

Community-level prevention and restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

Restorative justice seeks to repair harm, strengthen accountability, and restore relationships, but its effectiveness depends partly on the social conditions that support victim participation and offender reintegration. This article examined the role of community-level prevention in restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia. Community-level prevention was assessed through community responsibility for harm repair, the involvement of community representatives, awareness of community-based crime-prevention programs, community connection, support for offender reintegration, community awareness of crime impacts, perceived safety, and relationship strengthening. The research was guided by Reintegrative Shaming Theory and used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The target population comprised 17,605 adult victims who had participated in restorative justice programs in metropolitan Melbourne between January 2022 and December 2024. A target sample of 391 victims was selected through stratified and simple random sampling, and 373 completed questionnaires were obtained, yielding a 95.4% response rate. Fourteen justice professionals, comprising magistrates, prosecutors, and probation officers, were purposively selected for key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and simple linear regression, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings showed that 88.20% of victims agreed that communities had a role in repairing harm, 81.23% supported greater community involvement in offender reintegration, and 78.01% believed that restorative justice strengthened community relationships. However, only 42.36% revealed having community members other than family and friends involved directly, and only 66.76% perceived the presence of community-based crime prevention programs. The community-level prevention was moderately positively correlated with program satisfaction ($r = .512$, $p < .001$) and accounted for 26.2% of the variance ($R^2 = .262$). Qualitative evidence indicated that community members enhanced accountability and reintegration, with the participation being characterised as limited because of a lack of awareness, volunteers, and time requirements, as well as a lack of structural investment. The article concludes that at the community level, meaningful, visible, and institutionally supported roles contribute to restorative justice program satisfaction in a significant way. It suggests funded community roles, regular volunteer training, proactive public awareness, and community involvement in all types of restorative justice programs.

Keywords: Community Engagement, Community-Level Prevention, Melbourne, Offender Reintegration, Restorative Justice, Victim Satisfaction

I. INTRODUCTION

Restorative justice shifts the focus on responding to an offense from simply finding who is guilty and what they did wrong to repairing any harm, acknowledging responsibility, and restoring harmed relationships. Zehr (2002) stated that a crime produces obligations since it damages people and relationships. This orientation places a greater responsibility in the hands of victims, offenders, families, and communities to decide upon the direction of action to be taken in addressing harm. In a restorative approach, community involvement is important because crime impacts the broader social context in which victims and offenders reside. Braithwaite (1989) suggested that the focus of disapproval should be on the "transgression", in this instance, the offending conduct and the wrongdoer must remain as a potential law-abiding member of society. The community then gives a community of condemnation that expresses disapproval and the social support that makes reintegration possible.

Community-level prevention takes restorative justice beyond the one conference or mediation session. It entails introducing the concept of restorative justice publicly, collaborating with local groups, neighbourhood mediations, community participants trained to mediate, collective support for victims, and community involvement in the reintegration of the wrongdoer. Pranis (2007) noted that the restorative values can only be sustained if members of the community are engaged in the accountability, repair, and reaffirmation of common norms.

This community role is particularly significant in big cities with diverse ethnic populations. The city of Melbourne has indigenous communities, longstanding residents, and communities that have arrived in the city as migrants, with each group having its own interpretation of justice, harm, authority, and reconciliation. Marchetti and Daly (2007) showed how culturally respectful justice processes can enhance legitimacy when exercised within an environment involving meaningful, not symbolic, authority of respected community members. Cunneen (2020), however, warned that community engagement should take into consideration the diversity in the community, the history of mistrust, and unequal power dynamics within a community.

Restorative justice in Victoria has evolved in various ways, including victim-offender mediation, youth justice conferencing, Koori Court processes and beyond. While these offer the victim the opportunity to voice their opinion and the perpetrator the opportunity to show remorse, the extent of the involvement of the community depends on the type of program. As also pointed out by Daly (2016), institutionalised restorative justice becomes professionally managed and efficiency-driven, and thus may be limited in how it is a practice that involves the community. This variation forms the difference between endorsement of community involvement and community participation. The victims may feel that communities must be involved in repairing harm, supporting reintegration, and benefiting from restorative outcomes, and that the process involves the victim, the offender, the facilitator, and the immediate family members. Wood et al. (2021) pointed out that this conflict between State administration and community ownership has been a recurring problem with Australian restorative justice.

Community-level prevention can impact program satisfaction in a number of ways. Community representatives can affirm the victim's experience, articulate community values, and indicate the community's readiness to supervise and support the reintegration of the offender. Community awareness programmes can also boost awareness around the restorative options, and neighbourhood prevention programmes can help to make places safer and more supportive for participation. Lanterman (2021) highlighted the importance of research in restorative justice, explaining these mechanisms instead of simply reporting that a program seems to have a positive effect. This article analyses the community-level prevention as a multi-faceted effect on the satisfaction of restorative justice programs. It combines the perception of victims on community responsibility, representative involvement, awareness of prevention, community connection, reintegration, safety, and relationship strengthening. It also includes professional perspectives from magistrates, prosecutors, and probation officers on the importance of community engagement and its limitations.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Restorative justice policy provides communities with a crucial role in repairing the harm and assisting in reintegration, yet formal, community-organised programs can continue without communities' ongoing involvement. Although restorative justice reforms frequently talk superficially of the need for community ownership, they are expected to be dependent on the professional staff and a short-life volunteer system for their implementation (Schiff, 2018). It is a risk of restorative justice becoming a light version of case processing, instead of a community-based response to crime. Existing studies have documented positive victim experiences in mediation, conferencing, and community courts. Sherman and Strang (2007) discovered that restorative practices also enhance the satisfaction of the victims, although the role of community-level prevention is not quite as clear. Research has focused more on interaction between the victim and the offender than on public awareness, community representatives, neighbourhood prevention organisations, community safety, or post-process reintegration.

Melbourne's knowledge gap is especially significant because of the city's unique mix of extensive social and cultural diversity and its well-developed restorative justice model. The Victorian Department of Justice (2023) guidance includes community participation and victim support and culturally appropriate practice, but the impact of community-level prevention on victim satisfaction needs empirical examination. In the absence of evidence, community involvement can still be an under-resourced, inconsistently carried out, and hard-to-assess outcome. The practical issue is thus whether they are involved, whether people understand and realise the opportunities for prevention, and whether involvement in the wider system leads to satisfaction with restorative justice. The article addresses this problem by examining both the normative dimension of community responsibility and the structural dimension of prevention awareness and safety. It also reveals the disconnect between the high levels of support offered by the victims for community activities and their experience of community participation.

1.2 Research Objective

To examine the role of community-level prevention in restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia.

1.3 Research Question

To what extent does community-level prevention influence restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The article was guided by Reintegrative Shaming Theory, developed by Braithwaite (1989). The theory makes a distinction between reintegrative and stigmatising shaming. Reintegrative shaming condemns the bad behavior, but retains respect for the person and provides access to the community, whereas stigmatising shaming marks and marginalises the individual. Reintegrative shaming is fundamentally social and community oriented. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) described successful reintegration ceremonies as being performed by those whose views count for the offender, whether this is the family, their victims, or even friends and communities of care. Community involvement strengthens the 'communication of harm' and enhances the credibility of the offer of acceptance as an outcome of establishing accountability.

The theory implies relevance to community-level prevention efforts, as communities are not only present at restorative meetings. They share explicit and evolving rules, encourage those who have been harmed to exercise, enforce contracts, create opportunities to be involved pro-socially, and help offenders reintegrate into community life. Restorative justice processes tend to lead to satisfaction and deeper social repair, where the functions are complemented by public awareness, visibility of prevention structures, and trusted community representatives. Reintegrative Shaming Theory also draws attention to the danger of tokenistic participation. There is a risk that a community representative who is not legitimate, trained, or authoritative will not be able to pass on shared norms or offer meaningful reintegration. The theory thus recommends an evaluation process that looks at normative support for community responsibility and the structural conditions that enable communities to function.

2.2 Empirical Review

The involvement of the community in harm repair is routinely framed as one of the hallmarks of restorative justice. Pranis (2007) identified that those involved in peacemaking circles provided legitimacy, support, and a common understanding of obligations from the community. Through them, the response to crime has become a process that is no longer a private affair between the victim and the perpetrator. Indigenous justice processes offer significant information on the importance of culturally legitimate representatives. Marchetti and Daly (2007) found that the inclusion of Aboriginal elders and respected members who knew community histories and relationships lent weight to the processes of Koori Courts. Their study suggested that community authority to improve accountability is more likely to succeed if the participants see representatives as authentic, not outsiders appointed by the community.

Offender reintegration can also be enhanced with community representation. Reintegration is more credible if those who have voiced disapproval are willing to offer practical acceptance and support in the member's community (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). This process may include mentoring, help with employment, connection to services, and supervision of reparative obligations. Urban restorative justice programs face difficulties sustaining this participation. Schiff (2018) observed that volunteer recruitment, retention, training, and organisational support are recurring challenges. Community participation can consequently depend on a small number of retirees or highly committed volunteers who may not reflect the diversity of the population served.

Public awareness is another condition for community engagement. Hayes (2017) found that knowledge of restorative options influenced whether victims and community members were able to participate meaningfully. Awareness is not limited to knowing that a program exists; it also requires understanding eligibility, participant roles, safety protections, and ways to become involved. Community-level prevention also includes neighborhood structures that build conflict-resolution capacity and collective efficacy. Roche (2019) showed that locally organised peace initiatives can strengthen the ability of communities to address conflict before it escalates. Such initiatives may create relationships and norms that support later restorative processes. Restorative justice may also produce benefits that extend beyond the immediate parties. Church et al. (2021) found that community-service outcomes were valued when they visibly repaired community harm and allowed offenders to make a constructive contribution. This wider benefit can improve the legitimacy of restorative agreements in the eyes of victims and residents.

Community safety is still a key factor. If victims think their neighbourhoods are not safe, they may not attend meetings, connect with the representatives of the community or be interested in supporting the reintegration of offenders. Sherman and Strang (2007) highlighted the importance of restorative participation being voluntary and "safe" in order to achieve positive victim experiences. Community involvement does not necessarily mean it is good. Cunneen (2020) cautioned that a community can recreate exclusion, cultural domination, and imbalance of power when not all representatives are truly accountable to the people they represent. Transparent selection, cultural

competence, role clarity, and safeguards to protect the autonomy of the victim are thus necessary in order to be an effective practice.

Australian studies have also found some conflict between community ownership and professionalisation of institutions. Wood et al. (2021) pointed out that restorative justice can sometimes become quite narrow, with agencies focusing on optics or meeting quotas, rather than maintaining relationships within the community. This tension is especially salient in Melbourne, as programs are being delivered across different communities and with different levels of participation.

2.3 Knowledge Gap

Reviewed literature determined community representatives, public awareness, prevention structures, and reintegration support to be aspects relevant to restorative justice. However, it does not sufficiently measure the connection between them and the degree of satisfaction of the victims in one metropolitan area. Several studies document successful programs but do not collect data on community-level measures of program satisfaction by victims. Another gap relates to the attitudinal and implementation aspects. A victim might be very supportive of community responsibility, but not be in direct contact with community representatives or prevention programming. This article combines descriptive indicators, inferential analysis, and Melbourne professional interview evidence to cover both the gaps.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used the convergent parallel mixed-methods approach in a descriptive survey. Data collection and analysis were both quantitative and qualitative, conducted in the same phase and synthesised during interpretation. Creswell and Clark (2018) noted that this design is suitable for the explanation of relationships from a numerical context, which demands the necessity of engaging with participants who have first-hand experience in the institution. The quantitative portion involved examining the perceptions of victims and the association between victim satisfaction with community-level prevention and restorative justice programs. The qualitative component examined how magistrates, prosecutors, and probation officers understood community participation, volunteer capacity, awareness, and structural support. The two strands were used to identify convergence and differences between victim experience and professional practice.

3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out in metropolitan Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Melbourne was suitable as it has a track record of introducing restorative justice practices, such as youth justice conferencing, Koori Court processes and victim-offender mediation. The culturally diverse population also made it a relevant environment in which to explore the ways in which community engagement operates within various social and institutional contexts.

3.3 Target Population

The main cohort of individuals was 17,605 adult victims those who engaged with formal restorative justice activities in metropolitan Melbourne, from January 2022 to December 2024. Eligible participants included direct victims ages 18 and above who had engaged with a formal restorative process (including victim-offender mediation, a youth justice conference, or a Koori Court process). The qualitative population comprised justice professionals who have experience with justice referrals and processes in the context of restorative justice.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Procedures

Taro Yamane's formula produced a target sample of 391 victims from the finite population. The victim sample was stratified by program type, offense category, and geographic area, after which simple random sampling was applied within the strata. A total of 373 usable questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 95.4%. Fourteen key informants were purposively selected because of their professional roles and restorative justice experience. They comprised five magistrates, five prosecutors, and four probation officers. Purposive selection ensured that the interviews captured referral, adjudication, prosecution, supervision, and reintegration perspectives.

3.5 Data Collection Instruments

Data on victims were collected using a structured questionnaire. A five-point Likert scale was employed to measure eight community-level prevention indicators; moreover, some dichotomous items were added to measure direct community involvement, attendance at crime-prevention events, community benefit, and change in community trust. Key informants' detailed professional accounts were obtained using semi-structured interview schedules. The questionnaire was mostly sent electronically via a secure survey matrix with the assistance of appropriate restorative

justice and victim-service developments. These were individual interviews, which were recorded with consent and then transcribed for thematic analysis. The use of both instruments enabled the research to compare the experiences reported by the victims and the institutional explanations.

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Expert review and pilot testing were conducted to achieve both content and face validity. The community-level prevention scale was explored for construct validity using Principal Component Analysis. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was .851, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(28) = 1,892.456$, $p < .001$; it was concluded that the items were appropriate for factor analysis. Two components (total variance 68.7%) resulted from the analysis. The former was the community values and reintegrative norms, and the latter was the prevention awareness and community safety. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .812, showing acceptable internal consistency.

3.7 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 31. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarised the descriptive findings. Pearson correlation assessed the direction and strength of the relationship between community-level prevention and program satisfaction, while simple linear regression estimated the variance explained by community-level prevention. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically through familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation. The descriptive and inferential results were compared with the qualitative themes. Remler and Van Ryzin (2021) highlighted that such integration contributes to the interpretation by linking patterns in relation to institutional processes.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval and institutional permissions were obtained. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and it was explained that participants could withdraw or refuse to participate at any time. Identifying data was omitted from the victim questionnaires, and role-based codes were assigned to key informants. All digital records were secured using a password, and all excerpts from the interviews were de-identified. Participants could skip questions that caused discomfort, and victim-support information was made available where necessary. Professional role, confidential identifier, month, and year of interview recording were retained for the reporting of the qualitative evidence.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Response Rate and Construct Validity

Of the 391 questionnaires distributed to victims, 373 were completed and analysed, producing a 95.4% response rate. The high response rate provided a strong basis for assessing community-level prevention within the participating population. The qualitative evidence was obtained from fourteen justice professionals drawn from the magistracy, prosecution, and probation services. Principal Component Analysis confirmed that community-level prevention comprised two related dimensions. Community values and reintegrative norms captured the belief that communities should repair harm, support reintegration, and strengthen relationships. Prevention awareness and safety captured knowledge of local prevention programs, perceptions of safety, and observable community outcomes.

Table 1

Factor Structure for Community-Level Prevention Items

Item	Community values and reintegrative norms	Prevention awareness and safety
Community role in repairing harm	.782	—
Value of community representatives	.745	—
Awareness of community prevention programs	—	.801
Restored connection to the community	.612	.534
Community support for offender reintegration	.723	—
Improved community awareness of crime impacts	.588	.641
Community perceived as safe	—	.769
Restorative justice strengthens relationships	.698	.512

Source: Research Data (2026). Loadings below .500 were suppressed; cross-loadings above .500 were retained.

Table 1 shows that the scale did not treat community-level prevention as a single undifferentiated concept. The strong loadings for community responsibility, representative involvement, and reintegration support demonstrated

a coherent normative dimension. The strong loadings for program awareness and community safety demonstrated that victims also distinguished tangible prevention structures from general support for restorative principles.

4.1.1 Victims' Perceptions of Community-Level Prevention

Respondents assessed eight statements concerning the role of communities in restorative justice and crime prevention. Table 2 combines the response categories to show disagreement, neutrality, and agreement while retaining the original means and standard deviations. The table is introduced as a summary of the principal descriptive patterns rather than as a replacement for the item-level analysis.

Table 2

Summary of Descriptive Findings on Community-Level Prevention (n = 373)

Indicator	Disagree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Agree n (%)	Mean	SD
Community role in repairing harm	16 (4.29)	28 (7.51)	329 (88.20)	4.29	0.78
Community representatives were valuable	29 (7.77)	56 (15.01)	288 (77.21)	4.01	0.91
Awareness of community prevention programs	57 (15.28)	67 (17.96)	249 (66.76)	3.74	1.07
Restored connection to the community	47 (12.60)	72 (19.30)	254 (68.09)	3.83	1.03
Community support for offender reintegration	26 (6.97)	44 (11.80)	303 (81.23)	4.08	0.87
Improved community awareness of crime impacts	38 (10.19)	82 (21.98)	253 (67.83)	3.83	0.99
Community perceived as safe	51 (13.67)	69 (18.50)	253 (67.83)	3.79	1.05
Restorative justice strengthens relationships	28 (7.51)	54 (14.48)	291 (78.01)	4.01	0.88

Source: Research Data (2026). "Agree" combines Agree and Strongly Agree; "Disagree" combines Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

Community responsibility for harm repair was widely endorsed, the strongest finding. A total of 329 respondents (88.20%) agreed that the local community plays a role in the solution to harm caused by crime, having the highest mean of 4.29. The standard deviation was low, suggesting that this item was experienced by most respondents and was not only among members of one small group. This finding corroborated Zehr's (2002) belief that the obligation to restore goes beyond the state and the primary parties involved. It also embodied reintegration in line with Reintegrative Shaming Theory as it was community members who offered the social envelope in which wrongdoing is condemned, and reintegration is provided. The evidence indicated that community participation was not routinely viewed by victims as being against their interests.

There was also strong support for community involvement in offender reintegration. The mean score was 4.08, with 81.23% of the respondents agreeing that communities should play a greater role. The result contradicted the theory that the victims would always prefer that the offenders be excluded after such a restorative process. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) stated that for reintegration to be feasible, there must be a practical acceptance by the community after a responsibility phase. The present result indicated that victims recognised this wider community function. Reintegration was therefore understood as a community-safety strategy rather than as an excuse for wrongdoing. Community representatives were positively assessed by 77.21% of respondents. Elders, volunteers, and community panel members were valued because they could express local norms, support the victim, and demonstrate that the community was prepared to supervise the offender's return. Marchetti and Daly (2007) similarly found that respected community representatives strengthened the authority of culturally grounded restorative processes.

Victims also believed that restorative justice strengthened community relationships. The 78.01% positive response and a mean of 4.01 showed that participants saw benefits extending beyond the immediate agreement. This result supported Pranis (2007), who described restorative processes as opportunities to rebuild trust and reciprocal responsibility. The structural indicators were positive but less consistent. Awareness of community-based prevention programs recorded the lowest mean, 3.74, and the largest standard deviation, 1.07. Although 66.76% agreed that they knew of such programs, approximately one-third were neutral or disagreed, indicating uneven visibility across neighborhoods.

Awareness is important because community members will not use, support, or volunteer in programs that they are not aware of. Hayes (2017) stated the importance of providing information in order to achieve genuine restorative participation. The result thus indicated a lack of gap between the presence of community prevention mechanisms and their availability for victims. Restoration of community connection was reported by 68.09% of respondents. This indicated that many victims found restorative justice to be useful for them in order to deal with their feelings of isolation and mistrust, which can stem from being victims. The fairly high neutral response, however, suggested that this was not always guaranteed, and that it could rise or fall based on the quality of community participation pre, during, and after the restorative process.

The perception of security in the community was also favorably but differently rated. Overall, 67.83% thought their communities were safe, 13.67% felt the opposite, and 18.50% had no opinion. The findings showed that restorative justice is practised across street-level neighbourhoods with varying degrees of crime exposure, sense of neighbourhood, and trust of neighbourhood institutions. Community awareness of the impact of crime was positively assessed by 67.83% of respondents. This outcome indicated that restorative processes are educative for such community members when they come into contact with the account coming from the victim, as well as the consequences of the offence. Sherman and Strang (2007) noted that this learning can have beneficial effects in terms of strengthening informal social control and enhancing the community's understanding of harms.

4.1.2 Actual Community Involvement and Wider Community Outcomes

Four additional questions examined whether the positive attitudes reported in Table 2 were reflected in direct community participation and wider outcomes. Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage of the Yes and No responses. The questions distinguished community members from the victim's personal family and friendship network.

Table 3

Additional Findings on Community Involvement and Outcomes (n = 373)

Question	Yes n (%)	No n (%)
Community members beyond friends or family were directly involved	158 (42.36)	215 (57.64)
Victim had participated in a community crime-prevention event	132 (35.39)	241 (64.61)
Restorative outcome benefited the wider community	332 (89.01)	41 (10.99)
Restorative experience changed trust in the local community	193 (51.74)	180 (48.26)

Table 3 revealed a substantial implementation gap. Only 42.36% of victims reported direct involvement by community members beyond friends and family, whereas 88.20% believed that communities had a role in repairing harm. Normative endorsement minus participation indicated that practice had lesser importance than its value in community engagement. A gap was also apparent in the community prevention activity. Only 35.39% of respondents had participated in an event focused on crime prevention. This restricted involvement meant that victims were not given the opportunity to share their experience with public education, the development of prevention plans, and/or community safety initiatives. Less than half (37%) said that they had only a little direct involvement, but 89.01% thought that restorative outcomes had a positive impact on the broader community. Community service, treatment involvement, restitution, and decreased conflict might have been viewed as a general public good, while community members were not necessarily at the conference. This is also consistent with Church et al. (2021), who concluded that it was the visible reparative outcomes that reinforced public legitimacy.

There was less uniformity in their impact on community trust. Slightly more than half, 51.74%, reported that their restorative experience changed their trust in the local community, while 48.26% reported no change. The close split indicated that for some victims, the individual restorative process was useful for rebuilding trust, but the individual process was not necessarily the most effective at repairing community relationships in all cases.

4.1.3 Professional Perspectives on Community-Level Prevention

Interviews with magistrates, prosecutors, and probation officers provided the explanation for the discrepancy between robust victim advocacy for community-based approaches and the lack of implementation. The professionals reported that at all times, the community representatives could offer moral authority and cultural legitimacy, support to the victims, and community linkage to the reintegration of the offenders. They also cited challenges in regular participation, including a lack of volunteers, a lack of public awareness, and a lack of institutional investment.

“When we have community elders in the conference, something shifts. The offender realises that this is not just about the victim and the state. This is about the community, their neighbors, their church, their cultural group. The elder does not need to say much. Their presence alone communicates that the community is watching, the community cares, and the community is willing to welcome the offender back if they take responsibility. I have seen offenders respond to elders in ways they never respond to me or the prosecutor.” (Magistrate [M004], Key Informant Interview, 4 May 2026).

The magistrate explained that community presence could be another authority in a different way than the legal authority. The representative communicated that the harm had social consequences, while also indicating that reintegration remained possible after accountability. This account directly assisted with the high victim ratings for community responsibility and representative involvement.

“We talk about community involvement all the time, but honestly, it does not happen much. We struggle to find community members willing to volunteer. People have jobs, families, commitments. Even when they want to help, they cannot take time off work to sit in a conference that might last three hours. So we

end up with the same handful of retirees doing most of the community volunteering. They are wonderful, but they are not representative of the community, and they burn out quickly. The system is not set up for genuine community engagement.” (Prosecutor [P004], Key Informant Interview, 5 May 2026).

The prosecutor pointed out structural and not attitudinal barriers. Community members may be proponents of restorative justice but be unable to volunteer due to a lack of time, flexibility, and emotional effort. A small number of volunteers was also a concern regarding the representativeness and continuity.

“Most people in the community have no idea what restorative justice is. I mention it to friends and family, and they look at me blankly. Some think it is a program for juvenile offenders only. Some have never heard the term at all. How can we expect community members to volunteer for something they do not even know exists? We need a public awareness campaign, not just a website, but real outreach: community forums, information sessions at libraries and community centers, partnerships with local organisations. People cannot engage with what they do not know.” (Probation Officer [PO003], Key Informant Interview, 6 May 2026).

This account described the low awareness score and the fact that few people were involved in community prevention programs. Passive publication of information was deemed inadequate in that it relied on residents to know what to look for. The suggested solution included local forums, libraries, and community centres as well as partnerships that could reach individuals via familiar structures.

“We treat community involvement as an add-on, something nice to have if we have time and resources. That is backwards. Community engagement should be built into the core budget and core operations of every RJ program. We need paid community liaison positions, not volunteers expected to coordinate other volunteers. We need dedicated funding for volunteer recruitment, training, and support. We need to measure community engagement as a key performance indicator, not just count how many cases we processed. Until we invest structurally, community engagement will remain tokenistic.” (Magistrate [M005], Key Informant Interview, 7 May 2026).

The magistrate related limiting involvement with budgeting, staffing, and performance measurement. When relying on voluntary time and unpaid coordination, it was unlikely that the community could be engaged on an ongoing basis. The evidence thus pointed to the need for an institutional framework that considers community involvement as integral to the delivery of programmes for meaningful participation to happen.

“The Koori Court model shows what is possible when you invest in community engagement. They have Aboriginal elders who are respected, who are supported, who have real authority in the process. That did not happen by accident. It happened because the community demanded it, and the system invested resources to make it work. We need to learn from that model and apply it to other communities, migrant communities, youth, different faith groups. But that requires sustained funding and genuine partnership, not just consultation.” (Prosecutor [P005], Key Informant Interview, 11 May 2026).

The prosecutor utilised the Koori Court framework to differentiate between real power and fake consultation with the Kooris. The account reinforces Marchetti and Daly's (2007) conclusion that community engagement is most effective through community representatives who are valued and supported and have a degree of influence over the process.

4.1.4 Relationship between Community-Level Prevention and Program Satisfaction

Pearson correlation and simple linear regression were used to determine whether community-level prevention was associated with restorative justice program satisfaction. Table 4 summarises the principal inferential results. The independent variable was the composite community-level prevention score, while the dependent variable was restorative justice program satisfaction.

Table 4

Inferential Results for Community-Level Prevention and Program Satisfaction

Statistic	Result	Interpretation
Pearson correlation	$r = .512, p < .001$	Moderate positive relationship
Model summary	$R^2 = .262$; Adjusted $R^2 = .259$	26.2% of satisfaction variance explained
ANOVA	$F(1, 371) = 134.567, p < .001$	Regression model statistically significant
Regression coefficient	$B = .478$; $SE = .041$; $\beta = .512$	Positive predictive contribution
Coefficient test	$t = 11.601, p < .001$	Coefficient statistically significant
95% confidence interval for B	[.397, .559]	Estimated effect excludes zero
Durbin-Watson	1.723	No problematic residual autocorrelation

Dependent variable: Restorative justice program satisfaction.

Source: Research Data (2026).

The Pearson coefficient showed a moderate positive relationship, $r = .512$, $p < .001$. Victims who reported stronger community responsibility, representative involvement, prevention awareness, connection, reintegration support, safety, and relationship strengthening also reported higher restorative justice program satisfaction. The result established that the association was statistically reliable. The regression model was significant, $F(1, 371) = 134.567$, $p < .001$, and community-level prevention explained 26.2% of the variance in satisfaction. This was a meaningful contribution because satisfaction is influenced by several personal, procedural, and institutional factors. The adjusted R^2 of .259 indicated that the estimate remained stable after adjustment. The unstandardised coefficient was positive, $B = .478$, $SE = .041$, $p < .001$. A one-unit increase in the community-level prevention score was associated with an estimated .478-unit increase in program satisfaction. The confidence interval, .397 to .559, excluded zero and indicated a precise positive effect.

The result supported Reintegrative Shaming Theory by showing that community context was related to victim evaluation of restorative justice. Community-level prevention was not merely a distant policy aspiration; it was associated with how victims judged fairness, respect, accountability, and the overall value of the program. The moderate size of the relationship also indicated that community engagement should complement rather than replace high-quality victim participation and support. Sherman and Strang (2007) similarly found that community engagement was related to positive restorative outcomes, although the immediate quality of the restorative encounter remained important. The present evidence adds a Melbourne-specific explanation by showing that victims valued community responsibility and reintegration while experiencing limited actual community involvement. The statistical relationship was therefore accompanied by an identifiable implementation gap.

4.2 Contribution to Knowledge

The article distinguishes two dimensions of community-level prevention. The first is normative, involving beliefs about community responsibility, representative value, reintegration, and relationship repair. The second is structural, involving awareness of prevention programs, perceived safety, and actual opportunities for community participation. The main contribution is the identification of a support-participation gap. Victims strongly supported the community's role, but fewer than half experienced direct involvement by community members beyond family and friends. This is important because, in practice, community-level prevention was less developed and was significantly positively associated with satisfaction. The integrated evidence also demonstrates it is not just a lack of motivation but an institutional lack. Justice professionals indicated a lack of volunteer resources, a lack of awareness, a lack of time, and community engagement as secondary. Funded coordination, representative recruitment, training, and evaluation are needed at the community level for sustainable prevention.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Community-level prevention significantly influenced restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne. Victims overwhelmingly supported community responsibility for harm repair, community involvement in the reintegration of the offender, the value of community representatives, and the capacity of restorative justice to enhance community relationships. The moderate positive correlation and significant regression model supported that these conditions in the community were related to a higher satisfaction level. The results also clearly showed a lack of implementation. Direct involvement of the community beyond the victim's social circle was found in only 42.36% of victims; knowledge about community-based prevention programmes was also inconsistent. The evidence provided by professionals indicated that, predominantly due to the lack of volunteers, the time pressures, poor communication with the public, and insufficient investments in structures, the participation rate was low.

Community-level prevention should thus be viewed as a value and an institutional capacity. Without information and full representation of trained advocates and coordinators, resources, and recognised authority, normative support alone cannot result in meaningful engagement. Community involvement that is genuine, culturally legitimate, and linked to tangible means of prevention and reintegration is more likely to meet the needs of victims in restorative justice programs.

5.2 Recommendations

Paid community roles in restorative justice programmes should be funded through the Victorian Department of Justice. The recruitment, training, schedule planning, and follow-up of these officers should be done in a representative way, not informally through the volunteer system. Additionally, the quality of the program commitment to the community should be measured as a program performance indicator. Restorative justice agencies need to be involved in community forums, libraries, schools, and various culturally specific and other organisations on an ongoing basis to reach out in the community to raise awareness. Communication should detail to residents how they

might access roles in the program, roles available, safety protections, victim rights, and program eligibility. Relying on a central website passively should not be considered sufficient outreach.

Community representative involvement should be increased in victim-offender mediation or in other adult programs; it should not just be restricted to youth conferences or culturally specific courts. Representatives to be trained, have clear authority and selected transparently in restorative practice and trauma-informed engagement. Consent and safety of the victim must still continue to be a condition precedent for their participation. Volunteer participation should be feasible in terms of time shift, travel, and childcare costs, remote opportunities, and recognition of the time and emotionally required. These moves would expand the number of volunteers and lessen the emphasis on a small group of unrepresentative people. Case completion is not the only indicator of program evaluation. Indicators should include the proportion of cases where there has been meaningful community participation, victim ratings of representative legitimacy, awareness of local prevention services, reintegration support, community trust, and expanded community benefits. These would reveal whether or not restorative justice is truly a community-based process.

Declaration of Interest

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