

The Restorative Justice Listening Project Report

The Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice conducted a strategic Listening Project from February to April 2017. The goal was to engage a cross section of restorative justice practitioners from different communities—urban, rural, aboriginal, east coast, west coast, Midwest and one Canadian territory—to get a feel for “the state of the state” of restorative justice. Highlights of the project report include **a general consensus** from the 130 people who met in six locations that:

- Restorative justice (RJ) is vibrant and growing.
- There are two roots to RJ: the indigenous and the Western.
- Westerners in RJ have much to learn from the indigenous who do not see “restorative justice” (a Western term) as separate from their holistic lifeways. Indigenous practitioners share a focus on community and healing and an antipathy to top-down enforcement of “best practices” or other outside interference.
- More coordination and connection is needed among RJ practitioners and organizations to enable RJ to be most impactful and most true to its values.
- It is vitally important to uphold the quality of RJ work, and fully embody its values.

Tensions within RJ were noted:

- The term “Restorative Justice” is used by initiatives with very differing stances towards existing institutions and culture: from providing a social service within the criminal legal system, to building a separate system, to being a social justice movement, to embodying a holistic way of life.
- Some RJ practitioners want RJ certifications and best practices to uphold quality, while most at the listening sessions saw these as a threat to community involvement and local wisdom.

Strategies that were suggested to up the impact of the RJ movement include:

- Teach and practice RJ values using a bottom-up “Pillars of Wisdom” frame rather than a prescriptive “Best Practices” frame.
- Offer many more trainings, especially subsidized ones, and make trainings visible.
- Center indigenous wisdom, roots and current practices.
- Infuse the field with anti-racism and anti-oppression training and with personal work and circles on racism especially for white practitioners.
- Coordinate efforts without replicating top-down national structures. This requires creativity. Support regional RJ hubs, decentralized national networks and a restorative justice fund to bolster localized community-based RJ organizations.
- Consider and discuss the meaning of cooptation by systems, institutions and hierarchical structures and how to counter its dangers.
- Whatever is built, center it on values, relationships, and equity.