Direct participation and restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia

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Recommended Reference: Kimutai, F., Oruta, E., & Luhombo, C. A. (2026). Direct participation and restorative justice program satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia. *African Quarterly Social Science Review, 3*(4), 1039–1046.
https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.83

ABSTRACT

Restorative justice can give opportunities to victims to voice harms and shape responses, although the quality, safety, and level of practical support in which they are engaged can vary. This article explores how direct involvement is related to satisfaction with restorative justice programmes in Melbourne, Australia. A mixed methods approach was used with a convergent parallel design guided by a Reintegrative Shaming Theory. The target population consisted of 17,605 victim adults who were registered to have gone through restorative programmes from January 2022 to December 2024. The final number of questionnaires obtained was 373 as a result of a target sample of 391, which was stratified and then randomly selected. Fourteen justice professionals were purposively interviewed. Descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation and simple regression were employed in quantitative analysis, while qualitative accounts were analysed according to a thematic analysis. There was high acceptance for respectful facilitation (84.72 %), agreement fairness (81.50 %), empowerment (78.82 %) and opportunities for expression of emotions (78.29 %). There was less support for Physical safety (54.42%). While 91.96% said they received family or friend support, only 29.49% said that they would want to go through this process again. The reported association for direct involvement and satisfaction was positive ($r = .684$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .468$). Professional accounts all highlighted facilitator competence, time, preparation and suitable meeting rooms. Results indicated that the account of participation was not always positive. Cross-sectional self-report data and overlap between participation and satisfaction measures limited causal interpretation. Providers should strengthen facilitation, preparation, safety arrangements, and flexible participation formats, and evaluate reasons for reluctance to participate again.

Keywords: Direct Participation; Restorative Justice; Victim Satisfaction; Facilitation; Victim Safety; Melbourne

I. INTRODUCTION

Restorative justice gives persons affected by an offence an opportunity to discuss harm, responsibility, and an appropriate response. Its participatory promise differs from a process in which the victim mainly provides evidence for a decision made by legal professionals. Christie (1977) questioned the removal of conflicts from the people most directly affected by them. His argument provides a basis for examining whether participation returns a meaningful voice to victims or merely places them in another professionally controlled setting.

Direct participation is more than attendance at a meeting. It includes opportunities to explain the consequences of an offence, receive a respectful response, ask questions, influence the discussion, and contribute to an agreement. Daly (2016) distinguished restorative justice processes from the broader aspirations associated with the term. This distinction matters because the presence of a restorative programme does not establish that participants experienced its intended qualities.

Victim satisfaction also involves more than agreement completion. In this study, programme satisfaction encompassed perceptions of justice, fairness, overall satisfaction, and respect and responsibility. A victim could approve of an agreement while remaining uncomfortable with the meeting, or value being heard without wishing to repeat the experience. Examining these differences helps prevent favourable overall assessments from concealing weaknesses in particular aspects of participation.

Evidence from victim-offender mediation has linked positive victim experiences with opportunities for dialogue and involvement. Umbreit et al. (2004) reviewed practice and research across three decades and identified substantial support for mediation while also drawing attention to variation in programme operation. Their work provides a

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foundation for studying participation quality, but it does not establish that all programmes or all victims benefit equally. Local investigation remains important where programme formats, access arrangements, and participant needs differ.

Metropolitan Melbourne provided the setting for the present investigation. The participating population included adults whose experiences were recorded under victim-offender mediation, youth justice conferencing, Koori Court processes, and other restorative programme categories. These categories were retained as the study's sampling classifications rather than treated as identical institutional arrangements. The inquiry concentrated on how victims experienced participation and how justice professionals explained the conditions supporting or constraining it.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Restorative programmes can provide a forum for victims without ensuring that they have sufficient time, safety, support, or influence within that forum. Respectful facilitation may coexist with limited discussion, uncertain offender responsiveness, or an intimidating meeting environment. Consequently, participation must be examined through the experience it provides rather than through the number of meetings held.

Previous research established the potential value of restorative encounters, but it did not remove the need to examine how different participation features operated together in Melbourne. Strang et al. (2013) found benefits for victims in randomised studies of face-to-face conferencing, but the participating cases required consent from victims and offenders. Those findings do not automatically explain experiences across a mixed population using different restorative formats. The present study addressed this contextual gap by combining victims' ratings of participation with professional accounts of facilitation and delivery conditions.

A further problem concerned the relationship between favourable participation ratings and willingness to participate again. These are not necessarily interchangeable measures, and the reasons for their divergence cannot be assumed. The study therefore considered the quality of participation, reported satisfaction, and additional experience questions together. This approach allowed positive findings and less favourable experiences to remain visible within the same analysis.

1.2 Research Objective and Question

The objective was to investigate the relationship between direct participation and restorative justice programme satisfaction in Melbourne, Australia. The corresponding question was: How was direct participation associated with restorative justice programme satisfaction? The analysis retained the study's focus on participation quality without interpreting a cross-sectional association as a causal effect.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Reintegrative Shaming Theory

The study was guided by Braithwaite's (1989) Reintegrative Shaming Theory. The theory distinguished disapproval of wrongdoing from rejection of the person who committed it. Reintegrative responses communicate the seriousness of harm while retaining the possibility of acceptance and lawful community membership. Stigmatising responses, by contrast, attach a degrading identity to the person and weaken reintegration.

Victim participation is relevant to this distinction because the consequences of offending must be understood rather than reduced to an abstract breach of rules. An opportunity to communicate harm can support accountability, while respectful facilitation can prevent that communication from becoming humiliation. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) examined the conditions of successful reintegration ceremonies and emphasised the social organisation of such encounters. Setting and quality of interaction are their analytical conceptualisation in addition to the formal decision to convene a meeting.

The theory gave a framework to understand that the victim experiences a voice, the offender listens, that the victim feels empowered, and that agreements are just. But it did not imply that the victim had to forgive or that reintegration should be enforced or that the victim had to meet with the offender against their will. A process that relies on forced participation would be in conflict with the respectful engagement discussed herein. Physical security and emotional assistance were consequently deemed as a prerequisite of belonging through participating, and not as an incidental, administrative detail.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Victim Voice, Dialogue, and Empowerment

According to Umbreit et al. (2004), it was reported consistently throughout victim-offender mediation research that the victim was included in the discussion of harm and was given an opportunity to participate in how the consequences of the harm could be addressed. They also found that in their experience, the nature of inclusion in practice is often much harder to glean from programme names. Various set-ups can facilitate other voice/prep/dialogue

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opportunities. The relevant question is, thus, not one of mere presence, but whether a victim was influenced or not in a process.

Daly (2002) critiqued idealistic depictions of restorative justice and looked at the gap between the aspirations for and the actual experiences of restorative justice. This point of view lends credibility to an interpretation that sees any expression of satisfaction as evidence of transformation. Positive evaluations can exist in the context of partial or incomplete acknowledgment and incomplete procedural or engagement. Taken together, these studies support examining several participation indicators rather than relying on one general satisfaction statement.

2.2.2 Safety and Facilitation

Strang et al. (2013) synthesised randomised evaluations of face-to-face restorative conferences and found higher victim satisfaction than in the comparison conditions. Importantly, the review concerned cases in which victims and offenders had agreed to participate before allocation. Consent was therefore part of the boundary of the evidence, not a minor feature that could be omitted when applying the findings. The review supports attention to participation while cautioning against extending its conclusions to unwilling or unsuitable participants.

Jeffries et al. (2021) examined practitioner and service-provider perspectives on adult restorative justice and gendered violence in Queensland. Their analysis drew attention to professional concerns about safety and the conditions under which restorative work could proceed. It was not an evaluation proving that a particular safeguard caused better outcomes. Its contribution here is to reinforce the need to distinguish opportunities for dialogue from the preparation and protections that make dialogue appropriate.

2.2.3 Participation and Programme Satisfaction

The literature suggests that participation can contribute to satisfaction through voice, respectful treatment, acknowledgment of harm, and influence over outcomes. However, these concepts overlap, and a survey that measures them in both predictor and outcome scales may partly capture the same evaluative experience. Daly's (2016) emphasis on conceptual clarity is useful in this respect. A positive statistical relationship should be interpreted alongside the actual item wording and the limits of self-reported data.

The gap addressed by the study was therefore specific rather than a claim that participation had never been investigated. It focused on the mix between participation rating, extra questions on participation experience, and professional explanations in the Melbourne sample. Positive evaluations were included in the analysis along with concerns for safety and participation again. This offered a more particular explanation than a general partaking in the validity of restorative justice for a conclusion.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a descriptive, cross-sectional design with a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach. The questionnaire data came from victims, and the interview data from justice professionals, collected as one study phase, analysed separately from each other and combined in the interpretation phase. This was an appropriate design to analyse numerical response patterns in addition to explanations of institutional practice. Convergence, as it was presented by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), is a practice in which complementary evidence is brought together as a way to go beyond any one strand of evidence.

3.2 Study Area and Population

The study was carried out in Metropolitan Melbourne in Victoria, Australia. The total number of adult victims for which data for this quantitative target population was collected ranged from 17,605 in January 2022 to 17,872 in December 2024. Sampling classifications were victim-offender mediation, youth justice conferencing, Koori Court processes and other types of programmes. The qualitative population comprised of justice professionals who have experience with restorative referrals, adjudication, prosecution or supervision.

With geographical and programme diversity, it has been possible to focus on participation across a range of delivery settings. But participants in the sample were those who were in a restorative process, not all those who could have been. It thus could not capture the experiences of everyone who refused, was not referred or could not obtain access. Findings were considered as accounts rendered in the study context by participating victims and professionals.

3.3 Sample Size and Sampling

The Yamane's (1967) formula for the smallest finite population was used to determine a target sample of 391 victims. A stratified simple random sampling with stratification related to programme type, type of offence and

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geographic location was used for the victim sample. A total of 373 questionnaires were received from the target sample, with a 95.4% response rate. Descriptive results were calculated using the sample that was obtained, and not the desired sample.

The qualitative part included 14 justice actors: five magistrates, five prosecutors and four probation officers. They were intentionally chosen due to the incorporation of restorative justice processes and decisions related to participation in their work. Their accounts did not supplant victims' reports, although they complemented them. The two respondent groups were not aggregated, but each was used as a source of evidence.

3.4 Instruments and Data Collection

Direct participation was assessed using an eight-item, five-point Likert scale direct participation questionnaire, where the continuum ranged from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree. The topics covered are emotional expression, respectful conversation, offender listening, empowerment, complete conversation, physical safety, emotional support, and fairness of agreement. Four other questions focused on whether they had been involved face-to-face, whether they had received support from family or friends, how well they felt the offender understood them and whether they felt they wanted to be involved in the program again. Twelve items asked about justice, fairness, satisfaction, and respect and responsibility, all of which were operationalised as measures of programme satisfaction.

Questionnaires were either sent via a safe website or by post where necessary. Over the course of semi-structured interviews, facilitation, voice of the victim(s), format of the meeting, safety, time, and physical environment were explored. Interviews took place on an individual basis, either in-person or via secure video conference and were consented to and recorded. Qualitative findings are reported as summarised practitioner narratives, with anonymised occupational ascription.

3.5 Instrument Quality and Data Analysis

A pilot exercise in Geelong and an expert review were used to assess instrument clarity and relevance. Twenty-one items were used on the direct-participation scale, which had a pilot Cronbach's alpha of .876 for eight victim respondents. This was preliminary evidence from a small pilot that does not measure the quality of all measurements across all programme types. Tavakol and Dennick (2011) clarified that alpha is not a standalone certificate of validity, but rather needs to be interpreted in relation to the scale and its items.

The data was analysed based on descriptive analysis, Pearson correlation and simple linear regression in SPSS Version 31 for quantitative data. The frequencies of items were kept, and the adjacent categories of agreement and disagreement were collapsed and presented. The reported association and explained variance were interpreted without causal language. Qualitative analysis followed familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, and interpretation, consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2022) thematic approach.

3.6 Ethics and Analytical Limitations

The study reported ethical approval through Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology and institutional permissions for access. Participants received study information, provided consent, and could decline questions or withdraw. Questionnaire identifiers were omitted, interviewees were coded, and records were stored securely. Support information was made available because recalling victimisation could cause distress.

The cross-sectional design could not establish whether better participation caused satisfaction or whether satisfied participants evaluated participation more positively. Both constructs were self-reported, and their shared content concerning fairness and respect may have increased the observed association. The mixed-format sample also requires caution when interpreting items referring to a direct meeting. The results below use the reported full-sample denominator and do not present meeting-safety ratings as estimates for the face-to-face subgroup alone.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Victims’ Assessments of Direct Participation

The 373 usable questionnaires provided the basis for the item-level analysis. Table 1 presents the eight participation indicators in their original sequence. Agreement combines agree and strongly agree, while disagreement combines disagree and strongly disagree. Counts are shown with percentages so that the distribution remains visible rather than being reduced to a favourable mean.

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Table 1

Victims' Ratings of Direct Participation (N = 373)

Participation indicator	Disagree *n* (%)	Neutral *n* (%)	Agree *n* (%)
Meaningful opportunity to express feelings	36 (9.65)	45 (12.06)	292 (78.29)
Respectful and inclusive facilitation	20 (5.36)	37 (9.92)	316 (84.72)
Offender appeared to listen genuinely	53 (14.21)	56 (15.01)	264 (70.78)
Participation provided empowerment	30 (8.04)	49 (13.14)	294 (78.82)
Structure allowed full discussion	48 (12.87)	67 (17.96)	258 (69.17)
Physical safety during the meeting	95 (25.47)	75 (20.11)	203 (54.42)
Emotional support during the meeting	45 (12.06)	60 (16.09)	268 (71.85)
Agreement felt fair and appropriate	28 (7.51)	41 (10.99)	304 (81.50)

Source: Research data (2026).

Note. Agreement and disagreement combine adjacent categories. Percentages preserve the reported sums of rounded category percentages; these can differ by 0.01 percentage points from percentages calculated directly from the grouped counts. Meeting-related items retain the full-sample denominator, not the face-to-face subgroup.

Respectful and inclusive facilitation received the strongest endorsement, with 316 respondents (84.72%) agreeing. Fair and appropriate agreements were endorsed by 304 respondents (81.50%), and empowerment by 294 (78.82%). Meaningful emotional expression was reported by 292 respondents (78.29%). These findings indicated that many victims experienced voice, recognition, and influence, although positive evaluations were not universal.

The results were consistent with the emphasis on dialogue in Umbreit et al. (2004). They also supported the relevance of reintegrative interaction as a way of communicating harm without denying the dignity of either party. However, the survey did not establish that offenders internalised responsibility or subsequently desisted from crime. The appropriate conclusion was that victims commonly evaluated these aspects of participation positively.

Genuine offender listening received a lower positive rating of 70.78%. A further 15.01% were neutral, while 14.21% disagreed. These responses distinguished the opportunity to speak from confidence that the offender had meaningfully received the account. Facilitators could create a speaking opportunity without guaranteeing the response that a victim hoped to obtain.

4.2 Safety, Support, and the Conditions of Dialogue

Physical safety was the least positively rated participation item. Although 203 respondents (54.42%) agreed that they had felt safe, 95 (25.47%) disagreed and 75 (20.11%) were neutral. These findings required attention independently of the more favourable ratings for respectful facilitation. A positive assessment of dialogue did not eliminate uncertainty about the conditions in which participation occurred.

Emotional support was endorsed by 268 respondents (71.85%), while 60 (16.09%) were neutral and 45 (12.06%) disagreed. Full discussion of the event received 69.17% agreement. Together, these findings suggested that interpersonal respect was more consistently experienced than sufficient discussion, emotional support, or physical security. The pattern did not identify which specific venue or programme caused these differences.

Professional accounts provided contextual explanations. A prosecutor contrasted skilled facilitation with an encounter in which defensive responses by an offender were not redirected, leaving the victim distressed. Magistrates described time pressure as limiting the opportunity for a full account, while another professional identified institutional meeting rooms as unwelcoming. These accounts illustrated possible delivery mechanisms but were not treated as independently verified explanations for every negative survey response.

Jeffries et al. (2021) similarly emphasised the importance of examining the conditions and risks of restorative work. Their practitioner evidence helps frame the Melbourne findings as a question of appropriate participation rather than maximising direct contact regardless of circumstances. Safety, readiness, and facilitation therefore needed to be assessed together. The evidence did not justify treating face-to-face contact as an obligation for all victims.

4.3 Participation Format and Willingness to Participate Again

Table 2 presents the four additional experience questions. These items distinguished the actual format of participation and available personal support from general assessments of the process. They also allowed willingness to repeat the experience to be considered separately from the positive participation ratings.

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Table 2

Participation Format, Personal Support, and Willingness to Participate Again (N = 373)

Experience question	Yes *n* (%)	No *n* (%)
Participated in a face-to-face meeting with the offender	210 (56.30)	163 (43.70)
Family or friends were able to provide support	343 (91.96)	30 (8.04)
Believed the offender understood the full impact	256 (68.63)	117 (31.37)
Willing to participate in a similar process again	110 (29.49)	263 (70.51)

Source: Research data (2026).

Note. Each question was reported for the full sample. The reasons for willingness or unwillingness to participate again were not measured by these yes/no items.

A total of 210 respondents (56.30%) reported a face-to-face meeting with the offender, while 163 (43.70%) did not. Family or friend support was reported by 343 (91.96%). The combination showed that personal support could be present across a population using different participation formats. It did not establish that every respondent experienced the same type of conference or mediation.

There was a similarly high level of positive endorsement for the offender's awareness of the impact of the offence (68.63%), although most of the respondents believed this was the case. Most importantly, only 110 respondents (29.49%) said they would participate in a similar process again. The remaining 263 (70.51%) said they would not. This finding was kept as its own form of qualification and not reworked as an unmeasured aspect of a successful closure.

Emotional needs, issues that have not been addressed, or a desire not to be in justice system contact again may be reasonable explanations for willingness to repeat, but the survey finding did not demonstrate those explanations. Daly's (2002) critique of idealised restorative narratives is relevant here. A process can be scored positively on some features, and be an experience that participants would not repeat. Future evaluation should ask directly about the reasons for this response rather than assuming either complete satisfaction or complete rejection.

4.4 Relationship with Programme Satisfaction

The reported Pearson correlation between direct participation and programme satisfaction was positive and strong, $r = .684$, $p < .001$, with 373 observations. The simple regression summary reported $R^2 = .468$. These results indicated that higher participation scores accompanied higher satisfaction scores in the analysed sample. They did not establish that an intervention increasing participation would produce a corresponding causal improvement in satisfaction.

This association was compatible with Reintegrative Shaming Theory because communicating harm, experiencing respect, and contributing to a response were related to victims' evaluations of the process. Nevertheless, the predictor included agreement fairness and respectful interaction, while the satisfaction measure also included fairness and respect. Part of the association may therefore reflect conceptual overlap as well as substantive connections between participation and satisfaction. Its interpretation requires both the theoretical argument and attention to measurement boundaries.

Strang et al. (2013) provided stronger causal evidence for a specific conferencing intervention through randomised comparisons. The present design addressed a different question: variation in experience among respondents who had participated in different restorative arrangements. Its contribution was therefore contextual and explanatory rather than a replication of an experimental treatment effect. The statistical discovery was taken into consideration, combined with the unequal safety mark and restricted enthusiasm for repeat participation.

4.5 Integrated Interpretation

The scale of subject victim ratings and professional accounts were similar in terms of the importance of voice, respect, and competent facilitation. Magistrates said that direct expression allowed for acknowledging both of which a formal decision did not capture. Willingness and preparation were common themes when speaking about face-to-face encounters by probation professionals. These accounts aided understanding of how participation quality was significant, but not necessarily that one would work for all.

There was also a difference between interpersonal quality and delivery conditions in the integrated evidence. Facilitator respect was accepted by many respondents, while fewer reported full discussion or safety. Pressures were reported around time allocation and the environment of a meeting. However, findings suggested a conditional account in that, while entry was positively associated with satisfaction, there were aspects that related to protections and practicalities (not experienced by all) that affected how such participation was satisfied.

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V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1 Conclusion

For adults in Melbourne who were directly involved, there was a positive correlation between direct participation and satisfaction with the restorative justice programme. Respectful facilitation, equality-based agreements, empowerment and space for the expression of the impact of the harm were among the more commonly reported things the victims endorsed. Physical safety was less consistently mentioned, however, and most respondents were unwilling to repeat the process. Inability to draw a clear conclusion that participation was beneficial in all cases or that it was enough.

The primary one was the distinction between positive interaction and the necessary conditions for positive interaction. The professionally described relevance of competence for facilitators, time, readiness, and a suitable setting was also relevant for meaningful involvement. The cross sectional evidence failed to point towards a causal impact, and reoffending did not seem to decrease. It allowed for attention to be paid to both the quality and suitability of participation, not just attendance or agreement completion.

5.2 Recommendations

Restorative justice providers need to invest more in the preparation of facilitators in respectful dialogue, dealing with the distress of victims and managing defensive or minimising behaviour. Training should be followed up with the supervision and review of difficult cases, and not considered a once-and-future educational qualification. The victim should have the chance to clearly describe what they want to talk about and express concerns before a meeting is scheduled.

Programme managers should discuss with participants the length of meetings, the appropriate location and safety precautions. In cases where direct contact is not appropriate or desired, flexible formats should be available. The selection of what format is the most appropriate should be accompanied by adequate preparation and availability of a support person, not simply assumed because a conference is available.

Evaluation should take place, asking for separate scores on voice, safety, support, agreement fairness and participation again. Follow-up questions should delve into participants' reasons for doing or not doing the same thing again, as well as whether they felt their agreements stayed true to them over time. Future study needs include a stronger distinction between participation and satisfaction measures, and a focus on longer time measures such that outcomes are tracked over time, including those who opt out of and are unable to access restorative processes.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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