

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



The Effect of Youth Diversion Programs on Recidivism: A Meta-Analytic Review

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Youth, juvenile, delinquency, intervention, diversion, recidivism, meta-analysis

POPULATION GROUP

Youth in conflict with the law; at-risk youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Diversity, Social Inclusion and Safety; Coordinated & Youth Friendly Communities

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

SOURCE

Academic article (peer-reviewed)

“This research demonstrates clearly that involvement in the juvenile justice system, holding all other factors constant, is associated with an increased likelihood of offending behavior.”

1. What is the research about?

Under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, young offenders can be diverted away from the traditional criminal justice system. The rationale is that first-time offenders may be harmed, rather than benefitted, from being processed in the traditional justice system. While diversion programs are promising, there is a lack of research that compares the outcomes of youth who experience diversion as opposed to traditional criminal justice processing approaches. This study is a meta-analysis designed to compare the impacts of participating in either diversion or traditional criminal processing on reoffending rates.

2. Where did the research take place?

The study is a meta-analysis evaluating programs from USA, Australia, Canada, and two other countries.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth in conflict with the law. The study is intended to inform the practices of agencies offering services to such youth. The average age of youth in the study was 14.72, with ages ranging from 12 to 18. They were also more likely to be Caucasian males, and to have committed a property-related offense.

4. How was the research done?

Searches on popular online criminal justice databases were conducted using terms such as diversion, alternative programs, and extrajudicial measures. The researchers then limited the search to youth offenders and studies reporting on recidivism. Reference lists of these articles were also used to identify additional articles. In order to be included in the analysis, a study must examine the recidivism rate of youth offenders referred to a diversion program, compared to those who had undergone traditional processing. The programs were then measured for effectiveness using a calculated ratio known as the odds ratio, which calculates the probability of reoffending.

5. What are the key findings?

The meta-analysis looked at 73 diversion programs. The results are as follows:

- The recidivism rates for diverted youth ranged from 2% to 81%, with an average of 31.5%. On the other hand, the recidivism rate for the traditionally processed youth ranged from 8% to 81%, with an average of 41.3%. This indicates that diverted youth in general have lower recidivism rates.

- For low-risk youth, “caution” diversion programs were more effective in reducing recidivism than those providing an intervention.
- Intervention programs are equally effective for charged or non-charged youth.
- Diversion programs targeting medium/high-risk youth offenders achieved greater reductions in recidivism than programs targeting low-risk offenders.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

The meta-analysis demonstrates that diversion programs are a promising alternative for youth in conflict with the law. It also highlights a number of areas that require further research. In particular, the researchers pointed to the need for stronger research designs when evaluating diversion programs in order to accurately assess their effectiveness. They also stressed the importance of recording the characteristics of the clients and the nature, quality and amount of services that the youth receive, as it can shed light on which aspects of diversion are more effective. In addition, they felt that reoffending rates should not be the only basis for evaluating the impact of a diversion program – other outcomes related to attitudes and values, school performance and adjustment, and mental health functioning are also important indicators of success.

In light of these findings and recommendations, agencies serving youth should work to ensure that appropriate intervention programs are made available for young offenders and that connections are made with local police departments so that the youth can have access to these options. You can also strive for high quality evaluation of your programs, so that data on its effectiveness can be inform policy changes that can benefit the youth in the long run.



Wilson, H. A., & Hoge, R. D. (2013). The effect of youth diversion programs on recidivism a meta-analytic review. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 40(5), 497-518.