

Incorporating Students’ Voices: Adolescents’ Reasoning About Retributive and Restorative Approaches to Address Intergroup Harms in Schools



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Highlights

- To address the harms, adolescents reported they should and would talk to school authorities, and they would also frequently respond with retaliation.
- Regarding their preferred teacher-sanctioned responses, adolescents preferred compensation, followed by apologies, and evaluated suspensions less positively.
- Adolescents reported all three strategies were equally likely to occur in their school.
- Overall, adolescents reasoned that compensation would fit the offense and restore the victim, apologies would repair the relationship, and suspension would achieve retribution and teach a lesson to the offenders.

Introduction

When harms occur between peers at school, they can be addressed in various ways:

- **Retributive orientation:**
 - Place blame, seek punishment/retaliation, reaffirm adult authority.
 - Typical ways to achieve this goal involves suspension and expulsion.
- **Restorative orientation:**
 - Promote dialogue, repair the harm, prevent reoffending.
 - Typical ways to achieve this goal involves compensation and apologies.

- Few studies have contrasted adolescents’ evaluations of retributive and restorative practices.
- This study explored how adolescents reasoned they *should* and *would* respond to intergroup harms by a rival peer group and how they evaluated different teacher-sanctioned disciplinary approaches to address the harms.

References

Okimoto, T. G., Wenzel, M., & Feather, N. T. (2012). Retribution and restoration as general orientations towards justice. *European Journal of Personality*, 26, 255-275. <https://doi.org/10.1002/per.831>
Zehr, H. (2002). *Little book of restorative justice: A bestselling book by one of the founders of the movement*. Good Books.

Methods

77 adolescents (*M* age = 16.49 years) in two urban high schools serving youth from low-income neighbourhoods in Bogotá, Colombia were presented with two hypothetical vignettes in which a rival group in their school engaged in a transgression against their own group (e.g., property damage).

To assess adolescents’ strategies, we asked them:
“After the harm occurs, what do you think that your team **should** do, if anything?”
“Do you think that your team **would** actually do that? If not, what would you do?”

Then, we presented 3 teacher-sanctioned responses:

- **Compensation.** Perpetrators are asked to repair the harm by returning the belongings and paying to replace broken items.
- **Apology.** Perpetrators are asked to apologize for the harm and to express how sorry they felt.
- **Punishment.** Perpetrators are suspended for three days from school.

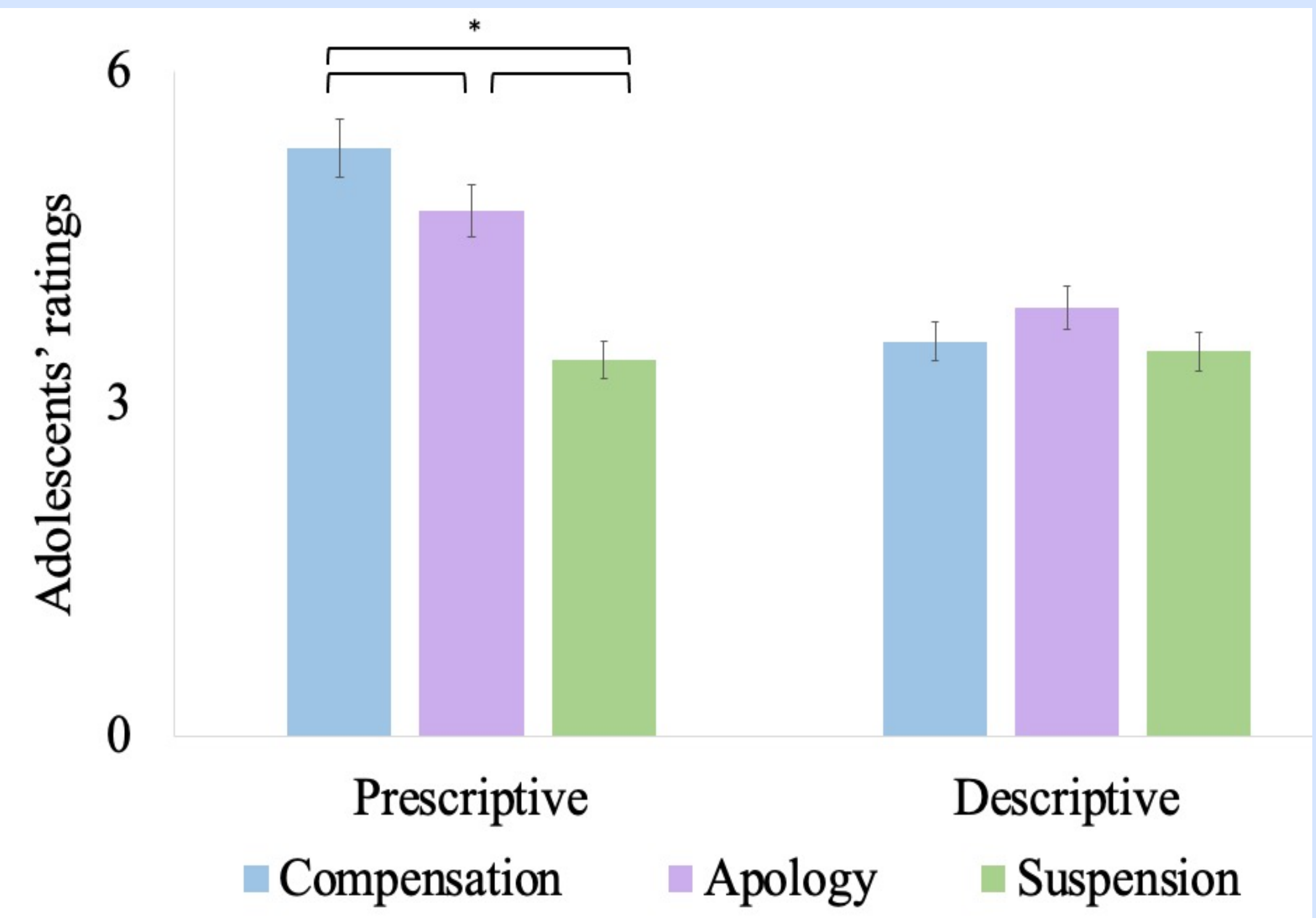
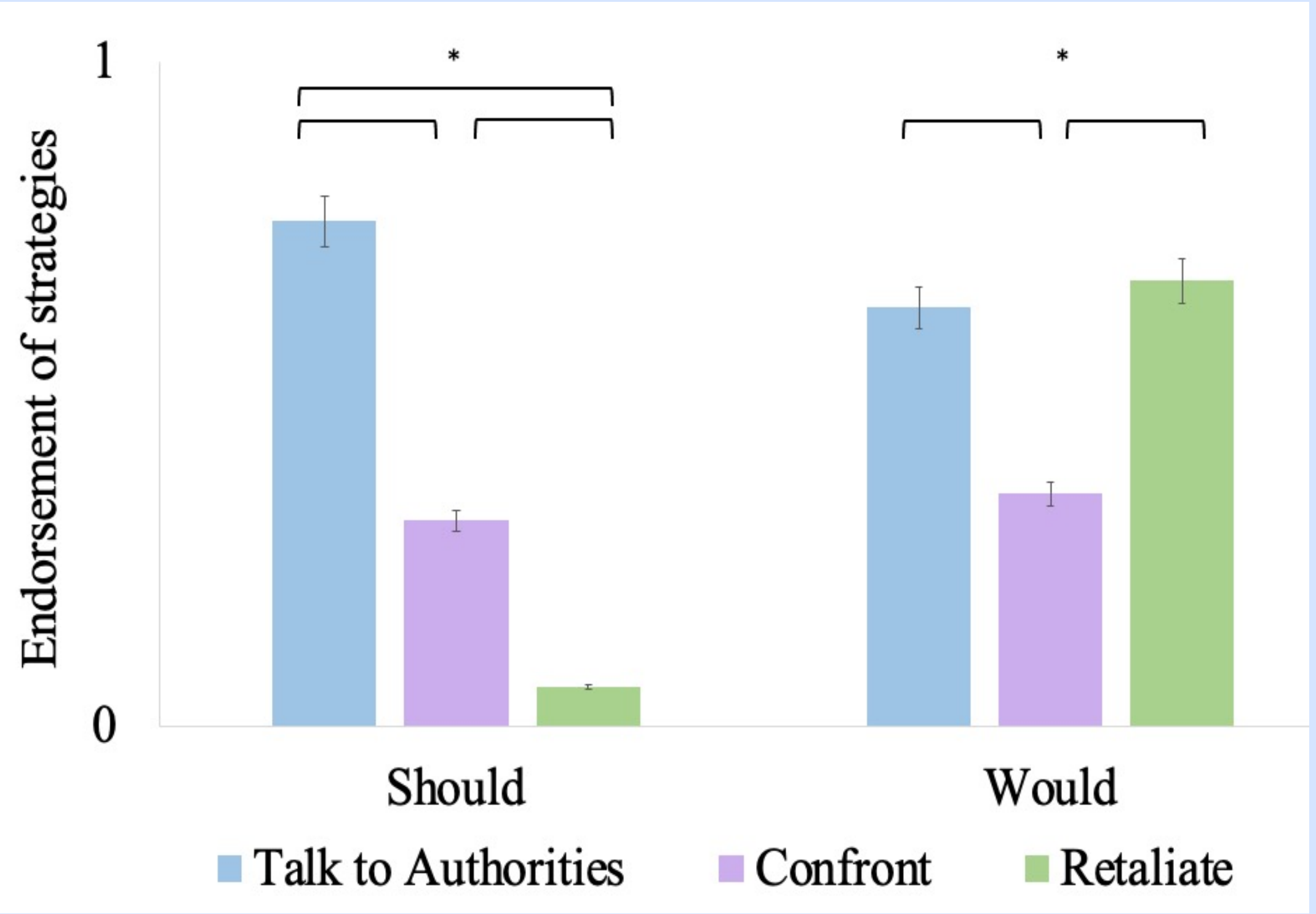
Each response was followed by questions to assess their prescriptive and descriptive ratings on 6-point Likert scales:

- **Prescriptive judgments:** Do you think that this is a good or not such a good way to handle the problem? Why?
- **Descriptive judgments:** How likely is ____ to actually happen?

Justifications for prescriptive ratings were coded for the presence or absence of 5 categories, which were further categorized regarding whether it was used to support or to criticize an approach ($\kappa = .74 - .92$):

- **Achieves retribution.** Endorsing an approach because it would punish or harm the offender, such as for the sole sake of retribution.
- **Fits the offense.** Endorsing an approach because it would be fair considering the perpetrators’ actions or for both parties.
- **Repairs the relationship.** It promotes reconciliation or a renewed consensus.
- **Restores victim.** It would cancel/reduce the negative consequences of the harm.
- **Teaches a lesson.** It would prevent future offenses and/or perpetrators would learn that what they did was wrong.

Results



Compensation fits the offense and restores the victim:

- “If I were to put myself in their shoes, I would do it because it is fair. Let’s say, if I damage something, I have to fix it because I was the one who did the damage”

Apology repairs relationships; fails to restore the victims

- “I would say the rivalry between the groups would end and there would be more communication between them, and there would no longer be any conflicts between them... A better relationship between them after what happened.”

Suspension achieves retribution and teaches a lesson to the offenders, but also criticized on the same basis (i.e., doesn’t achieve retribution and doesn’t teach a lesson). Also, does not fit the offense and fails to repair the relationship.

- “It’s good because they’re going to get behind, so they are going to do badly at school... Then, they will have to get serious to study and they won’t have time to be thinking about that [hurting others].”

Discussion

- Youths’ endorsement of different strategies and teacher-sanctioned responses reflected an understanding of complex issues, such as moral, pragmatic, and psychological factors.
- Overall, adolescents reported they *should* and *would* talk to school authorities, and they also reported that they *would* also frequently respond with retaliation.
- Adolescents preferred restorative over retributive disciplinary practices which suggests that youth recognize the value of such approaches, even in the context of conflict with peers from a rival group.
- Youths’ reasoning illustrated how their evaluations are informed by context-specific features of harms, as well as their goals. For instance, students were capable of coordinating both restorative concerns, such as meeting victims’ needs and being fair to both parties, with more retributive concerns to punish/harm the perpetrators.

Implications:

- Inform programs targeted at implementing restorative justice models in ways that fit youths’ needs and use their perspectives as a starting point.