Pietsch, E. B. (1999). State Centered and Community Centered social control in police sponsored family group conferencing. Honors Paper, Bowdoin College Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Brunswick, ME.

The purpose of the paper is to examine whether there are difficulties in creating restorative programs when the delivery system relies primarily on agencies and personnel that have been primary actors in the formal, punishment-centered criminal justice system. After an extensive theoretical introduction examining the concept of re-integrative social control, this paper explores “the degree to which conflicts in theory and approaches are reflected in police officers’ understanding of juvenile crime, FGC, and their own roles” in two Maine-based FGC programs at differing stages in their development. Both programs dealt with primarily first time offenders and minor offenses through conferencing.

The investigator conducted interviews with nine police officers across the two towns to explore their opinions and their understanding across the following domains:

Views on juvenile crime: the majority of the officers located the root of the problem within the juveniles themselves or within their family environment, but did not invoke broader social context variables in their explanations.

Views on the juvenile justice system: the majority of the officers felt the system was “too soft” and allowed youths to get away with too much.

Appropriate responses to juvenile crime: three officers described a general approach but the majority felt the approach should be varied based on the type of kid involved. The net result appeared to be that FGC was seen as an added option for responding to “good” kids who merely made a bad choice, but not for the “real” delinquents.

Perceptions of role: All nine officers believed that police, victims, offender families and communities all have a role in responding to and preventing crime.

Conclusion: the author concludes that the current police opinions and understandings may potentially lead both to net widening [by referring to FGC cases that previously would have been informally handled] and to failure to deliver the socially re-integrative benefits of FGC to those cases most in need of it.