample, alternatives to FGC would possibly have greater impacts on reducing recidivism. However, FGC may provide positive outcomes for young offenders in other samples and communities.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said, *"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."* In the case of restorative justice, including practices like Family Group Conferencing, the service is not only to the individuals involved but to the entire community, fostering an environment where healing and growth can take place.

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