



# **'WHAT WORKS' WITH YOUNG OFFENDERS**

## **YOUTH ON TRACK GUIDELINES**

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6 April 2016



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## **Purpose of the Guidelines**

Youth on Track is an early intervention scheme for 10-17 year olds that identifies and responds to young offenders at risk of long-term involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Guidelines aim to provide an overview for Youth on Track Providers of the current research and evidence base regarding 'what works' to reduce young people re-offending. The information included in the Guidelines offers a basis for further detailed consideration by the Youth on Track Providers. The Guidelines will assist Youth on Track Providers address the criminogenic risks and needs of young people referred to Youth on Track.

The document also outlines the demographics and needs of young people who offend. Youth on Track Providers can use the information, in conjunction with the Youth on Track Service Specification, to develop and deliver an effective and evidence-informed service.

# 1 PROFILE OF YOUNG OFFENDERS

Research shows us that while a significant proportion of young people will at some time commit some type of offence, it's only a small proportion that do so on an ongoing basis.<sup>1</sup> Most young people who do offend will stop without any form of intervention and without ever coming into contact with the criminal justice system.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is a small group of juvenile offenders who do not stop and this group has been found to be responsible for a disproportionate amount of crime.<sup>3</sup> Youth on Track aims to identify these young people at their first or second formal contact with the criminal justice system.

## 1.1 Demographics of young offenders

Research shows that young people in NSW who receive their first caution are majority male, non-Indigenous, live in a major city, and are aged between 15 and 17 years old. One in five young people who are cautioned will offend at least a further three times in three years.<sup>4</sup>

In NSW Indigenous young people are 15 times more likely than non-Indigenous young people to have had greater levels of contact with the juvenile justice system or to receive community supervision by Juvenile Justice. Indigenous young people are also 17 times more likely to spend time in detention.<sup>5</sup>

Young people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background represent 16% of the entire Juvenile Justice client base (community and custody) and are found predominantly in the metropolitan area (South Western Sydney, Western Sydney and Sydney).

Research shows that young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system at a very young age are the most likely to continue offending for longer and are most likely to be Indigenous.<sup>6</sup>

Of the young people referred to Youth on Track approximately 80% are male, almost half are 10-14 years old with the average age being 14.8 years old. Approximately 60% of the young people referred to Youth on Track identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (this is expected to increase to over 75% in 2017).<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2 Social characteristics of young offenders

Evidence suggests that young people involved in offending behaviour have serious and multiple inter-related needs, even at an early age.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Youth on Track

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2013). Young people aged 10–14 in the youth justice system 2011–12. Juvenile justice series No.12. JUV 19. Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>2</sup> Nelson, P. (2015). Characteristics of Prolific Offenders in NSW. *Crime and Justice Statistics*. No. 112. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research; Vignaendra, S. & Fitzgerald, J. (2006). Reoffending among young people cautioned by police or who participated in a youth justice conference. *Crime & Justice Bulletin* No. 103. NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

<sup>3</sup> Chen S, Matruggio, T, Weatherburn, & Hua, J. (2005). The Transition from juvenile to adult criminal careers, *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, No. 96, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research; Vignaendra & Fitzgerald, 2006; Lind, B. (2011). Screening cautioned young people for further assessment and intervention. *Crime and Justice Bulletin*, No. 149, NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

<sup>4</sup> Lind, 2011

<sup>5</sup> AIHW, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Chen S, et al. 2005; Vignaendra & Fitzgerald, 2006; Lind, 2011; AIHW, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Youth on Track data July 2013 to June 2015

<sup>8</sup> NSW Department of Attorney General & Justice, (2012). *Youth on Track: Need and service analysis*. Retrieved from [www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au)

participants are also likely to have several of the following characteristics even though they have a small number of formal contacts with the criminal justice system.

A young offender may have any number of social characteristics<sup>9</sup> such as:

- ✚ being from remote areas and areas of low socioeconomic status
- ✚ experience of disengagement from education and poor educational achievement
- ✚ experience of family dysfunction, such as having experienced abuse or trauma, and being placed in out-of-home care
- ✚ a disability, including cognitive<sup>10</sup> and mental health impairments
- ✚ a psychological disorder
- ✚ a previously undetected oral language deficiencies
- ✚ very poor literacy and numeracy
- ✚ involvement in alcohol and other drug misuse and other risky behaviour
- ✚ an offending parent and / or exposure to a criminal lifestyle or pro-criminal attitudes
- ✚ close friends who engage in risky behaviour and crime
- ✚ a lack of structured activities or employment

## 2 'WHAT WORKS' WITH YOUNG OFFENDERS

There is a significant body of knowledge based on over thirty years of international research that has identified “what works” to reduce juvenile offending. For an intervention to be deemed successful it must have a record of proven success in reducing recidivism. Often this might be success that has been independently evaluated multiple times across different jurisdictions nationally and internationally.

The research demonstrates that specific correctional interventions are effective in reducing recidivism. The ‘What Works’ literature is based on the research that shows young people should be provided with services that have proven effectiveness and are based on research regarding best practice.<sup>11</sup>

The significant majority of the ‘what works’ literature is based on research conducted with young offenders undertaking custodial or community sentences, therefore ‘involuntary’ young offenders. This must be considered when delivering an early intervention with ‘voluntary’ young offenders like Youth on Track.

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<sup>9</sup> NSW Department of Attorney General & Justice, (2012). *Youth on Track: Potential participants*. Retrieved from: [www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au); NSW Department of Attorney General & Justice, (2012). *Youth on Track: Project volumes and needs* accessed at [www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au); AIHW 2015; Indig, D., Vecchiato, C., Haysom, L., Beilby, R., Carter, J., Champion, U., Gaskin, C., Heller, E., Kumar, S., Mamone, N., Muir, P., van den Dolder, P. & Whitton, G. (2011). *2009 NSW Young People in Custody Health Survey: Full Report*. Justice Health and Juvenile Justice. Sydney; *Response to Inquiry into Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs*, (2012). Legal Aid NSW and the Aboriginal Legal Service (NSW/ACT). Retrieved from <http://www.legalaid.nsw.gov.au>; Snow, P. & Powell, M. (2011). ‘Youth (in)justice: Oral language competence in early life and risk for engagement in antisocial behaviour in adolescence’, *Trends & Issues in crime and criminal justice*, No. 435

<sup>10</sup> Cognitive disabilities of young offenders may include acquired brain injury, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, general developmental delay, intellectual disability, autism spectrum and others.

<sup>11</sup> Latessa, E. & Lowenkamp, C. (2011). ‘What Works in Reducing Recidivism? The principles of effective intervention’, *University of St. Thomas Law Journal*, Vol 3:3

## 2.1 Risk-Needs-Responsivity

The 'What Works' literature led to the development of the Risk-Need-Responsivity principles.<sup>12</sup> Research demonstrates that adhering to the principles result in a 30% decrease in reoffending, compared to a 6% decrease when the principles are not followed<sup>13</sup>. The three core principles include:

**The risk principle:** Match the level of service to the offender's risk to re-offend.

The risk principle states that the frequency, intensity and focus of interventions should match the offender's assessed risk of re-offending. Resources for programs and services should be more intensive and target higher risk offenders. Interventions for lower risk clients should be relatively brief. Research shows that interventions that target low risk offenders and their non-criminogenic needs using non-behavioural therapeutic approaches were associated with an *increase* in recidivism<sup>14</sup>.

**The need principle:** Assess criminogenic needs and target them in treatment.

Criminogenic needs include the 'Big 4' and extend to the 'Central 8'. Evidence suggests that the 'Big 4' are the main factors associated with a risk of recidivism and time spent focusing on these is associated with the most significant decrease in re-offending<sup>15</sup>:

- ✚ antisocial attitudes and thoughts
- ✚ antisocial peers
- ✚ history of antisocial behaviour
- ✚ antisocial personality pattern

The other four criminogenic risk factors that contribute to the central 8 are:

- ✚ problematic family circumstances
- ✚ problems at school/work
- ✚ problems with leisure activities
- ✚ substance abuse

The YLS/CMI assists case managers to determine the young person's criminogenic needs. Once assessed, these needs should help shape the young person's case plan goals in order to have the most effective outcomes.

Interventions should address the complex, dynamic criminogenic needs of young people and their families. The goal of the intervention should be the reduction of the dynamic risk factors directly associated with offending risk (criminogenic needs). Offenders have many needs deserving of treatment but not all of these needs are associated with their criminal behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

**The responsivity principle:** tailoring the intervention to the learning style, motivation, abilities and strengths of the offender.

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<sup>12</sup> Bonta, J. & Andrews, D. (2007). 'Risk-Need-Responsivity Model for Offender Assessment and Rehabilitation', *Public Safety Canada, Government of Canada*. Retrieved from: <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsk-nd-rspnsvty/index-eng.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> Bonta, J., Bourgon, G., Ruge, T., Scott, T., Yessine, A., Gutierrez, L., & Li, J. (2010). 'The Strategic Training Initiative in Community Supervision: Risk-Need-Responsivity in the Real World', *Corrections Research: User Report*, Public Safety Canada

<sup>14</sup> Bonta, et al 2010; Wilson, H., & Hoge, R. D. (2013). The effects of youth diversion programs on recidivism: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol 40:5, 497-518.

<sup>15</sup> Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Wormith, S. J. (2006). The recent past and near future of risk and/or need assessment. *Crime and Delinquency*, 52, 7-27.

Responsivity factors are those not necessarily related to offending but are relevant to the way the young person will interact with interventions. Interventions should be delivered to young people and their families in a way that meets their individual needs, promotes participation and is culturally appropriate. Examples of responsivity factors are anxiety, personality, learning capabilities and the current level of motivation of the client.

## 2.2 Protective factors

Research has identified a number of protective factors that can influence the young person's exposure to multiple risks, reducing the likelihood of a young person engaging in criminal behaviour.<sup>16</sup>

Individuals may have similar risk factors, but differ in recidivism as a result of the presence or absence of protective factors. They represent strengths to build upon and can reduce the impact of risk factors that are present. Protective factors may involve strengths in individual disposition and competencies, family environment and relationships or external support systems. Some protective factors are static, for example being female, and others are dynamic factors which are important to include in the design of case plans.

Examples of protective factors include<sup>17</sup>:

- ✚ Pro-social behaviour and attitudes
- ✚ Appropriate language development and good academic performance
- ✚ Supportive, interested parents or carers who use good discipline
- ✚ Link with teachers and other adults and peers who role model pro-social behaviour
- ✚ Social and problem solving skills

## 2.3 Effective Criminogenic Interventions

Targeted individualised intervention to address the underlying causes of young offender's involvement in crime can be effective in reducing the likelihood that the young person will continue offending into adulthood.<sup>18</sup>

Research regarding criminogenic interventions shows that effective intervention:<sup>19</sup>

- ✚ is structured and focused
- ✚ must be designed to address the dynamic criminogenic needs that can be changed

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<sup>16</sup> Sutherland, A., Merrigton, S., Jones, S., & Baker, K. (2005). *Role of Risk and Protective Factors*, Youth Justice Board for England and Wales; Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. (2012). Protective and promotive factors in the development of offending. *Antisocial behavior and crime: Contributions of developmental and evaluation research to prevention and intervention*, 71-88; Farrington, D. P., Lösel, F., Ttofi, M. M., & Theodorakis, N. (2012). *School bullying, depression and offending behaviour later in life: An updated systematic review of longitudinal studies*. Stockholm: Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention.

<sup>17</sup> Sutherland, A., et al. (2005); Farrington & Ttofi (2012); Farrington et al. (2012).

<sup>18</sup> Hoge, R. D & Andrews, D.A (2011). YLS/CMI 2.0 User's Manual.

<sup>19</sup> Tennyson, H. (2009). Reducing Juvenile Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis of Treatment Outcomes (Doctoral dissertation, Pacific University). Retrieved from: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/spp/109>; Trotter, C. (2013). *Working with Involuntary Clients*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Routledge; Trotter, C. (2013). *Collaborative Family Work: A practical guide to working with families in the human services*. 1st ed. Australia: Allen & Unwin; Lipsey, M. W. (2009). The primary factors that characterize effective interventions with juvenile offenders: A meta-analytic overview. *Victims and Offenders*, 4, 124-147.

- ✚ take place in the different environments relevant to the young person such as in the community, home, and school and address a variety of factors that influence likelihood of reoffending
- ✚ use a multi-modal approach where different strengths and different needs are identified, and different and appropriate means are used for addressing them
- ✚ focus on skills training (social skills, lateral thinking, problem solving, negotiation, assertiveness, critical thinking)
- ✚ use cognitive-behavioural methods for 13 – 18 year olds that include anger control and interpersonal problem solving skills
- ✚ works with families, in a family systems approach and problem solving nature, particularly for 10 – 12 year olds
- ✚ must be of sufficient integrity to ensure that what is delivered is consistent with the planned design of the intervention
- ✚ the worker's competence is sufficient to deliver the intervention with integrity
- ✚ uses homework or skill practice in between sessions

Some examples include:

- ✚ Cognitive behavioural therapy (such as the CHART program)<sup>20</sup>
- ✚ Functional Family Therapy
- ✚ Multi-Systemic Therapy
- ✚ Aggression Replacement Training

## 2.4 Effective Practice Skills

Research suggests that three particular practice skills are effective in reducing re-offending with involuntary clients<sup>21</sup> such as those under community supervision or in custody.

Effective practice skills include:

- ✚ **Role clarification** involves frequent, open, and honest discussions about each party's role, the purpose of the intervention, exploring what the client and the worker wish to achieve, boundaries, and confidentiality.
- ✚ **Pro-social modelling and reinforcement** involves workers modelling and then identifying pro social behaviour and values of the client and rewarding and encouraging these behaviours. It is also about the worker challenging anti-social behaviour or comments.
- ✚ **Collaborative problem-solving** involves working with the client's definition of the problem, developing goals that are relevant for the client not just for the worker and identifying strategies with the client to solve the problem. The key steps of problem-solving should be shared with the client to facilitate a collaborative approach.

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<sup>20</sup> Changing Habits and Reaching Targets CHART Procedure, Juvenile Justice, NSW Department of Justice (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.juvenile.justice.nsw.gov.au>; Youth Justice Community Practice Manual, Department of Human Services (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au>

<sup>21</sup> Trotter, C. (2013)



## 2.5 'What Doesn't Work'

Features of interventions or programs that are not effective in reducing recidivism are those that are vague and non-directive counselling programs, programs that emphasise discipline and challenge, and programs that have infrequent sessions.<sup>22</sup>

Some examples include:

- ✚ Shock probation and 'scared straight'
- ✚ Correctional boot camps using a military model

## 3 SUMMARY

Young people who are referred to Youth on Track are most likely to be male and Indigenous with only one or two prior offences. Half will be under 15 years old at the time of their first offence which puts them at greater risk of re-offending.

The high-risk young people identified for Youth on Track are often from disadvantaged backgrounds, characterised by poor education, disrupted families, exposure to family or peer pro-criminal attitudes, mental health and/or cognitive disability and engagement in regular risk taking behaviour such as substance abuse. These young people are likely to continue offending unless they receive an individualised targeted intervention to address the underlying causes of their involvement in crime.<sup>23</sup>

Interventions should target higher risk young offenders and address their criminogenic needs while considering responsivity factors and protective factors of the individual. Evidence outlines the requirements for an effective intervention and the practice skills needed by those implementing interventions with young offenders.

Youth on Track aims to identify and provide intervention for medium to high risk young offenders. Even though most of the presented evidence was based on young people who are under supervision or in custody there is evidence that suggests intervention at an earlier point for medium to high risk offenders is equally beneficial as interventions at a later stage.<sup>24</sup> Youth on Track aims to build on this evidence base by assessing the Youth on Track model via several outcome evaluations of the scheme.

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<sup>22</sup> Tennyson, H. (2009). Reducing Juvenile Recidivism: A Meta-Analysis of Treatment Outcomes (Doctoral dissertation, Pacific University). Retrieved from: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/spp/109>; Washington State Institute for Public Policy Retrieved from: <http://www.wsipp.wa.gov/BenefitCost?topicId=1>

<sup>23</sup> Farrington, D. P. and Welsh, B. C. (2007) *Saving Children from a Life of Crime: Early Risk Factors and Effective Interventions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, H., & Hoge, R. D. (2013). The effects of youth diversion programs on recidivism: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, Vol 40:5, 497-518.