



**Town Hall Meetings 2007**  
**Report prepared by D. Crocker, March 2008**

In November 2007 the NSRJ-CURA held Public Town Hall meetings in Sydney and Millbrook. The Town Halls aimed to:

- investigate public knowledge of the NSRJP and their appreciation of restorative justice principles;
- raise the public profile of the NSRJP and familiarize the community at large with the principles of restorative justice;
- provide policy makers with tools to promote RJ among the general public in Nova Scotia.

During the meetings, participants were divided into groups to address questions under four themes:

**Community** (How should community be involved with dealing with youth crime? What dynamics in this community would make it easy for community to be involved? What dynamics in this community would make it hard for community to be involved?)

**Success** (How important is public confidence in the justice system?  
How important is repairing the harms caused by crime?  
How important is victim and/or offender satisfaction in the CJS?)

**Justice** (How do we get "justice" for young offenders? How do we get "justice" for the community? How do we get "justice" for victims?)

**Accountability** (How do we make young offenders accountable to the community? How do we make young offenders accountable to the victims? How do we help young offenders take responsibility for their actions?)

## Thematic Notes

- On Achieving Justice

Participants debated the balance between achieving justice through traditional approaches (deterrence, courts, and incarceration) and more community-based approaches and alternatives. Some felt that we are moving too far away from traditional methods and that serious crimes should result in incarceration. Others argued that justice will be achieved only by opening up spaces for youth and community to be heard.

- On Achieving Community Based Justice

Participants felt that community-based justice could be better achieved with a diversity of community involvement including post-secondary students and seniors. Seniors were viewed as valuable community resources who should be encouraged to participate.

Education was emphasized many times as a means of encouraging the success of community based forms or justice. Participants felt that the community needed to be better educated about the workings of both criminal justice and restorative justice systems and the positive ways in which young people participate in their community.

Participants described a lack of education among:

- Youth (about the consequences of crime);
- Parents (parenting skills and resources available to help them); and
- Community (about how to model good citizenship to youth)

There was strong agreement that education and increased awareness of options to the traditional criminal justice system and of the value of community based research were paths to its success.



*"I think it's important to remember that community means everything, because you're in the community when you're going to school, [you're] in the community when you're going to work . . . "*

- Barriers to Community Based Justice

Participants emphasized that public opinion is a big problem—people will not participate in a program if they don't have faith in it. In terms of criminal justice, several participants suggested that a lack of confidence in the formal system can result in instances of vigilante justice.

Two issues related to public opinion emerged as barriers:

Fear of young people, especially among seniors

Fear of retaliation , especially in a community where everyone knows everyone else

The media were generally perceived as perpetuating these issues. As one participant stated: "*the buzz is negative*" about young people and the criminal justice system. Further, there was a sense that the media present incarceration as the only appropriate response to crime.

Ironically, the nature of communities themselves was also identified as a barrier to community based justice. Participants suggested sub-communities, including a "justice community," exist within any one geographic community. Lack of dialogue between these communities creates barriers. There was also some suggestion that communities can sometimes be defined by who is not a part of them—that living in a place does not make a person part of the community.



*"You know, from the time I was in elementary, and I am twenty-two now, I was taught 'don't talk to strangers.' So, don't get to know your neighbours, right? . . . But what that says is 'I don't know my neighbour . . . I'm not going to think twice about their situation . . . and I don't mind stealing or breaking or vandalizing something'. And, it's the sense of community, you know, where you're going to get justice. You know if the children are being raised, and the family life isn't good, then the community steps in and you know, maybe just one or two members of the community that are stepping in and getting this child involved in things. You know, and the parents are having trouble, the community is there to support them and back them up, not just demonizing that child or you know that individual. . . . I think it's a major tear in our social fabric; the sense of community isn't there like it was in my father's time. You know, when he was growing up."*

- Restorative Justice

Several aspects of RJ were discussed, including the notion of "repairing harm." Participants emphasized this as an issue for victims—that repairing harm would promote their sense of closure, renew their sense of personal safety and improve their self-esteem. There was also some discussion of how harm done to the community could also be achieved through restorative processes.

The discussions around accountability focused on the potential consequences that a young person could face, as a result of the wrongdoing or crime. Suggestions included community service, apologies to the victim and so on. There was some brief discussion of the use of re-integrative shaming as a mechanism to achieve accountability.

Some participants also emphasized the accountability of the community to its young people, and that accountability can be achieved through enhanced connection to the community.

Perceptions of RJ varied and revolved around questions of whether it should be used for serious offences and whether it is not just the easy way out. Some participants were concerned that RJ did provide enough deterrence.



*"See, when I look at this [the RJ program]. . . it is kind of a break. You are doing something that's a crime in society and you're coming in and we are giving you a break. It's a break. You're not going to get a criminal record. When this happens again though . . . there has to be a form of deterrence."*

In contrast, other participants suggested that the traditional criminal justice system could not properly integrate community and that it did not adequately foster a sense of accountability.