



# Research at a glance

## Raising Offender Awareness of the Impact of Their Crimes on Their Victims: A Literature Review

**KEY WORDS:** *empathy, victim awareness, parole decision-making, recidivism, restorative justice*

### Why we did this study

Diverse groups such as victim advocates, offender treatment providers and offenders themselves sometimes believe that offenders who accept responsibility for their crimes and who appear to demonstrate remorse and expressed empathy are more suitable candidates for release due to the positive effects of rehabilitation efforts and that they present a reduced risk to the community. However, the extent to which these factors are actually related to decreases in the likelihood of future criminal behaviour (including crimes against persons) has not been thoroughly investigated through research.

### What we did

This study reviewed available research on the concept of empathy from both theoretical and measurement standpoints within the correctional context and explored how parole authorities incorporate victim awareness into decision-making. Research relevant to restorative justice was also examined.

### What we found

The review found that, while measures of empathy and offending may be statistically related, there is no evidence that change on such measures (i.e., increased empathy and victim awareness) is related to reductions in the risk of recidivism. This may reflect the lack of a commonly accepted definition of empathy, the lack of corrections-relevant measures of empathy or challenges associated with assessing genuine and meaningful empathy. In addition, it may be that increasing victim empathy *indirectly* translates into reductions in criminal recidivism by leading to enhanced treatment motivation, engagement and benefit, which, in turn, leads to reductions in recidivism. Regardless, research clearly indicates that parole authorities place considerable weight on offenders' claims of increased empathy and victim awareness in decisions regarding suitability for safe release from custody.

Although there is some evidence that restorative justice programs yield positive effects in the area of victim satisfaction and restitution compliance, limitations with current data (e.g., inadequate research methodologies) do not allow a causal link between restorative justice initiatives and the various outcomes examined.

### What it means

This review of available evidence revealed that, despite the emphasis placed on victim empathy and awareness by case workers and parole authorities, the relationship between victim awareness and reduced risk is not clear. Additional research is needed that incorporates more robust research methodologies and measures of empathy that are relevant to corrections and the criminal justice system in order to determine the direct and indirect nature of the relationship in order to inform correctional policy and operational practice.

**Note:** *This research was completed under a contract managed by the Evaluation Branch, Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CSC or the Minister of Public Safety.*

### For more information

Brown, Shelley L., Serin, Ralph, Greiner, Leigh & Gottschall, Shannon (2015). *Research on Existing Approaches to Raising Offender Awareness of the Impact of their Crimes on Their Victims* (Special Report SR 15-02). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

