

Fact Sheet:  
*What We Are Learning from Research:*  
**Victim Offender Mediation & Dialogue  
in Crimes of Severe Violence**

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There exist many anecdotal stories from victims and offenders who often speak of their participation in a mediated dialogue as a powerful and transformative experience which helped them in their healing process. Parents of murdered children have expressed their sense of relief after meeting the offender/inmate and sharing their pain as well as being able to reconstruct what actually happened and why. One such mother whose son was murdered stated "I just needed to let him see the pain he has caused in my life and to find out why he pulled the trigger." A school teacher who was assaulted and nearly killed commented after meeting the young man in prison, "it helped me end this ordeal...for me, it has made a difference in my life, though this type of meeting is not for everyone." An offender/inmate who met with the mother of the man he killed stated "it felt good to be able to bring her some relief and to express my remorse to her." A doctor in California whose sister was killed by a drunk driver and who was initially very skeptical about meeting the offender, following the mediation session, stated "I couldn't begin to heal until I let go of my hatred...after the mediation I felt a great sense of relief...I was now ready to find enjoyment in life again."

Only three studies of victim offender mediation in crimes of severe violence have been conducted in the U.S. Two were small exploratory initiatives that each examined 4 case studies. The third study has just recently begun and represents the first major initiative in the U.S., involving multiple sites

The first study (Umbreit, 1989) found that offering a mediated dialogue session in several very violent cases, including a sniper shooting case, was very beneficial to the victims, offenders and community members or family members that were involved in the process. Three of these four cases (all adult offenders) were handled by a police department in upstate New York (Genesee County) that operates a comprehensive restorative justice program. The second study (Flaten, 1996) involving four cases of severely violent crime committed by juvenile offenders found very high levels of satisfaction with the process and outcomes, from both victims and offenders. The offenders were inmates in a juvenile correctional facility in Alaska.

A third study initiated in 1998 (Umbreit, Coates, & Vos) is a multi-site, multi-year study that represents the largest initiative in the United States to examine the impact of victim offender mediation and dialogue in crimes of severe violence. Programs in Texas and Ohio are being examined, along with a number of cases in other states. A total of 58 interviews with victims and offenders have been completed, with a total of 80 interviews to be completed by the end of the study. Preliminary data from 30 completed post-mediation victim interviews indicated: in Texas (N=13), 92% were very satisfied and 8% somewhat satisfied with the case preparation; 100% felt the meeting with the offender was very helpful; 100% were very satisfied with their overall

involvement in program. In Ohio (N=17), 88% were very satisfied and 12% somewhat satisfied with the case preparation; 65% felt the meeting with the offender was very helpful and 35% felt it was somewhat helpful; 100% were very satisfied with their overall involvement in program.

Preliminary data from 28 completed post-mediation offender interviews indicated: in Texas (N=10), 100% were very satisfied with the case preparation; 100% felt the meeting with the victim was very helpful; 100% were very satisfied with their overall involvement in program. In Ohio (N=18), 88% were very satisfied and 12% somewhat satisfied with the case preparation; 89% felt the meeting with the victim was very helpful and 11% felt it was somewhat helpful; 71% were very satisfied with their overall involvement in program and 29% were somewhat satisfied.

A qualitative analysis of the first five cases involved in the Victim Offender Mediation/Dialogue Program of the Victim Services Unit, Texas Department of Criminal Justice found that in virtually all of the cases, these victims expressed a very high level of satisfaction with the program and found the meeting with the offender to be very helpful to their healing. Offenders/inmates also expressed the positive effect that meeting the victim/survivor had on their lives. Four of the cases involved parents of murdered children and the fifth case involved a parent of a sexually abused daughter.

The only completed study (Roberts, 1995) that has examined a larger number of cases examined the Victim Offender Mediation Project in Langley, British Columbia. This community-based Canadian program, after having pioneered the early development of victim offender mediation and reconciliation with property offenses and minor assaults many years ago, initiated in 1991 a new project to apply the mediation process with crimes of severe violence involving incarcerated inmates. Prior to initiating this project, a small study (Gustafson & Smidstra, 1989) had been conducted by the program to assess whether victims and offenders involved in severely violent crime would be interested in meeting with each other in a safe and structured manner, after intensive preparation, if such a service was available. A very high level of interest in such meetings was found.

In the study conducted by Roberts (1995), virtually all of the 22 offenders and 24 victims who participated indicated support for the program. This support included their belief that they found considerable specific and overall value in the program, felt it was ethically and professionally run, and would not hesitate to recommend it to others. The overall effects of the mediation session expressed by victims included: they had finally been heard; the offender now no longer exercised control over them; they could see the offender as a person rather than a monster; they felt more trusting in their relationships with others; they felt less fear; they weren't preoccupied with the offender any more; they felt peace; they would not feel suicidal again; they had no more anger.

For offenders, the overall effects of a mediated dialogue with the victim included: discovering emotions; feelings of empathy; increasing awareness of impacts of their acts; increasing self-awareness; opening eyes to the outside world, rather than closed institutional thinking; feeling good about having tried the process; achieving peace of mind in knowing one has helped a former victim.

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For copies of research reports, monographs, articles and training materials related to restorative justice and victim offender mediation and conferencing, contact the web-site of the Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking, University of Minnesota, School of Social Work.

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