SUMMARY

Restorative Justice in NYC High Schools
An Evaluation

As the harms and inequities of traditional responses to student misbehavior have come into sharper focus, many schools have adopted some version of restorative justice with the goal of reducing the reliance on suspensions and other "zero tolerance" policies. Founded on Indigenous practices, restorative justice seeks to address the root causes of conflicts, build relationships, and repair harms. Many practitioners have also urged the adoption of an explicit anti-racist framework. But few rigorous evaluations have examined the effects of restorative justice in schools.

An Ambitious NYC Project

In the last decade, the New York City Department of Education has encouraged schools to adopt less punitive ways to manage student behavior. Beginning in the fall of 2017, and continuing until the onset of the pandemic in 2020, restorative justice programming was put in place in five Brooklyn high schools in a district with some of the highest suspension rates in New York City. At each school, full-time staff from the Center for Court Innovation led relationship-building and harm circles to create a space for mutual support among students and staff and to respond to specific conflicts. Schools were also offered individualized training and investments to foster community spirit. The goal was to improve school climate and reduce incidents and suspensions.

Our Study

Ten high schools in the Brooklyn district were randomly divided into two groups: the "treatment" schools received the programming described above, the other "control" group did not. Outcomes in terms of the number of incidents and suspensions and overall school climate were then compared across the two groups.

Along with this effort at *quantifying* the program's impact, we also carried out a *qualitative* evaluation, including interviews and focus groups, in part to capture perceptions of the work's impact.

What We Found

Our findings are marked by a seeming contradiction. On the quantitative side, we found no significant differences in incidents or suspensions between the two groups of schools. This suggests, at least over the period we studied, the program didn't meet one of its key objectives. However, qualitatively, we found both students and teachers felt the program improved relationships, serving as a space for students to openly discuss problems and challenges.

> « *A circle gives time to cry with people—people going through the same stress as you.*

Some school staff emphasized the importance of an opportunity for students to decompress, given that conflicts often result from students "holding things inside."

The portrait that generally emerges of the program from our interviews is of a support system that helps to foster positive relationships and that also supports mental and emotional health, providing tools for navigating what in the past risked becoming volatile conflicts.

> « *There was a time…where I had overreacted and it made me realize… from the other person's side, that I should have thought about something before I did that action… It made me reflect on some of the decisions that I should have taken.*

What These Findings Mean (and *Don't* Mean)

Our findings are mixed, but also encouraging. There are clear signs the program was improving relationships in the five schools, that it helped to create a space for dialogue and support that wasn't there before—significant interim steps toward restorative justice's broader goals.

Yet the use of suspensions proved resistant to change. Our decision to prioritize this metric was in line with the focus of policymakers, as much as many practitioners. But our finding may be evidence more of a flawed theory of change than of a shortcoming of restorative justice. Schools' reliance on suspensions is long-standing. Restorative justice programs are unlikely to influence these systemic responses, at least during early implementation (the period we studied). It's our hope future researchers will consider prioritizing different measures—outcomes more aligned with the overall goals of restorative justice.

For More Information

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Read the full report: https://www.courtinnovation.org/publications/RJ-schools

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