

## Effect of transitional or restorative justice & Justice system support and reform on Social norms regarding violence and atrocities.

Transitional and restorative justice interventions can have harmful effects on social norms, sometimes reactivating trauma and reinforcing negative emotional outcomes in affected communities.

Effect: Harmful effect ( $g = -0.246$ )

Geographic Location: Sub Saharan Africa and Latin America

Confidence in study findings: Low (7 studies with 26 effect sizes)

### Short Summary:

Transitional and restorative justice mechanisms, alongside justice system support and reform, aim to reshape social norms around violence and atrocities. Programs like Sierra Leone's Fambul Tok and Colombia's ComunPaz sought to replace violence-driven governance with community-driven dispute resolution. While these interventions promote reconciliation and trust-building, the evidence indicates a harmful effect in some contexts, as revisiting past trauma can provoke negative emotional outcomes among participants, reducing the overall effectiveness of the programs..

### Long Summary

#### *The Intervention:*

The interventions bring together victims and perpetrators of historic or current conflicts to prevent further violence. This includes Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) and other programs that encourage acknowledgement of past harms, apologies, or reparations. They also involve efforts to strengthen the justice system through reforms such as integrating human rights into legal frameworks, building capacity for courts and lawyers, and reforming penal codes to ensure equal protection under the law.

#### *How the Intervention is expected to work:*

The interventions rely on community participation and collaboration with local leaders and stakeholders. In Sierra Leone, the Fambul Tok program facilitates community forums where victims share experiences and perpetrators confess, promoting reconciliation, forgiveness, and social trust. ComunPaz in Colombia engages state authorities, local organisations, and community members affected by armed group demobilization to improve dispute resolution, governance, and trust in institutions. Both interventions aim to empower communities, repair social ties, and promote sustainable peace through inclusive local leadership.

#### *The Evidence Base:*

The cell contains 8 studies, 7 of which are impact evaluations and 1 qualitative study by Muke (2016).

The primary studies are from Rwanda (4 studies), Liberia (1 study), Sierra Leone (1 study) and Colombia (2 studies).

### *Evidence Findings:*

The evidence indicates that transitional and restorative justice interventions can shape social norms and promote reconciliation. However, the interventions also show a harmful effect ( $g = -0.246$ ) in some contexts, as revisiting past conflicts may reactivate trauma, provoke negative emotions, and produce mixed outcomes in affected communities. Programs like Fambul Tok and ComunPaz demonstrate the importance of managing psychological risks carefully,

### *Included Studies:*

**Bazuin (2013):** Bazuin’s study reveals that transitional and restorative justice processes can fundamentally reshape social norms regarding violence and atrocities by promoting accountability and fostering reconciliation. The introduction of the gacaca process—“a revival of a traditional participatory justice framework” aimed at enabling victims and perpetrators “to testify what had happened to them, to re-establish accountability, and to promote reconciliation”—illustrates how restorative justice seeks to transform a culture of violence into one of healing and mutual understanding. Moreover, the research indicates that when communities perceive judicial processes as fair, they are “far more likely to endorse attitudes of forgiveness and reconciliation,” suggesting that reform and support for the justice system can help delegitimise violence and reduce cycles of retribution. This shift, by challenging entrenched norms that once normalised violence, paves the way for a collective reimagining of societal values—a necessary step in the arduous process of post-conflict recovery. This study is rated low confidence due to little or no description of the interventions and outcomes.

**Best (2011):** This study illustrates how transitional justice mechanisms—embodied by initiatives such as Liberia’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—can transform social norms that have historically legitimised violence and atrocities. The authors note that national reconciliation processes “often include four overlapping phases: (1) public truth-telling; (2) a redefinition of the identities of the belligerents and the roles and relationships of important social groups and institutions; (3) limited justice (i.e. justice short of full retribution for all harms); and (4) an explicit call to break with the past and show dedication to a new relationship and a new social and moral order”. In this framework, restorative justice is not merely about addressing past wrongs but about reshaping collective memory and social expectations; by publicly acknowledging historical abuses and reforming judicial support, these processes promote a shift away from cycles of retributive violence toward norms that favor healing and reconciliation. As the study further explains, facilitating dialogue through interactive digital media enhances individual self-efficacy—a critical component in enabling people to “tell [their] own story” and engage in constructive public debate, thereby reinforcing a societal commitment to nonviolence and accountability. This study is rated medium confidence due to partial description of evaluation questions and no mention of power calculations.

**Blair (2022):** The ComunPaz program's intervention in Colombia interacts with existing social norms regarding violence and atrocity in several ways, shaped by the region's historical context and the lived experiences of its communities. Communities affected by prolonged armed conflict often have entrenched social norms that influence the perception and resolution of disputes. In areas where armed groups once held control, notions of justice, authority, and community relations were deeply impacted by the violence during the civil war. The ComunPaz program sought to integrate state and communal dispute resolution mechanisms, aiming to shift these norms toward formal processes of reconciliation and conflict resolution. However, many

residents in post-conflict areas had internalised informal methods of conflict resolution that favored direct negotiation or reliance on illegitimate non-state actors. Combined with a historical distrust of communal authorities, such as the police, this created a significant challenge. As a result, adjusting to the new mechanisms and changes introduced by the program became a stress point, hindering the impact of positive effects within the intervention. This study is rated low confidence due to partial outcome definition and low to no mention of power calculation.

**Cilliers (2018):** Social norms surrounding violence and atrocity play a crucial role in shaping the effectiveness of transitional and restorative justice. In Sierra Leone, the Fambul Tok reconciliation programme provided a platform for victims to confront perpetrators in community-led truth-telling ceremonies, fostering forgiveness and social reintegration. The programme strengthened social capital by increasing trust in ex-combatants, encouraging participation in community organisations, and promoting collective contributions to public goods. However, despite these societal benefits, the intervention also had significant psychological costs. Many participants experienced heightened PTSD, anxiety, and depression, suggesting that confronting past atrocities can reopen psychological wounds. This study is rated high confidence.

**Kanyangara (2014):** Kanyangara et al. (2014) demonstrate that transitional justice procedures like the Gacaca courts can both reshape and complicate social norms regarding violence and atrocities. The results show that survivors who participated in Gacaca experienced "a large reduction of survivors' personal and collective guilt," suggesting that such processes can empower victims by restoring their sense of dignity and control—an essential step in breaking cycles of violence. However, the research also reveals a darker side: survivors reported that they "expressed higher doubts about the effectiveness of Gacaca" and became "more revengeful" after participation, indicating that while the courts facilitated public acknowledgment of past abuses, they simultaneously deepened personal grievances and distrust. This duality underscores the paradox inherent in transitional and restorative justice reforms, which aim to transform social norms by promoting collective healing yet may inadvertently reinforce divisions if the restorative measures are perceived as insufficient to fully address the trauma of violence. This study is rated low confidence due to partial description of intervention, outcome and evaluation question as well as little to no mention of power calculations.

**Rime (2011):** This study revealed that transitional justice mechanisms like the Gacaca tribunals have a profound yet complex impact on social norms related to violence and atrocities. The study shows that while participation "reactivated negative emotions" such as fear, sadness, and anxiety among both victims and perpetrators, it also facilitated significant social integrative effects. For instance, after the tribunals, both groups experienced "a decreased ingroup self-categorisation" and an "enhancement of positive stereotypes" about the outgroup, suggesting that restorative justice can help reframe collective identities and reduce entrenched prejudices. However, these reforms are not uniformly beneficial; victims, for example, suffered an increase in post-traumatic stress symptoms, proving that while such processes may pave the way to broader social integration, they can also reinforce the emotional costs of past atrocities. This duality illustrates that reforming the justice system through restorative practices can challenge the normative acceptance of violence, yet may simultaneously impose a heavy emotional burden on those most affected. This study is rated low confidence due to little or no mention of power calculations.

**Rincon-Unigarro (2022):** This study suggests that while reparations acknowledge victims' rights, their effectiveness in fostering reconciliation is mixed, as they may fail to meet victims' needs for agency and status. Societal attitudes towards justice also play a crucial role, with individuals favoring retributive justice (emphasis on punishment) showing lower levels of

reconciliation, while those endorsing restorative justice (centered on repairing harm and rebuilding relationships) are more inclined to reconcile. Institutional trust is a key factor in shaping social norms, as justice reforms that include truth commissions and official apologies can foster peaceful conflict resolution. However, in some cases, victims' exposure to violence does not necessarily result in harsher attitudes towards perpetrators but rather depends on community experiences and fears of future violence. Additionally, conservative ideologies and authoritarian beliefs (RWA) correlate with lower reconciliation levels, suggesting that justice system reforms promoting equality and restorative practices may challenge entrenched social hierarchies. Ultimately, the success of justice reforms in shifting social norms depends on their ability to address victims' psychological and social needs rather than solely focusing on legal restitution. Societies prioritising restorative justice mechanisms are more likely to foster reconciliation, whereas those emphasising retributive justice may struggle with ongoing resentment and social division. This study is rated low confidence due to little to no description of the intervention and no mention of power calculation.

*Confidence Assessment:*

Overall, the confidence is low due to inconsistent effect sizes and the majority of studies being rated as low confidence.

**Other outcomes in the study:**

Violence / Justice

Violence / Nature and scale of violence or atrocities

Community and state governance / Government Performance