



The Impact of Community Conferences

Findings from the RJCA Evaluation: 2024 – 2025

Author: Jennifer McCleary

January 2026

**Wilder
Research**
Information. Insight. Impact.

Key findings

This section summarizes key findings from the evaluation of Restorative Justice Community Action's Community Conference and Interact programs. The findings highlight that RJCA has a deep impact on referred participants, volunteers, and the wider community, including the criminal-legal system.



RJCA changes people at the core: Referred participants, volunteers, staff, board members, and community members all agree that the things they have experienced and learned from their work with RJCA has changed them fundamentally. They are better listeners, care more deeply for their communities and neighbors, and have gained new self-awareness.



Community conferences are an effective alternative to traditional sentences: Overwhelmingly, referred participants credit RJCA and the community conference experience with not only addressing their specific charge, but also changing the way they engage with their communities overall. Many participants report significant growth and self-awareness and report a better sense of repair and justice than a traditional criminal justice sentence would provide.



RJCA can have a significant impact on the current criminal-legal system: Many of the board members and community volunteers affiliated with RJCA are also part of the criminal-legal system as public defenders, judges, and attorneys. Many volunteers express concern with current criminal-legal practices that don't foster the type of growth, self-reflection, and relationship building that restorative justice practices do. As RJCA grows in its work, they are well positioned to increase the impact of their work within the current system.

CONTENTS

Background.....	1
About RJCA	1
Evaluation approach.....	3
Program data	3
Post-conference survey.....	3
Community Volunteer interviews	3
Graphic recording session.....	4
Limitations	4
Program data	5
Community conferencing.....	5
Interact	8
Post-conference survey.....	9
Community belonging.....	9
Impact of Restorative Justice.....	10
Learning	10
Community volunteer interviews.....	11
Overall experience	11
Personal impact.....	12
Ripple impacts of RJCA	15
Introduction	15
Themes	16
Participation in RJCA’s work shifts perceptions of the criminal-legal system	17
Appendix	19

FIGURES

1. Community Conference process for referred participants.....	2
2. Community Conference process for Community Volunteers and people who have been harmed by crime.....	2
3. Race	5
4. Sex	5
5. Age	5
6. Referral source	6
7. Level of offense.....	6
8. Case outcome.....	6

Background

In June 2024, Wilder Research partnered with Restorative Justice Community Action (RJCA) to serve as the evaluator on their Office of Justice Programs (OJP) Community Crime Intervention and Prevention grant. RJCA is a non-profit organization that provides community-based restorative services in Hennepin County. RJCA offers opportunities for adults to reduce or avoid their criminal record through community based restorative justice programs. RJCA primarily serves participants with misdemeanor and felony charges referred for diversion from the Minneapolis City Attorney's Office, Hennepin County Drug Court, and the Hennepin County felony diversion.

In 2024, RJCA received a two-year grant from OJP to strengthen their adult restorative justice programs. Wilder Research partnered with RJCA to evaluate the impact of their programs on referred participants, community volunteers, staff, and the broader community.

ABOUT RJCA

RJCA was founded in 2005 with a focus on providing community-based alternatives to criminal prosecution. RJCA's mission is to "foster individual growth while strengthening communities through restorative justice practices." Using the principles of restorative justice, RJCA brings together individuals who have committed misdemeanor or low-level felony offenses, community members, and individuals impacted by the offense to discuss the incident, learn from each other, and determine a restoration plan. Individuals who complete the program can avoid fines, clear convictions from their record, and reduce their interaction with the justice system. This evaluation covers two of RJCA's programs: Community Conferencing and Interact.

COMMUNITY CONFERENCING

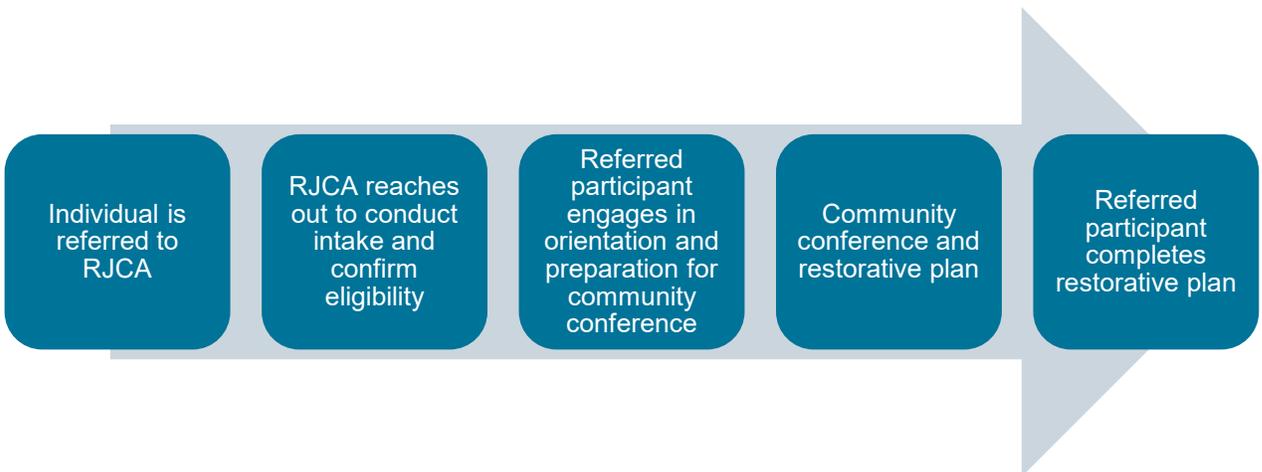
A community conference is a restorative justice process that brings together people who have caused harm with those who have been harmed to discuss the situation, build mutual understanding, and co-create an agreement to repair harm. Adults who are charged with a crime and are eligible for community conferencing may be referred to RJCA's Community Conferencing program. Participation is voluntary and may or may not result in reductions in charges or sentences. Each conference consists of one to two skilled facilitators, the referred participant, and community volunteers. Supporters, and the people harmed directly (if they opt to be part of the process) may also participate. Participants talk about what happened, what led to their behavior, hear about the impact of their behavior on individuals and community members and build shared understanding. The group builds consensus

and agrees on a plan to meaningfully repair harm. This may include community service, donations, written apologies, personal development activities, or other creative options. Referred participants then have two months to complete their restorative plan, with the support of RJCA case managers.

INTERACT PROGRAM

Individuals who are charged with obstructing an officer’s duty may be referred to RJCA for the Interact program. This program focuses on facilitating a one-on-one restorative conversation with a representative of law enforcement, such as the Minneapolis Police Department, the Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office, or the Metro Transit Police. RJCA staff facilitate a one-on-one conversation between the referred participant and a law enforcement representative to share perspectives and provide opportunities for understanding each other.

1. Community Conference process for referred participants



2. Community Conference process for Community Volunteers and people who have been harmed by crime



Evaluation approach

Wilder Research used a variety of methods to evaluate the impacts of RJCA's work on referred participants, community volunteers, and the wider community. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used including interviews, focus groups, quantitative program data, and a graphic recording session that mapped RJCA's impact on referred participants, community volunteers, staff, and the broader community. The methods for each data collection activity are described below. Information was gathered and analyzed both individually and together to develop an integrated, comprehensive evaluation of the impact of RJCA's Community Conferencing and Interact programs.

PROGRAM DATA

RJCA keeps comprehensive data about people (called "referred participants") who are referred to the Community Conferencing and Interact programs. This data includes demographic information, program completion data, and information about the professional development and restoration activities each referred participant engages in. RJCA downloaded this data and shared it with Wilder Research. Wilder conducted descriptive and comparative analyses to assess the impact of the program on referred participants.

POST-CONFERENCE SURVEY

RJCA sends a post-conference survey to all referred participants after their conference is over. The survey asks about their experience with the conference, RJCA staff, and the impact the conference had on areas of their life such as their relationships with family and peers and their connection to community. Wilder helped revise the survey to make it more user friendly. Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER INTERVIEWS

A unique aspect of RJCA's work is the involvement of community volunteers in community conferences. Volunteers are community members who may or may not have experienced a crime like the charge referred participants are facing. Volunteers serve as representatives of the community and offer their perspective on the impact of the crime that resulted in the participant being referred to the program. They also listen deeply to the story of the referred participant. Together with the referred participant, they co-create an agreement to repair harm to the extent possible.

Wilder Research interviewed four community volunteers to gather an in-depth understanding of volunteers' overall experience, the impact of their experiences on their connection to their community, their perceptions of safety and well-being, and suggestions on ways to improve the program.

GRAPHIC RECORDING SESSION

A graphic recording session is an innovative way to capture data from evaluation participants. In a graphic recording session, an artist captures in real time what participants say in visuals, drawings, graphics, and text. The result is a visual image that reflects the depth and breadth of the conversation. Wilder Research facilitated a graphic recording session with RJCA community volunteers, board members, and referred participants. The group discussed a series of questions about the impacts of RJCA's work on them as individuals, their relationships, their communities, and the justice system. During the discussion, a graphic notetaker documented the conversation visually and another Wilder Research staff member took notes.

LIMITATIONS

There are some limitations that should be considered when reviewing the findings in this report. First, 16 people completed the post-participant survey, which is a small fraction of the 224 individuals who completed a conference. There may be barriers to post-conference survey completion for referred participants. Surveys are emailed to participants after they complete their conference, and these emails can be missed or ignored. Referred participants may have busy lives that make taking a survey difficult. While several different recruitment strategies were used, the number of surveys completed remains low and should not be used to make broad generalizations about the impact of the Community Conference program.

Second, demographic data about referred participants who did not complete a conference is limited, making it difficult to make comparisons between individuals who completed a conference and those who did not.

Program data

During the grant period (January 1, 2024, through December 31, 2025), RJCA engaged with 334 individuals referred to the Community Conference program and 25 individuals referred to the Interact program. RJCA collects data about all referred participants, including demographic data, information about the offense charge, and notes about completion of professional development activities and restoration plans.

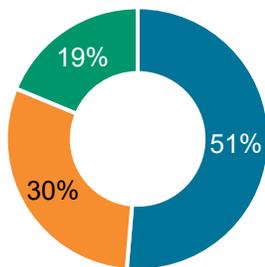
COMMUNITY CONFERENCING

DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic data including age, race, gender, income, education level, language spoken at home, and current employment status were recorded for all referred participants. While this data was fairly complete for participants who completed a community conference during the grant period (N=224), more than 70% of the respondents who did not enroll in the program or complete a conference are missing demographic data. Therefore, demographics are only reported for those who completed a conference. Also, between 17% and 20% of participants who completed a conference are missing one or more demographic variables.

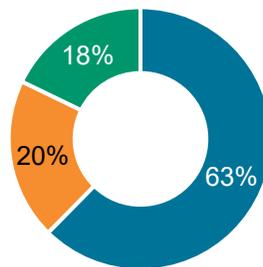
Fifty-one percent of participants who were referred and completed a conference (N=224) identified as people of color (51%; Figure 3). Sixty-three percent were male (Figure 4) and 59% had incomes at or below \$24,300. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 70 (Figure 5), and the average age was 38. Forty-two percent of referred participants had completed high school or a GED, and 30% had completed at least some college. Forty-six percent of participants were employed full-time or part-time. Complete demographic data for participants who completed the program is displayed in Appendix 1.

3. Race (N=224)



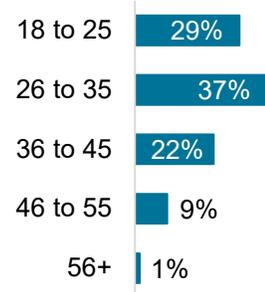
■ BIPOC ■ White/Caucasian ■ Missing

4. Sex (N=224)



■ Male ■ Female ■ Missing

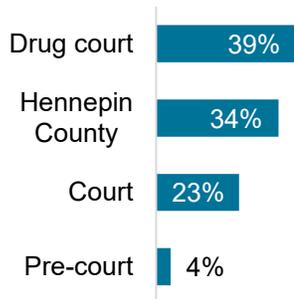
5. Age (N=224)



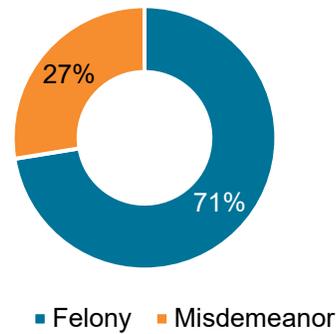
PROGRAM COMPLETION DATA

Of the 334 individuals referred to RJCA, 39% percent were referred through drug court, 34% through the county and 23% through regular court (Figure 6). A handful of participants (4%) were referred through pre-court. Most referred participants were charged with felonies (71%), and the rest with misdemeanors (27%; Figure 7). Offense level data was missing for six participants.

6. Referral source (N=334)



7. Level of offense (N=328)



Two hundred and forty referred participants (72%) entered the program. Ninety-four individuals were referred to RJCA but did not join the program, primarily because RJCA was not able to connect with them, they attended orientation and then ceased contact, or they refused the program, often choosing to complete community service instead (Figure 8).

8. Case outcome (N=332)

Total referrals	N=334	
	N	%
Successfully completed case	224	67%
Did not successfully complete case	16	5%
Closed – non-participant or referred back to court	94	28%

Of the 240 participants who entered the program (N=240), 93% successfully completed their contracts after the conference. The sixteen participants (7%) who did not complete their contracts were most often sent back to court for new charges. Of the 224 referred participants who successfully completed the program, 40 (18%) completed their case without attending a community conference or panel. This was often because they were able to come to an agreeable restoration while in orientation or preparing for the conference. Referred participants who successfully completed the program spent an average of 39 days between enrolling in the program and participating in a community conference. This time

was used to meet with the referred participant, orient them to the process, and prepare them to participate in the conference. On average, participants spent 89 days completing their restorative agreements after the conference.

RESTORATIVE AGREEMENTS

Many restorative agreements include engaging in personal development activities in one of four categories: community connection, mental health and wellbeing, career building, and education. Of the 224 participants who created restoration plans, 166 engaged in personal development work in at least one of these categories. Seventy individuals engaged in more than one category of development work. Participants spent from 1 to 50 hours on personal development, with an average of five hours.

Mental health and well-being was the most common category with 99 participants engaging in work to support their mental health. Most participants engaged in therapy to meet their mental health goals, however, many participants also made health care and other behavioral health appointments and attended AA or NA meetings. RJCA staff work closely with participants during this time to reflect on their mental health and well-being and make goals related to self-care. Many participants made lists of things they liked about themselves and journaled about how to improve their sense of self. Many participants engaged in exercise as a form of self-care. Some participants made goals for the future. Throughout the case notes about these activities, it is clear that RJCA staff not only encouraged participants to engage in activities to support their mental health and wellbeing but also worked with participants to reflect on their experiences and integrate those reflections into their lives and behaviors.

Eighty-six participants engaged in activities that fostered connections with their wider communities. Most participants attended events or meetings such as AA and NA groups, Art-a-Whirl, community center events, religious services, or the farmer's market. These activities often involved a purposeful connection with another person such as a family member, neighbor, or friend. Like with mental health, RJCA staff helped participants reflect on these experiences and how they encourage community connection. Many participants spent time reflecting on their story and experience with the criminal-legal system so that it could potentially help others. The way that RJCA staff meet each participant where they are at is visible in how they approach this work. For some participants, simply writing out steps to community engagement or building courage to attend an event was enough, whereas for others taking specific steps and then reflecting on that experience was helpful. In each case, RJCA staff helped participants to comfortably reach out to engage with community and build connections.

Thirty-three participants engaged in career support activities such as applying for a job, participating in training or starting a business. Several participants worked on preparing for job applications by reinstating drivers licenses or replacing lost paperwork like a birth certificate or social security number. Finally, 27 participants engaged in education activities such as enrolling in school or saving for future schooling.

Fifty-four participants performed community service during their time in the program. Hours of community service ranged from 1 to 24, with an average of eight hours. Participants most often served at non-profit organizations like Feed My Starving Children, Twin Cities Recovery Project, Joyce Food Shelf, and People Serving People.

Restorative agreements occasionally include writing letters of apology to people who have been harmed either directly or indirectly by the referred participant's actions. One hundred and two individuals wrote apology letters. These letters were primarily written to family members such as parents, children, and siblings. Several participants wrote letters of gratitude to the police or probation officers for supporting them in this program. Many participants also wrote letters directly to the individuals they harmed.

INTERACT

DEMOGRAPHICS

Twenty-five individuals were referred to the Interact program. Of those, seventeen successfully completed the program. Demographic data is missing for most of the individuals who were referred to the program but did not enroll, so this data is only reported for individuals who successfully completed the Interact program. Of the 17 individuals who completed the Interact program, 14 were people of color, six were female, 12 had incomes at or below \$48,600, and nine were employed part-time or full-time. All of the participants had graduated from high school, and four had a 2-year vocational degree or higher degree. Four participants spoke a language other than English at home (Somali, Oromo, Arabic, and Spanish). Most of the participants were referred for disorderly conduct or obstruction from the Minneapolis Police Department and the Metro Transit Police Department.

Post-conference survey

From August 2024 through October 2025, fifteen referred participants completed a survey after completing the Community Conference program. All 15 respondents agreed that the restorative justice process helped them improve relationships with their family members and their friends/peers and introduced them to needed resources. All but one respondent agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the restorative justice process helped them to address challenges, achieve goals, and increase their sense of belonging. One participant disagreed with each of these statements. All 15 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the restorative justice process and felt supported by RJCA staff. Fourteen participants agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend RJCA to someone else and one disagreed.

Participants were also asked to write answers to three prompts:

- In what ways did you feel a stronger sense of belonging in your community?
- Which part of the restorative justice process had the biggest impact on you?
- Please describe one learning you are taking with you from this process.

COMMUNITY BELONGING

Participants felt strongly that Community Conferencing helped them to connect with their communities and feel a sense of belonging. Respondents said being listened to respectfully and being understood helped them to connect with others. One participant said their connection to community helped them to “give back and help when others have helped me during my journey.” Another participant wrote:

I was nervous about going in front of three different people from a different sex and race [from me]. I felt very uncomfortable at first, but after a few minutes all my nervousness went away. I didn't feel judged at all, once they introduced themselves. I actually got a chance to finally tell my side, how I felt doing the things I did that affected my community, and I opened up more than I thought I ever would. I left feeling relieved and determined to make things right in my community and continue doing good even after the program.

A third participant wrote:

As I went to places like the local library and farmers market it strengthened [my] sense of belonging because I got to meet people from my area and parents that made me feel seen and heard. I felt welcomed at every opportunity we took to get out and take action.

IMPACT OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

When asked about the biggest impact of the restorative justice process, most respondents said it was the feeling of being listened to without judgement. Participants felt understood and heard, often for the first time. One individual said the biggest impact was being “given the reassurance of being part of the community.” Participants also felt very supported during the process and engaged in deep self-reflection. Several quotes support this impact:

Taking to people who wanted to listen to me instead of judging me.

I really liked how I had someone to hear me out and not be judged by it.

I feel like the biggest impact that this program had on me is reflecting on the decisions that I made and also allowing me to tap back into my children’s lives and understanding that what I do can affect them greatly.

LEARNING

When asked about the biggest learning they were taking away, most participants talked about realizing others care for them and that their behavior, good or bad, has an impact on others. Several participants said they learned to be open with others. One person wrote:

I’m very grateful for this program to prove to the system that us humans are more than our mistakes and what we carry.

Another participant wrote:

[I learned that it is] okay to open myself up and reflect on my life because I’ve learned that nobody is perfect and we can change to be a better person.

Community volunteer interviews

Wilder Research interviewed four community volunteers, who work with restorative justice circles and conferences at Restorative Justice Community Action (RJCA). The purpose of the interviews was to gather an in-depth understanding of volunteers' overall experience, the impact of their experiences on their connection to their community, their perceptions of safety and well-being, and suggestions on ways to improve the program. To recruit interviewees, RJCA staff reached out to their listserv of community member volunteers and invited them to participate. Wilder Research staff conducted interviews in October 2024 with four volunteers. Interviews lasted up to 30 minutes and participants were given a \$25 gift card to compensate them for their time. Transcripts and notes from the interviews were analyzed thematically. The following are key themes that were identified from the interviews.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE

All community volunteers aid their overall experience with RJCA has been positive. One volunteer said they appreciated the passion facilitators have for their work. Other volunteers said they appreciated being able to build connections with one another and with observers, facilitators, and Community Conference referred participants. Several volunteers reported that they were able to build trust within the circle and feel it is a privilege to go through this journey with the referred participant.

Several quotations from the volunteers exemplify this:

...even though he came in guarded, he said at the end that this was the only time throughout this process where he felt heard and treated like a human being.

...it feels like [referred participants] are renewed and want a fresh start. To me, that is really what you hope for. Really, we don't tell them what to do – we want them to try to figure it out themselves. And sometimes you get a light bulb flicked off on your head or their head, and it's just really refreshing.

I had the privilege to walk with him on this path.

Some volunteers described challenges with the overall process. One volunteer said it can be difficult to balance encouraging an individual to speak and knowing it can take a lot of time for individuals to feel comfortable participating. Other volunteers described barriers including the limitations of online conferences or unfamiliarity with specific demographic populations, such as youth. Several volunteers said it can be quite challenging when cases do not end positively.

[It is hard to know] when to push and when to acknowledge what the person has been through. And also, being supportive. Holding both ends on that when you are sitting as a community member. Pushing someone to understand the impact that they have done, and doing that allows them in a healthy way to get there as opposed to shutting down and not being able to go there.

What's really important is for me to be in person with people. When COVID hit, many cases were done via Zoom, and some cases now are being done in Zoom. I appreciate the option, but it's more difficult to make a connection with someone over a screen.

PERSONAL IMPACT

All of the volunteers described positive benefits from volunteering with RJCA. Two volunteers said they have grown more empathetic and understanding of people in their communities who commit crimes, especially those who are historically marginalized or experiencing economic and mental health challenges. Other volunteers said they have gained knowledge of the criminal justice system, especially the drug court system. Finally, several volunteers said they have grown in their ability to communicate with people from different backgrounds.

I am more inclined to see people on street corners who are holding cardboard signs as worthwhile people. So I go to church, and on Sunday mornings, there's this individual who is standing with a cardboard sign... one day I struck up a conversation with him, and he is now my friend. I see them often—[and] have lovely conversations. It feels like an equal exchange—not an "I'm better than you." RJCA has played a role for me in seeing him as a person who has value, who has something to contribute and someone that can enrich my life that I didn't expect before.

It's easier for me to communicate with different people and to look for ways we can connect. RJCA conversations have helped me learned how to speak out more comfortably with people I do not know.

Interviewees reported they appreciate that RJCA provides updates from participants on their goal process and accomplishments. They enjoy reading stories, learning about what participant accomplishments, and are often impressed with the work done by referred participants.

You read the stories and read what they have done, and there is restoration, which may happen—they're just planting the little seed in you and when you get these letters—seeds have sprouted to grow.

However, one community volunteer mentioned that although they appreciate participants' updates and know that all cases are confidential, they forget the specific case information, which confuses understanding of why the goal impacted the participant.

What has been challenging, but not on RJCA's end—remembering back to that case. Everything needs to be confidential, I know, but it would be helpful for me to have a small journal to take notes and then remember when I am reading what they are sending in regards to their restorative plan.

All of the community volunteers appreciated the time for debriefs after each conference. They appreciated that this time gave them the opportunity to process the experience and validate their emotions. One individual reported that they appreciated the opportunities for community observers to offer insight about the context of criminal justice to the volunteers.

[The debriefs] have been helpful. I have enjoyed them—they are a very important thing for us to do. Especially if something didn't go particularly well or if there was something left unsaid that should have been said.

Another volunteer said:

The debriefs are critical, but also if you have an intense conference, it can help to think out what [is] said and heard. It is very important as you leave the circle, you know other people's experiences and what they went through, and what leaders are going through. Important to hear that so you can let it rest in that circle and let it evaporate and go on. A lot of the time, it renews my confidence in humankind.

One volunteer said that sometimes there is not enough time to debrief thoroughly. This person also noted that circles can be emotionally draining and they might not have enough energy left after the conference ends to do a thorough debrief.

I think [debriefs] vary. We often run late with conferences themselves. [The] debrief is really important and a time to think. All the times we have done debriefing—it has been insightful to hear everyone’s viewpoint of how it went. And sometimes we go overtime, and we aren’t able to hear that. I can just remember there are some times where we don’t have enough energy left and enough time that we can engage with each other, with the experience and what we would do differently and what has been impactful for us.

Ripple impacts of RJCA



INTRODUCTION

On October 9, 2025, Wilder Research facilitated a graphic recording session with Restorative Justice Community Action (RJCA) volunteers, board members, and referred participants. The group discussed a series of questions about the impacts of RJCA's work on them as individuals, their relationships, their communities, and the justice system as a whole. During the discussion, a graphic notetaker documented the conversation visually, and another Wilder Research staff member took notes. This discussion resulted in a visual image of the impact of RJCA across multiple domains (above), as well as this summary of the themes discussed during the session.

The themes described in this report emerged from a simple thematic content analysis that involved listening to a recording of the discussion, reading over the notes to get a sense of the whole, and analyzing the visual image. Next, text from the notes and recording were sorted into "buckets" that reflected the topic, such as "individual impacts" or "shifts

in perception.” Then, these topics were combined or further elaborated to elicit themes. Each theme is described below and includes supporting quotations from the participants.

THEMES

PARTICIPATION IN RJCA’S WORK IS A COLLECTIVE GIFT

Early in the discussion, one person referred to participating in a conference with RJCA as a “collective gift” that is shared by both community members and referred participants. This idea resonated with the rest of people in the discussion and the gift metaphor was repeated throughout the discussion.

The gift is ours collectively and reminds us how connected we are. We come together and we are changed.

When asked to name the most meaningful aspect of their work with RJCA, people often described something they received or learned from the experience. One person said participation made them a better person. Another said that bearing witness to people putting their lives back together felt like receiving a gift. People described their experience with RJCA as teaching them to listen deeply, connect to others, and expand their sense of compassion. People also talked about receiving hope, courage, and joy from their participation in RJCA conferences. Importantly, the gift was described as “collective,” meaning it was not something that only volunteers received by donating their time. Referred participants also used the metaphor of a gift to describe the impact participation in a restorative justice conference had in their lives. One referred participant in the group explained that participation in RJCA’s work had given her the gift of knowing her self-worth and also that she could now pass that gift on to her daughter.

PARTICIPATION IN RJCA’S WORK CHANGES PEOPLE AT THE CORE

All of the people in the discussion agreed that participation in RJCA conferences has transformed core aspects of their being and the way they interact with others. One of the biggest changes people described was their ability to truly listen deeply to others without judgement, to bear witness to their growth, and to connect with other people both within and outside of RJCA conferences. The following quotes underscore how the active practice of listening is at the heart of RJCA’s work:

Working with RJCA has taught me to listen, hear others, and be open to bearing witness to change and growth.

I have learned to decenter myself and recognize the agency of the other.

What the referred participants are doing is incredibly difficult – opening up and sharing their trauma. Watching them sort through their trauma reinforces my belief in human potential and helps me to be a better person.

One referred participant said she started the program because she thought it would shorten her required community service hours. But then the program changed her life. She said that integration back into society has been possible because of the work she has done with RJCA.

PARTICIPATION IN RJCA'S WORK SHIFTS PERCEPTIONS OF THE CRIMINAL-LEGAL SYSTEM

Many of the people in the discussion reported that working with RJCA has shifted the way they perceive the criminal-legal system and their ideas about crime and safety in their communities. Especially for those who work or have worked within the criminal-legal system as public defenders or in jails and prisons, RJCA offers an alternative vision of what justice can mean. One person said:

My work as a public defender is dehumanizing and my work here is re-humanizing. [At RJCA] I am able to talk about higher values like love and repentance, which aren't part of the criminal justice system.

For many people, both volunteers and referred participants, restorative justice offers a way to shift what it means to hold someone accountable for their mistakes. Rather than a formulaic sentence in response to a crime, RJCA offers an opportunity for referred participants to grow and learn from their actions and allows volunteers to witness that change and bring that learning into their own lives. Most of the discussion participants agreed that this is far more effective in reducing crime than jail sentences.

Working with RJCA has given people insight into the trauma that referred participants carry with them into the criminal-legal system and has expanded their compassion for those who engage in criminal activity. One person said that volunteering with RJCA “helps to humanize people for whom the default is to de-humanize.” Another person said working with RJCA has helped her understand the reasons people end up in the criminal-legal system, and it has also showed her that the traditional system does not treat the root causes of crime, such as mental health issues and trauma. She asked,

What if our justice system was built on giving people help instead of putting them in cages?

PARTICIPATION IN RJCA'S WORK IMPACTS PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY

Most of the people in the discussion agreed that working with RJCA has shifted who they perceive as part of their community. It has both broadened their scope of who is in their community and changed their sense of responsibility to their community. One person explained that participating in conferences teaches people to expand their vision of who is harmed by a crime. The criminal-legal system tends to focus on a singular victim, whereas the restorative justice process has a much broader sense of who is harmed when a crime is committed in a community. This allows people to have a more expanded definition of who they are in community with.

Along with broadening people's sense of who is in their communities, participating in restorative justice work has shifted how people think about their responsibility to their community. Participants report that they have more compassion for others and extend more grace to people in their lives, even those they don't know.

RJ is a philosophy. If you are doing it with integrity and ethically, you have to take it outside of your work. It needs to apply to my life and everything I am doing.

Appendix

A1. Community conferencing demographic data (N=224)^a

	Number	Percent
Race		
African	13	6%
African American	51	23%
American Indian/Alaska Native	7	3%
Asian American/Pacific Islander	7	3%
White	67	30%
Hispanic/Latino	18	8%
Biracial/Other	19	8%
Missing	42	19%
Gender		
Male	140	63%
Female	44	20%
Missing	40	18%
Income		
At or below \$24,300	132	59%
\$24,301 - \$48,600	27	12%
\$48,601 - \$66,825	9	4%
Greater than \$66,626	9	4%
Missing	48	21%
Education		
Did not complete high school or GED	23	10%
High school/GED	94	42%
Some college	14	6%
Two year/vocational degree	19	8%
Bachelor's degree	30	13%
Advanced degree	4	2%
Missing	40	18%
Employment		
Full-time	79	33%
Part-time	27	12%
Student	19	8%
Not employed	61	27%
Other	5	2%
Missing	37	17%

^a This table includes data for individuals who completed the community conference program.

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the contributions of all of the people who participated in data collection and the work of RJCA.

Wilder Research staff who contributed to this report include:

Anna Alba
Julie Atella
Naw-Amelia Kacher

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104
651-280-2700 | www.wilderresearch.org

Wilder Research[®]

Information. Insight. Impact.

