



Supporting Positive Outcomes for Youth

Involved with Law in Ontario

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Youth in conflict with the law, Youth Criminal Justice Act, extrajudicial measures, prevention, rehabilitation, intervention, custody, detention, racialized youth, Aboriginal youth, Indigenous youth, visible minority youth

POPULATION GROUP

Youth in conflict with the law

STEPPING UP THEMES

Diversity, Social Inclusion & Safety

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario

“While Ontario is investing in a broad range of prevention and rehabilitation programs, little is known about best program models and practices for supporting Indigenous and racialized youth. There is a need to document and evaluate programs that are responsive to the needs and strengths of Indigenous and racialized young people.”

1. What is the research about?

This report reviews literature that helps us understand how to better support positive outcomes for youth involved with the law. The report is meant to serve as a resource and guide for evidence-based practice for programs working with this population. The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) is the legal statute that governs youth justice programs and systems in Canada. Its emphasis on using extrajudicial measures to divert first time or less serious and non-violent offenders away from the criminal justice system has successfully changed the youth justice system from being more punitive to being more rehabilitative and has reduced the incarcerated rate of youth in general. Nonetheless, the YCJA is only regarded as a “qualified success” because the incarcerated rate of Indigenous youth has not decreased and there have been unintended adverse impacts on youth from racialized groups as a result of the new legislation. This report reviews the outcomes of this new legislation, identifies “what works” from the literature, and provides evidence-based guidelines and principles for practitioners and program developers to support positive outcomes for youth involved in the law.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research reviewed Canadian and international research along with grey literature related to supporting positive outcomes for youth involved with the law.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth, age 12 -25, with priority given to racialized and Indigenous youth involved with the law.

4. How was the research done?

This is a selective literature review. It is extensive but not systematic. It draws on an array of sources including academic and peer-reviewed papers and books, and grey literature (e.g., policy documents, government reports, conference papers, and unpublished dissertations). Specific databases used were: Academic Search Premier, Criminal Justice Abstracts, PsychINFO, MEDLINE, Psychology and Behavioural Science Collections and Current Contents, Sociological Abstracts, Scope, Social Work Abstract, Social Sciences Abstracts. In addition, searches were made of unpublished materials (Dissertation Abstracts International, ERIC, ProQuest).

5. What are the key findings?

There is compelling evidence (demonstrated through meta-analysis of research literature) that punitive sanctions such as jail, which is designed to shock youth into law-abiding behaviour, do not reduce recidivism. Instead the review identified the following practices that do reduce youth recidivism:

Targeted and Responsive Programs

Programs that adhere to the principles of risk, need, and responsivity are more effective.

Diversion Programs

Diversion programs that accept low-risk youth demonstrated significantly greater effectiveness when accepting them pre-charge than post-charge.

Multi-and Family-focused Intervention

Counselling programs that offer individual, group, and family sessions programs were the most effective response to youth delinquency.

Treatment Length and Dosage

Programs should be limited to six-months, as both high-risk and low-risk offenders were successful when the program was shorter than six months.

Treatment Setting

The findings on treatment setting (community-based intervention vs. treatment in institutional setting) are inconclusive. It appears that treatment forms are more important than the treatment setting.

Program Integrity

Those programs that follow program integrity principles (i.e., training, staff supervision, produced manuals, and measured program compliance) generated more positive outcomes compared to programs that did not report efforts to ensure program integrity.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

It is important that frontline youth justice professionals (e.g., police and crown prosecutors) have clear guidelines about the use of extra-judicial measures. All stakeholders working with youth involved with the law should develop a process for coordinating and integrating diversion programs. Program designs should be built on a theoretical framework that identifies clear, attainable, and measurable program goals for implementation and evaluation purposes.

All programs working with youth involved with the law should focus on family rather than on the youth individually. Youth need a sense of empowerment and ownership of the program. Staff are role models and should have the required level of cultural competency to implement the program. It is important to ensure program integrity and fidelity by developing a clear and accessible manual that clarifies program objectives and implementation processes. Program evaluation is important because it enables continuous improvement that can help programs to better meet the needs of youth. Moreover, there is a lack of program evaluation data on youth justice programs making it difficult to assess what is and is not working.



Kwok, S.M., Houwer, R., HeavyShield, H., Weatherstone, R. & Tam, D. (2017). *Supporting Positive Outcomes for Youth Involved with Law in Ontario*. Youth Research and Evaluation eXchange (YouthREX). Toronto, ON.