

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FOR JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN VIETNAM: HISTORICAL APPROACHES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

JUSTIÇA RESTAURATIVA PARA JOVENS INFRATORES NO VIETNÃ: ABORDAGENS HISTÓRICAS E PERSPECTIVAS FUTURAS

Article received on: 7/21/2025

Article accepted on: 10/27/2025

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The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Abstract

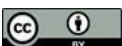
Restorative justice is increasingly recognized as an effective approach to reduce recidivism, increase victim satisfaction, and help juveniles acknowledge and positively modify their wrongdoing. In Vietnam, this model has been piloted in several localities but still lacks uniformity. Nevertheless, the positive results from these pilot models and the promulgation of the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024 have created an important legal premise, affirming Vietnam's cautious and appropriate step towards expanding restorative justice. Furthermore, intrinsic factors rooted in the nation's cultural traditions demonstrate careful preparation for the application of restorative justice for juveniles, while simultaneously creating a solid foundation for developing the model towards broad, comprehensive, and effective implementation in Vietnam and aligning with international standards. This article analyzes the formation and development process of restorative justice globally and in Vietnam, identifies existing challenges, and assesses the development prospects as a basis for policymaking and effective implementation of this model in the coming time.

Keywords: Juvenile Justice. Restorative Justice. Juveniles. Vietnam.

Resumo

A justiça restaurativa é cada vez mais reconhecida como uma abordagem eficaz para reduzir a reincidência, aumentar a satisfação das vítimas e ajudar os jovens a reconhecer e modificar positivamente seus atos ilícitos. No Vietnã, esse modelo foi implementado em caráter experimental em diversas localidades, mas ainda carece de uniformidade. Contudo, os resultados positivos desses projetos-piloto e a promulgação da Lei de Justiça Juvenil de 2024 criaram uma importante base legal, confirmando a cautela e a adequação do Vietnã em sua trajetória rumo à expansão da justiça restaurativa. Além disso, fatores intrínsecos enraizados nas tradições culturais do país demonstram uma preparação cuidadosa para a aplicação da justiça restaurativa a jovens, ao mesmo tempo que criam uma base sólida para o desenvolvimento do modelo, visando uma implementação ampla, abrangente e eficaz no Vietnã e em consonância com os padrões internacionais. Este artigo analisa o processo de formação e desenvolvimento da justiça restaurativa globalmente e no Vietnã, identifica os desafios existentes e avalia as perspectivas de desenvolvimento como base para a formulação de políticas e a implementação eficaz desse modelo no futuro.

Palavras-chave: Justiça Juvenil. Justiça Restaurativa. Jovens. Vietnã.



1 INTRODUCTION

It's a clear truth that when a crime occurs, it negatively impacts society in general while simultaneously causing direct harm to the victim. However, the victim is not permitted to independently employ similar retaliatory measures to reclaim justice; their protection is provided only through state measures that involve punishing the offender via criminal liability (which is mandatory) and civil liability (which is not entirely mandatory in every case with a victim if the evidence is insufficient and the matter must be separated and resolved through civil litigation procedures in court). Meanwhile, criminal liability, which impacts the perpetrator, is a responsibility owed to the State. The victim's rights assured here are essentially a “moral” issue, perceived as the offender being “punished” or “paying the price”. The injuries and losses caused by the crime to the victim, however, remain, existing as a tangible and lingering reality that cannot be alleviated merely by the offender being punished with a sentence. Therefore, crime handling must be viewed through the lens of protecting social order by subjecting the offender to state-imposed punishment, but it must not overlook the offender's responsibility toward the victim—the party whose interests were directly violated by the criminal act. This approach will ensure substantive justice from both the perspective of the governing authority and the perspective of the harmed individual, and it is the core value of Restorative Justice (RJ) .

Originating in the early 20th century, RJ and diversionary measures are relatively new concepts in Vietnam, currently only at the stage of being “identifiable by some initial characteristics of RJ” (Dao, 2023). Practical evidence from various countries indicates that RJ is increasingly recognized as an effective approach for reducing recidivism and increasing victim satisfaction, while also helping minors recognize their wrongdoing and make positive changes. Because this is a relatively new judicial perspective/philosophy in Vietnam, it has only been implemented on a pilot basis and has garnered significant attention from scholars. Studies and practical evaluations affirm the crucial need to establish a specialized juvenile justice system, ensuring thorough preparation in terms of legal mindset, social awareness, and verified practical testing before Vietnam implements it broadly and comprehensively in practice.

Through this review, it is evident that issues concerning RJ for juveniles are approached by scholars from relatively diverse and multi-dimensional angles, focusing

on the international legal framework, the experiences of various countries, and the lessons for Vietnam. Research on juvenile justice reforms, with a particular interest in the implementation of diversion, has taken place in several countries within the ASEAN community, such as Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Vietnam. This research reflects the influence of cultural factors, traditions, and the political and legal context on the success of these reforms. Each of these countries possesses unique characteristics that have resulted in a slow pace of reform, but from which numerous lessons can be drawn to prompt Vietnam to reassess its juvenile justice reform strategies (Le *et al*, 2022). Furthermore, other studies on the experience of organizing and promoting diversion in various countries worldwide, such as Kenya, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives,...(Cao, 2023) contribute to diversifying the knowledge base for Vietnam's legal drafting and refinement processes, as well as its practical implementation. From another perspective, when approaching RJ for juveniles in terms of rights—not just for the accused but also for the victims—research has outlined the fundamental rights of this demographic across the dimensions of time (historical, past, and present) and space (comparing Vietnam and international standards) (Le, 2023; Le, 2024). However, this research also points out that in the context of international integration, while Vietnam can access and learn valuable experiences and lessons in legal drafting and application, this does not mean it can “simply and mechanically adopt the standards and regulations regarding the rights of minors from international law or the laws of other nations; rather, it must be a process of selection” to ensure suitability with Vietnam's economic and social conditions and the specific characteristics of its crime situation (Le, 2024).

Although RJ has indeed garnered the attention of the State and society, the level of development and institutionalization of this model still varies significantly across different regions in Vietnam. In a research article on justice for juvenile offenders, the authors conducted a survey of 444 Vietnamese justice officials (police, prosecutors, judges; along with officials from related agencies such as local government, mass organizations, schools, and social workers). The results show that the application of RJ through mediation between conflicting parties differs considerably by region: justice officials in Hai Phong, Thai Nguyen, and Dak Lak provinces have strong confidence in the activities of RJ (with a converted survey score of 3.0 points—indicating a very high level of support); this contrasts with Can Tho and Binh Duong (with a converted survey score of 2.0–2.5 points) (Tuan *et al*, 2024). In this study, the authors explain that the

differences in the application of RJ through mediation may stem from different justice philosophies, cultural practices, and the availability of local resources, reflecting the complex and diverse nature of juvenile justice across regions (Tuan *et al*, 2024). However, this survey was conducted at a time when Vietnam had not yet enacted the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024 (effective from January 1, 2026), which significantly expands RJ measures.

The aforementioned studies contribute to affirming the value and the inevitable trend of building specialized, restorative-oriented juvenile justice in Vietnam. However, these assessments were carried out before Vietnam had enacted a specialized law on juvenile justice. Therefore, the research gap this article aims to fill is to seek a satisfactory answer to the main research question: What challenges are currently posed in the process of deployment, and what are the prospects for the development of the RJ model for juveniles in Vietnam in the context of the Law on Juvenile Justice being constructed and implemented for the first time?

In the process of answering this central question, the article will address the following derived Sub-questions:

- 1) How has RJ for juveniles been established and developed globally?
- 2) How has the legal and policy history of Vietnam in handling juvenile offenders shifted from a punitive model to a restorative model? This includes highlighting the key focus points on RJ in the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024.
- 3) What are the barriers/challenges (institutional, legal, social) that Vietnam is facing in implementing or expanding the RJ model for juveniles?
- 4) What are the prospects for the development of the RJ model for juveniles in Vietnam in the coming period?

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs the historical-legal method to identify the process of formation and development of RJ globally and in Vietnam. This clarifies the theoretical foundations and the operational trends of this model within the global and domestic contexts. In addition, the study also utilizes secondary data analysis from published research findings, particularly specialized reports from the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) organization in Vietnam. By leveraging these

valuable secondary data sources, the research contributes to identifying the challenges currently posed in the implementation process of RJ in Vietnam, while simultaneously building the theoretical basis for forecasting the future development prospects of this model.

3 RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 History of the birth of RJ thought

3.1.1 The early period of the formation of RJ thought

In the history of global law, the concept or term “Restorative Justice” was not formally defined in the early stages. However, as early as the mid-19th century, certain forms of handling in judicial practice began to emerge with core features and values similar to RJ, such as prioritizing mediation, reparation (compensation) for damages, and the rebuilding of relationships among the offender, the victim, and the community. Canada is the birthplace of RJ in North America, with the first Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP) being implemented in Kitchener, Ontario, in 1974. This occurred when two intoxicated teenagers vandalized the property of 22 victims (broken windows, slashed tires, spray paint, etc.), causing approximately CAD 2,200 in damages. After pleading guilty, they were assigned to a probation officer (who would later be involved in VORP). Probation officer Mark Yantzi (along with volunteer Dave Worth from the Mennonite Central Committee) proposed that instead of the defendants paying a fine, they should meet directly with each victim to apologize, discuss, and agree on compensation. Judge G.H. McConnell approved the plan, conditioning it on the two defendants paying \$550 each within three months and meeting with each victim to personally apologize under the supervision of a VORP officer or volunteer. During implementation, the face-to-face meetings took place at the victims' homes or workplaces, establishing reconciliation agreements based on discussions between the parties. Approximately 80% of the victims agreed to participate; the two youths fully completed the compensation within a few months. After six months, the agreements were enforced, and the two youths were placed on probation for 18 months and fined CAD 200 each (Tappe, 1989). This event became the first RJ program and had a global influence.

Subsequently, this model spread throughout North America and Europe. The start of RJ in the United States was also marked by the use of the Victim-Offender Reconciliation Program (VORP), first implemented in Elkhart, Indiana, in 1978, as a joint effort between the Mennonite Central Committee and Prisoner and Community Together (PACT). The program was modeled after the Canadian VORP in Ontario (Bonta *et al*, 1998).

The implementation of RJ has changed the approach of the traditional criminal justice system. In the traditional system, the offender is held criminally liable to the State, so the focus is on conviction, identifying the offender, and determining their criminal responsibility. Consequently, the end of the judicial process results in a winner and a loser—a model Howard Zehr called Retributive Justice. In contrast, RJ views a criminal act as harm against people and a disruption of social relationships; its focus is on repairing the harm, healing, and restoring the relationships broken by the crime. Thus, Retributive Justice prioritizes law enforcement while neglecting the victim's need for protection and the need to mend the relationship between the victim and the offender, which is precisely what RJ achieves (Zehr, 1995). Following this, the Mennonite organization (an international non-governmental organization originating from the Mennonite community—a Christian group adhering to non-violence and reconciliation principles), through its funding and training activities for mediators and the community on RJ, helped expand and popularize the VORP mindset and model globally, moving beyond the criminal justice sector.

3.1.2 Formation of the theory and terminology of RJ (1977–1990)

Nils Christie—a renowned Norwegian criminologist—is one of the scholars who profoundly influenced the philosophy and practice of RJ. Although Nils did not construct a complete RJ model, his views and works, particularly the famous article “Conflict as Property” (Nils, 1977), laid the ideological foundation for the modern RJ movement. In his seminal work, “Conflict as Property”, he argued that when a crime occurs, the conflict between the person who caused harm and the person who was harmed is their “property”, and they should have the right to resolve it. However, the criminal justice system has “stolen that conflict” (the professional theft of conflicts), transforming the victim into a “witness”, the person who caused harm into a “defendant”, and placing the State in charge

of resolution—which disenfranchises and diminishes the role of the parties directly involved in the conflict. It is clear that Nils viewed crime as a form of conflict between the offender and the victim, and this conflict is the property of the involved parties; therefore, the involved parties have the right to resolve that conflict as an act of determination over their owned property. The State's use of the criminal justice system to handle crime while ignoring the involved parties is likened to the State “stealing” the conflict, thereby taking away the ownership of the conflict from the victim and the community. Therefore, Nils's view emphasizes returning the right to resolve the conflict back to the involved parties—meaning allowing the involved parties to participate in resolving the conflicts caused by the crime through dialogue, mediation, and restoration instead of punishment. As such, the relevant parties must include not just the State and the defendant, but also those who were directly and actually affected by the conflict (including the victim, community, family, and society). Although this constitutes the core philosophy for the later development of RJ, the term itself had not yet appeared.

The 1990s marked the period when the theories of RJ were clearly established: The book “Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice” by Howard Zehr, first published in 1990 by Herald Press, is the foundational work that systematically theorized RJ. Zehr argued that the traditional criminal justice system (retributive justice) primarily focuses on the State's handling of the criminal act, with the offender being accountable to the State because the offender “owes a debt to society”. According to him, this marginalizes the victim, the community, and even the offender. He proposed a new lens (RJ) that approaches the issue by asserting that the offender “owes a specific debt to the victim—and can only pay that debt by repairing the damage done” (Zehr, 1990). Osakabe emphasizes that Howard Zehr laid the groundwork for the RJ approach, not only in terms of the legal system but also as a shift in religious and cultural perspectives (Osakabe, 2016). Inspired by Zehr's book, Kurt Willems stresses in his article that the RJ model is a relationship-based journey with healing as its ultimate goal (Willems, 2014). However, shame can be a barrier to facilitating a meeting between the person who caused harm and the victim. Addressing this, John Braithwaite—a renowned Australian criminologist—developed the theory of “Reintegrative Shaming”. This theory suggests that when a crime occurs, society's reaction should be to condemn the wrongdoing but not condemn the person who committed the act. When the offender admits their fault, the community facilitates the restoration of their honor, instead of reacting with “Stigmatizing Shaming”,

which condemns both the act and the person, thereby excluding the offender from society and hindering their successful reintegration (Braithwaite, 1989). This became a fundamental theoretical basis for promoting RJ models of dialogue and healing within the community.

3.2 Historical development process of RJ for juveniles in Vietnam

The national justice system's development of a general criminal justice model, and a specific juvenile criminal justice model, is influenced by political will, academic theories, international experience, national practical needs, and policy impact assessments. This influence is manifested through the approach and purpose of criminal handling, which is then concretized by provisions in criminal laws. Based on the evolution of policy approaches and legal drafting, the shift in traditional criminal thought towards RJ for juvenile offenders in Vietnam can be divided into periods marked by the promulgation of the Criminal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code, and the Law on Juvenile Justice:

3.2.1 Firstly, the stage of approaching juvenile crime handling with traditional—Punitive combined with humanitarian—justice (pre-2000 period)

This period saw Vietnam entering the post-war reconstruction era and the promulgation of the 1985 Criminal Code and the 1988 Criminal Procedure Code. However, even before the drafting of the 1985 Criminal Code, most regulations on handling juvenile offenders were not systematically compiled but were scattered across various documents and mainly in summary reports providing professional guidance from the Supreme People's Court. The general viewpoint still emphasized the elements of deterrence and punishment when dealing with crime in general, placed alongside a humanitarian perspective when handling juvenile crime. In an orientation document on adjudicating minor criminal cases, the Supreme People's Court determined: “For those whose prosecution is optional, non-prosecution should be chosen, relying instead on the masses, using administrative measures, severe criticism, warning, or temporary custody” (Supreme People’s Court, 1975). This regulation clearly shows that the spirit of diversionary measures was considered early on by the State. In cases where children (or

adults) committed socially dangerous acts of a criminal nature but the offense was deemed “minor”, handling could be diverted to community measures for the purpose of education, deterrence, and prevention.

In the first codification, the 1985 Criminal Code dedicated a separate chapter (Chapter 7) to handling juvenile offenders. Although still rudimentary, it laid the foundation for RJ through regulations on the principles for handling juvenile offenders, which were primarily aimed at educating and assisting them to correct their mistakes, develop healthily, and become useful citizens to society. The approach emphasized educational and preventive measures, with the family, school, and society having the responsibility to actively participate in implementing those measures. It stipulated that juvenile offenders should only be brought to trial and subjected to penalties in cases of absolute necessity (Article 59). However, it lacked a legal framework for restorative or alternative measures to criminal processing. Nevertheless, the 1985 Criminal Code was the first legal foundation to establish a separate approach for juveniles, however nascent and reflective of the subsidy, post-war period, and served as the basis for later developing more humanitarian and RJ models in the 1999 Criminal Code and especially from the 2015 Criminal Code onward. As for the 1988 Criminal Procedure Code, although the procedure for handling juvenile offenders was designated as a special procedure (Chapter 31), it was still carried out through the general handling mechanism for adults, without a separate institutional mechanism.

3.2.2 Secondly, the stage of adopting the core philosophy of RJ in handling juvenile offenders (2000–2010)

In this period, with the accession to international conventions on child protection (especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child - CRC), Vietnam was influenced by these treaties and began to view minors as a group requiring special protection. This led to the emergence of a handling approach centered on education and prevention rather than punishment. This shift was reflected in the second codification, the 1999 Criminal Code, effective from January 1, 2000, as well as the promulgation of the 2003 Criminal Procedure Code and the first 2004 Law on Protection, Care, and Education of Children. The 1999 Criminal Code added the principle for handling juvenile offenders: “education is primary, clemency is essential” and expanded the alternative measure to punishment:

education at the commune, ward, or town level for juvenile offenders who committed less serious or serious crimes.

In this period, an important step that laid the foundation for shaping RJ was the view on judicial reform and the construction of a child-friendly justice system for juvenile offenders. Accordingly, Resolution No. 48/NQ-TW (2005) on the Strategy for Building and Perfecting the Vietnamese Legal System until 2010, with an orientation towards 2020, defined the direction of reform as building “Justice for the people” and moving towards a system of specialized courts, which served as the basis for the later establishment of Family and Juvenile Courts. Furthermore, Resolution 49/NQ-TW (2005) of the Politburo on judicial reform strategy directed that the handling of juvenile offenders should “highly value the effectiveness of prevention and the principle of rehabilitation”, which provided the basis for the subsequent concretization of RJ provisions in the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Code.

3.2.3 Thirdly, the stage of shaping RJ based on establishing child-friendly justice institutions and personnel (2010–2017)

This was the phase when Vietnam entered a period of extensive administrative reform alongside the specific deployment of judicial reform policies. Based on the aforementioned Resolutions 48 and 49, Vietnam proceeded to draft the 2013 Constitution, which included many new provisions on the reorganization of the judicial body system, including the stipulation that People's Courts could organize specialized courts (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2013). This was subsequently concretized in the Law on the Organization of the People's Courts 2014 (effective from June 1, 2015), which for the first time regulated the establishment of the Family and Juvenile Court within the system of specialized courts at the provincial level and at the district level if deemed necessary. On April 1, 2016, the first Family and Juvenile Court was established at the Ho Chi Minh City People's Court, after which it was piloted in a few localities and expanded nationwide in 2018. Accordingly, juvenile criminal cases were processed using a child-friendly investigation room model, tried at specialized courts with a child-friendly courtroom model, and procedures were characterized by a friendly approach towards minors. However, these contents remained at the pilot stage and were not yet widely implemented, and diversionary measures as alternatives to

criminal proceedings remained limited (with no new alternative measures added compared to Stage 2). Nevertheless, this was the period when Vietnam moved closer to the RJ model.

3.2.4 Fourthly, the stage of comprehensive RJ approach (2018–present)

This is the period when Vietnam built the legal basis for diversionary measures and established institutions to serve RJ, training judicial officers and social workers to participate in the RJ process for juveniles. Accordingly, key legal documents directly governing the handling of juvenile offenders officially came into effect. The Law on Children 2016 and the 2015 Criminal Code, amended and supplemented in 2017 (Chapter XII), further refined a series of issues associated with the core values/content of RJ: they legalized the principle of ensuring the best interests of the minor recognized by the CRC, narrowed the scope of criminal responsibility, and expanded diversionary measures for minors exempted from criminal responsibility (including supervisory and educational measures: reprimand, community mediation, or education at the commune, ward, or town level). These measures were more specifically regulated by the Criminal Code, making them more practically applicable. Alongside this, the 2015 Criminal Procedure Code, amended and supplemented in 2021 (Chapter XXVIII), increasingly perfected regulations on procedural steps, requiring investigators, prosecutors, and judges handling criminal cases involving minors to be individuals who have been trained or have experience investigating, prosecuting, and adjudicating cases related to individuals under 18, possessing the necessary understanding of psychology and educational science for minors. Furthermore, regulations on the participation of family, school, and the community in educating and supporting minors to reintegrate into the community served as a crucial legal basis for deploying the RJ model in practice. Simultaneously, the Family and Juvenile Court institution was expanded for consistent application nationwide, truly allowing RJ to be applied comprehensively in terms of both procedure and alternative measures.

However, with the promulgation of the Law on Juvenile Justice in 2024, Vietnam has shown that it has adopted RJ as a formal legal orientation. Accordingly, the goal of handling juvenile offenders is not focused on punishment but on education and restoration, through diverting them away from criminal proceedings to give them a chance

for healthy education and development in the future. Child care, education, and protection are important tasks for the whole society. Specifically, the handling of juvenile offenders must ensure humanitarianism and clemency, while focusing on education and community reintegration. Notably, in Directive No. 28-CT/TW dated December 25, 2023, the Party set forth the solution to “develop a child-friendly and protective justice system”. This demonstrates the Party's commitment to building a justice system that is not only fair but also humane, appropriate to the characteristics and needs of minors (Nguyen Hoa Binh, 2024). In this spirit, combined with the ratification of many international legal instruments protecting children's rights and an assessment of socio-economic and political conditions, the promulgation of the Law on Juvenile Justice has significant legal value for diversion and RJ, realizing the Party's view on child-friendly justice for this specific demographic.

The consistent viewpoint on criminal policy toward juvenile offenders is clearly reflected in this Law: it does not prioritize punishment but promotes the philosophy of education and restoration (Article 5). Concurrently, the Law allows “diversion to be prioritized for application to juvenile offenders in all stages of investigation, prosecution, and trial” and states that “the Court shall only apply penalties to juvenile offenders if it deems that the application of diversionary measures does not ensure effective education and prevention. In cases where a penalty must be applied, priority shall be given to applying reprimand, fine, non-custodial rehabilitation, and imprisonment with a suspended sentence”. Furthermore, it stipulates that the application of penalties to juvenile offenders is “mainly aimed at educating them to respect and obey the law and ethical norms, preventing them from committing new crimes, and having a preventative and anti-crime effect” (Article 12). These are all principles that express the core values of RJ.

At this time, RJ is no longer just a model that Vietnam aspires to adopt for handling juvenile offenders; it has become a practical handling model with a full legal basis, including alternative measures to criminal justice and institutional arrangements for the authorities and procedural officials in Investigation Agencies, Procuracies, and Courts. Accordingly, the diversionary measures that procedural authorities can choose to apply under the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024 as alternatives to criminal justice measures are relatively diverse, with the majority (9 out of 12 measures) being recognized for the first time in Vietnam's legal system. The majority of these are community-based

diversionary measures (11 out of 12 measures).

Table 1

Diversionary measures for juvenile offenders in RJ in Vietnam

No.	Community-Based Diversionary Measures	Non-Community-Based Diversionary Measures
1	Reprimand	Performing community service
2	Apologizing to the victim	
3	Compensation for damage	
4	Education at the commune, ward, or town level	
5	Supervision at home	
6	Restriction on travel hours	
7	Prohibition from contacting persons at risk of leading the minor to commit a new crime	
8	Prohibition from entering locations at risk of leading the minor to commit a new crime	
9	Participation in study or vocational training programs	
10	Participation in treatment or psychological counseling	
11	Performing community service	

Source: National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2024

Diversionary/Alternative Measures are precisely the mechanism for implementing RJ based on the principle that instead of taking a case to court, the procedural authorities can divert it to RJ programs. Within this framework, the person subject to a diversionary measure will have to carry out one or more alternative measures to punishment to ensure they acknowledge their wrongdoing and take responsibility for their actions. However, this is done in a way that resolves conflict, restores broken relationships, repairs harm to the victim, and facilitates successful community reintegration, thereby reducing the burden on the criminal justice system. Therefore, RJ can be seen as a form of implementation within the framework of diversion, and diversionary measures are the means to promote RJ. The diversity in the number and types of diversionary measures in Vietnam's Law on Juvenile Justice 2024 demonstrates a humanitarian criminal policy, allowing for increased individualization and flexibility in the choice of handling measures, enhancing the effectiveness of restorative education (it is possible to select multiple diversionary measures simultaneously), and mitigating the negative consequences of criminal justice (increasing the likelihood of applying diversionary measures reduces the incidence of judicial proceedings, minimizing the risk of adverse effects from criminal justice detention or custody measures).

Thus, the historical overview of the formation and development of RJ in Vietnam

shows a sequential shift: laying the foundation → philosophical permeation → institution building → comprehensive legalization, with the current focus being on education, restoration, and reintegration instead of mere punishment. This process reflects an evolutionary transition driven by changes in perception leading to progressive criminal policy changes in Vietnam, moving from a punitive approach towards a restorative, child-friendly, and humane approach, aligning with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and advanced international practices.

Table 2

Summary of the Formation and Development Process of the RJ Model for Juveniles in Vietnam

Period	Key Characteristics	Typical Measures/Institutions	Key Progress (✓) and Limitations (✗)
Traditional Justice: Punitive and Humanitarian (Pre-2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Application of the same handling principles as adults. - Contained humanitarian elements but was skewed towards punishment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sentence mitigation. - Reformatory schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Aid the rudimentary foundation for RJ, allowing diversion in minor offense cases. ✗ Lack of a legal framework and child-friendly institutions; restorative measures were scattered.
Adoption of RJ Thought (2000 – 2010)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction of the RJ concept from international sources. - Implementation of some pilot models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Out-of-court mediation. - Psychological counseling. - Community intervention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The “seeding” stage of RJ. ✓ Beginning of a mindset shift from punishment to education ✗ Lack of specialized institutions and personnel; diversionary measures were limited
Shaping RJ and Child-Friendly Institutions (2010 – 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Formation of specialized institutions and personnel. - Clear demarcation of the legal system's role concerning minors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Child-friendly courtrooms. - Specialized justice officers. - Reform of the Criminal Code and Criminal Procedure Code. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Establishment of specialized institutions and personnel; child-friendly procedures were piloted. ✓ Consolidation of the legal foundation. ✓ Preparation for widespread institutionalization. ✗ Diversionary measures were not expanded beyond Period 2; limited to pilot scale.
Comprehensive RJ (From 2018 to Present)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - RJ explicitly legalized through a specialized law. - Priority given to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Law on Juvenile Justice 2024. - Diversionary measures (11/12 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ The restorative model now has a full legal basis and judicial institutions. ✓ Prioritized diversion at

	education and diversion instead of trial.	measures are community-based). - Participation of family, community, and victims.	all stages of proceedings; diversified community-based diversionary measures. ✓ Aligned with international standards ✗ Challenges regarding resources, synchronized training, and effective supervision of application.
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3.3 Challenges and prospects for developing RJ for juveniles in Vietnam

3.3.1 Challenges in implementing RJ for juveniles

The value of RJ for juveniles is undeniable. Nevertheless, some argue that because RJ is designed to be owned by the community, creating a space of shared power where everyone has a voice, it has the potential to generate excessive resentment and resistance from the conflicting parties, ... (Lyubansky, 2019) or suggest that RJ measures are too lenient, lack a strong punitive element, are inconsistent, and may erode the authority of the justice system (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007; Cunneen, 2003), furthermore, under community pressure and the acknowledged truth revealed during mediation between conflicting parties, the accused may lose the right to silence, and fundamental principles of justice could be undermined if not implemented correctly (Pavlich, 2005; Ashworth, 2002).

In Vietnam, the theory of RJ has for the first time been specifically and synchronously institutionalized into mandatory legal provisions—from principles, measures, to application procedures—as seen in the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024. This is a significant step forward, but it will undoubtedly face many difficulties and challenges. Identifying these challenges is crucial for determining the development prospects of RJ, as it provides a clear view of the current situation and the bottlenecks hindering the institutionalization and practical implementation process. From this, policymakers, implementing agencies, and relevant stakeholders can propose a suitable reform roadmap, prioritizing the resolution of fundamental issues. It also helps quantify the readiness of the legal system, institutions, and society to embrace new reforms, thereby clearly defining the necessary conditions for the RJ model to develop sustainably—in terms of legal foundation, resources, social awareness, and inter-sectoral coordination capacity—

which promotes the future development prospects of RJ. These challenges can be identified in the following aspects:

3.3.2 Firstly, conflict with traditional values and the current legal culture

Although the RJ model for handling juvenile offenders has a long history of formation and development in Vietnam, its widespread application and institutionalization as a formal, mandatory legal framework will likely face significant conflict arising from traditional values and the historical legal culture. In Vietnamese society, long-standing legal thinking is often associated with the notion that “law is a punitive tool”, emphasizing deterrence, discipline, and strict handling to maintain social order. Consequently, more flexible reforms, such as diversion from criminal proceedings, community-based education, or mediation, are easily misinterpreted as “being lenient with criminals”, “lacking strictness”, and thus diminishing the effectiveness of the law. Furthermore, many people may misunderstand the true nature of RJ, confusing “restoration” with “forgiveness”, or believing it is only suitable for minor offenses, leading to a lack of confidence in the mechanism. This reflects a conflict between modern legal thinking—which emphasizes restoration and reintegration—and traditional values that prioritize strict discipline and tight control. A tangible reality is that the majority of current justice officials in Vietnam were trained and gained practical legal experience within a traditional legal culture. Therefore, their acceptance and application of modern legal cultural values may encounter certain barriers. For humane legal reforms to be accepted and effective, an extensive legal communication and education process is needed to change social perceptions and build a more progressive legal culture. However, this requires a long-term, systematic strategy tailored to specific target groups.

3.3.3 Secondly, practical diversity makes standardization difficult

In the process of applying RJ, each case of a juvenile offender presents significant differences in the circumstances of the offense, age, personality, family environment, and community living conditions. This diversity makes it very complex to create a unified application process with clear criteria for the timing of diversionary handling and the level of intervention. This poses a challenge in establishing a common template that can be

applied uniformly to all situations.

3.3.4 *Thirdly, insufficient institutions and resources to meet requirements*

Although the legal basis for establishing child-friendly investigation rooms and child-friendly courtrooms, in line with international standards, has been recognized in the Law on the Organization of the Courts, the Criminal Procedure Code, and guided by sub-law documents such as Circular 43 and Circular 02/2018¹ and despite profound support from UNICEF in establishing and expanding the Family and Juvenile Court in provinces and cities since 2016. However, this specialized court institution has not yet been implemented nationwide, the goal is for all provinces to have this specialized court operational by 2026 (UNICEF in Vietnam, 2025). Furthermore, the implementation of RJ requires investigators, prosecutors, judges, and social workers to possess knowledge of child psychology and skills in mediation and counseling—areas that are currently very limited. Although training and fostering efforts have been conducted, they can hardly alter the fundamental mindset deeply rooted in traditional justice ideology. Moreover, in the diversion process, the role of social workers is immense, as they are the key players responsible for compiling the diversion conditions investigation report and proposing appropriate measures for the Investigation Agency, Procuracy, and Court to apply. Nevertheless, the operating mechanism for this group of individuals is not specifically addressed in the Law on Juvenile Justice and lacks guiding documents, which may lead to difficulties in application.

3.3.5 *Fourthly, challenges in institutionalizing and establishing internal legal mechanisms for RJ*

Despite the progressive view that RJ is a new approach based on humanitarian values and has been institutionalized in the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024, this is an

¹ *The full titles of the documents are Circular No. 43/2021/TT-BCA, dated April 22, 2021, of the Minister of Public Security, stipulating the responsibilities of the Public Security forces in carrying out certain child-friendly criminal procedural steps and procedures when receiving, resolving reports, information, and investigating cases of infringement against persons under 18 years old, and Circular No. 02/2018/TT-TANDTC, dated September 21, 2018, of the Chief Justice of the Supreme People's Court, providing detailed guidance on the trial of criminal cases involving participants under 18 years old under the jurisdiction of the Family and Juvenile Court.*

entirely new Law with numerous provisions and diversionary measures being recognized for the first time. As a result, it is inevitable that there will be legal gaps, issues with synchronization within the legal system, or concerns regarding feasibility. Although there have been references to the validity of provisions in the Criminal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, and some other legal documents (Law on Execution of Criminal Judgments, Law on Children, Law on Residence, Law on Legal Aid), these have mostly been limited to reviewing terminology, modifying/supplementing phrases, or removing provisions, rather than a systematic and comprehensive amendment driven by a new legal philosophy. The consequence is that while these policies are humane, if they lack synchronization or contain legal gaps, they will be difficult to implement substantively or may be carried out in a perfunctory manner, failing to achieve the initial reform goals.

3.3.6 Fifthly, challenges in implementation and inter-Agency coordination

The psychology of hesitation and fear of risk in implementing new policies is also a major barrier to the effective deployment of progressive legal views like RJ. It is inevitable that justice agencies tend to prioritize safety and stability, being reluctant to innovate if there is no clear practical evidence of the effectiveness of diversionary measures. The mindset of “waiting for guidance from superiors” or “following the correct procedure to avoid responsibility” means that even after the law is enacted, the implementation process lacks determination and is sometimes merely perfunctory. Furthermore, new legal perspectives often lack sufficient empirical data, making it difficult to convince both the public and implementing officials. The lack of policy impact assessment studies before and after deployment also reduces the ability to make flexible adjustments when problems arise, leading to slow, ineffective implementation, or even deviation from the original goals.

3.3.7 Prospects for developing RJ for juveniles in Vietnam

In the context of the legal system shifting towards a practice-centered approach and the RJ model being gradually recognized in policy and law, the prospects for the development of this model in Vietnam are entirely feasible. Not only is it legally enshrined through the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024, but RJ is also reinforced by positive

feedback from pilot models, support from the international community, and a cultural foundation that values mediation and community responsibility among the Vietnamese people. Therefore, clear development prospects for RJ can be forecasted for the near future in Vietnam.

3.3.8 Firstly, leveraging the strengths of Vietnam's long-standing culture and fine traditions

Vietnam's juvenile justice system is profoundly influenced by traditional ideologies, though it has also recently been affected by Western legal thoughts. It reflects a blend of the benevolent and compassionate culture rooted in Confucianism and Buddhism, the philosophy of President Ho Chi Minh prioritizing children's rights, Communist ideology, and several globally common juvenile justice models (Dao, 2023). If correctly perceived and leveraged, Vietnam's traditional culture can absolutely become a major advantage in developing RJ. The principles of humanitarianism, valuing relationships, promoting tolerance, and education—which are characteristic features of Vietnamese culture—are highly compatible with the spirit of RJ, where the priority is healing, repairing, and reintegration rather than punishment. Furthermore, the spirit of community, high mutual support, and the presence of traditional village institutions such as residential groups, the Fatherland Front, and mass organizations, also provide a favorable foundation for developing community-based mediation and intervention models. Reality shows that Vietnamese culture does not emphasize the individual but encourages responsibility toward family, lineage, and society. Meanwhile, the regulations stipulate that the roles of family, school, and community are significant in applying diversionary measures to minors. Therefore, this cultural characteristic can help enhance the self-awareness and commitment to restoration of minor offenders. Researchers and UNICEF Vietnam also indicate that developing community-based intervention and mediation measures is perfectly consistent with Vietnam's community culture and tradition of solidarity (Dao & Dandurand, 2021). In the context of Vietnam actively reforming its legal system while receiving support from international organizations in the field of child justice, promoting national cultural values will open up the prospect of building a RJ model with its own unique identity, one that is humane, sustainable, and suitable for practical conditions.

3.3.9 Secondly, increasingly clear political and legal commitment

While RJ was previously only sporadically mentioned in documents like the Law on Children 2016, the Criminal Code, and the Criminal Procedure Code 2015 (as amended), its status has now been elevated with the promulgation of a specialized law—the Law on Juvenile Justice. RJ has become a systematic legal policy, marking a crucial step in national judicial reform. The emergence of this Law demonstrates an increasingly clear political and legal commitment to reforming the juvenile justice system towards a child-friendly, child-centered approach and building a RJ model. Specifically, the Law has officially institutionalized the core values of RJ into mandatory provisions by setting forth principles such as prioritizing diversionary, educational measures, mediation, counseling, psychological support, and the participation of family and community in the cycle of handling juvenile criminal behavior. This ushers in an era of mandatory, nationwide application of the restorative model.

More importantly, the synchronization and consistency between the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024 and foundational codes like the Criminal Code, Criminal Procedure Code, Law on Execution of Criminal Judgments, and Law on Children, which will be carried out in the coming time, will eliminate legal gaps, remove the psychology of hesitation, and enhance the confidence of legal practitioners and society. Institutionalizing this as a national policy (e.g., in a national strategy for juvenile justice, budget allocation, professional guidelines, etc.) will help consolidate the stability, longevity, and widespread diffusion of the RJ model for juveniles in Vietnam.

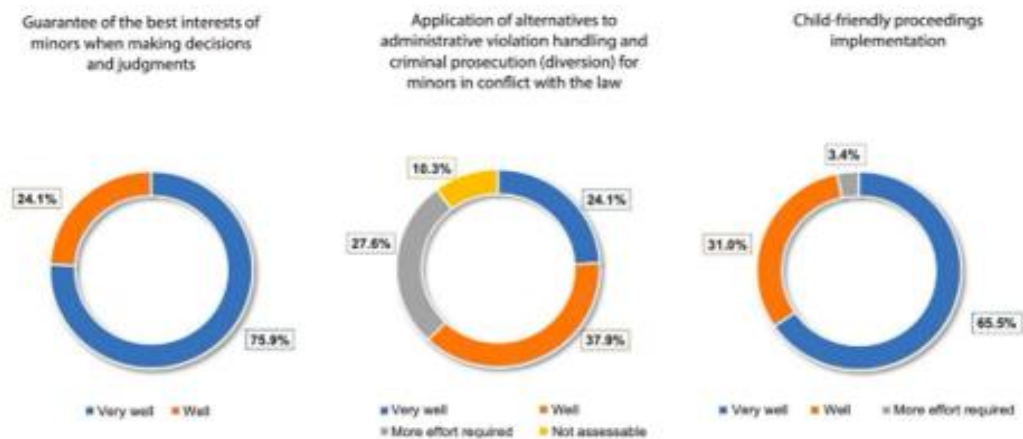
3.3.10 Thirdly, positive initial experimental results

Several pilot models, such as child-friendly investigation rooms, community mediation, and diversionary handling in Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and Quang Ninh, have demonstrated positive impacts: reduced recidivism, increased victim satisfaction, and improved behavior in minors. According to a survey result by UNICEF Vietnam, the establishment of Family and Juvenile Courts (FJCs) with Judges equipped with necessary knowledge and skills in juvenile justice has been promoting the application of child-friendly procedural steps and the consideration of the minor's best interests when issuing decisions. Specifically, approximately 76% of FJCs participating in the survey reported

that they were performing “very well” in considering the best interests of the minor when issuing decisions or judgments. Similarly, 65.5% of FJCs assessed that these Courts were performing “very well” in applying child-friendly procedural steps (**Figure 1**).

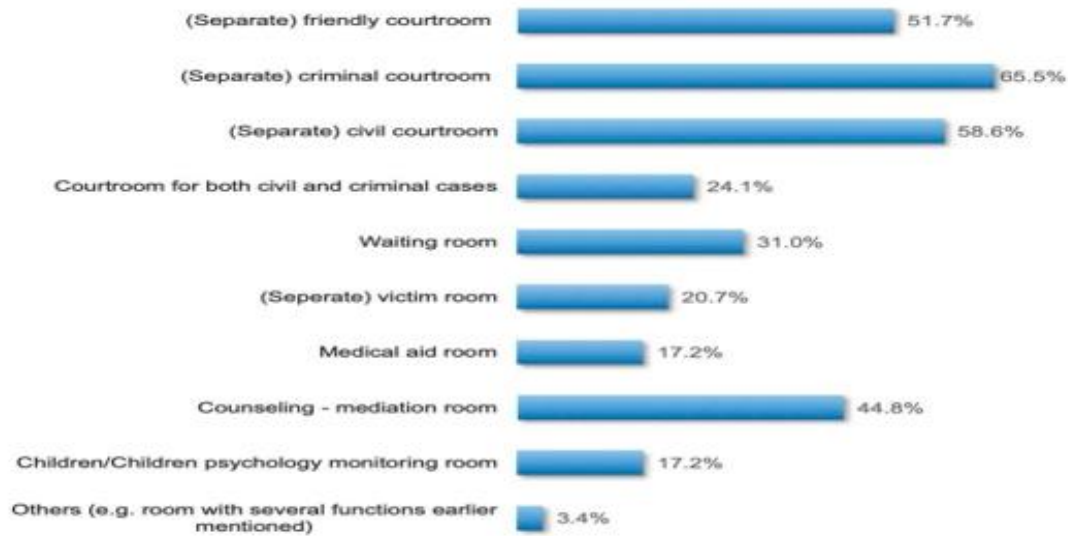
Figure 1

FJCs respondents’ evaluation of adjudication of cases involving families and minors



Source: UNICEF Vietnam, 2024

In addition, according to statistics on the results of establishing specialized rooms at the headquarters of the Family and Juvenile Courts (FJCs), more than half (51.7%) of the Courts have arranged a separate Child-Friendly Courtroom to try criminal cases involving defendants under 18 years old, and nearly half (44.8%) of the FJCs have arranged a Counseling-Mediation Room to create a private space and promote the mediation process for marriage and family cases (Figure 2). With activities stemming from these institutions, the research also points out that the establishment of the Family and Juvenile Court with its specialized physical infrastructure has allowed minors to access a child-friendly trial environment, reducing the psychological stress for them when participating in proceedings at the Court.

Figure 2*Function rooms at FJCs*

Source: UNICEF Vietnam, 2024

The pilot results show that Vietnam's justice system is gradually and effectively shifting from the traditional punitive justice model to the restorative model—the foundational principle of RJ. Especially with the Law on Juvenile Justice officially recognizing the Family and Juvenile Court as a formal institution in implementing RJ, it can be expected that this model will achieve distinct effectiveness in the near future, contributing to the sustainable institutionalization and expansion of RJ in Vietnam.

3.3.11 Fourthly, social needs and the imperative for judicial reform

RJ is perfectly aligned with Vietnam's judicial reform orientation until 2030, which emphasizes building a child-friendly justice system, reducing criminalization, and expanding reintegration opportunities for minors. In the current context, where strict punitive measures are increasingly revealing their limitations in the education and rehabilitation of children, the need to innovate the judicial approach has become more urgent than ever. Officially incorporating RJ into the judicial reform policy not only elevates the political commitment but also helps ensure the sustainability of this model in practice. Furthermore, the growing social interest in children's rights, humanitarian values, and a restorative instead of punitive approach shows that the social foundation has begun to shift. If supported by well-directed and effective communication and legal

education campaigns, these innovative philosophies will gradually be accepted by society, creating a significant awareness lever for the judicial reform process in Vietnam.

3.3.12 Fifth, active support from international organizations and Regional Experience

Vietnam is currently receiving active support from international organizations such as UNICEF, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the European Union (EU), and various civil society organizations in training human resources, perfecting the legal framework, and providing technical assistance for the development of RJ. In addition, the experience from countries in the ASEAN region like Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines—which have built fairly comprehensive legal frameworks for this model—is a valuable source of reference. Learning from existing models will help Vietnam outline a clearer institutionalization roadmap, avoid common mistakes in the early stages, and effectively shorten the implementation time. If the current challenges are clearly identified and addressed step-by-step, RJ in Vietnam can absolutely develop into a sustainable, humane, and effective model, contributing to the construction of a child-friendly, people-centered justice system.

Despite the many challenges, RJ in Vietnam still holds significant development prospects if it is integrated into the overall reform strategy, supported by substantive pilot programs, gradually legalized, and accompanied by increased social awareness. This is not only a humane model but also a path aligned with international commitments and global progressive trends.

4 CONCLUSION

RJ has through its historical evolution, truly become a global judicial trend, including in Vietnam. Although RJ has been present in Vietnam's legal history at various levels, it was only truly recognized, enshrined, and guaranteed for comprehensive, mandatory implementation when the National Assembly passed the Law on Juvenile Justice 2024. This Law will officially take effect on January 1, 2026, but positive feedback from pilot models and the current legislative reform trend show that society is ready to embrace this new handling method. Concurrently, Vietnam is entering a phase of deeper integration, shifting from a purely “academic” law-making mindset to one based

on “evidence”. Accordingly, law is moving away from the approach of “if you cannot manage it, ban it” (centered on management and control) to a philosophy that “values practical factors and the effectiveness of legal regulation” (prioritizing regulatory effectiveness in practice). This very transition opens up great prospects for the development of RJ in Vietnam. When law is constructed on an evidence-based foundation, referencing models that have proven effective in practice—such as RJ—the capacity to design policies appropriate to social needs and the specific characteristics of minors will be higher. Moreover, the “evidence-based” mindset facilitates the expansion of pilot programs, the summary of models, and their institutionalization through specific regulations, ensuring that policy does not remain in the theoretical framework but operates in practice in a more sustainable, flexible, and humane manner.

Furthermore, studying the global context, including the legislative and implementation experiences of RJ in foundational and developing countries, indicates that the success of RJ depends on: (i) the diversity and flexibility of diversionary measures; (ii) an independent, well-trained professional team to coordinate mediation and supervise the restorative plan; and (iii) the proactiveness of the community. Drawing from international lessons, combined with Vietnam's process of comprehensively restructuring its justice system, the correct identification of challenges and the effective utilization of opportunities for innovation will create favorable prerequisites for RJ to become a model rich in potential, with strong prospects for long-term sustainable development.

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Authors' Contribution

Both authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

How to cite this article (APA)

Phuong, V. T. (2025). RESTORATIVE JUSTICE FOR JUVENILE OFFENDERS IN VIETNAM: HISTORICAL APPROACHES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS. *Veredas Do Direito*, 22(4), e223742. <https://doi.org/10.18623/rvd.v22.n4.3742>