Face-to-face Restorative Justice Conferences are cost-effective in reducing reoffending and increasing victim satisfaction.

Face-to-face Restorative Justice Conferences (RJCs) between offenders and victims have a modest but highly cost-effective impact on reoffending. Victims’ satisfaction with the handling of their cases is consistently higher among those who attend RJCs, compared to those dealt with solely by standard criminal justice processes, usually the courts.

What is this review about?
Restorative justice approaches attempt to repair the harms caused by a crime rather than harming the offender. This review covers face-to-face RJCs in which the offender meets the victims of the crime to discuss the offence and its consequences.

During face-to-face RJCs participants describe how they are connected to the crime, victims describe the harm caused, and everyone – including the offender – talks about how the harm might be repaired.

This review compares the effects of face-to-face Restorative Justice Conferencing with standard criminal justice alone on (a) repeat offending for a two-year period after the disposal of the case and (b) measures of victim satisfaction.

What studies are included?
Included studies have all the following characteristics: (1) a randomized design to test the effects of face-to-face RJCs compared with standard criminal justice alone; (2) a report on face-to-face RJCs between at least one victim of a crime and at least one of the offenders involved; (3) provide data on the frequency of convictions or re-arrest for two years after the disposal of the case in a way which allows calculation of the effects of both treatments; and (4) published in English after 1994.

Ten eligible studies were identified from the United Kingdom (7), Australia (2), and the USA.
How effective are face-to-face RJC interventions? The average effect of the ten studies indicated that face-to-face RJC resulted in offenders committing significantly less crime than their counterparts randomly assigned to standard criminal justice alone. The effect of RJC on violent crime is larger than its effects on property crime.

For victims, again comparing those whose cases were assigned to RJC with those assigned to standard criminal justice, those taking part in face-to-face RJC express higher levels of satisfaction with the handling of their cases, are more likely to receive an apology from offenders and rate these apologies as sincere, be less inclined to want to seek revenge, and suffer less from post traumatic stress symptoms.

What are the implications of this review for policy makers and decision makers? Compared with standard criminal justice, usually through the courts, face-to-face RJC reduce the frequency of subsequent crimes among offenders who are willing to take part in these programmes and whose victims are also willing to consent to RJC. The effects of face-to-face RJC on the frequency of subsequent offending are strongest when these programmes are in addition to conventional justice procedures. The use of face-to-face RJC appears to be highly cost effective: data from the seven UK experiments indicates that the value of benefits of averted crimes is eight times the cost of delivering RJC.

What are the research implications of this review? Recruitment and retention for face-to-face RJC among victims and offenders requires skill and more attention is needed about how to increase uptake.