

YOUTH ON TRACK RANDOMISED CONTROLLED TRIAL

Process Evaluation

Evaluation Plan

(NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 9 October 2017)

BACKGROUND

Youth on Track

Youth on Track is an early intervention scheme targeting young people in NSW aged between ten and 17 years who have had at least one formal contact with the criminal justice system but have not yet come under the supervision of Juvenile Justice NSW. It focuses on engaging families and provides targeted, individualised interventions to address the underlying causes of the young person's involvement in crime.

Youth on Track has three key objectives (*Source: Service Specifications, 30 May 2016, p. 1*):

1. to identify young people at high risk of continuing in the criminal justice system in a timely way;
2. to provide one-on-one case management and evidence-informed interventions targeted to address the individual criminogenic risk factors of the young person; and,
3. to provide an evidence-informed family intervention to support the family of young offenders to reduce the young person's contact with police.

The scheme's expected outcomes are:

1. Young people's formal contact with police is reduced.
2. Young people's well-being is improved by reducing their criminogenic risks and needs.
3. Young people's participation and achievement in education or employment is improved.
4. Families display more positive family behaviours and ability to support their children.

The scheme, which has multi-agency support, consists of six key elements – referral and screening, engagement, assessment, case management, intervention, and review and exit planning. Discretionary referrals are made principally by NSW Police Youth Liaison Officers, but also by schools. To be deemed suitable for referral into Youth on Track, the young person must be aged between ten and 17 years, offend within the Youth on Track LAC, have received at least one formal police contact (i.e. caution, Youth Justice Conference or charge) and have several identified risk factors (discretionary referrals) or have at least two formal police contacts and a 60 per cent or greater chance of re-offending (automatic referrals), but has never received a supervised court order with Juvenile Justice NSW.

The scheme was endorsed by NSW Cabinet in late 2012 and commenced operation on 1 July 2013 in three NSW Police Local Area Commands (LACs) – Blacktown, the Mid-North Coast and Newcastle City. Cabinet provided \$14.48m in 2016 to expand to three new sites – Central West (Orana and Canobolas LACs), Coffs

Harbour (Coffs Clarence LAC) and New England (Oxley and New England LACs). These six sites will continue until 2019, at which time NSW Cabinet may consider state-wide expansion of the scheme.

Previous evaluations

Two external evaluations have been undertaken of the Youth on Track scheme (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), July 2014, unpublished; Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre of Australia (CIRCA), 2017). BOCSAR's research findings were based on the telephone interview responses of young people, caregivers and stakeholders as well as an analysis of two relevant databases. Both the young people and their caregivers gave overwhelmingly positive feedback regarding both the scheme and their case workers. The vast majority of stakeholders believed that the scheme is beneficial, innovative and has the potential to enhance the lives of the young people and their families. However, they suggested improvements in the operation of the scheme, most of which should occur prior to the scheme's implementation.

CIRCA's evaluation of the impact of Youth on Track on social outcomes for young people and their families comprised interviews with young people, family members, staff and stakeholders; and an analysis of data. CIRCA found improvements over time in a number of specific criminogenic domains – education/employment, leisure/recreation and peer relations, but no improvements in other domains, for example, personality/behaviour, attitudes/beliefs, alcohol and other drug use, and family and living circumstances.

As CIRCA noted, their evaluation did not include a comparison group. Consequently, it cannot be determined whether the improvements observed in the various criminogenic domains are due to the young people's participation in the Youth on Track scheme or to some other factor(s). In addition, neither the CIRCA nor the initial BOCSAR evaluation examined the scheme's central objective of reducing re-offending rates by young people. This situation is currently being remedied by BOCSAR undertaking a rigorous randomised controlled trial.

Randomised controlled trial

The key objective of the randomised controlled trial is to determine if young people in the Youth on Track scheme have reduced re-offending rates after consenting to participate in the scheme compared to young people in the control group. The control group consists of young people who are eligible for the Youth on Track scheme but who have not been randomly balloted to receive Youth on Track services; instead, the control group receives a shorter, less intensive intervention, referred to as 'Fast Track'. Fast Track was developed specifically for the purpose of this randomised controlled trial. It was designed to provide at least some support and intervention to young people who are eligible for the Youth on Track scheme but who were balloted out of the Youth on Track treatment group. The randomisation of the young people into the two groups began on August 9, 2017. The primary outcome variable to measure the re-offending rates of the young people in the two groups is time (in days) to the first formal contact with the police (i.e. a caution, a Youth Justice Conference or a charge) after consenting to participate in the evaluation.

This randomised controlled trial has received ethics approval (Bellberry Application 2017-05-361). In addition, staff from BOCSAR and Juvenile Justice NSW conducted 18 consultations over a four-week period in April 2017 with relevant stakeholders in each of the six sites. Stakeholders identified three important risks posed by the proposed randomised controlled trial. Firstly, stakeholders noted the potential for participants to feel disadvantaged and disheartened and perhaps not engage with the scheme if they discovered that others are receiving treatments of different intensities and/or durations. Secondly, stakeholders were concerned about the limited number and capacity of services available in some sites. The third risk identified by stakeholders was the potential for differential judicial treatment for Fast Track participants who are before the court for bail or sentencing decisions. Both BOCSAR and Juvenile Justice staff acknowledged each of these risks and explained how each could be mitigated, for example, when young people consent to participate, case workers will fully explain the differences in program intensity and duration and that the evaluation will attempt to assess which approach is the most effective; limited services is an existing problem, but, if needed, Fast Track participants will receive a fifth 'case conference' session to ensure a plan for continuity of care when they exit from Fast Track; and BOCSAR will inform the President of the Children's Court about the evaluation. In addition, an Evaluation Advisory Committee (with representatives from Aboriginal Affairs, Juvenile Justice Aboriginal Strategic Unit, NSW Police Force, NSW Treasury and NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet) has been established to discuss and address any other issues that arise during the course of the evaluation.

Furthermore, since it is very rare for randomised controlled trials to be conducted of criminal justice intervention programs, BOCSAR proposes to simultaneously undertake a process evaluation.

CURRENT PROCESS EVALUATION

In consultation with the Youth on Track Unit, BOCSAR's process evaluation will be structured around the following issues:

1. Is the referral and engagement process into the scheme operating efficiently/effectively?
2. Are there any challenges in referring Fast Track and/or Youth on Track participants to external services?
3. What types/levels of support are Fast Track participants getting? How does this differ from the support provided to Youth on Track participants?
4. Are there any major challenges in implementing Fast Track and Youth on Track?
5. Is the evaluation (and the randomisation process) producing any unexpected consequences (either positive or negative)?
6. Is the delivery of Fast Track/Youth on Track producing any unexpected consequences (either positive or negative)?
7. Were both programs delivered as intended?

Data sources:

1. relevant Youth on Track database(s). Variables of interest include participant characteristics (e.g. gender, age, Indigenous status); number and type of previous contact with the police (cautions, Youth Justice Conferences, charges); type of referral (discretionary or automatic); referral source; CAIDS-Q

assessment outcome (i.e. diagnosed cognitive disability, a possible cognitive disability or no cognitive disability); group (Youth on Track or Fast Track); service types to which participants have been referred; and

2. semi-structured interviews (to be conducted by BOCSAR's Senior Research Officer) with key stakeholders (e.g. Youth on Track caseworkers; external service providers; Youth Liaison Officers). It is proposed to conduct some of these interviews in person at the Youth on Track offices

BOCSAR's proposal is contingent upon co-operation from relevant key stakeholders.

REFERENCES

Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia (CIRCA). (2016). *Youth on Track Social Outcomes Evaluation: Final Report*. Retrieved from:

<http://www.youthontrack.justice.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Youth%20on%20Track%20Social%20Outcomes%20Evaluation%20-%20Final%20Report%2019%20April%202017.pdf>

NSW Department of Justice. (30 May 2016). *Youth on Track Service Specifications*.