Punishment versus Hope: Perceptions of Social Media Portrayals of Restorative Justice

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Abstract

Research focused on the intersection of social media messages and perceptions of restorative justice has the potential to provide insight on criminal justice reform. In light of national conversations about mass incarceration, restorative justice has become a topic of conversation on social media, particularly among activists. This research utilized qualitative interviews (n = 20) to ascertain Gen Z college students’ familiarity with, understanding of, and interpretation of messages about restorative justice as portrayed in social media posts that they have been exposed to during the course of their everyday lives. The study found that most participants learned about restorative justice in the classroom and generally had positive perceptions of restorative justice, and that many believed the general public likely views restorative justice as “soft on crime.” Additionally, the severity of the crime influenced how accepting participants were of restorative justice. These findings have the potential to contribute to the literature on restorative justice, as well as to current advocacy practices as they are perceived by young adults.

Introduction

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, especially among developed countries, despite using some of the harshest punishment methods and policing practices (Frost, 2006; New York Times, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2018). Pew Research Center data reveal that the United States has an incarceration rate of over 600 people per 100,000 people, significantly more than any other country (Pew Research Center, 2018). Restorative justice is a term that entered the lexicon in recent years with the media highlighting the ineffectiveness and inhumanity of the current criminal justice system. Restorative justice serves as an alternative to traditional forms of punishment such as prison sentences (Doolin 2007; Morris & Maxwell, 2001). Restorative justice aims to fundamentally change the inappropriate behavior of criminal offenders by addressing the underlying factors and conditions that might drive an individual to delinquency (Clear & Karp, 2002; Morris & Maxwell, 2001; Wright, 1996).
Restorative justice also aims to help reintegrate offenders back into society, help them take responsibility for their actions, and involve the community and victims in the process to rebuild trust and achieve closure for victims (Clear & Karp, 2002; Doolin, 2007; Morris & Maxwell, 2001; New York Times, 2021). One of the early advocates for restorative justice, Tony Marshall, defined restorative justice as the process of solving existing problems and issues by involving both parties and collectively deciding how to move forward while also dealing with the aftermath of the incident (Dignan, 2005; Marshall, 1999). Rather than focusing on punishment, restorative justice emphasizes the importance of rehabilitation and repairing harms. The future of the criminal justice system may be intertwined with restorative justice practices such as victim-offender reconciliation and conferencing, group therapy, and community involvement as a rehabilitative approach proves its effectiveness.

The United States currently has a punitive, or punishment-based, criminal justice system. The idea behind this approach is to deter crime and punish people for breaking the laws set in place (Dolovich & Natapoff, 2017; Frost, 2006). Despite the historically punitive-based approach to crime, the United States has seen its criminal justice system becoming increasingly punitive-based over recent decades. The increasingly punishment-based system has likely contributed to the issue of mass incarceration that exists within American society (Dolovich & Natapoff, 2017). The punitive criminal justice system has become stricter in terms of sentencing minimums and percentages that must be served, the use of capital punishment, and the ways in which the system punishes people (Dolovich & Natapoff, 2017). For example, the United States uses solitary confinement in prisons to punish offenders; however, studies have shown that solitary confinement is extremely detrimental to an individual’s mental health and often sets offenders back in terms of their criminality and behavior (Casella et al., 2016).

Instead of measuring success within the criminal justice system based on how released offenders function in their communities or on decreased recidivism rates, the punitive system emphasizes prosecution and conviction as measures of success (Dolovich & Natapoff, 2017). The current punitive criminal justice system also fails to address the root causes of crime and how society affects individuals negatively. Restorative justice offers a beacon of hope to offenders stuck in the punitive system and offers offenders a chance to heal and create meaningful personal change. Restorative justice takes a rehabilitative approach to crime and criminal offenders. Rather than putting people in prison and releasing them without providing them with the crucial tools required to survive after their release, restorative justice aims to equip offenders with the resources to thrive. Instead of expecting behavioral and cognitive changes to occur as a result of punishment, restorative justice practices help create meaningful change and treat offenders with humanity and dignity (Judah & Bryant, 2004).
Awareness of restorative justice appears to be increasing, although it is not a widely used practice in society. Knowing the perceptions and attitudes that the public has toward restorative justice is important because as a democratic society, citizens have the power to influence the laws and policies that affect them (New York Times, 2021). One possible way to examine the public’s perception and opinions regarding a wide range of social issues, including restorative justice, is through social media. Social media has shown its usefulness as a news source, which many organizations are capitalizing on. Studies have also found that the public tends to have positive attitudes toward certain businesses or brands after interacting with those organizations through social media (Funk, 2013). For example, one study examined how police departments utilize social media as a news outlet to reach their target audience. Cheng (2021) discovered that social media reduces reliance on mass media and also allows police departments to spin stories in their favor. Through social media, the New York Police Department was able to effectively defuse the public’s negative perceptions of contested situations, including a 2018 police shooting (Cheng, 2021). Other studies have examined how media allows people to engage in political activism without physical presence, simplifies communication and coordination, and may help amplify marginalized voices (Schroeder, 2018). It is crucial to understand the real-world implications of social media for people, as social media is often used to influence and persuade audiences. Moreover, it is important to recognize how social media may be used to portray restorative justice currently, and also how it could be used to increase awareness of restorative justice in the future.

Generation Z (hereafter referred to as Gen Z)\(^1\) is an important demographic to study when investigating the influence of social media on public perception and attitudes, because Gen Z uses social media at an extremely high rate compared to other generations of users (Duffett, 2017). Research suggests that Americans under the age of 30 use platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat more than other age groups do and also use social media in general more than older Americans do (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Many businesses and organizations are targeting their virtual marketing on this age group through social media because of these high rates of usage among Gen Z individuals (Duffett, 2017; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Social media is a powerful tool for social justice advocates and organizations, and Gen Z is often involved in the creation and engagement of content. Importantly, studies suggest that younger people use social media to engage in political participation and advocacy more than older people (Schroeder, 2018; Tyson et al. 2021). Similar to social media, television and news outlets have a large impact on the public’s perception of crime and safety in their area (Eschholz et al., 2002; Rosenberger & Callanan, 2011; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2004).

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\(^1\) Gen Z includes individuals born after 1996 (Parker & Igielnik, 2020).
The purpose of this case study is to understand through qualitative interviews how Gen Z students at a medium-sized Midwestern university interpret social media messages portraying restorative justice. Restorative justice is defined as the practices that aim to restore community and victims’ trust in the offender, understand the motivating factors that cause people to commit crimes, help the victim get closure and answer questions about their crime, engage the offender, encourage the offender to take responsibility for their actions, and help reintegrate the offender back into their community and society (Clear & Karp, 2002; Doolin, 2007; Morris & Maxwell, 2001; New York Times, 2021; Wright, 1996). Messages of restorative justice are defined as social media posts that discuss alternatives to traditional forms of coercive punishment for offenders or, more broadly, critique the criminal justice system in its current form. Such posts may be created by individuals or activist organizations on any social media platform, including Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok.

Importantly, one poll found that 64% of respondents support restorative justice, and the percentage increased to 70% when easy-to-understand language was used (American Friends Service Committee, 2021). Despite generally high public support, restorative justice has not been widely implemented in the American criminal justice system. Confusion surrounding what restorative justice is and its practices likely prevent an increase in public support. This study aims to examine the complexities regarding the public’s perception of restorative justice, how restorative justice has been portrayed in the media, and what factors into opinions of restorative justice.

Methods

I conducted 26 total semistructured interviews between November 2021 and February 2022. Six of those interviews were excluded from analysis because of the participants’ unfamiliarity with restorative or community based justice. Some participants confused it with related terms (e.g., social justice, Black Lives Matter movement, racial equality movements), had looked up the term before the interview, or simply were not familiar with the term. When a participant did not know what restorative justice was or had never heard of it before, I ended the interview and deleted any collected data (e.g., interview recording). If a participant had a vague understanding, such as having heard of the term but being unable to fully define it, I proceeded with the interview and asked questions that were relevant to the participant’s knowledge and made a note on the transcript document. Occasionally, I did not realize a participant was confusing restorative justice with a different social justice movement or term until the interview was partially completed; in these cases, I continued with the interview and made a note at the end of the transcript.
Coding

I began the open coding process by reading through each transcript in its entirety before beginning to code. Through open coding, I began coding by examining the major themes I found throughout the transcript, in order to narrow the codes into specific categories or groups. After transcription, the interviews were inductively coded to identify valuable themes and patterns as they emerged from data (Thomas, 2006). This emergent coding approach allowed me to create new codes as the themes and patterns emerged from data, rather than creating codes prior to beginning the coding process (Neuman, 2011; Thomas, 2006). A few of the most common themes throughout the transcripts included the effectiveness of restorative justice, the source or context in which the participant had become familiar with restorative justice, and possible demographic factors that might influence the public’s perception of restorative justice.

Sample

The sample consisted of 20 participants from a predominantly White, medium-sized Midwestern university, consisting of 19 females and 1 male. Each participant was given the option to choose a pseudonym to be identified by in the analysis of the study’s findings, and if they did not choose one, I assigned one to them. The majority of the participants were White and majored in psychology and/or criminology or sociology. To obtain this sample, recruitment of participants occurred through snowball sampling, which is a type of convenience sample. This sampling procedure allowed me to recruit participants within my own social network, participants whom I did not know, and those who were readily available to me to expand my sample. Additionally, I used SONA, a participant-recruitment tool, which allowed students to sign up to participate in the study and potentially receive course extra credit. These methods allowed me to gather data from Gen Z individuals currently attending a medium-sized Midwestern university.

Findings

Although I anticipated that social media would play a large role in advocacy and awareness of restorative justice, the findings did not support this idea. Instead, social media is more of a secondary source of information for restorative justice, rather than a primary source. Typically, educational settings such as the classroom served as a primary source of exposure to restorative justice. Additionally, I found that many participants had incomplete understandings of restorative justice and were unable to define or comprehend it fully. The vague understanding that participants did have of restorative justice was typically positive, however. Participants recognized the flaws of the current criminal justice system and generally critiqued the punitive approach to
dealing with crime. Participants also recognized the different demographic factors that might influence the American public’s perception of restorative justice, and they acknowledged how these demographics could create differences in opinion regarding restorative justice and other social justice issues. Many participants were hopeful about the future of restorative justice but lacked the capability to present tangible or substantial solutions to the issues the country faces regarding crime. Moreover, some participants saw restorative justice as a possible solution to mass incarceration and as a beneficial approach to dealing with offenders.

Awareness of Restorative Justice

One main takeaway from my research is that students at this small Midwestern university were not overly aware of or familiar with restorative justice and how these practices currently work. Six of my original 26 participants were excluded from analysis because of their lack of knowledge of restorative justice, and several more either had very vague understandings of restorative justice or confused restorative justice for a separate, but similar, social justice issue. Several participants ($n = 5; 25\%$) mentioned that they were familiar with the idea of restorative justice but were unable to define it. Olive said, “I honestly probably couldn’t give you a direct definition of restorative justice, but I understand the concept of it.” Another participant, identified as Dixie, stated, “I wouldn’t be able to give you, like, an exact definition, but when I hear those on social media, like, or even just in general, like, I know what it’s about to refer to.” Similarly, Grey said, “I couldn’t like… I don’t… I couldn’t define them if you said, like, give me a definition.” All three of these responses were in response to the interview question “Are you familiar with either of the terms, ‘restorative justice’ or ‘community-based justice’?”

Participants believed that restorative justice is not a well-known practice and that without awareness, it might be hard to implement these practices successfully and with the support of the public. Blue said:

In order for more people to be in support, more people need to understand it and [the] depictions of it needs [sic] to change because… when I very first heard about [restorative justice], I didn’t know what the heck this was going to do. Obviously, the more you look into it, the more it makes sense, but I think most Americans will probably not be in favor right now.

Roxy said, “I think people just need to even know it exists, like first and foremost” regarding the potential widespread use of restorative justice programs. Billie suggested that “if they’re better at promoting it and [showing us] what they actually need, I’m pretty sure if they were to teach things that actually benefit a person, and we would see how an individual can change through this program, so just like promote it
more.” Furthermore, Dixie suggested that additional educational awareness is necessary for restorative justice programs to be implemented into society:

I hope that it will be drawn into more conversations, especially when it comes to courts of law, just kind of like working to educate people. . . . There’s like an opportunity for education, I hope, mostly like courts of law, shift their ideals and look at it from a more ethical standpoint, and I’m hoping ethics plays a larger role than vengeance will in the future.

Social Media

While it is true that social media is influential in shaping Gen Z perspectives (Duffett, 2017), more than half \((n = 11; 55\%)\) of participants reported that they had first learned of restorative justice in the classroom. Additionally, some participants \((n = 3; 15\%)\) later went to social media to supplement their initial understanding and opinions, and other participants reported that social media was a superficial source of information on restorative justice and other societal issue topics \((n = 5; 25\%)\). Violet said, “On the surface level, yes, they [social media platforms] have allowed me to gain a deeper understanding. . . . I don’t think they are as helpful as a class.” Similarly, in response to the same question, Ray said that media forms and platforms have “enhanced my understanding or supplemented the stuff that I’m learning about in class.” Both responses suggest that social media might play less of a direct role in restorative justice awareness for the public and that only those who are already familiar with restorative justice may be exposed to such messages.

The main platforms mentioned by participants included Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, TedTalks, and Tumblr. Instagram was the most common platform mentioned by participants as a source of information regarding restorative justice. Twitter was the second most commonly mentioned social media platform, followed by TikTok. With regard to social media, participants frequently discussed the ease and efficiency of social media and how easy it was to access information. Olive said, “I think it’s the fast part of it, like it’s quicker and I feel like it’s short and to the point and I feel like I can get to the information faster. . . . I feel like you can get more information straight out of it through social media.” Similarly, Ray said, “Yeah, I think its accessibility” in response to why TedTalks and Instagram are influential and significant for messages of restorative justice.

Although participants reported that social media is an important part of their lives and that the convenience of social media is alluring, 10 participants \((50\%)\) reported that social media content can be misleading and unreliable. For example, Sally described how social media content is potentially specious:

I know it’s biased and it’s anything you see on the Internet. You have to take into account that that’s just one person’s point of view. . . . I know I have a
[mis]construed vision of what it even is just because I’m… just seeing it off of Snapchat, which is not a reputable source.

Similarly, Olive said, “I mean obviously they would think like the news and your [own, independent] research should be the best.” Olive’s views reflected most participants’ ($n = 12; 60\%$) sentiment that social media is a poor source of information for restorative justice and other topics and issues.

Participants indicated that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between factual and fictional content on social media. Poppy said, “It’s sometimes hard, because you know you’re always told from when you’re… little that not everything on social media is real, which is true, but it kind of allows you to have all the information and kind of evaluate it for yourself to the best of your ability.” Poppy’s response suggests that some participants may see social media as a supplement to other forms of education about restorative justice. In other words, the onus is on the individual consumer to assess content in order to determine its validity, which requires an initial familiarity with the topic in order to discern between fact and fiction. This potential perception of social media may be contrasted with traditional forms of media, like newspapers, which have historically acted as initial contacts for consumers to learn more about current events and issues (Jones, 2006). Similarly, Blue said, “Given the nature of especially social media, with all of the opinions and all of the stuff that’s out there, and you know just because it’s on the Internet doesn’t mean it’s true or accurate.”

Similar to considering social media to be misleading, participants frequently viewed it as opinionated and biased as well. Interestingly, I did not directly ask participants if they viewed social media as unbiased or biased. Instead, these themes emerged without prompting as the interviews progressed. Most commonly, participants discussed social media as being biased and/or opinionated in a general sense, or politically polarized. Angel described their interactions and perceptions of using social media as a source of information regarding current events and other issues:

Social media will twist it to only give you like I said, usually, not a lot of middle ground. . . . I’ll see like on social media sometimes based on things that you see in the news they’ll be like stuff made based on either severely politically left or severe politically right based on their opinions.

These participants saw media portrayal of topics, including but not limited to restorative justice, as biased and therefore inaccurate. These participants displayed a lack of trust in different media sources, including news stations. Dixie said, “Personally, like if Fox News is posting on social media about something, I automatically know it’s biased.” Participants viewed content containing a strong
opinion as “biased” and often did not choose to further investigate the validity of the message.

Restorative Justice Use: Nonviolent versus Violent Crimes

Participants’ opinions and beliefs typically differed when participants were asked “How would you feel if someone was participating in a restorative justice program for a nonviolent offense?” and “How would you feel if someone was participating in a restorative justice program for a violent offense?” Most commonly, participants were more accepting of offenders who had committed nonviolent crimes, such as drug offenses, rather than of offenders who had committed violent offenses, such as armed robbery. For example, 15 (75%) participants conveyed viewing restorative justice as a potentially beneficial and positive method of dealing with nonviolent offenders, while 10 (50%) participants said the same for violent offenders. Ray said, “I think more serious or violent crimes or repeat offenders might be placed in more punishment-based facilities and then people who are maybe nonviolent offenders might fall to that restorative justice sort of spectrum.” Skylar said, “I would support it,” in reference to using restorative justice methods for nonviolent offenders. Skylar added, “Whenever it comes to drug crimes, I feel like direct punishment and incarceration isn’t really going to do anything. . . . I feel like rehabilitation is a more promising solution to kind of handling [drug crimes].” The participants’ differing reactions to nonviolent and violent offenders suggest that initial uses of restorative justice could be aimed at nonviolent offenders before moving to violent offenders.

Some participants also believed restorative justice could help humanize offenders for the general public, and identify the root causes of crime. Jane said, “I think the more that we can view them [nonviolent offenders] as people who were in some maybe difficult circumstances and treat them as such and also looking at punishment more like treatment, that we may improve and not need traditional punishments anymore anyway.” Shay said, “I definitely think that makes more sense than putting them in jail,” in reference to using restorative justice programs for nonviolent offenders. Shay also said that violent offenders could benefit from restorative justice practices:

I think that would, I still think it would be better than a traditional form of punishment because you’re working at, like, the actual root of the problem. And, rather than just like reacting to the behavior you’re reacting to, like, what actually is causing the behavior.

Similarly, Lane said, “I almost feel that it’s [restorative justice] a lot more helpful for nonviolent offenses because I feel like it’s a lot easier to get down to root causes of something . . . and, I don’t know, try to fix the factors that cause nonviolent offenses.” Moreover, seven (35%) participants expressed apprehension about using restorative
justice practices rather than traditional forms of punishment with violent offenders. For example, Roxy said, “I would definitely support it, I would just be more cautious, I guess . . . just like if it was me as a community member or whatever, I would want maybe like a closer eye on them, I guess I would just like to have a tighter rein on them.” Participants also suggested implementing restorative justice practices into the current criminal justice system and traditional forms of punishment, especially for violent offenders, as a way to use caution with violent offenders and restorative justice programming. Dixie said:

I also think that there should be like, it should be like a stronger version, and there should also be limitations placed. They should get the education and it should be like a large part of what they’re doing. However, I feel like not necessarily prison but definitely like house arrest and things like that, because that’s dangerous to, like, society and a community, and when it comes to armed robbery, a lot of people could have been hurt, so I think, like, a combination of the two. I wouldn’t say I’m necessarily all for only restorative justice. I’d say I, like, part, I . . . I think parts of restorative justice are important to implement into other systems.

Additionally, I found that participants’ personal experiences with crime and offenders might affect their perceptions of restorative justice. One participant reported a personal experience with drugs and drug users and therefore said they would not be comfortable with drug crimes being directed toward restorative justice programs. This opinion was in the minority, as the majority of the participants were accepting of nonviolent crimes, including drug crimes, being directed toward restorative justice rather than punitive punishment. In addition, some participants recognized that their privilege as White college students influenced their perception of restorative justice and the criminal justice system, more broadly. In other words, participants recognized that the punitiveness of that criminal justice system disproportionately affects people of color, particularly low-income people of color.

Restorative Justice: Soft on Crime

When asked what participants thought the American public would think about restorative justice programs, many believed that Americans would view restorative justice as harmful or negative. Many believed that Americans would see restorative justice as a “second chance” or as being “soft” on crime. Olive said,

I think the fact that they might not perceive it as, like, fair, but they think these people are, if they commit any sort of crime, like they’re outwardly dangerous so . . . a lot of people don’t believe that people deserve second chances, and I kind of could see this as almost sort of a second chance.
Similarly, Skylar said, “I feel like some people may view restorative justice as though restorative justice isn’t truly effective or harsh enough,” and continued to suggest that Americans might see restorative justice as “the easy way out” of punishment. Liz said that Americans might see restorative justice as “not having to really pay punishment for it, like they’re just going to a program, it’s more like a slap on the wrist.” Additionally, restorative justice might be too abstract or intimidating to Americans, according to some participants. Violet said, “I would say the majority of Americans probably don’t like the idea of restorative justice programs. . . . I think that, unless I had a background in criminology and, like, sociology, something like victim-offender mediation would be too scary for a lot of people.” Moreover, Blue said, “I would say most Americans probably would not be in support just because, without really looking into it, some people will be like, it’s, like, an easier way out or it’s not enough.” Participants also suggested that Americans prefer traditional punishment because it is what the public is comfortable and acclimated with when it comes to dealing with crime. Ray said, ‘There’s still very much, like, this sentiment of ‘People need to pay for what they did and be punished for what they did’ . . . so I think restorative justice isn’t seen in the most positive light right now.” Shay echoed this sentiment: “I think sometimes people desire to see others punished or, like, held accountable, and they wouldn’t even see restorative justice as holding people accountable.” Dixie added, “A lot of people like relying on that prison system to feel safe,” which shows how the American people might be more accepting of things that feel like a tradition, or because it is how things have always been done. Participants saw the American public as wanting to avoid dealing with the possible risks of implementing something new, like restorative justice, into the punitive carceral system that has been historically used to deal with crime.

Factors That Influence Perceptions of Restorative Justice in America

While being asked to discuss their perceptions of how Americans view restorative justice, participants were also asked to theorize about potential factors that may influence Americans’ opinions. I asked participants about what specific demographic factors they thought would be influential in Americans’ perceptions of restorative justice, and the most common responses were political affiliation and race. Participants also mentioned age, wealth, and firsthand experiences with addiction or drug crime as factors that might influence how an American may perceive restorative justice. For analysis, I focus on political affiliation and race because these were the two demographic factors discussed extensively by participants. Both the frequency and extent of discussion regarding race and political affiliation suggest that participants believed these factors to be most influential in determining support for or opposition to restorative justice among the American public.
Most commonly, participants (n = 12; 60%) mentioned how race influenced individuals’ perceptions of restorative justice. Additionally, many participants (n = 11; 55%) discussed political affiliation as a demographic factor that might influence perceptions of restorative justice in the United States. Regarding political affiliation, participants typically discussed how they thought conservative-leaning Americans would be less likely to accept or agree with the implementation of restorative justice practices, compared to their liberal-leaning counterparts. Lane said, “Conservative people might feel more negatively towards restorative justice.” Two other participants succinctly articulated this belief:

Conservatives and Republicans are usually more on that punishment and, like, pay for what you did, whereas Liberals and Democrats are usually more of that, like, everyone can contribute to society and we should rehabilitate them and work together within the community. (Ray)

I actually think that more-left-leaning individuals would probably be more open to something along these lines, alternative routes, and I think more-conservative right-leaning individuals would probably, in my experience, be more supportive of the current system that we have. (Blue)

Political affiliation was frequently discussed in relation to possible demographic factors that might influence Americans’ perceptions of restorative justice. Skylar discussed how politics and political affiliation infiltrate many aspects of society and individual daily lives and activities:

I feel like almost everything in our life just boils down to political affiliation and it seems that, overall, you know, those on the liberal side of the spectrum seem to be more understanding and willing to work towards change, whereas those on the conservative end of the spectrum are just kind of... they don’t really want to give people a chance to change.

Participant responses regarding the differences between conservative- and liberal-leaning individuals and their perceptions on restorative justice were echoed frequently. Interestingly, some participants (n = 3; 15%) saw political affiliation as a dividing demographic factor and a cause of conflict. Poppy said, “I feel like I’ve seen specific sides of politics being claimed as a specific movement or program and that kind of deters the other political party from supporting.” Furthermore, Belle also indulged in the idea that the political parties are divided, saying, “The two parties are probably as divided as they’ve ever been, so I think they try and find everything to argue about, so if one party supported, the opposite party is probably gonna bash them.” Participants viewing the political parties as polarized might suggest that this division may pose an obstacle to the implementation of restorative justice practices because the two parties may not agree on the proposal. Shay, while discussing influencing
demographic factors and how Americans might value traditional punishment over restorative justice, said,

I mean, since things have become increasingly polarized like the last few years, especially, I think that people have become very resistant to, like, hearing the opposing side of things or, like, wanting to challenge their beliefs, and restorative justice is like a challenge to the traditional narrative of punishment, so therefore people are… people who have endorsed the previous system would be resistant to that because it’s different and some people don’t like to change.

Similarly, the idea that Americans are resistant to change, or that Americans value traditions such as the punitive methods of the current criminal justice system, was discussed by one participant (5%):

America holds, like, the prison system in really high standing, and it doesn’t really focus on reform or restoring or, like, trying to make you a better person; it’s just purely about punishing what you have done. I think it would be a lot more helpful, and I think they call it a reform system, but it’s not a reform system, and so I think it would be a lot more helpful if it actually was a reform system and, like, other countries have much higher rates of reform that have also, like, nicer jails and prisons and, like, it’s not like what we [America] do as a jail, it’s more of like—honestly, there’s some that like look like hotels—it’s about, you know, learning from your mistakes, instead of just suffering from them. (Grey)

Participants like Grey saw the benefits of taking a rehabilitative approach to dealing with crime and offenders in America; however, many also acknowledged the deep-rooted value and tradition linked with the current punitive justice system and saw the connection between political affiliation as well.

Race was another common demographic factor that participants in the study believed to be significant in an individual’s perception of restorative justice in America. Belle considered the stereotypes that exist within American society regarding crime and criminals and said, “Some people have stereotypes about what race is going to be committing a crime, so I think that kind of thing will play a role.” Participants also considered the difference in experiences with the criminal justice system between racial minorities and White people. Ray said, “I think people who aren’t White might view it a little bit more favorably just because they’ve probably had more experience with the system, whereas people who are White and don’t have that experience might not really take it all that seriously and might be more on that punishment side of things.” Grey also discussed the significance of police discrimination and sentencing disparities in American society and the impacts they might have on an individual’s perception of restorative justice: “People of color might
feel like they’re targeted by the police, and so people of color have, like, charges for possession of marijuana and are serving time for ten times longer than any White person would, or a White person wouldn’t be jailed.” Similarly, Lane said, “I feel like minorities might go more for restorative justice because they’re unfairly represented and a disproportionate amount of people of color are in prisons, so I feel like they would prefer that [restorative justice] more than White people.” Similarly, Blue discussed how the current criminal justice system affects people of color differently than it does White people, often harmfully and destructively:

I also think race might definitely have a lot to do with it. Obviously, different races have different perceptions of the justice system, and, you know, for White people, the justice system has worked for a very long time, and it works great for them. But for people of color, the justice system doesn’t really work great for them a lot of times, so I think, you know, if it works for you, don’t change it, but if it doesn’t work for you, of course you’re gonna want to change it.

Interviews revealed that these participants recognized the existing racial stereotypes and discrimination within the criminal justice system in America, but their responses showed that they do not know how to fully solve these issues in a comprehensive approach.

Future of Restorative Justice

The final question of the interview dealt with what each participant saw as the future of restorative justice, and a potential balance between restorative justice and traditional punitive forms of punishment. Through interviews, the notion emerged that although the current justice system will never be completely abolished or reformed, restorative justice offers an additional way to treat and rehabilitate criminal offenders. Rainbow said, “Everyone’s still going to be in favor of traditional forms of punishment, just because that’s what we’ve known, but I feel like restorative justice could maybe start to balance it out.” Similarly, Jane said,

I don’t think that we will really ever get away completely from traditional forms of punishment from prison and probation, but I think that, again, moving forward, we’re just going to start to see more restorative justice-type programs to really start balancing out, you know, who really deserves to be locked up and who deserves a chance to show that they’re not a criminal.

However, the interviews also revealed that some participants ($n = 3; 15\%$) had doubts about restorative justice as a whole and saw it more as supplemental to traditional punitive forms of punishment for criminal offenders. Dixie acknowledged the practicality and value of restorative justice but also expressed reluctance:

I think it’s really important for society, but it also has its downfalls because we don’t really like . . . personally, I don’t know if it’s, like, more effective than, like,
punishment in the way you know. But, I think it’s a really good idea. I think it’s, just like in a way, there needs to be some compromises between the two [restorative justice and the traditional justice system]…. I think parts of restorative justice are important to implement into other systems…. People aren’t ready to drift towards something new; they’d rather implement new things into it. However, the way I see it, it’s that the prison system needs to be completely reformed in order to even implement new things, because it’s so corrupt. So, people are like… they’re okay with adding change to the system that already exists, but they’re not ready to reroute.

In a similar sense, Grey mentioned that restorative justice needs to be properly funded in order to be successful, and that money may come from the current prison system at some point in the future:

I hope that the criminal justice system will defund the prison system a little bit more and put that money into programs. I don’t know if that will happen anytime soon. But I do hope that it does, and I think that’ll happen eventually. I just don’t know how soon and especially like private prisons, I think they might start closing more and more instead of having private prisons, they might do private reform programs.

Additionally, discussed how there should be specific and detailed descriptions of restorative justice, and guidelines and policies that depict when restorative justice methods are appropriate and when traditional forms of punishment should be utilized.

Blue said,

If restorative justice doesn’t take a better grip, then I do think that the country will not phase out traditional justice anytime soon, if ever. I definitely think it would have to be more of a combined effort, you know, like I said earlier, more case by case, like meet these qualifiers, or, I don’t know, something like that. I think it would definitely even work in partnership, but I don’t see it ever overtaking traditional measures, though.

Overall, participants seemed hesitant to agree to abolishing the traditional justice system completely. Many suggested integrating the two and reforming the current system to be more rehabilitative in nature, rather than punitive.

Belle said,

I think there’s gonna have to establish a really fine line about where the differences are and really identify so there’s, like, no room for debate when someone’s going through, like, trial or whatever. Like, they need to establish certain crimes, definitely get prison time, or what went into the crime, like if weapons were involved, so I think it just, like, would depend on what the person does.
Discussion

The American public has grown increasingly distrustful of the criminal justice system in recent history, especially of the punitiveness of the prison system in the United States. Recent events such as the murder of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery have spiked discussions related to social justice issues and brought the issue of policing and discrimination in the United States, especially on social media platforms, to the forefront of national discourse. Restorative justice offers a promising alternative to the current issues with the criminal justice system, such as mass incarceration and high recidivism rates (Morris & Maxwell, 2001; New York Times 2021; Rossner 2008; Umbreit, 2000; Van Ness & Strong, 2015). Through the completion of 20 interviews and the subsequent qualitative and emergent coding process, the research revealed several trends and patterns regarding the relationship between social media and perceptions of restorative justice. Although my findings suggest that social media does not play a significant role in informing this sample of Gen Z college students about what restorative justice is, it is possible that social media could be harnessed for restorative justice advocacy. Although research exists regarding restorative justice and social media (see Islam [2008] for exceptions), there is a gap in research at its intersection. Social media serves as a method of communication and connection; however, an unanticipated finding suggests that social media might not serve as a significant form of advocacy for restorative justice among students at a medium-sized Midwestern university.

Prior research with social media has revealed the power that media holds in society, and how it is used for marketing, advocacy, and personal agendas (Cheng, 2021; Funk, 2013; Islam, 2008; Wetstein, 1996). Restorative justice advocacy does not appear to be influential on social media platforms, however, given that the majority of college students in this study use social media regularly without knowingly observing or interacting with such content. Additionally, restorative justice content on social media platforms currently appears to serve as a supplemental tool, rather than a dominant or primary source of information or awareness. Instead, educational methods, such as the classroom, continued to be a recurring source of initial awareness of restorative justice for participants. Many participants mentioned that they were introduced to the idea of restorative justice through classwork and educational formats. The lack of exposure to restorative justice messages on social media suggests two possibilities for future research and direction: (1) social media should be harnessed more effectively to spread awareness of restorative justice to a wider audience and (2) educational settings should be utilized more often to teach about and expose people to restorative justice.

Some participants mentioned that without their background as a criminology/sociology/psychology majors or minors, they would not have been aware of restorative justice, let alone understand what it is or how it could be used in society.
These findings suggest that expanding the curriculum of other departments and fields could help increase awareness of restorative justice to people outside the typical fields of social justice.

Participants reported feeling that social media that contained strong opinions or emotions was “biased,” yet they did not verify if the information was indeed factual. The lack of fact-checking and the quick labeling of content as biased is dangerous because it perpetuates the notion that content that challenges an individual’s personal beliefs is biased or opinionated, regardless of its accuracy or validity.

This research revealed several possible patterns related to social media, crime, and forms of justice. For the most part, participants agreed on overall ideas and themes, such as the differences between nonviolent versus violent crimes. Most frequently, participants were more accepting of restorative justice for nonviolent offenders compared to for violent offenders. Many suggested that if restorative justice programs are used with violent offenders, extra caution and regulations should be applied. The participants’ hesitation to implement restorative justice programs with violent offenders might suggest that society start implementing restorative justice programs with nonviolent offenders before trying to use them with violent offenders. This might help ease society into the idea of a restorative approach to crime. Unsurprisingly, many participants believed that the public views restorative justice as “soft on crime.” The belief that restorative justice is an “easy way out” may stem from a lack of understanding of what restorative justice really is and what restorative processes truly entail. This research supports the idea that many people are not familiar with restorative justice, and this lack of familiarity likely fuels myths regarding restorative justice.

Importantly, many participants also recognized the flaws with the current criminal justice system, including recidivism rates and mass incarceration. Participants recognized that restorative justice could be an effective way to help reduce recidivism rates, mass incarceration, and bias within the criminal justice system, and this research suggests that overall public awareness of restorative justice should be increased. The findings also align with prior research regarding general public support for restorative justice practices for nonviolent offenders. Future research should focus on where restorative justice fits into violent offenses.

The findings also revealed trends related to demographic factors that influence the public’s perception of restorative justice, and how restorative justice could be used in society. Race and political affiliation were the two most frequently discussed demographic factors that participants believed to be influential in America’s perception of restorative justice. The interviews revealed that participants thought that conservative versus liberal political beliefs would be influential in how Americans perceive restorative justice. Specifically, the participants believed that conservative-leaning individuals would be less likely to accept restorative justice or to
view it in a positive light compared to more liberal-leaning individuals. Additionally, the participants believed that people of color would be more accepting of restorative justice, compared to White people, because of the history of bias, discrimination, and racism that exists within the current criminal justice system.

It is crucial that society address the root causes of crime, including poverty and institutional discrimination and racism, in order to effectively implement restorative justice practices. Restorative justice approaches often rely on community support and involvement; if the community in which an offender resides or commits a crime is unable to support and become involved with restorative justice attempts because of external factors (e.g. poverty, gun violence, lack of education), the entire community suffers and the program could be ineffective. The future of restorative justice relies heavily on mending the broken and symptomatic communities plagued with crime because of environmental and societal factors beyond their control.

Limitations

The participants I accessed through SONA systems and the snowball sampling methods limited my participant pool to mostly students majoring and/or minoring in psychology, criminology, and sociology. These areas of study may be more likely to address the criminal justice system, which might have made my participants more likely to know what restorative justice is, compared to the general population. This sample may have skewed beliefs regarding crime and the criminal justice system, as their studies focus on examining these issues. If the sample had included a broader spectrum of participants, it is likely that the overall perceptions of restorative justice would have been less positive and accepting. The participants in this study were enrolled in classes that examine the issues and structural failures of the criminal justice system, topics that had likely primed them to be accepting of reform in the criminal justice system. It is also important to note that all the participants in this study went to the same mid-sized Midwestern university. The lack of demographic and locational variety within participants likely also influenced the findings. Future research should aim to pull participants from different areas in the United States and people with varying demographic characteristics.
References


