

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



“The trauma of the juvenile justice system itself must be challenged through programs that attend to the impact of individual and institutional trauma on youth and leverage meaningful relationships to foster support and connection instead of punishment and isolation” (p. 1).

“Love and Compassion Not Found Elsewhere”: A Photovoice Exploration of Restorative Justice and Nonviolent Communication in a Community- Based Juvenile Justice Diversion Program

1. What is the research about?

Due to the impacts of structural racism, youth of colour are overrepresented in the juvenile detention system. Black youth are five times more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system than white youth. Research suggests that youth who are referred to the juvenile justice system are **more likely to have experienced trauma**, such as domestic violence and abuse. Since alternative justice approaches have failed to empower youth, racial disparities and repeat offences remain high. Evidence shows that trauma-responsive interventions can **empower youth, reduce the rate of repeat offences**, and **address the impacts of structural racism**. This study presents the findings of an evaluation of a community-based juvenile diversion program that teaches restorative practices, such as nonviolent communication.

2. Where did the research take place?

This study was conducted in Leon County, Florida, a community that is 57% white and 34% Black. Over the past 20 years, Florida has changed how it handles juvenile offending, moving from harsh sentences and detentions to evidence-based diversion programs that allow youth to remain in their communities.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth who participated in a community-based juvenile diversion program. Among the participants, 60% self-identified as Black, 30% as white, and 10% as Latino.

4. How was the research done?

As part of the 14-week program, youth participants were paired with adult volunteer-mentors from the community. They met twice a week to learn restorative practices, such as nonviolent communication. The researchers recruited 17 youth who had participated or were currently participating in this program.

The researchers used **photovoice**, a methodology that allows subjects to respond to a prompt and/or question using photos and words. This approach was chosen because it allows for creative expression, empowers youth by allowing their voices to be heard, and provides policymakers with feedback. Participants were given two weeks to take photographs that best represented how the program had impacted them, and were then invited to discuss these images as part of a focus group. Disposable cameras were provided for youth who did not have access to (or did not want to use) their own cameras.

Researchers used the following prompts for the photovoice method: this is how I was before the program; this is how the program has impacted me; and this is how the program has impacted my relationships and/or interactions with people.

5. What are the key findings?

The researchers found that youth who participated in the program had **increased confidence in themselves and their ability to succeed at school**, and that this resulted in improved school outcomes. Participants experienced **positive changes in their interpersonal relationships** because they were better able to communicate and express empathy. Improvements in listening skills and self-regulation meant that they were also **better at resolving conflict**.

The photovoice prompts were effective in **eliciting responses that reflected how the program led to change in young people's lives**. For example, one participant shared that he was expelled from kindergarten for pulling an alarm. As a result of this incident, in which he was not shown empathy, and instead labelled as a 'bad kid', he began to act out further. During the focus group, he shared a photograph of a fire alarm, and explained that the program taught him to have empathy for his young self and others, freed him of a burden that he had carried, and helped him better understand other people in his life.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This research suggests that community-based juvenile justice diversion programs can benefit youth involved with the juvenile justice system. Restorative justice programs may be most effective when they **take place in young people's home communities, empower youth by teaching practices like nonviolent communication, and engage adult mentors**.

Organizations may want to consider using photovoice in their evaluation work, as this method was shown to be effective in helping youth deeply reflect on research questions and offer meaningful responses.



McMahon, S. M., & Pederson, S. (2020). "Love and compassion not found Elsewhere": A Photovoice exploration of restorative justice and nonviolent communication in a community-based juvenile justice diversion program. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 117.