

Use of restorative justice and restorative practices in prison: a systematic literature review

Lucrezia Perrella | Ernesto Lodi | Gian Luigi Lepri | Patrizia Patrizi

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Corresponding Author: Lucrezia Perrella
email l.perrella@phd.uniss.it

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Abstract

Aim: recent years have seen an increasing use of restorative justice (RJ) and restorative practices (RP) in prison. The aim of the study was to conduct a systematic literature review analysing research studies concerning RJ and PR within adult and/or juvenile prisons. The aim was to investigate whether and which restorative practices are applied, and the results obtained.

Methods: the scientific articles included in the study were selected according to the following inclusion criteria: 1) years of publication between 2010 and 2023; 2) adult and/or juvenile prisons; 3) English-language literature; 4) full texts accessible directly or upon request to the author(s). 11 studies were included in this study and a qualitative synthesis was carried out.

Results: the most widely used restorative practice in prisons is circle (n = 9), followed by victim-offender mediation (VOM) (n = 4) and restorative conferences (n = 3). The application of RP produced positive results in terms of: promotion of conflict management skills and problem solving strategies; interpersonal relations within the prison and with the community; taking responsibility in terms of awareness of the harm caused to the victim; promotion of social and emotional skills.

Conclusions: results highlighted the need to apply restorative justice and its practices in prisons as an alternative and innovative approach to conflict management, in prisoners' treatment pathways and the related difficulties and challenges in their application. However, scientific studies on this topic are limited and therefore further studies on the impact of RJ and RP in prison settings are needed.

Keywords: restorative justice; restorative practices; prison; detention; criminal justice.

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Use of restorative justice and restorative practices in prison: a systematic literature review

Introduction

Restorative justice is an approach aimed at peaceful conflict management, restoration of the value of justice and accountability among individuals and in communities, through dialogue, respect and solidarity among all persons involved (EFRJ, 2018, p. 3).

The restorative justice paradigm, also following the Recommendation CM/Rec (2018)8, is part of a complex international debate on regulatory changes, implementation measures and operational protocols to be adopted in the judicial, penitentiary, school, social and, more generally, in communities, with the main aims of promoting individual and collective well-being, countering recidivism and spreading a participatory sense of social security, in a perspective of enhancing social, community and cultural relations in general (Lodi et al., 2022).

Today, public policies are questioning the need to promote and experiment new actions/interventions that can better foster the promotion of wellbeing and the optimal functioning of individuals, communities, organizations, and institutions, as well as improve the lives of all people and the safety of the places where people live, work, and operate (Read et al., 2019). Also by virtue of the goals of the 2030 Agenda, which aim to combat the phenomena of social exclusion and marginality, fight inequalities and build peaceful societies that respect human rights, the attention of public policies is also directed to the experimentation and promotion of new forms of local welfare in the areas of: peaceful management of conflicts; protection and listening to the victim, also with respect to the risks of secondary victimization; active reintegration of offenders; promotion of opportunities for participatory democracy as a means of involving people and systems in the prevention of deviance, crime, recidivism; conflict situations within organizations; promotion of individual and collective well-being.

Many restorative justice experts and researchers agree that restorative justice can be defined as a theoretical approach comparable to a socio-political movement that aims to change/transform the current justice systems. In fact, it is proposed as an approach capable of reducing the punitive and exclusionary nature of the current penal measures (Johnstone, 2014; Patrizi, 2019; UNODC, 2008; Zehr, and Mika, 1998), which see the objective of the re-educative function of punishment as a failure. In fact, current prison systems use punitive practices to control, manage and respond to the misbehavior of people detained in prison, very often exacerbating

disciplinary problems rather than containing them. In addition, each prisoner follows a treatment programmed with the aim of being 're-educated', made more responsible and no longer adhering to the deviant/criminal code of conduct with a view to re-entering society. However, research shows that prison (and punishment), instead of being (re)educational, is very often ineffective (both in deterring crime and in preparing people for life after release), inhumane, stigmatizing and characterized by violence and conflict (e.g., between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, such as prison officers) (Johnstone, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to review current prison systems and make practices within them more constructive and meaningful, as well as to make prison a safe place to live and work. The restorative approach and its practices could be a viable alternative to the practices currently used in prisons, where the focus is both on repairing the harm caused by the offence and rebuilding relationships through the involvement of victims, offenders, and the community (Carroll, and Warner, 2014; Johnstone, 2014; Patrizi, 2019; Wacquant, 2014; Wood, 2015), and on new ways of addressing/managing/responding to the different conflicts that may occur within prison.

Based on existing research studies in literature, the aim of this systematic review was to highlight which restorative practices are implemented in prisons and the results achieved, analysing its effects in terms of its advantages, criticalities, and challenges.

Restorative justice and restorative practices in prison

In recent years there has been a significant growth in the application of restorative justice and restorative practices also within prisons, both in terms of restorative practices activated to involve prisoners, victims, prison staff (educators, police officers, directors) and institutions, and as a possible prison disciplinary policy. In fact, while many researchers support the idea of restorative justice as a possible alternative to imprisonment (EFRJ, 2020; Garcia et al., 2020; Johnstone, 2014; Płatek, 2007; Ross, and Muro, 2020; Ruggiero, 2011; Van Ness, 2007; Van Ness, 2014), there is an awareness that for some offenders a restraining response (e.g., detention) is necessary. Therefore, if incarceration is sometimes an appropriate and fundamental sanction, restorative justice and restorative practices will have to enter prisons so that this possibility can also be offered to detained offenders and, if possible, to victims and society (Dhami et al., 2009; Edgar, and Newell, 2006; Garcia et al., 2020; Johnstone, 2014; Ross, and Muro, 2020; Van Ness, 2007; Zehr,

2005), in combination, for instance, with treatment programmes.

Restorative justice is a paradigm that cannot be identified with a specific programme or field of application (Johnstone, 2014; Johnstone, and Van Ness, 2006; Patrizi, 2019; Wright, 2002; Zehr, 2002), as it represents a cross-cutting approach that can be applied in different contexts and for different purposes. Moreover, within the restorative justice paradigm, there are different programmes that vary according to the people involved and the context in which they are applied. These can be: family group conference, restorative conference, victim-offender mediation (VOM), community-building circles.

Regarding issues of criminal relevance, restorative justice is not necessarily the other pole of retributive justice, although the two paradigms represent different systems in terms of the meaning they attach to crime and consequently in the goals they pursue in responding to it (Johnstone, 2014; McCold, and Wachtel, 2003; Patrizi, 2019; Wright, 2002; Zehr, 2005). Restorative justice, in fact, is normative in nature and sees crime as a violation of state law because of which responsibility for the act is determined in terms of guilt and the respective punishment is imposed. For restorative justice, the offence is seen as a harm caused and suffered by the victim (not by the state) and emphasizes repairing the harm as a means of restoring justice, relational balance, and trust in bonds, taking care of all parties affected by the harm (victims, perpetrators, community), since, for restorative justice, it is not enough to punish the offence to achieve these goals. Therefore, it is possible, and it would be desirable, for both to dialogue together so that their mutual diversities and specificities are a strength that enables them to build systemic responses through integrated pathways, attentive and capable of welcoming/taking care of all the needs of those affected by the crime/harm. In fact, the most recent research in this field (Armstrong, 2012; Johnstone, 2014; Carroll, and Warner, 2014; Hechler et al., 2023; Shapland et al., 2011; Waquant, 2014; Wood, 2015) shows that restorative justice and restorative processes represent a space for listening and responding to needs that have remained unheard and/or unreceived by traditional justice systems, and victims and offenders who participate in restorative processes experience justice in a much more satisfying and meaningful way than those experienced in court. For example, with regard to victims, restorative processes have been shown to achieve at least 85% satisfaction among victims (Armstrong, 2012; Chapman, 2019; Hechler et al., 2023; Laxminarayan, 2011; Shapland et al., 2011; Wallace, and Wylie, 2013) and reduce their fear of suffering further harm (Armstrong, 2012; Hechler et al., 2023; Strang, 2002; Van Camp, 2017; Zehr, 2005) due to the opportunity they are given to tell the truth about what happened, to ask why, and to make known the consequences of the harm they have suffered. Thus, restorative processes can help the offender to take responsibility for his or her actions in terms of

harm and consequences on the victim, and to change with a view to reintegration into the community. In this sense, restorative processes may also be a protective factor with respect to the containment of the risk of reoffending, as they may help to change the offender's perspective, discourage crime (Latimer et al., 2005; Lauwaert, and Aertsen, 2015; Robinson, and Shapland, 2008) and contribute to the reduction of reoffending rates and thus also of incarceration levels (Chapman, 2019; Johnstone, 2014; Latimer et al., 2005; Shapland, and Robinson, 2011; Sliva, 2018).

The development of restorative justice and restorative practices as a prison-wide approach, i.e. as a prison disciplinary policy, allows restorative justice processes to be used not only to promote the repair of the harm caused by the offence for which the prisoner is in prison, but also to manage and respond to different conflicts/problems (between prisoners, between prisoners and prison officers, between prisoners and educators, etc.). Therefore, the restorative approach and practices can facilitate collaborative and cooperative decision-making processes with respect to what is right to do to restore harm, resolve conflict and heal a wounded relationship, thus helping to build a fair, safe, supportive, and inclusive prison environment and, at the same time, to promote and develop interpersonal and individual skills such as empathy, self-efficacy, and non-violent communication.

Materials and Methods

For the aims of this study, studies that have activated restorative justice processes within prisons for adults and/or minors have been taken into consideration.

This systematic literature review was conducted between May 2022 and May 2023 and the scientific articles included were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

- years of publication between 2010-2023;
- target: adult and/or juvenile prisons;
- interventions: restorative justice's practices;
- English language literature;
- full-texts publications directly accessible from the scientific databases or by request to the author(s).

The research was done in line with the PRISMA guidelines, checklist, and the flow chart (<http://www.prisma-statement.org> accessed on: 04/06/2023). 233 articles were found based on the search carried out with the keywords: "restorative justice" and/or "restorative practices" and/or "prison" and/or "detention" and/or "correctional". The figure 1 presents a PRISMA flow diagram of the article's selection process.

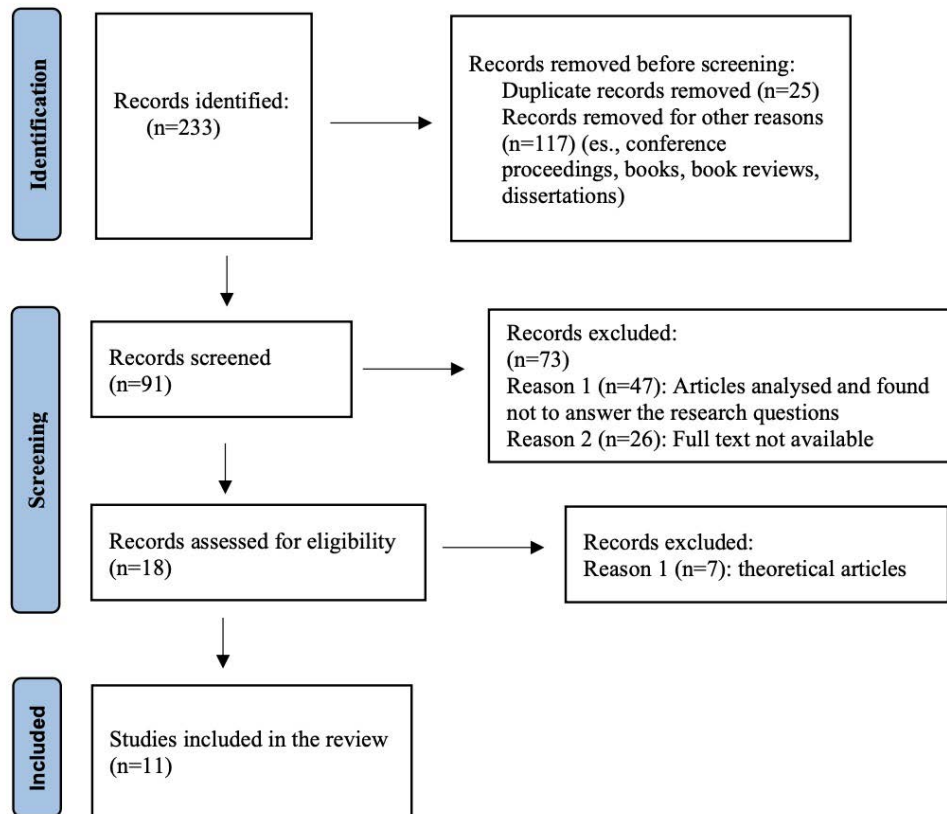


Figure 1 – Study selection process by PRISMA flow diagram

As can be seen from the figure above (Fig. 1), of the 233 articles found 25 were excluded because they were duplicates and 117 because they were books, book reviews, conference proceedings and doctoral dissertations. There were 91 articles evaluated as eligible: of these, 26 were excluded because full texts were not available (none of the 26 required articles were submitted) and 47 did not answer the research questions. 18 articles were evaluated as eligible but in the end 7 articles were excluded because they were a theoretical article. These 7 articles are reported in Appendix A (Table A1) as a possible subject of the reader(s) to be interested in. Therefore, at the end of the selection process, 11 articles were evaluated as suitable and thus included in this systematic review. To proceed with the content analysis of the articles, a codebook was developed, and the qualitative data analysis was subsequently conducted using SPSS 25.0 software. The codebook was set up on 50% of the selected records and then verified on the remaining 50% (Losito, 2002).

Two experts coded the studies according to the response categories created. In two records, discrepancies emerged in the interpretation of the data, which were then submitted to two other external coders and the supervisor. Two independent experts coded the articles according to the constructed categories. In 2 articles were their different

modes of interpretation by independent coders (only one category interpreted differently by coders for each article). The 2 articles were submitted to 2 other independent coders and subsequently to the research supervisor. A final discussion with the supervisor and research team resolved the doubts on these 4 articles.

Results

The studies included in this systematic review were conducted in five countries (USA, 5; UK, 3; Canada, 1; Brazil, 1; Israeli, 1) and all studies concern correctional institutions with adult prisoners. One study is multimethod research (Armour, and Sliva, 2018); five studies are qualitative studies (Bohmert et al., 2018; Calkin, 2021; Gavrielides, 2014; Nowotny, 2018; Walker, and Greening, 2010); three studies are randomized controlled trials (RCT) (Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020), in which one (Duwe, 2018) is an update of the original protocol (Duwe, 2013); one study is quantitative studies (Stewart et al., 2018); one study used mixed methods (interviews and case studies) (D'Souza & Shapland, 2023).

The characteristics of the 11 included studies and the qualitative synthesis are reported in Appendix B (Table A2) following the PICOS scheme: participants,

interventions, comparisons, outcomes, and study design.

None of the studies planned to train the participants involved in Restorative Justice and its practices, either in terms of raising awareness or in terms of training people so that they could directly activate and facilitate the practices.

The people involved in the studies as the participants were prisoners, prison staff (director, penitentiary police, educators, counselors) victims (direct and indirect), families, citizens, for a total of about 910 participants from about 31 prisons.

The studies included in this review were aimed at analyzing the impact of the implementation of restorative justice and its practices, both as a prison-wide approach and as practices activated in response to specific cases, through a comparison with the pre-implementation period. Specifically, in 81,8% (9 studies) of the studies,

prisons provided traditional disciplinary practices and policies; in 18,2% (2 studies) prisons provided traditional disciplinary practices and policies oriented towards punitive approaches.

The restorative practices used in prison

In all 11 articles examined, it was found that every prison implemented and empowered at a minimum one restorative practice, either in terms of practices as part of the treatment pathway or in terms of practices to manage, address and respond to conflict situations within the prison (e.g., harmful behavior, violence).

As can be seen in Figure 2, the most frequently used restorative practice was circles (n = 9), followed by victim-offender mediation (VOM) (n = 4), restorative conferences (n = 3).

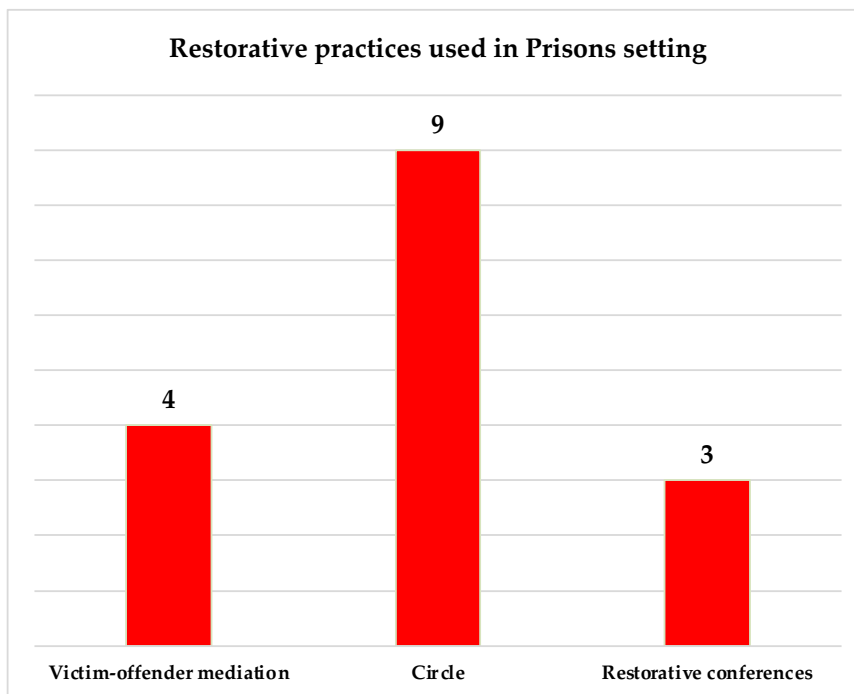


Figure 1 – Study selection process by PRISMA flow diagram

Within prisons, restorative practices have been used both as practices that become part of the treatment pathway and as practices that are activated to manage, address, and respond to conflict situations within the prison (e.g., in situations of violent acts).

Concerning circles, the following have been activated: circles between prisoners and victims (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Walker, and Greening, 2010; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020), circles between prisoners (Bohmert et al., 2018; Calkin, 2021; Gavrielides, 2014; Nowotny, 2018; Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018), circles between prisoners and prison guards (Calkin, 2021; Gavrielides,

2014; Walker, and Greening, 2010), circles between prisoners and their families (Calkin, 2021; Walker, and Greening, 2010), circles between prisoners and community members (Bohmert et al., 2018; Walker, and Greening, 2010; Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018).

Circles between prisoners and families and between prisoners and community members were activated with the aim of fostering the (re)construction of positive relationships, also with a view to reintegration into the community. In other cases, circles and conference have been activated instead of the traditional prisoners' councils.

Restorative conferences have been activated both to address and manage mostly serious conflicts and as alternative disciplinary processes in the case of acts for which a sanction was envisaged, to find a joint agreement on how to respond to the events that occurred, as well as at the end of victim-offender mediation processes.

On the other hand, victim-offender mediation was activated in almost all cases at the request of the prisoners themselves who expressed a wish to meet the victim, except in the study of D’Souza, and Shapland (2023), as mediation was part of the trial and was therefore proposed by the researchers.

The effects of restorative approach and restorative practices

The analysis of the studies revealed positive results with regard to several aspects: reduction in incidents, disciplinary sanctions and prison offences and conflicts; increased ability to manage/resolve conflicts and increased

problem-solving strategies and non-violent communication; increased personal and collective responsibility and group cohesion; increased responsibility and awareness for the harm caused to the victim and its consequences; offender’s distancing from the criminal behavior and deviant identity; greater sense of justice perceived by victims; reduction of recidivism; greater perceived social, moral, emotional and instrumental support, also with a view to re-entry into the community; (re)building of positive relationships between inmates, between inmates and families, between inmates and officers; perceived fairer processes and treatment respectful of human rights.

As can be seen from Figure 3, studies have shown that the effects of applying the restorative approach and restorative practices in prison are: discipline and conflict (1); support (5); social, interpersonal, and emotional skills (3); interpersonal relationships (2); responsibility and awareness of harm caused (7); experience of detention (2); reduction of recidivism (7).

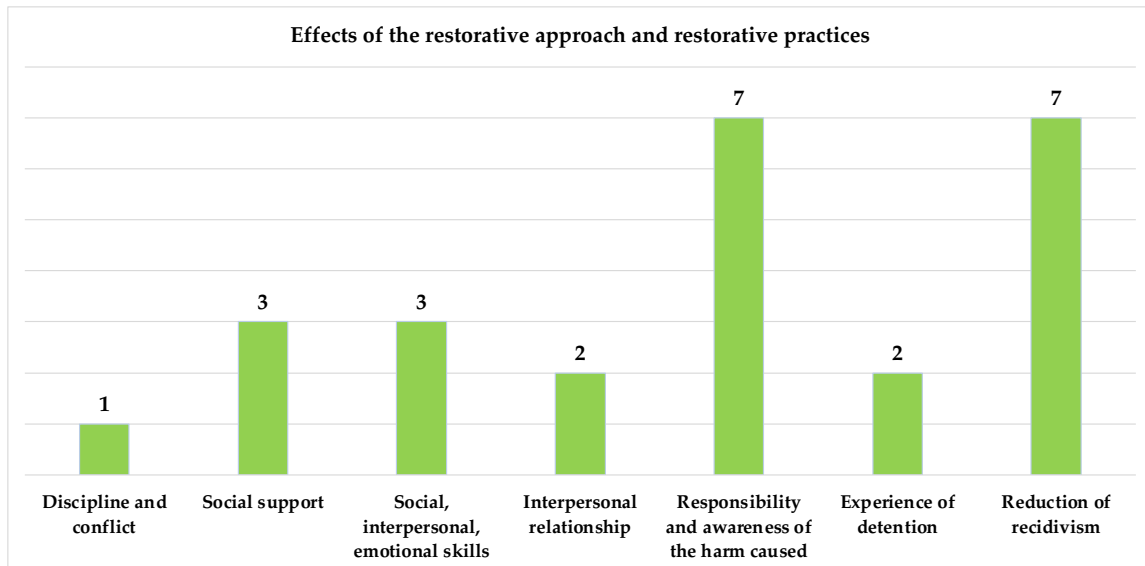


Figure 3 – Effects of the restorative approach and restorative practices

Studies have shown that restorative practices help to increase inmates’ *responsibility for their actions in terms of awareness of the harm caused to victims* (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Bohmert et al., 2018; Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; D’Souza, and Shapland, 2023; Walker, and Greening, 2010; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020) as a direct consequence of their own actions, compared to inmates who did not participate in such practices and that this is true even with detainees who manifest low or no self-acceptance of responsibility.

Furthermore, prisoners who have participated in programmes that include such practices show more positive attitudes towards the possibility of participating in a restorative process [51] to repair the harm caused. In

addition, mere exposure to videos of real (even indirect) victims telling their story and the harm they have suffered can also contribute to such outcomes.

Participation in restorative encounter groups within prison that involve prisoners and victims (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018), or prisoners, prisoners and families, prisoners, and police officers (Calkin, 2021; Nowotny, 2018), can contribute to the development of both *positive interpersonal relationships* and *social, interpersonal, and emotional skills*. For example, an increase in trust, cooperation, caring and mutual support (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018), the development of innovative strategies and methods of peaceful conflict management and problem-solving, respect, empathy, non-

violent communication, and personal and collective responsibility can be evidenced (Calkin, 2021; Nowotny, 2018), and repercussions on mental and emotional well-being (D'Souza, and Shapland, 2023).

The studies analyzed have shown that confrontation with one's own actions, consequences and the harm resulting from them, made possible by participation in restorative practices and/or processes, increases the likelihood of greater responsibility for the harm caused to the victim. This significantly contributes to distancing the offender from the criminal behavior and deviant identity, resulting in a *reduction of recidivism* (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Bohmert et al., 2018; Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; D'Souza, and Shapland, 2023; Stewart et al., 2018; Walker, and Greening, 2010). The reduction of recidivism, and thus consequently of incarceration rates, also has effects on the costs of imprisonment for institutions/governments (Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018). Indeed, while the model and its implementation are already cost-effective compared to traditional prison programmes, lowering criminalization rates leads to a general reduction in the *costs of the criminal justice and prison system*.

In addition, social, moral, emotional, and instrumental support (e.g., in finding employment or housing, etc.) provided to offenders (Armour, and Sliva, 2018; Walker, and Greening, 2010; Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018), both by victims and community members who participated in restorative processes, towards reintegration into the community, was found to contribute significantly to reducing recidivism rates. Furthermore, the study by Walker L., and Greening (2010) found that victims who participated in restorative practices and/or restorative processes experienced a greater sense of perceived justice.

The study by Nowotny et al. (2018) found that the systematized use of restorative practices can also lead to beneficial outcomes in terms of better skills in dealing with behavioral issues and prison discipline, as well as increased adherence to rules. In fact, a significant *reduction in levels of violence and prison's crimes* emerged with a consequent *reduction in the need for disciplinary sanctions and punitive measures* compared to when traditional practices were used, which included the use of force not only by inmates but also by prison staff.

Related to this is another aspect that emerged from some of the studies analyzed: sometimes, prison-internal decision-making systems and treatment methods are not always considered to be fair, legitimate, and respectful of prisoners' rights, and this negatively affects the detention experience of prisoners and prison staff (Calkin, 2021; Nowotny, 2018). Restorative processes could be used as decision-making practices for sentencing, prisoner councils or other ways of working within prisons, either when conflicts and/or incidents liable to disciplinary sanctions occur, or as dialogue and decision-making practices in general (Calkin, 2021; Nowotny, 2018). In this sense, both prisoners and prison staff who have

experimented with RJ practices for these purposes report an *improved experience of detention*: RJ practices support respect, communication, personal and collective responsibility, and a rehabilitative culture, also acting in preventive terms regarding possible future situations.

In accordance with what just described, the need to implement restorative justice and practices to improve the prison experience opens the consideration of how RJ can be implemented as a whole-prison oriented disciplinary policy (Calkin, 2021; Gavrielides, 2014; Nowotny, 2018), also in combination with current prison policies, on how to combine restorative practices and treatment programmes (Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020) and on the difficulties that are encountered/can be encountered for these purposes, as well as in general for the application of restorative practices in prison. The difficulties encountered in the application of the restorative paradigm and the experimentation of restorative practices within prisons are due, for example, to current prison laws and the character of a prison itself (Gavrielides, 2014; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020).

Despite the positive outcomes that could be achieved, including in terms of reducing the costs of imprisonment (Duwe, 2013; Duwe, 2018; Gavrielides, 2014; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020), there is a lack of adequate training programmes for staff, support from institutions, regulatory and practical frameworks, guidelines, and economic investments [45-46-47-51-52] (Calkin, 2021; Gavrielides, 2014; Nowotny, 2018; Stewart et al., 2018; Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020), considered key aspects for the application of restorative practices in prison. Furthermore, the study by D'Souza, and Shapland (2023) reveals not only a lack of knowledge of the paradigm and thus of adequate training in it, but also a certain scepticism and fears in the application of restorative justice and its practices with serious crimes.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to examine which restorative justice practices have been implemented in prisons and what kind of results have been achieved.

It emerged that the most used restorative practices are circles, i.e., practices involving several people rather than practices involving only the victim and the offender, such as victim-offender mediation (VOM). This, on the one hand, might confirm that the use of restorative justice is due as a more comprehensive and holistic approach than traditional models, on the other hand, the difficulty of being able to activate restorative processes with the involvement of victims within prison.

Firstly, the results of this study show that most of the restorative paths activated had mainly rehabilitative/treatment goals, underlining a still very reocentric vision. Overcoming the vision of the centrality

of the prison and the prisoner to shift the attention to the victim should be a prerogative, since restorative justice was born to give victims a space to listen and to respond to needs that remained unheard and/or unreceived by traditional justice systems and where the victim does not have to 'serve' the offender's re-educative process.

The circles represented moments of reflection, listening, sharing of the actions performed and of the consequent harm, also through direct confrontation with the harm (in the cases of circles between prisoners and victims, both direct and indirect). In some cases, circles and conferences were activated instead of traditional prisoner councils.

It emerges that the offender's encounter with the victim and/or the harm caused can help the offender to become aware of the harm and to take responsibility for his or her actions in terms of the consequences on the victim. This can also be a protective factor against the risk of reoffending. Moreover, in broader terms, restorative processes enable the parties involved to mend the relational fracture that has been created because of the crime committed. Indeed, the offence harms interpersonal and social relationships, e.g., with family and community members, as well as with victims, who are inextricably linked to their offender. The restorative practices activated made it possible to help support people in the (re)creation of a responsible and supportive relational context, made up of a critical re-elaboration by the offender of his conduct (involving also, when necessary and possible, the victim), of a personal restorative commitment, of a restoration of life according to legality. These aspects have proved to be central to the offender's social recovery with a view to reintegration into the community, as well as in preventing re-offending and recidivism, and in reducing incarceration rates (Thomas et al., 2019; Strémy, and Griger, 2020). This also influenced the costs of incarceration for institutions/governments, as the reduction of criminalization rates led to an overall reduction in the costs of criminal justice and the prison system, which is also in line with the relevant literature (Aos et al., 2006; Vooren et al., 2023).

Restorative justice processes and practices have also been activated to address the various conflicts that have occurred within prisons, both as a prison disciplinary policy aimed at building safer places in which to serve one's sentence and work.

Restorative circles and conferences have proved to be useful practices for the management of conflicts, problems, and detrimental behavior of prisoners (e.g., violence and offences), as they have enabled the construction of listening moments useful for co-constructing responsibilities, as well as meaningful actions and solutions through the involvement of all parties concerned and/or affected by the detrimental conduct. In addition, there was an increase in pro-social behavior, trust, fairness and positive relationships, empathy, awareness, and responsibility, foster the ability to express and manage emotions, mental and emotional well-being.

Therefore, the use of restorative practices can lead to positive outcomes in terms of increased ability to manage behavioral problems and prison discipline, reduced levels of violence and prison offences and a consequent reduction in the need for disciplinary sanctions and punitive measures (Millana et al., 2020).

The activation of restorative conferences as an alternative to traditional disciplinary processes represented participatory and co-constructive decision-making processes that allowed for proactive and respectful engagement in addressing the problem/conflict and finding common ways and solutions to resolve it, rather than having a sanction imposed passively.

A certain difficulty in implementing the restorative approach and restorative practices in prison has emerged and the complexity of implementing restorative justice cannot be underestimated. Although it is essential to define models, standards, and guidelines with respect to the implementation of these practices, it is not possible to apply a standard and univocal model, especially within places such as prisons, and therefore each action must always be adapted, constructed, studied, since the place where it is experienced. Some problems arise from the difficulty of involving/motivating prisoners, since, on the one hand, sometimes the proposal to participate in restorative justice pathways is late and the prisoner may believe that detention itself, and thus serving the sentence, is already an assumption of responsibility for the crime committed and that he is already paying his debt for it. On the other hand, within prison there are rules and codes of behavior that very often hinder the possibility of participating in pathways that involve talking about the crime, one's emotions and feelings, and confrontation with other people, especially with prison staff and even more so with prison officers (Albrecht, 2011). The involvement of victims is also sometimes complex. As for prisoners, the proposal to participate in restorative justice processes is sometimes delayed for victims and, due to the closure of the trial with the conviction of the offender, they may feel satisfied with the sentence, consider the punishment just and not want to reopen the wounds. In addition, victims may perceive that they are being 'used' for the offender's re-education process and/or to obtain benefits from the offender and/or that the offender's choice to participate is not so much due to a real desire to be accountable for the actions committed and their consequences as to possible rewards, even though, in both cases, the prisoner does not actually benefit directly. Finally, it is possible that the proposal to meet the prisoner in prison may frighten the victim, since, also due to stereotypes and prejudices, prison is seen and perceived as an insecure and potentially re-victimizing place (Wood, 2016).

Another difficulty concerns the implementation of the restorative approach as a disciplinary strategy in prison, if its implementation does not consider the already existing disciplinary system and does not act to build a single system that considers the specificities of both (Perán,

2017; Wood, 2016). It is essential to customize programmes and procedures through a context assessment that identifies the main areas of strength and possible areas to be exploited, starting from small changes to an extended and shared action plan. This has been very difficult to achieve due to the lack of adequate training programmes for staff, support from institutions, regulatory and practical frameworks, guidelines and economic investments, which are considered key aspects for the implementation of restorative practices in prison, as well as for rethinking prison as a place where both RJ and PR principles and values and restorative practices and treatment programmes can be integrated within the prison paradigm, where the use of alternative methods can have significant therapeutic effects.

Reflection on current punitive disciplinary policies within prison systems is a health justice issue and the value of implementing alternative systems and practices, such as restorative justice, is increasingly emphasized. Indeed, it is crucial to foster new actions that aim to promote responsibility in the offender for the actions perpetrated and for the harm suffered by the victim, that counteract the negative effects of incarceration, and that restore the relationship with the community (Romano, 2011; 2012), instead of traditional approaches that sometimes further increase suffering, fragility, vulnerability, and inequalities. Prisons provide disciplinary policies that are predominantly punitive in nature, in which prisoners are passive subjects and sole beneficiaries of predetermined rehabilitation/treatment programmes, when instead the challenge would be to think of restorative justice models that are flexible and consider specific educational, psychological, and contextual needs.

Moreover, communication within the prison is marked by internal laws such that talking about actions committed and personal matters, as well as with prison staff (especially officers) is very often in conflict with prison codes, which makes the prison itself an unsafe place. The management of daily prison life is articulated through regulations and rules that, to enforce/maintain internal social order, provide for forms of surveillance and disciplinary sanctions/measure, issued directly by the prison warden, in the event of their violation. This approach, however, requires the quasi-passive obedience of prisoners to the prison authorities and the need to comply with the rules becomes a means of avoiding disciplinary sanctions. Thus, it becomes increasingly necessary for institutions and practitioners to work towards restorative justice practices becoming complementary to those already present in traditional justice systems (Moreno Álvarez, 2019).

The starting assumption, therefore, becomes the need to try to change one's view of rule-breaking: misconduct is not only a violation of rules, but also a violation of human beings and relationships, actions have consequences, and these consequences can cause pain/harm to those who suffer them. A restorative process pushes people to take responsibility for the actions they

have taken because, instead of having a sanction imposed on them, they are asked to confront others and engage proactively, constructively, and respectfully in addressing the problem/conflict/harm and finding together strategies and solutions to solve it. In this way, the restorative approach and practices can facilitate collaborative and cooperative decision-making processes with respect to what is right to do to restore harm, resolve conflict and heal a wounded relationship, thus contributing to building a fair, safe, supportive, and inclusive prison environment and, at the same time, promoting and developing interpersonal and individual skills such as empathy, self-efficacy, and non-violent communication (Butler, and Maruna, 2016; Millana et al., 2020). Moreover, as demonstrated by virtuous experiences in this field (Lepri et al., 2019; Liebmann, 2019; Straker, 2019; Van Cleynebreugel, 2019), restorative justice and its practices make it possible to promote accountability (a central element in rehabilitation/treatment pathways) and social security (fundamental for communities in view of offender reintegration) and consequently the community should always be included in prison work as well.

From the studies reviewed, interesting findings emerged regarding the benefits of the application of restorative justice and restorative practices in prisons, as also confirmed by the scientific literature on the subject, and by the theoretical articles and reviews in Appendix A.

Conclusions

This study was conducted according to the PRISMA guidelines, and its purpose was to provide an overview of the adoption of restorative approach practices in prisons and to demonstrate their benefits. Although this review indicates positive results, the criteria for the realization and implementation of restorative approach practices in prisons are changeable and highly dependent on regulatory and institutional policies.

The importance of understanding the restorative approach as an influential element of cultural and institutional transformation implies that cultural and institutional transformations themselves are deterrents to the implementation of restorative justice practices in prisons. Reflections on the current knowledge, implementation and sustainability of restorative justice and its practices in prisons, as well as the difficulties in their integration within prison disciplinary systems, pose theoretical and practical challenges.

For this purpose, further studies on the topic would both enable a better understanding of the potential implications of restorative justice and restorative practices in promoting desired outcomes, and support institutions and prisons in implementing effective interventions and ensuring a positive, safe, respectful, equitable and welfare-oriented prison environment. Furthermore, a qualitative synthesis was carried out in this review. Therefore, it should be emphasized that a systematic review that

includes a quantitative synthesis of the data would certainly be necessary to provide a comprehensive research picture of the available evidence on the beneficial and effective use of RJ and PR in prisons.

Finally, the evidence in terms of direct correlation about the benefits of restorative justice and restorative practices in prisons is still limited and suggests further studies. Therefore, most of the studies about restorative justice and practices in prison are published in non-indexed journals and therefore their actual impact on the prison population may currently be underestimated.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Academic scientific literature excluded from the systematic review ($n = 7$).

First author, Year	Study design	Population	Intervention	Comparison	Outcomes
Albrecht, 2011	Theoretical article	Prisons in Norway	Implementation of restorative practices in the model of prison practices	Traditional system and practices	Critically reflecting on the theoretical and practical challenges for the application of restorative justice and restorative practices in prison, analysing possible limitations/problems and strengths/resources
Butler, and Maruna, 2016	Theoretical article	Prisons in UK	Whole-prisons restorative approach	Punitive discipline policies	Reflection on the development and systematization of RJ practices in the prison environment, to: replace prison disciplinary hearings with restorative processes; addressing conflicts within prisons; promote responsibility, empathy, listening
Millana et al., 2020	Theoretical article	Prisons in Spain	Restorative justice and restorative practices as an alternative prison disciplinary strategy	Traditional punitive practices	Greater responsibility than the behavior performed; development of alternative and peaceful conflict resolution strategies; development of peaceful relations between prisoners; non-violent communication; reduction of reoffending; reduction of disciplinary sanctions; more opportunities for dialogue; greater sense of control over one's life
Perán, 2017	Theoretical article	Prisons in Spain	Implementation of restorative practices in the model of prison practices	Traditional system	Difficulty of joining the prison punitive paradigm without abolishing the prison paradigm and at the same time applying the principles and values of RJ and PR; difficulty implementing RJ and RP due to overcrowded prisons and lack of staff; possible exploitation by prisoners; need for awareness and training for prison; need for regulatory and practical frameworks; RJ and RP to prevent, address and manage the harms of imprisonment; RJ as a potential approach to prison reform; greater attention to human rights; reduction of violence
Strémy, and Griger, 2020	Theoretical article	Prisons	Implementation of restorative practices in the model of prison practices	Traditional system	Reflections on the punitive prison discipline and system as a question of health justice and on the importance to promote accountability for one's own actions and the harm caused to the victim, to fight the negative effects of incarceration and restore the relationship with the community
Thomas et al., 2019	Theoretical article	Prisoners with mental illness	Restorative circles to facilitate reentry in the community of offenders with mental illness	Traditional practices	Community integration; increased positive social support and (re)relationship building; deviation of the perpetrator from criminal behavior and deviant identity; increased accountability; collective efficacy; reduced social isolation; need for regulatory and practical frameworks
Wood, 2016	Theoretical article	Prisons	Restorative justice approach and practices in prison	Traditional prison system	Reflection on the current knowledge, implementation, and sustainability of RJ practice in prisons; difficulties in integrating RJ and PR in the prison setting, partly due to inaccessibility of victims; The importance of comprehending the restorative approach as an influential element of both cultural and institutional transformation implies that the same cultural and institutional transformation and where cultural and institutional transformation are deterrents to the application of RJ and PR in prisons.

Appendix B

Table A2. Characteristics of the included studies (n = 11)

First author, Year	Study design	Population	Intervention	Comparison	Outcomes
Armour, and Sliva, 2018	Multimethod research (qualitative data from surveys and questionnaires)	18 offenders, 4 victims and 2 facilitators in a Texas prisons (USA)	Restorative justice group program (Bridges to Life-BTL) to reduce the recidivism and to facilitate the healing process of victim volunteers and offenders	Traditional practices	Greater responsibility for the harm caused to the victim; deviation of the perpetrator from criminal behavior and deviant identity with consequent reduction of recidivism; increased group cohesion between prisoners and victims, including trust, cooperation, caring, support
Bohmert et al., 2018	Qualitative study (surveys)	18 level II sex offenders (Minnesota, USA)	Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOASA)	Traditional practices	Greater social, moral, emotional, and instrumental support (e.g., employment, housing, etc.) also with a view to returning to the community; greater responsibility for the harm caused to the victim; deviation of the perpetrator from criminal behavior and deviant identity with consequent reduction of recidivism
Calkin, 2021	Qualitative study (semi-structured interviews)	29 inmates, 16 officers and governors, and 4 professionals in 3 UK prisons	Scope of application of RJ practices in prison, in particular their complementarity with rehabilitation practices and possible support from institutions	Traditional practices and punitive discipline policies	Positive relationships and (re)building of positive relationships between prisoners, between prisoners and families, between prisoners and officers; fairer trials; increased ability to manage/resolve conflicts, problem-solving strategies, non-violent communication, and personal and collective responsibility; need to implement RJ and RP to improve the inmate incarceration experience and as a prison disciplinary policy
Duwe, 2013	Randomized controlled trial – RCT (Preliminary Results)	62 sex offenders (Minnesota, USA)	Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOASA)	Traditional practice	Greater responsibility for the harm caused; reduction of recidivism (for both sexual and other crimes); reduction of the costs of detention for the institutions; economically advantageous intervention model; possibility of application to other types of prisoners with a high risk of violent recidivism
Duwe, 2018	Updates to the original trial protocol (Duwe G., 2013)	100 sex offenders (Minnesota, USA)	Minnesota Circles of Support and Accountability (MnCOASA)	Traditional practice	Greater responsibility for the harm caused; reduction of recidivism (for both sexual and other crimes); reduction of the costs of detention for the institutions; economically advantageous intervention model; possibility of application to other types of prisoners with a high risk of violent recidivism
D'Souza, and Shapland, 2023	Mixed methods (interviews and case studies)	5 offenders and 7 victims, 36 RJ's experts and 42 policemen in UK prison	Implementation of restorative justice and practices with serious and organized crime and restorative practices of victim-offender mediation and conference	Traditional practices	Non-use until then of RJ in serious and organised crime because it was considered inappropriate considering the type of crime; lack of knowledge of the paradigm; risk for inmates participating due to laws within the prison that give rise to the idea that participation means repentance; increased awareness of the harm caused, even with inmates who manifest low or no self-acceptance of responsibility; deviation of the perpetrator from criminal behaviour and deviant identity resulting in reduced recidivism; increased social capital; benefits for mental health and emotional well-being.
Gavrielides, 2014	Qualitative study (surveys)	20 interviews with prison guards, RJ professionals, policy makers and academics in a UK prison	Implementation of restorative practices in the model of prison practices	Traditional system	Difficulty of joining the prison punitive paradigm without abolishing the prison paradigm and at the same time applying the principles and values of RJ and PR; need for regulatory and practical frameworks; need to set up RJ and RP to counter isolated enforcement; need for training and knowledge; need for support (including financial) from the institutions; difficulty in creating a safe place for the participants due to the "prison internal laws"; need to implement an RJ model that is flexible and considers specific educational, psychological, and contextual needs

Nowotny, 2018	Qualitative study (semi-structured interviews)	28 people: 4 senior security representatives, 9 support service providers, 2 members of the judiciary and 13 detainees in a Brazilian prison	Restorative practices (circles) to reduce prison violence among prisoners and implementation of restorative practices in the model of prison practices	Traditional practices and punitive discipline policies	Reduction of accidents, disciplinary sanctions, and prison crimes; non-violent communications, respect, responsibility; better perceived experience of detention; treatments respectful of human rights; need for regulatory and practical frameworks; need of training; need for support (including financial) from the Institutions
Stewart et al., 2018	Quantitative study (external data and questionnaire)	122 offenders in a Canada prison	Restorative practices of victim-offender mediation during and post incarceration to address recidivism	Traditional practices	Reduction of recidivism rates; deviation of the perpetrator from criminal behavior and deviant identity; social support; need to implement RJ and RP alongside correctional rehabilitation programs
Walker, and Greening, 2010	Qualitative study (semi-structured interviews and questionnaires)	50 offenders; 280 people in totally (family, friends, victims, prison staff/counselors and offenders) in USA prison	Implementation of restorative practices to facilitate reentry in the community and circle as a tool for restorative process	Traditional practice	Greater perceived social support: greater sense of justice perceived by victims; increased responsibility for the harm caused and its consequences; reconstruction of the link between prisoner and family and between prisoner and community; reduction of recidivism
Weimann-Saks, and Peleg-Koriat, 2020	Randomized controlled trial – RCT	133 male detainees from two Israeli prisons (68 from a rehabilitation prison and 65 from a normal prison)	Restorative practices as a tool to increase victims' awareness of harm, willingness to participate in a restorative process and whether attitudes towards this willingness varied between prisons with different therapeutic-rehabilitation orientation	Traditional practices	Increased awareness of the harm caused, even with detainees who manifest low or no self-acceptance of responsibility; increased willingness to participate in restorative processes; increased accountability; need for combine restorative practices and treatment programs; need for standards and guidelines; need to implement an RJ model that is flexible and considers specific educational, psychological, and contextual needs.