

The economic case for restorative conferencing

1. Barry's Story

What actually happened

In his own words, three things ruled Barry's childhood: crime, drink and violence. Involved in petty offending from the age of 6, he soon moved on to burglary, robbery, car crime and drug abuse. Kicked out of the family home whilst still at primary school, he was expelled from secondary school at the age of 12. By his mid teens he was into drug dealing and, between periods in approved schools and borstal, built up a 'mini drugs empire'.

Having initially avoided heroin, Barry eventually became addicted and sank ever lower into depths of deprivation and ill health. The next 30 years were characterised by short periods of prolific offending to raise money for drugs, some of it accompanied by gratuitous violence, interspersed with lengthy periods in prison. By his middle 40s, Barry had spent most of his life in prison but, incredibly, in the periods when he was not locked up, he estimates that he committed 20,000 crimes.

At the age of 43, just released from jail and back on drugs, Barry was arrested again. Pleading guilty, he was offered the opportunity to meet victims of two of his recent burglaries at a restorative conference, to which he agreed. Face to face, Barry recounted that he had sold Ronald's laptop for just £25. An emotional Ronald - a doctor - told him that the laptop held all his research notes for a book he was preparing. Now the notes were lost forever and he felt his life had been ruined. Anthony on the other hand was angry at Barry's attempts to justify his actions.

Barry says, "I had never thought about all the Ronalds and Anthonys I had harmed in my life. All I had thought about was the money and the risks I had taken to get drugs. I had never thought about those I stole from as

people, human beings like me. I was devastated at what a rotten person I had become. I was deeply ashamed."

Barry gave an undertaking to Anthony and Ronald that he would change his life, getting off alcohol and drugs once and for all, undertaking some courses to educate himself and turning his back on crime. He promised to write to them (through the facilitator, Kim) every 6 months to report on progress.

Barry was sentenced to 4 years' imprisonment and accepted into the drug rehabilitation wing, before being sent to an open prison. He has now been back in the community for three years, has got married and not committed any crimes or taken drugs or drunk alcohol in that period. He is determined to earn an honest living and accepts that his employment prospects are limited because of his previous convictions.

Ronald and Anthony have now put their experiences behind them and Ronald has started a new life. They recognise that, as victims, they were selected at random and accept as genuine the apologies they received from Barry. They are satisfied that he will never harm anyone else again.

What would have happened without restorative conferencing?

There can be little doubt that - without the restorative intervention - Barry's life would have continued along the same path as before. That would have meant, in the next five years, fewer than 6 months would have been spent 'outside', while for most of the time he would have been in prison. Whilst at liberty, Barry would have committed 3-4 crimes each day and over six months might well have carried out 450 burglaries, 100 'personal' robberies and perhaps other more serious offences. He would continue to steal property worth about £1500 daily to raise the

money needed to pay for his heroin/crack cocaine addiction. Those offences would inevitably have been followed by police investigations, but there would have been few court cases, since Barry would have been given another significant custodial sentence on any further conviction. The victims meanwhile would have to pick up the pieces, possibly having to deal with the physical injury, emotional distress and loss of earnings, as well as material losses.

The cost of the restorative conference

The main public cost of the conference was in police officer time. A PC initially contacted Barry and, when he agreed to take part, his victims and all their supporters were

approached. In preparation, each was visited to discuss the meeting. As the victims coincidentally lived close to the prison, travel time and costs were low. It took around two months to get ready and the time spent on visits, travel and telephoning was carefully recorded. Including the conference, the amount of officer time came to 14 hours. With other administrative expenses - and prison costs associated with the meeting - the total cost of the conference was approximately £800. This compares with £1,690,000 saved from the discontinuation of Barry's career (see box). Even allowing for a margin of error, it is transparently clear that, even if just a small proportion of Conferences in such cases are effective, the cost benefits will be huge.

The costs of the continuation of Barry's criminal career over the next five years can be estimated as follows:

Costs to individuals and households

Net value of property stolen or damaged		£300,000
Physical and emotional impact	Burglaries	£291,000
	Robberies	£381,000

Criminal justice system costs

Police investigations and court costs	Burglaries	£260,000
	Robberies	£110,000
Prison		£107,000
Drug treatment in prison		£13,000

Other consequential costs

Value of lost output	Burglaries	£29,000
	Robberies	£126,000
Health services for robbery victims		£60,000

TOTAL **£1,690,000**

Explanatory Note

The forward projection of Barry's life and associated costs are indicative, but are based on interviews with Barry and others involved with his case, as well as his written account of his life. Costings are estimated using the latest available figures published by the Home Office and other reputable research reports with an allowance for inflation. Sources used include:

Dubourg R, Hamed J and J Thorns (2005), The economic and social costs of crime against individuals and households 2003/04. Online Report 30/05. Home

Office: London.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/rdsolr3005.pdf>.

Godfrey C, Eaton G, McDougall C and Anthony Culyer (2002), The economic and social costs of Class A drug use in England and Wales, 2000. Research Study 249. Home Office: London.

<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors249.pdf>.

Matrix Knowledge Group (2007), The economic case for and against prison. London: Matrix Knowledge Group. Main report and technical appendix.

<http://www.matrixknowledge.co.uk/prison-economics>.