

THE EVOLVING ROLE OF POLICING IN COMMUNITY JUSTICE

*The role of police in conflict resolution, crime reduction and
community-building*

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1991: 'Justice for the Cree' observed that:

Cree people want the same quality and quantity of policing received by their non-Cree peers. That is, when they seek out the assistance of the police, they want their complaints and concerns to be taken seriously; they want meaningful reactions from police and actions from the courts, commensurate with the nature and degree of victimization experienced.

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The challenge is to determine what is meant by
'meaningful reactions' to crime and conflict

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Increasingly ‘meaningful reactions’ have come to be equated with restorative and community justice approaches

‘Restorative justice’ is both a philosophy and set of processes which emphasize “*peaceful approaches to harm, problem-solving and violations of legal and human rights*” (Carruthers, 2012:1); it is a collaborative, healing response to conflict which *seeks to rebuild and restore people and relationships, rather than determine guilt and impose punishment.*

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Restorative justice dovetails with Indigenous traditions of justice because restorative approaches are:

- *relational*, that is, they understand that people exist within family and social networks/communities that need to function well to support individual growth and well-being;
- mindful that *harmful acts damage individuals and their networks*;
- focused on *activating and empowering damaged networks* to repair and strengthen damaged relationships, and thereby heal past harms and prevent future harms

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The intersections of Indigenous and restorative approaches to justice can be seen in the many community justice initiatives currently active within First Nations, including for example:

- Healing & Talking Circles
- Sentencing Circles
- Elders Panels
- Family Group & Community Conferencing

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To be effective, community and restorative approaches must be:

- *of the community* – that is, based on the culture and reflective of the strengths, values and aspirations of community members;
- *for the community* – that is, focused on the unique needs of, and challenges facing, community members, with a clear plan for building up those members and the community as a whole;
- *in the community* – that is, integrated into mutually-supportive and respectful network of supports and stakeholders within and around the community

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The police are part of the community and integral to the success of community justice, but to advance community justice, police must strive to integrate community and restorative approaches into their policing activities.

The police must shift from a focus on enforcing the law to encouraging accountability, responsibility and respect for the obligations that are integral to traditional understandings of community and family.

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Restorative Policing involves a shift in officer perspectives on crime, its management and consequences, to a position in which policing is “understood to be a whole community responsibility with police as a part of a broader social maintenance effort. Restorative policing actively supports victims, offenders, their families and communities to respond creatively and positively to conflict through restorative processes. The goal of restorative policing is reducing harmful wrongdoing and conflict through the positive engagement of community and governmental resources” (McCold, 2016:1)

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Policing thus becomes about:

- peacemaking before law enforcement, which is viewed a last resort
- Seeing crime and conflict as an opportunity to make sense of what happened and what is needed to strengthen relationships and keep people safe
- Using discretion to prioritize problem-solving over crime control with an emphasis on realizing the positive possibilities created by problems
- Working with the community to foster the conditions for safe and supportive relationships which prevent crime

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Stand Alone, community-based Aboriginal Police Services are in a unique position to support community justice, because Aboriginal officers are already:

- *of the community* – officers know the people, understand the relational dynamics, and possess the language and cultural skillsets to support safety, healing and repair
- *for the community* – officers understand the importance and necessity of building up the community and the challenges which must be overcome to do so
- *in the community* – officers are family members and community members as well as police officers, and can build upon family and social networks to engage restorative policing

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Police must be the change they wish to see within their communities.

Restorative policing offers a vision of that change.

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For more information about restorative policing, see:

Paul McCold, ed. (2016) *White Paper on Restorative Policing*, Restorative Justice International. Online at:

<http://www.restorativejusticeinternational.com>

If you would like to receive a copy of this presentation or access to resources on community and restorative justice, please contact me at:

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Thank you!