Bridges to Life: A Promising In-Prison Restorative Justice Intervention
Abstract

Although restorative justice has emerged internationally as a viable response to the harm caused by crime, initiatives have been used primarily, if not exclusively as a “front-end” diversionary option reserved for non violent property crimes and minor assaults. Bridges to Life (BTL) is a manualized, pre-release, ecumenical faith-based 12-week in-prison program that is built on restorative justice model. BTL graduates have an appreciatively lower recidivism rate than the general population of released inmates. A partial cost-benefit analysis based on three-year recidivism rates indicates that BTL might prove to be a valuable approach for the criminal justice system.

Key words: restorative justice, faith-based, prison, re-entry, pre-release, surrogate
Nearly 2.1 million people currently serve time in federal and state correctional institutions (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2004, May 27). Over two-thirds of released prisoners return in three years. (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). In 1999, the cost to support the criminal justice system in the United States was an astounding $146.6 billion (Poulson, 2003). Restorative justice has emerged internationally as a viable response to the harm caused by crime. As an alternative to systems that advocate retributive justice, restorative justice seeks to elevate the role of crime victims and community members, hold offenders directly accountable to the people they have violated, and restore the emotional and material losses of victims by providing a range of opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and problem solving that can lead to a greater sense of community safety, conflict resolution, and healing for all involved (Umbreit, 2001)

Restorative justice programs in the United States have been identified as primarily, if not exclusively, useful as a “front-end” diversionary option reserved for non violent property crimes and minor assaults. “Victim Offender Mediation” (VOM) programs, sometimes referred to “Victim Offender Reconciliation Programs” (VORP), are limited to the victim and either the juvenile or adult offender and their immediate family members. “Family Group Conferencing” (FGC) involves the victim, offender, and the family, friends, and key supporters of both parties in deciding the resolution of a criminal or delinquent act. Diversionary programs are the most widely used and empirically substantiated form of restorative justice dialogue. A recent reanalysis of the combined samples of 1,298 juveniles from four studies found that VOM participants reoffended at a rate 32 percent lower than non participants (Nugent, Umbreit, & Paddock, 2001).
In-Prison Restorative Justice Programs

Relatively few restorative justice programs exist within adult correctional settings. A small number of states offer “Victim-Offender Mediated Dialogue (VOM/D)” which is a victim-initiated option for victims and offenders of severely violent crime (Umbreit, Vos, Coates, & Brown, 2003). Except for this emerging state-supported initiative, attempts to implement restorative justice programs inside prisons are usually sparse and rely on the initiative and dedication of individuals rather than being part of the mainstream policy of the prisons.

Participants in prison-based group programs include unrelated or ‘surrogate’ victim volunteers, offenders, and community representatives. Programs have been conducted at Washington State Reformatory in Washington (Lovell, Helfgott, & Lawrence, 2002), Shakopee Women’s Prison in Wisconsin (Burns, 2001), a maximum security prison in Green Bay, Wisconsin (Keeva, 2004), Augusta Correctional Center in Virginia (Peace Studies, 1994) and Headly Correctional Institution in Manitoba (Sawatsky, 1988). The ‘Sycamore Tree’ project operates in the United States and England under the auspices of a Christian voluntary organization called Prison Fellowship (Restorative Justice Consortium, 2004). Although the format of these programs vary, they provide a safe place in the prison where offenders can learn about the effects of their offending and victims can learn about the reasons for offending. The programs are voluntary, occur during incarceration, and do not affect the status of offenders including any changes for commutation of sentence or for any kind of clemency action. They focus less on the violation of law and more on the pain and suffering caused by the harm to individuals and communities. Moreover, in-prison
programs generally have not been viewed as a tool towards reducing recidivism. Rather, they are seen as a means toward empowering offenders to take responsibility for their actions and to make amends to their victims and their communities.

Most of these programs use the telling of personal stories as the mechanism to bring about empathy with the victim and identification with the offender. Group norms of self disclosure, mutual respect, and confidentiality build group solidarity among participants. Evaluations of the “Citizens, Victims and Offenders Restoring Justice Program” at both the Washington State Reformatory (Lovell et al., 2002) and the Shakopee Women’s Prison (Burns, 2001) found that victims felt less fear and shame and were more accepting of offenders. Many offenders were finally able to recount their crimes and the terms ‘responsibility’ and ‘accountability’ became more real. Other changes included overcoming stereotypes of each other, enhanced awareness of commonalities, enhanced awareness by offenders of harms caused to victims, victim’s families, and the pain and suffering their own families experienced, and greater appreciation of the need for atonement and amends-making.

**Bridges to Life**

Although in-prison restorative justice programs are built on the premise that increased awareness may facilitate pro social behavior within prison or upon release, program evaluations have not examined the impact of programs on post release behavior. Bridges to Life (BTL) is a manualized, pre-release, ecumenical faith-based 12-week in-prison program that is built on restorative justice model to facilitate victim healing and help offenders come to terms with their offenses and learn to deal with them in rehabilitative and redemptive ways. BTL operates in 15 Texas prisons and jails and has
completed 51 projects serving over 1500 inmates since 2000. BTL has tracked the recidivism rates of its graduates using statistics gathered from the database of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. To date, only 12.4 percent of post release BTL participants have been reincarcerated. For those offenders who graduated from BTL and were released from prison before mid-2001, the three-year re-incarceration rate is 16 percent, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the 3-year recidivism rate of 31.4 percent (Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2000) in Texas and the 3-year recidivism rate of 67.5 percent nationally (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). This drop in recidivism suggests that in addition to victim sensitization and victim healing, in-prison programs may offer increased safety for citizens, produce financial savings related to reduced offender incarceration, and demonstrate to the community that offenders can contribute to society rather than being a financial and emotional liability.

A survey of BTL participants (Armour, Sage, Rubin, & Windsor, in review) found that they value their experiences in the program and believe it will lower recidivism and should be implemented in other prison units. Survey responses suggested that victim panels and victim stories help overcome offenders’ denial, self-centeredness and lack of awareness, expose offenders to the impact of their actions, and help offenders feel the pain their crimes created. The survey findings further suggest that cognitive dissonance emerges between the past and the present, making offenders less likely to return to crime. In fact, the dissonance can be reduced as offenders engage in pro social behaviors. In light of the promising survey findings as well as BTL’s comparatively low recidivism rates, this article describes the BTL intervention and provides a partial cost-benefit analysis.
The Bridges to Life Program

BTL is a non profit 501©(3) corporation whose mission is to connect communities to the prisons in an effort to reduce the recidivism of offenders and thereby effect a subsequent reduction of crime in Texas (Sage, 2004). The organization has two goals: a) to reduce the recidivism of program graduates and b) to facilitate the healing process of victim volunteers and offenders. For victims, these goals are achieved by providing a safe place to interface with offenders on an ongoing and meaningful basis; feel their deepest pain and discover an often-illusive healing; come to understand the impact of the Restorative Justice methodology; and feel empowered to transform a painful experience into a positive outreach. For offenders, these goals are achieved by providing a safe place to acknowledge the consequences of their behavior; feel their deepest shame and accept their guilt; take responsibility for their crimes; learn how to stop re-offending; and experience a “change of heart” (Sage, 2004).

The objectives for accomplishing the BTL goals reflect restorative justice theory. Central features of restorative justice include a definition of crime as a violation on one person by another; direct involvement of participants; recognition of victim rights and offender responsibility/accountability; holistic understanding of the offender; removal of stigma of crime through restorative action; possibilities for repentance and forgiveness, focus on problem solving, dialogue, negotiation, restitution, and repairing social injury; and community facilitation of the restorative process.

Although the spiritual mission of BTL “is to minister to victims and prisoners in an effort to show them the transforming power of God’s love and forgiveness” (Sage, 2004), the program stipulates that “evangelizing, proselytizing and preaching are not part
of the mission of Bridges to Life” (p. 28). Rather, BTL strives to ensure that people of all faiths or of no faith feel completely comfortable to express their feelings in the group. Expressions of personal faith, therefore, must be made as “I” statements.

The goals and objectives of BTL are met through an intensive, 12-week program that brings victim volunteers into prisons to meet face-to-face in small facilitated groups for 2 hours on a weekly basis with pre-release offenders. The small group format is used for victims to tell the story of their victimization to offenders who have hurt others like themselves and for offenders to tell the story of their broken lives and criminal behavior, and eventually acknowledge to the victims the pain their actions have caused innocent others like the victims in the group. Victim panels are used intermittently during the program to further sensitize offenders to the victim’s experience and the painful ripple effects of their crimes. Groups are led by volunteer community facilitators who begin and end each session, monitor adherence to the curriculum, model active listening, encourage participation, and expedite the dialogue between the victim volunteers and offenders. All participants agree to adhere to a standard of strict confidentiality to ensure the safety necessary for sharing.

BTL Groups

Each BTL prison project accommodates 5-7 groups based on the availability in each facility of private rooms for small group break-outs on a weekday evening. Groups are comprised of five offenders, two victims, and a facilitator. Offenders are recruited by prison chaplains who use flyers, personal knowledge of offenders and information sessions to solicit interest in the program. Offenders are asked to fill out brief forms about their willingness to commit the time and effort the programs takes throughout the
entire twelve weeks. Inclusion criteria for offender participation are a) pending release within 12 months and b) commitment to full participation and necessary personal changes. Full participation includes attending all sessions, doing reading and writing homework between sessions, talking in small assigned groups about the crime(s) they have committed, and writing two letters that offenders read out loud in their small assigned groups at the end of the program. The first letter is to a victim of the offender’s crime. If there is not a specific victim, the letter is written to society. The second letter is to a family member that has suffered because of the offender’s crime. Offenders can exercise their own discretion about whether or not to mail the letters to the intended recipients. Offenders with a known history of sexual offenses are excluded from the program.

Victim volunteers are recruited by regional coordinators who are responsible for the BTL programs in their assigned geographic area. Volunteers may be drawn from community organizations, churches, other crime victim programs, prison ministries, and civic programs. They usually are picked from areas within an hours drive of the correctional facility. Victim volunteers participate in small groups and/or on victim impact panels. Regional coordinators meet with new victim volunteers prior to their participation to determine where victim are in the victim cycle, length of time since their victimization, and their readiness to share in small groups. Victim panelists are selected for the diversity of their experiences and the potential impact of their stories on offenders.

Volunteer facilitators are also recruited by the regional coordinator. They usually have backgrounds in criminal justice, mental health, ministry, or come from other related fields, e.g. nursing, teaching and are selected additionally for their expertise, patience,
understanding, and flexibility. New facilitators participate in two twelve-week projects with another facilitator before facilitating a small group alone. Groups are facilitated with the aid of a Volunteer Manual that includes a study guide, orientation materials, and an opportunity for learning, growth, and reflection. Periodic in-service trainings are held in each BTL region for volunteer facilitators.

Regional coordinators assign facilitators, victim volunteers, and offenders to the small groups based on diversity in race and ethnicity, crime type, gender, and victimization. The groups are adjusted when there are absences or other issues, i.e. someone must leave the project. Victim volunteers and facilitators frequently elect to do more than one project thereby establishing a cadre of experienced volunteers. Over 300 volunteers have participated in BTL programs and commit close to 24,000 victim hours annually inclusive of attendance and driving time to and from prisons.

BTL Curriculum

The BTL program follows a twelve-week curriculum that explores the topics of crime, awareness, confession, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and reparation. Before the official program begins, separate three-hour orientation sessions are held for offenders and new volunteers that a) provide an overview of the program, b) discuss group dynamics, c) explore self-awareness, victimology/sensitivity, and the offender perspective, and d) provide helpful hints and an opportunity for questions. Participants are given a BTL Volunteer Manual or offender packet (consisting of the BTL curriculum, project schedule, media articles and pages from the curriculum manual specific to each of the twelve sessions). Volunteer participants understand they are to have no contact outside of the weekly meeting or any contact (i.e. in person, phone, mail, email, etc.) with
offender participants after the BTL 12-week project is over. Any volunteer who violates this policy is subject to dismissal from the BTL program. Volunteers are referred to only by their first names.

Session 1 is called ‘Opening Day’. It is held on a Saturday from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Volunteers eat lunch on the prison unit. An overview of the program is provided, a three-person victim impact panel is heard, small groups are assigned, and the first small group meeting takes place. After introductions are made, the facilitator asks each small group member to comment on key issues raised by the panelists and how those issues relate to him or her personally. The facilitator asks for and records the expectations of each person.

Sessions 2-11 are held from 7:00-9:00 on a weekday evening. All participants gather in a large room for the first part of the evening. The regional coordinator makes announcements, shares information about current events in Bridges to Life, e.g. a media story, awards, feedback from an offender, and introduces the topic for the evening. Participants break into their small groups. Although time allocation is flexible, the schedule usually includes 1) 15 minutes for brief participant check-ins and an optional opening prayer; 2) 5 minutes for introduction of the weekly topic. The facilitator reads the questions, word and quote of the week out loud from the Volunteers Manual; 3) 15 minutes for discussion of two or three of the questions/topics from the curriculum; 4) 45-60 minutes for the victim or offender story, feedback, and application of the story to group member’s lives; 5) 10 minutes for summary comments by group members and an optional closing prayer.
The weekly topics covered in Sessions 2-10 are as follows: Session 2—What is crime?; Session 3—Domestic Violence and Child Abuse; Session 4—Responsibility and Accountability; Session 5—DWI and Burglary/Robbery; Session 6—Confession; Session 7—Repentance; Session 8—Forgiveness; Session 9—Reconciliation; Session 10—Restitution. Session 11 is a review of the BTL process. In place of stories, offenders are asked to read aloud both of their letters to victims/society and family members. They are each encouraged to add a covenant that serves as a contract between themselves and the victim volunteers and specifies the actions they intend to take in the future in order to change their lives and avoid a life of crime. Group members are encouraged to give each other personal and individual comments. Sessions 3 and 6 include victim panels in the large group as well.

Session 12 is called ‘Graduation Ceremony’. It lasts from 6:00-9:00. The objective of this session is to reflect on and celebrate the new awareness that group members have about crime and healing. Participants are invited to come to the front of the room for a three minute “open mike” sharing. After comments and testimonials are made, graduation certificates are distributed and approximately 30 minutes is given for small group pictures, signing of one another’s certificates, and goodbyes.

This curriculum is not designed to be followed exactly. Rather, it is the basis for the program and is implemented and utilized in some way each week, and the integrity and consistency of its use is upheld. BTL has developed a Volunteers Manual and a 200-page Operations Manual that provides consistency and standardization of the program.

Preliminary Cost-Benefit Analysis.
The potential value of the proposed study is further illustrated by a preliminary cost-benefit analysis based on current statewide and BTL re-incarceration rate figures and costs. It currently costs the state $44.01 per day for each recidivist offender sent to prison (Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2003). The mean length of prison stay for these offenders is 4.74 years (TDCJ Annual Statistical Report, 2002). Thus, the total state cost for each recidivist offender sent to prison is $76,193.85 ($44.01 per day X 4.74 years X 365.25 days). It currently costs the state $30.13 per day for each recidivist offender sent to a state jail (Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2003). The mean length of state jail stay for recidivist offenders is 1.1 years (TDCJ Annual Statistical Report, 2002). Thus, the total state cost for each recidivist offender sent to a state jail is $12,105.48 ($30.13 per day X 1.1 years X 365.25 days).

Current BTL data indicate that so far 90.8 percent of BTL recidivist graduates have been sent to prison, and 9.2 percent to state jails. They also indicate that the BTL program cost per BTL participant is $450. Thus, the cost saving is $75,743.85 ($75,193.85 minus $450) for each prison sentence prevented and $11,655.48 ($12,105.48 minus $450) for each state jail sentence prevented. For every 10 sentences prevented, therefore, the cost savings are estimated to be:

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\begin{align*}
9.08 \text{ (prison sentences)} & \times \$75,743.85 = \$687,754.16 \\
0.92 \text{ (state jail sentences)} & \times \$11,655.48 = \$10,722.60 \\
\text{TOTAL COST SAVINGS} & \times \$698,476.76
\end{align*}
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Dividing the above total by 10, we get a mean saving of $69,847.68 per sentence prevented by BTL. We do not yet know how many sentences will be prevented by BTL under conditions of random assignment. All we have so far are descriptive data from the
BTL program showing that the two-year re-incarceration rate for the 266 BTL graduates who have been released for two years or more is 14.3 percent. (Of the 266, thirty-eight were re-incarcerated. BTL does not yet have three-year re-incarceration rate figures.) This compares with a statewide two-year re-incarceration rate for all offenders in Texas of 24.6 percent (Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2002).

In comparing the two figures, however, we have to adjust for the fact that the 14.3 percent recidivism rate for BTL is based on BTL program graduates, only. The dropout rate among BTL participants who do not graduate might be higher. Although BTL does not have recidivism rates for its dropouts, we can assume that the rate would approximate the two-year recidivism rate for participants who dropped out of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative. That re-incarceration rate was 36.3 percent (Criminal Justice Policy Council, 2003)

As noted above, the BTL dropout rate is 7.1 percent. Thus, for every 100 offenders who participate in BTL, 92.9 graduate, and 7.1 drop out. If we multiply the 92.9 graduates by their 14.3 re-incarceration rate, we get 13.28 re-incarcerations. If we multiply the 7.1 dropouts by their 36.3 percent re-incarceration rate, we get 2.58 re-incarcerations. Adding the 13.28 and the 2.58, we get 15.86 re-incarcerations per 100 BTL participants. This 15.86 percent two-year re-incarceration rate for BTL is lower than the statewide 24.6 percent rate. For every 100 BTL participants, therefore, these rates would indicate a savings of 8.74 (24.6 minus 15.86) times $69,847.68 per sentence prevented by BTL, or $610,468.72 for those offenders re-incarcerated during the two-year follow-up period.
The current two-year BTL re-incarceration rate is based on 266 BTL graduates. With a 7.1 percent dropout rate, there would have been a total of 285 participants. Thus, we can multiply the above savings ($610,468.72) based on 100 BTL participants by 2.85 to estimate how much BTL has saved the state in two-year re-incarceration costs so far. That amount is $1,739,835.85. This has obvious important policy implications, therefore, if the above difference in re-incarceration rates is not merely a function of a selectivity bias.

Of course, with random assignment controlling for any selectivity bias, the real difference in re-incarceration rates might be far less than current descriptive data indicate. But since the BTL program costs only $450 per participant, 100 participants would cost only $45,000. Thus, if only one prison sentence (at a mean cost of $69,847.68) were prevented per 100 participants, the cost of the BTL program would be exceeded by the incarceration costs saved.

Conclusions

To date, restorative justice programs have emerged primarily as “front-end” diversionary options reserved for non-violent property crimes and minor assaults. This article has described an in-prison program in Texas built on the restorative justice model. The program, Bridges to Life (BTL) is a manualized, pre-release, ecumenical faith-based 12-week in-prison program. So far, its participants have had an appreciatively lower recidivism rate than the general population of released inmates. A preliminary cost-benefit analysis based on those rates suggests that BTL might prove to be an extremely valuable approach to restorative justice in motivating offenders to make a successful transition and re-entry into the free world, reducing recidivism, and saving re-
incarceration costs. Corrections officials therefore may want to consider implementing
the BTL program in their facilities. However, it is conceivable that BTL’s lower
recidivism rate is influenced by a selectivity bias, in which offenders who are less likely
to recidivate in the first place are also more likely to choose to participate in BTL. To
assess that possibility, rigorous outcome research, ideally using random procedures to
assign participants to BTL or to comparison groups, is recommended.
References


