This study reports the impact of the Bethlehem Police Department implementation of Family Group Conferencing as a diversion option.

DESIGN: For research purposes, those eligible between Nov. 1, 1995 and May 1, 1997 were randomly assigned to a control or treatment group. The treatment group became two groups as about sixty percent of the cases referred to conference did not meet, primarily because the offender or the victim chose not to participate. Observation of conferences, surveys of participants and analysis of records were utilized.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS: Eligibility requirements included: first time offenders, i.e., youth who had not been through the probation system; no felony level crimes; no drugs or alcohol offenses; no sex offenses; would include simple assaults (no serious bodily injury, no weapons), thefts of a misdemeanor or summary violation, property crimes of a misdemeanor or summary level. Breakdown of crime types for the three groups was as follows:

1. Statistical control group: n = 68 property, 35 violent
2. Selected for conferencing and participated: n = 56 property, 24 violent. Of this group, 60% were arrested for retail theft.
3. Selected for conferencing but did not participate: n = 57 property, 52 violent

OUTCOMES: 42% participation rate, 100% of conferences (n=67) reaching an agreement, 94% of offenders (n=80) fully complying with agreements, and participant satisfaction and sense of fairness exceeding 96%.

RECIDIVISM One year recidivism for property offenders was: control--21%; conference--32%; selected but not conferenced--35%. For violent offenders it was: control 35%; conference--20%; selected but not conferenced--48%. Results suggest that recidivism may have been more a function of offenders choice to participate than the effects of the conferencing, per se.

SATISFACTION, FAIRNESS AND COST: Ninety-two percent of participating victims, offenders and police officers would recommend conferences to others. The report also presents data comparing FGC with multiple sites where VOM was implemented. Authors conclude that FGCs yield as high if not higher satisfaction and fairness scores and, because of the use of police officers, can cost less.

Authors concluded that typical police officers can be trained to carry out family group conferences consistent with due process and restorative justice principles. Overall case processing of juvenile offenders "by police and courts was largely unaffected by the existence of the program."


Available online at: http://fp.enter.net/restorativepractices/BPD.pdf
Link to extensive summary: http://www.iirp.org/library/summary.html