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# *Recidivism and the Effectiveness of Criminal Justice Interventions: Juvenile Offenders and Post Release Support*

Chris Cunneen<sup>\*</sup> and Garth Luke<sup>\*\*</sup>

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## ***Abstract***

The purpose of this journal article is twofold. First, it provides a discussion of the use of recidivism as a measure of effectiveness of criminal justice interventions, and, secondly, there is discussion of an evaluation of a juvenile post-release support program. The article argues that there has been a significant growth in recidivist studies, particularly as a measure of effectiveness. However there has been less and less attention placed on the limitations of measures of recidivism, or the nature of extraneous factors that influence re-offending. We use an evaluation study we conducted of the Post Release Support Program (PRSP) for juvenile offenders in New South Wales to explore these issues further. One of the interesting points to the study was that, while the statistical results on re-offending were not conclusive, the qualitative interviews among staff and offenders were overwhelmingly positive about the program. For us this raises the question: what value do we place on recidivism in evaluating a program when qualitative outcome information appears more conclusive?

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

Recidivism studies are a common way of measuring the effectiveness of various criminal justice programs and interventions, and re-offending is a major overall performance indicator for the criminal justice system. Departmental goals are variously set to encapsulate reductions in re-offending and, particularly for juvenile justice services, reducing re-offending may seem to constitute their *raison d'être*. State audit commissions and the national Productivity Commission hold reductions in re-offending as a primary measure of effectiveness. Less thought is given to understanding the limitations of the measure that is being used. For example, how do we define re-offending and what exactly is being measured? What conclusions can be drawn from the results? Further, there appears to be little consideration of what we understand by the concept of 'effectiveness'. For example, is a program or intervention only 'effective' when it reduces re-offending?

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The authors have experience conducting recidivist studies, and evaluations of programs using recidivism as an outcome measure (Luke & Lind 2002; Luke 2004; Cunneen et al. 2005; Cunneen et al. 2006). However, we also have experience using other outcome measures including qualitative measures which provide insight into how participants understand and give meaning to programs and their outcomes (Cunneen et al. 2005). While we utilise recidivism as a measure, we also acknowledge its limitations. The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it appears to us that while there has been a significant growth in recidivist studies, less and less attention is being placed on the limitations of current measures of recidivism, or the nature of extraneous factors that influence re-offending. Our purpose is not to deny the importance of recidivist studies as a measure, but rather to think more clearly about the limitations of the method. The second and major part of the paper deals specifically with an evaluation study we conducted of the Post Release Support Program (PRSP) for juvenile offenders in New South Wales. One of the interesting points to the study was that, while the statistical results on re-offending were not conclusive, the qualitative interviews among staff and offenders were overwhelmingly positive about the program. For us this raises the question: what value do we place on recidivism in evaluating a program when qualitative outcome information appears more conclusive?

### **The Rise of Recidivism Studies**

Measures of recidivism have been used for many years. We do not suggest they are 'new'. However, our argument here is that they appear to now outweigh all other measures when considering the impact of particular criminal justice policies, programs and other types of interventions.

One factor driving the emphasis on measuring re-offending has been the growth in public sector requirements for measurable performance outcomes. Public sector corporate goals identify the primary aim of a department. Perhaps not surprisingly, for adult corrections and juvenile justice the primary mission is stated to be a reduction in re-offending. New South Wales Corrective Services has two key performance measures: re-offending rates for offenders released from prison; and the percentage of accredited program modules successfully completed by prisoners. New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice has a vision of 'Striving to break the juvenile crime cycle' and a statement of purpose of 'Working together to provide services and opportunities for juvenile offenders to meet their responsibilities and lead a life free of further offending' (Department of Juvenile Justice 2007).

The Australian Productivity Commission's Annual Report on Government Services uses recidivism as a measure of effectiveness for the overall performance of the criminal justice system. While the Commission acknowledges that it is 'a partial measure of the performance of the system in improving public safety by reducing the incidence of crime' (SCRGSP 2006:C11), recidivism is the only overall performance measure identified. Compared to juvenile justice outcomes like providing opportunities for offenders, or criminal justice objectives identified by the Productivity Commission such as enhancing community safety and the application of appropriate, consistent and fair sanctions for offenders (SCRGSP 2006:c5), re-offending rates may seem like a transparent and relatively universal measure across criminal justice agencies. It is also a measure that is relatively easily available in some form. As the New South Wales Auditor-General noted in its review of the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services, data was available on re-offending as measured by return to prison, or return to correctional supervision. However,

it was not possible 'to find out the extent to which prisoners as a group improved their health, employability, and education skills' (Auditor-General 2006:14).

### ***Criminogenic Need, Risk and Re-Offending***

The increased emphasis placed on recidivist studies also derives in part from the ascendancy in criminal justice policy of a 'criminogenic needs' paradigm. Certainly, the current dominant view in juvenile justice is a focus on intensive, highly structured programs aimed at meeting criminogenic needs. This is despite the continuing lack of clear evidence for the effectiveness of such programs in actually reducing offending. It is what Muncie (2004:277) has referred to as the 'new orthodoxy' in juvenile justice that facilitates specific types of interventionist programs. For an example of the rise of risk assessment and a critique of specific risk assessment tools in the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice see Priday (2006).

Within the new orthodoxy, the idea of rehabilitation tends to have a relatively narrow focus based on psychologically based interventions, or specific forms of treatment or training (particularly cognitive behavioural training) (McGuire 2002). Criminogenic needs are often defined in contradistinction to the economic, social and welfare needs of offenders. As a result, rehabilitation is considered within a narrow individualised and psychology-based framework. The broader social welfare agenda of providing employment, income, education and accommodation is no longer seen as essential to rehabilitation goals.

Thus in a study of juvenile justice programs, Day et al. (2003:1) note that 'rehabilitation is used in this review to refer to those types of practices in juvenile justice that are most directly aimed at reducing re-offending in young people'. Arguably this represents a shift in the conceptualisation of rehabilitation to a significantly more limited focus. Rehabilitation is connected to meeting criminogenic needs, and criminogenic needs are themselves defined by their relationship to the measurable risk factors associated with offending. Risk factors are transformed into criminogenic needs which are to be met by various programs. The sequence might be explained as

- Identify risk factors for offending through risk assessment
- Eliminate risk factors by meeting criminogenic needs
- Reduce re-offending

Hence, in the risk assessment/criminogenic needs policy context a key outcome measure for whether programs are 'working' is a reduction in re-offending. Recidivist studies are often now used to determine whether a program or policy can be considered as effective — whether the program can lay claim to being an 'evidence-based' intervention in the 'what works' approach.

Unfortunately recidivism is often measured over very short timeframes, with very limited data and without adequate controls for comparison. Our view is that social integration outcome measures are also important and these have been downplayed because of the dominance of the particular paradigm reflected in the criminogenic needs approach. Measuring re-offending is important and it needs to be done as effectively as possible. However, perhaps more importantly, it should not stand as a substitute for all other outcome measures. As Brown (2006) has pointed out, one of the problems with the criminogenic needs paradigm is that it attempts to exclude other types of interventions and needs as 'non-criminogenic'.

### *A More Robust and Transparent Measure?*

If we are going to use recidivism measures, there is a need to clarify and refine the way recidivism is measured so that it is more transparent and robust. There are significant differences in the way recidivism is measured in various Australian studies, and to some extent this is dependent on the existing limitations of official client-based databases.

The Department of Human Services (2001) study *Recidivism Among Victorian Juvenile Justice Clients 1997-2001* is an example of a limited approach to measuring recidivism.<sup>2</sup> The study reported on the recidivism rates for young offenders who were clients of the Victorian Juvenile Justice program over the period between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998, and for a follow-up period of two years. Recidivism rates were determined for the entire sample of juvenile justice clients; as well as sub-sets of the sample identified as either clients for the first time or as clients previously on court orders supervised by Juvenile Justice. Recidivism rates were also calculated by gender, age and ethnicity. Recidivism was defined as the reappearance of juvenile justice clients in court leading to a further proven offence and supervised statutory order or sentence. As acknowledged in the report, this is a limited measure of recidivism. It ignores those who are convicted and receive other courts outcomes, and those who are diverted from the court system completely through police discretionary decisions. Further it does not take into account frequency of re-offending or offence severity.

There have been significant developments in the analytic techniques used to study re-offending. It is common to utilise additional measures of re-offending such as time to first and subsequent re-offence, number of re-offences within a period, and some indication of seriousness of re-offence. The use of Survival Analysis techniques provide a better understanding of the patterns of re-offence and the impact of time-related factors such as age and repeated orders. The use of multivariate models (such as Cox proportional hazards and negative binomial regression techniques) help identify the individual effects of each measured characteristic and provide initial predictive models. There has been a growing sophistication in the statistical methods used to measure re-offending.

However, it is also important to recognise that variations abound in the definitions of re-offending, particularly in the juvenile justice literature. In some cases, re-offending is measured as a police *apprehension* (Marshall 2006) or as a *referral* to court, youth conference or police caution (e.g., Hayes & Daly 2004). In some cases, it may be a *court appearance* (Chen et al. 2005) or a *proven court appearance* (e.g., Vignaendra & Fitzgerald 2006). The variations in definition do not make the studies 'wrong', but it does need to be understood that the measures are a proxy for actual re-offending. We need to be honest about what is being measured, and in the final analysis that is the formalised and recorded re-contact with some agency within the juvenile justice system. We need to remember that the juvenile justice system is one where significant levels of informal and formal discretionary decisions are made concerning the treatment of young people (Cunneen & White 2007). Formalised re-contact with juvenile justice agencies occurs within frameworks of institutional power and decision-making.

Improvements in the collection of data on offenders has allowed the tracking of individuals from the juvenile system into the adult criminal justice system in some jurisdictions (see e.g., the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research Re-offending database). This has enabled a consideration of re-offending as young people

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2 The authors acknowledge that the Department of Human Services is currently significantly revising the previous report with a more thorough analysis.

move from the juvenile to adult jurisdictions, and to enable the examination of re-offending over longer periods of time. The ability to conduct studies over a longer period of time and across juvenile and adult jurisdictions offers a vast improvement in our understanding of re-offending. However, there remains the problem that relatively few co-variables are examined with the re-offending data. The co-variables studied in association with re-offending are based on the very limited data routinely and consistently collected by criminal justice agencies — which is basically age, sex, ethnicity/race, some measure of offending history, and a limited history of intervention type and outcome.

However even the most comprehensive long-term measurement and analysis of reoffending is of limited value without the use of an appropriate control group. The practical and ethical difficulties associated with random allocation in sentencing mean that other methods are usually used to establish a control group such as matching of offenders, time-based or geography-based comparisons or the use of selected non-participants or non-completers in programs. All of these methods for choosing a control group have problems, especially when trying to evaluate the effects of programs that are highly shaped by human differences and non-measured characteristics such as the attitudes of participants, sentencers and program staff.

### ***Alternative Measures***

While there are improvements that can be made to recidivist studies, we also argue that there is a need to consider alternative and additional outcome measures besides recidivism. Governments often remain wedded to simple performance measures such as re-offending. Some program or initiative is seen to 'work' if it appears to reduce re-offending. However, this reliance on overly simplistic measures runs the risk of seriously limiting the life of valuable criminal justice interventions. Consideration of effectiveness may require alternative quantitative and qualitative measures. These measures might be intrinsic to the specific aims of certain types of programs (e.g., programs with aims to improve employment skills, social reintegration, drug and alcohol, mental health); they might be related to particular groups (e.g., young women, Indigenous young people) or to compliance with accepted international human rights principles (e.g., principles of diversion, or children's participation), or legislated principles (e.g., the New South Wales *Young Offenders Act* 1997, or the Victorian *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* 2006).

Such outcomes might also include the health and wellbeing of young offenders, improvements in their life and employment skills, and positive feedback from families and communities. These might broadly be considered social integration outcomes. There may also be a range of outcomes sought which are related to skills development or reductions in harmful or risk-taking behaviour. There also may be outcomes sought which are not related to the young offender at all. For example, in jurisdictions that utilise youth justice conferencing models, victim participation and satisfaction may be seen as an important outcome measure. Measuring the variety and distinctiveness of these outcomes requires a consideration of a range of qualitative data beyond re-offending measures.

Consider, for example, youth justice conferencing. Research by one of the authors (Luke & Lind 2002) showed that young people appearing before youth justice conferences for property and violent crime had a lower re-offending rate than similar young people appearing before the courts. The difference was between 24 and 28 per cent. But what if the results had been different? For the sake of argument, let us assume that the Luke and Lind (2002) study had shown no significant difference in re-offending rates between comparable groups who had participated in a youth justice conference and who had attended Children's

Court. Would we advocate the abandonment of youth justice conferencing? It would seem to us that basic children's human rights principles of participation and diversion, and principles of victim participation would all justify retaining and expanding the program. In other words there may be well accepted principles for using particular types of interventions irrespective of any measurable impact on re-offending.

### **Evaluation of the Post Release Support Program (PRSP)**

In the second part of this article we turn to an evaluation of the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice's Post Release Support Program (PRSP) undertaken by the authors (Cunneen et al. 2005). The primary purpose of the PRSP is to support young offenders released from custody by addressing barriers to reintegration and facilitating their successful reintegration into their communities. The stated goal of the program is to reduce re-offending among young people.

The New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ) developed and introduced the PRSP in 2002. The program is a structured 12-week intervention designed to achieve an overall reduction in the number of clients who re-offend after release from a juvenile justice centre. The PRSP was designed to address offending behaviour by concentrating on the economic, social and welfare needs of young offenders. The key outcome areas identified for the program were income, accommodation, education and training, employment, legal needs, health, family networks, living and survival skills, social and personal skills, leisure and recreation.

The PRSP is enhanced by a brokerage system that supports clients who are geographically isolated and not readily accessible by the PRSP provider. At the time of the evaluation (2002-2005) there were 10 PRSP programs operating throughout New South Wales. The program providers were non-government organisations funded by the DJJ to provide the service to young people on release from detention. Typically the PRSP worker would establish contact with a detainee in the weeks prior to his or her release. The young person's participation in the PRSP was voluntary upon release. In the majority of cases which were analysed for the evaluation, the initial 12-week program was extended for a further 12 weeks.

#### ***Profile of the PRSP Clients***

The most common groups of offences for PRSP clients prior to their referral to the PRSP were theft (41.6%), followed by offences against the person (37.2%). Some 84% of young people had offending histories prior to the court appearance that lead to custody and their eventual referral to the PRSP. Some 40% had between one and three prior proven appearances, and a further 44% had four or more previous proven appearances. Thus the group that was referred to the PRSP was well entrenched in the juvenile justice system. More than 60% of young people accepted in the PRSP were 16 or 17 years of age. Almost 22% were 18 years or older.

Young women comprised 12.5% of young people accepted onto the program. This is greater than their comparative representation in detention, which was approximately 7% at the time. A greater proportion of young women (46.4%) referred to the PRSP had offences against the person immediately prior to the referral than young men (36.1%). However, this difference was not statistically significant. Young women were slightly more concentrated among those with no previous proven appearances or fewer prior appearances than young men. However, this difference was not statistically significant.

Some 30% of all referrals to the PRSP involved Indigenous young people. This proportion of referrals is significantly lower than the proportion of Aboriginal young people in detention during the same period, which ranged between 37% and 43%. However, once referred to the program, Indigenous young people had a higher acceptance rate on to the PRSP than other referrals (84% compared to 79%). There were no statistically significant difference in the offence categories between Indigenous and non-Indigenous offenders prior to being referred to the PRSP.

Indigenous young people were concentrated among those with longer prior records and this difference was statistically significant. Some 41% of Indigenous young people had more than five previous proven appearances, compared to 19% of non-Indigenous youth. Only 8.6% of Indigenous young people had no previous proven appearance, compared to 19.1% of the non-Indigenous group.

### ***Re-Offending***

The evaluation was required, *inter alia*, to identify whether the PRSP was meeting the objective of reducing the number of clients who re-offend after serving a period in custody. In order to test whether the PRSP reduced subsequent offending all PRSP admissions linked to a 2002-03 discharge from a control (detention) order, through a successful appeal or after a long remand (longer than 14 days) were studied. These three categories of admission made-up the bulk of PRSP clients and complied with the primary criteria for entry to the program. There were 169 PRSP admissions that met these criteria out of a total of 897 control, appeal and long remand discharges from New South Wales juvenile detention centres in 2002-03.

Re-offending rates are influenced by many factors. Some factors, such as prior record, gender, age, ethnicity are recorded as client details on departmental databases. Many other characteristics such as attitude, peer and family relationships, education, employment, health, drug and alcohol use, are not routinely available. For this reason it is very difficult to isolate the rehabilitative effects of a program such as PRSP unless clients are randomly allocated to the program. As there was no random allocation for this study, matched control groups were selected to compare re-offending patterns. Two control groups were identified for this study – a group from 2002-03 and a group from 2000-01. All were discharged in those periods either from control orders, appeals or long remand.

The two control groups were matched against the PRSP participants on:

- gender
- Indigenous status
- age at first offence
- age at discharge
- number of prior proven court appearances
- number of prior court appearances resulting in control, and
- the most serious previous offence type.<sup>3</sup>

The second comparison group was created as it was possible that those admitted to PRSP in 2002-03 were in some ways different from all those other young people discharged in 2002-03. That is, participants in PRSP may have been selected by staff on the basis of unmeasured characteristics (e.g., attitude, level of parental support) and are thus

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3 All offences were assigned to one of the four following decreasing categories of seriousness: serious person offence, less serious person offence, theft offence, other offence.



intrinsically different from other young people discharged in 2002-03 even when matched on the above measured characteristics. The nearest year in which the current PRSP scheme was not operating is 2000-01 and thus the full range of unmeasured characteristics are more likely to be present in any matched control group selected.

In this study re-offending was defined as any offence committed after discharge from detention which was handled by Youth Justice Conference or found guilty in the Children's Court. The follow-up period was to the end of June 2004 for discharges in the 2002-03 period and up to the end of June 2002 for discharges in the 2000-01 period. Information on warnings and cautions issued by police was not available for this study, nor was information on offences committed after age 18. Thus the re-offending measure did not include matters that were dealt with by way of police diversionary alternatives, nor with offences committed as an adult.

In order to test the time to re-offence a Cox proportional hazard's regression was carried out on the PRSP admissions and the matched group from 2002-03. The PRSP participants had a slightly lower likelihood of re-offending (8% less than the matched group from 2002-03). However, these results were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level. The proportion of PRSP participants who had re-offended within three months was almost the same (1% lower) as the matched group from 2002-03. The proportion of PRSP participants who had re-offended within six months was slightly lower (3.4%) than in the matched group from 2002-03. The proportion of PRSP participants who had re-offended within 12 months was slightly lower (6.4%) than in the matched group from 2002-03. However, the differences shown in the results for the three, six and 12 month periods were not statistically significant.

A negative binomial regression analysis showed a very small and non-significant difference in the re-offending rates when comparing PRSP participants and the matched group from 2002-03, with PRSP participants having a 1% lower re-offending rate. The mean reappearance rates yielded no significant difference between the two groups, although the rate is slightly lower for PRSP participants (1.39 compared to 1.45). Nor was there a significant difference in the proportion that reduced the seriousness of their re-offending, although again the direction favoured the PRSP group.

The same comparisons as above were made between the PRSP clients and the matched group from 2000-01. The differences were not statistically significant, but slightly favoured the group who had not received post release support.

In order to gain some insight into whether participation in the PRSP was more effective for certain subgroups, comparisons of time to re-offend were carried out between the PRSP participants and those in the 2002-03 matched sample on the basis of gender and Indigenous status. There was no difference in time to re-offend for males if they participated in the program or not, however the difference for females was quite large in that young women who participated in the PRSP were less likely to re-offend than similar young women who did not participate in the program. While the number of female cases was very small (only 18 in total) this does suggest that they may have benefited more from the PRSP than males.

As with young women, a similar but smaller benefit is indicated for Indigenous participants. While the survival plot for non-Indigenous participants was very similar to that for non-Indigenous members of the 2002-03 matched sample, there was a clear difference in the plots for the two Indigenous groups with members of PRSP showing a pattern of lower re-offending than their matched sample of Indigenous non-participants.

The recidivist study did not show a significant reduction in re-offending for PRSP participants overall. While there was a small beneficial effect when compared with a matched control group in 2002-03 the differences were not statistically significant. There is however indication that the program may be having a beneficial effect on re-offending for female and also Indigenous participants. The small number of cases available for analysis, the relatively short follow-up period and the small scale of any effects made it difficult to establish statistically significant results. If the success or failure of the PRSP was measured by recidivism analysis alone, then the results would not be seen as an endorsement of the effectiveness of the program. However, as we indicate below, interviews with participants and stakeholders were far more positive about the effects of the program.

### **Young People and Staff's Response to the PRSP**

The evaluators interviewed both DJJ staff and PRSP service providers, as well as young people who were on, or had been on the post release program. There is evidence from the interviews that the program has delivered positive outcomes across the targeted areas for support. Most services reported positive outcomes in the key outcome areas. Services were also realistic about what they could achieve through post release support. Providing stability for the young person through income and accommodation were seen as the two key outcomes, followed by education, training and employment. Providing for the legal needs of young people was also a very important outcome of the PRSP.

Many staff also acknowledged that factors other than re-offending measures were important. 'Young people who re-offend and are re-committed to the Centre do not reflect a failure of the PRSP. The measure of skills, of what they have learnt may be a more important measure of success' (Detention Centre Manager). Many staff wanted better reporting on qualitative outcomes, rather than whether the young person simply re-offended or not. Assisting with community re-integration, improving self-esteem and reducing social isolation were identified as important achievements.

The evaluation involved structured interviews with 32 young people who had participated in the PRSP. Some 25% of this group had re-offended and were interviewed whilst they were in custody. The remainder were in the community when interviewed. Qualitative interviews with young people showed a high level of support for the program – even among those interviewed who had re-offended and were returned to custody. More than three quarters (78%) of young people interviewed stated that the program had helped them stop re-offending. Young people detailed how, from their perspective, meeting the five most important outcome areas (income, accommodation, education/training, employment and legal needs) directly impacted on reducing the likelihood of re-offending. Young people saw themselves as less likely to re-offend when provided with basic support. Assisting with the legal needs of young people meant they were more likely to comply with existing orders and meet outstanding fines. It appears from the interviews, that young people least likely to benefit from the PRSP were those who had ongoing and unresolved alcohol and drug problems.

#### ***Education / Training***

Where data was available it showed very few PRSP clients had completed schooling at Year 10 or above. PRSP service providers found the program helpful in identifying the educational needs of clients, and in linking young people back into education and training where this was desired. About half of the young people stated they had wanted help in accessing education or alternative schooling. A key problem faced by PRSP services in

getting young people into education or training was the lack of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as what service providers described as 'motivation'.

Most young people (78%) who were interviewed were aware that training was needed to obtain the particular job they wanted, and most young people (91%) who were interviewed thought that training would be helpful to them.

He [PRSP worker] talked to me about it when he would come and visit me inside. He rang up schools to see if I could come in. He organised the interview and came with me ... [Did you want help?] Yeah, because I need Year 10 to get a job at least. I need something to do to keep me out of trouble.

However, young people were also often realistic about their immediate future, and the issues that impact on successful completion of educational and training courses.

He talked to me about it but I said no. I want to get a job. I got a baby coming. ... [Did you want help?] No, I'll do Year 10 just for the certificate in a couple of years. But the only thing I got to worry about now is a little bub.

She [PRSP worker] got onto the internet and found me courses to do. I started doing a hairdressing certificate, but I didn't finish it. My boyfriend got out of gaol and I started doing drugs again.

Bricklaying course at TAFE – he hooked me up. He drove me to TAFE everyday and picked me up. The problem was I had too many court dates. They said I can do it again in the second part of the semester.

### ***Employment***

PRSP services thought the program was useful in identifying the type of work young people want, and working towards obtaining that goal. The main limitations were whether the young person was 'job ready' and whether there was employment available. Just over half (53%) of young people interviewed believed they were ready to get a job, and some were assisted by their post release worker to find work.

Yes, I felt I was ready to work because I done training when I was in there [detention] working in the kitchen.

Yeah, I was ready but I still had some doubts – no confidence. But [my PRSP workers] talked to me, helped me build my confidence and stuff.

I got a job straight away. While I was in rehab I did work experience in a coffee shop. That's how I got my first job after I got out.

The comments from those young people who did not feel ready for work often reflected a lack of self confidence.

No, I just didn't feel very good. I had low self-esteem. I hated myself.

I was going through something – a negative stage of life.

I couldn't be bothered doing anything at the time. I was real lazy about everything. I was used to not doing anything from being inside. A lot happened when I was inside. I was a bit depressed when I came out.

Other young people prioritised education over employment: 'I wanted to get back into school straight up. I was pissed off that I was expelled so close to the end. I just want my Year 10 certificate'.

Young people were asked how the post release worker helped them with employment.

She tried to get me work as a brickies' labourer and concreting. She would ring up and get me interviews. [She] got me three, but I didn't get a job.

They referred me to JPET [employment service] – got my resume together and looked for jobs for me ... took me around to jobs for interviews. No one got back to me.

Searching for jobs, she [PRSP worker] helped me with this. She came with me – I didn't feel like I could do anything on my own. She is helping me with my resume right now.

### ***Accommodation***

Young people coming out of detention have significant differences in their accommodation needs. Some young people will return home, or the extended family will assist in accommodation. Others may move in with a friend or partner. When young people cannot return home, there are limited accommodation options. The key problems with accommodation included lack of services, lack of family support, lack of acceptability in the rental market and inappropriate accommodation. In regard to inappropriate accommodation, one PRSP worker noted:

Haven't had any clients where accommodation couldn't be found, but there is a lack of options, some of which is substandard. The Department of Housing will use motels next to methadone clinics, or places used for prostitution.

In about half the cases (53%) young people stated that they needed the PRSP to find them somewhere to live after release from detention.

[I] had a house waiting for me when I got out. They organised this. It was a little flat, just on my own.

[PRSP worker] started to help me find a place through the paper. She found the place I moved to first. She took me to the interview with the owner. She helped with the signing of the lease. She took me to a couple of interviews, but I was rejected from a couple of places – the first couple of flats, but then I got into share accommodation.

For those young people who returned to their family the PRSP was helpful in working through family conflict and negotiating the return. 'I was homeless and living on the streets with my boyfriend. We [my PRSP worker and I] talked about what I wanted. She was probably the one to build my courage up to ask my nan if I could go back home'.

PRSP services saw working with families as a fundamental part of the program, and half the young people interviewed acknowledged that the post release worker helped them with their family relationships when they were released from custody.

### ***Income***

All PRSP services agreed that the program had a major impact on ensuring Centrelink payments, both through assistance with the necessary identification of the young person and with ensuring ongoing payments by avoiding breaches. Two thirds of young people interviewed had Centrelink payments as their source of income. As one young person stated:

I didn't know what to do. I didn't think you could get it at 15, because I was away from home. He took me to Centrelink, helped me get my birth certificate – I didn't know how to get all that. A medicare card, health care card – he also helped to get my ATM card and start a bank account. I didn't know how to do all that.

### ***Legal Issues***

Attending to legal issues is often neglected in the literature on post-release services. However, our experience in this evaluation is that meeting the legal needs of recently released young people is an important function. PRSP assistance with legal issues included direct assistance or advocacy, and referral to other agencies. The type of direct assistance

included court support (by attending court), assistance with Legal Aid forms and in using the Legal Aid Hotline, taking the young person to a solicitor, explaining legal status and obligations in relation to any mandate or order, assistance in addressing outstanding fines by contact with the State Debt Recovery Office and requesting time to pay, and acting as an independent person in police interviews. Referral work included linking young people to appropriate services such as the Aboriginal Legal Service, Legal Aid Commission or community legal centres.

Comments from young people showed the importance of the assistance.

I was a bit confused and all over the place. He sat me down to work out what I had to do. He went to court with me.

[I had] one matter for stealing. [PRSP worker] came and picked me up for court. I wasn't gonna go because I didn't have any money. She took me there and drove me back home. Court was an hour away.

I had reporting to probation and parole every week to every fortnight. She [PRSP worker] took me down so I could do the first interview with Probation and Parole. Meet my worker for the first time. She [PRSP worker] would ring me and remind me. A couple of times she picked me up. She helped by understanding the process and all that. Otherwise, I would have been left on my own to work it out.

### **Health**

Approximately 60% of the young people interviewed stated that they had health problems on leaving detention, and of these the majority identified alcohol and other drugs as the key health issue. The health issues of young people on release and identified by the PRSP service providers included Hepatitis C, sexual health, family planning, drug and alcohol, and mental health. PRSP workers provided assistance in arranging for young people's appointments or referrals with general practitioners, counsellors, specialists and specialist clinics.

### **Conclusion**

The PRSP clients were entrenched in patterns of offending and contact with the juvenile justice system. They had histories of poor educational attainment, homelessness, lack of skills and steady employment, ongoing drug and alcohol problems and health problems, and ongoing legal needs. The PRSP service was important in negotiating various relationships, in advocating for and in assisting young people. The PRSP provided both material and personal support to young people. The material support related directly to income, accommodation, training and employment. The personal and emotional support was also seen as important.

Because they're understanding [PRSP workers]. I felt comfortable with them. I knew whatever I said, they wouldn't go tell anyone else. It stopped me drinking. I used to be drunk every day. She [PRSP worker] helped me get off it.

If I didn't have someone to support me I would have re-offended. I would have got out alone, and angry with all these problems with my family. Now, if I am stressed I ring him, and he helps me calm down.

If I wasn't with him, who knows where the fuck I would be. He did so much for me. He went way out of his way for me.

There was a common view that the PRSP filled a serious gap in service provision, fulfilled important client needs and was consistent overall with the Department's approach to reducing offending behaviour. Despite the absence of statistically significant results in the

analysis of re-offending, it was clear that there was a strong perception among staff and young people that the service reduced young people's offending behaviour. Indeed some 78% of young people interviewed stated that the program had helped them stop re-offending. For those who continued to re-offend drug and alcohol issues played a significant role.

The strength of the PRSP was seen in providing stability around income and accommodation, assisting with community re-integration, improving self-esteem and reducing social isolation. However, it was also acknowledged by staff that there were unmet needs that the program could not satisfy. These included lack of appropriate services such as accommodation, lack of access to training/education opportunities, and lack of employment opportunities. It was also recognised that some young people with patterns of entrenched offending required intense support. A 12-week program of post release support (even if extended to a total of 24 weeks) could only have a limited impact on the complex problems these young people faced.

The PRSP evaluation used qualitative measures in gaining both young offender and departmental staff views on the program and its effects on young people. This qualitative research showed the importance of evaluative measures other than statistical measures of re-offending. The statistical results were inconclusive, although young women and Indigenous young people who completed the PRSP had lower re-offending rates than comparable groups released from custody without post release support. The importance of this research was that it reconfirmed the need to consider a range of outcome measures when determining program impacts, and which include in particular, young people's views. It also reconfirmed the need for longer time periods to be considered when using recidivism as a measure. In the PRSP study the maximum timeframe for recidivism was only 12 months – a condition imposed by the project timetable determined by the Department.

From our experience re-offending studies have a place in the evaluation of specific programs and the overall effectiveness of interventions. However, they need to be considered in a broader context of evaluative tools. One of the problems with more managerialist approaches that rely on simple performance measures like recidivism is that they downplay the complexity of the impact of programs like post-release support. Although a thorough discussion is beyond the purposes of this article, we note that our approach is also more consistent with those advocating a model based on desistance. The type of social integration outcomes evident from the PRSP evaluation are similar to those advocating the need to develop and build upon social capital (Barry 2006). Rather than take a short term performance measure of re-offending, the focus on desistance looks at personal change as a process over a much longer period.

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