

# NSW Ministry Health

## Early Intervention & Innovation Fund

### Summary of key findings and implications for policy and practice

**Project title: “They’re there to support you and help you, they’re not there to judge you”  
Breaking the cycle of incarceration, drug use and release: Evaluation of the Community Restorative Centre’s AOD and reintegration programs**

#### **Lead investigator and organisations**

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#### **Other investigators and organisations**

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### Background and Rationale – what problem were you solving?

There is a significant body of research into the demographic, social and structural factors that define prisoner populations.<sup>1</sup> There is also research that explores the capacity of various psychological programs to reduce reoffending and recidivism.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a gap in research and evaluation around the efficacy of post-prison programs, in particular the longer-term trajectories of program participants and the efficacy of models of support for particular groups over-represented in the criminal justice system. The experiences of people leaving prison who require drug and alcohol support requires particular attention.

Recidivism as a measure for success has been critiqued as a limited and blunt measure of the effectiveness of a program or intervention.<sup>3</sup> There are other measures of success, but the question of why or why not a program is successful is not always answered by the fact of whether or not someone returns to custody. This evaluation takes the approach that we need to understand the impact of a program or intervention on recidivism, but we also need to understand this in combination with other measures of wellbeing and social and economic outcomes, informed by the expertise and voices of people who have identified a need for drug and alcohol support, experienced incarceration and experienced leaving prison.

The evaluation questions for this piece of research were as follows:

- What is the efficacy of long-term, community-based outreach support for people leaving prison requiring AOD treatment?
- What is the impact that these programs have on the client group in supporting their transition into the community? This includes reducing the risk of reoffending, improving community reintegration, and improving social and health outcomes for clients.
- What are the strengths and weaknesses in terms of efficacy of the different treatment models within CRC?
- What is the cost-effectiveness and economic value of an outreach model for populations with complex needs? Particularly as compared to residential rehabilitation and imprisonment.

### Summary of Key Research Findings

*Please summarise findings from the research below in abstract format (maximum 300 words)*

This evaluation investigated the efficacy and impact of support provided by the Community Restorative Centre (CRC) to people leaving custody or at risk of incarceration, with a particular focus on populations requiring support around the use of drugs and alcohol. The evaluation took a mixed methods approach involving five distinct studies:

<sup>1</sup> For example see literature reviewed in <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/crime-and-justice/prisoners-australia/latest-release#prisoner-characteristics-australia>; <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports-data/population-groups/prisoners/overview>; <https://www.alrc.gov.au/publication/pathways-to-justice-inquiry-into-the-incarceration-rate-of-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-alrc-report-133/2-context/social-determinants-of-incarceration/>  
<sup>2</sup> McNeill, F., Farrall, S., Lightowler, C., and Maruna, S. (2012) Re-examining evidence-based practice in community corrections: beyond 'a confined view' of what works. Justice Research and Policy, 14 (1) UNSW Sydney.  
<sup>3</sup> See for example, McCausland, R (2015) *Measurement, management and marginalisation: Evaluation and the Diversion of Aboriginal Women from Prison*, PhD thesis: UNSW.

1. **Qualitative Study:** 26 in-depth interviews with CRC clients and staff about their perspectives on and experiences of CRC support
2. **Client Survey Data Study:** shifts in health and wellbeing over time for 147 CRC clients who completed 243 SURE (Substance Use Recovery Evaluator) surveys
3. **Quantitative Analysis of CRC Client Outcomes:** interrupted time series analysis of BOCSAR court and custody data for 483 CRC clients over an 11-year period from 2009 to 2019 who participated in specific AOD, transition and reintegration programs between 2014 and 2017
4. **Quantitative Databank Comparison Study and Costs:** comparative interrupted time series analysis of the court and custody outcomes for 246 CRC clients compared with a cohort of 567 people from the UNSW Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Disability in the Criminal Justice System (MHDCD) Databank with AOD issues who did not receive CRC support
5. **Matched Comparative Case Studies and Costs:** two case studies of CRC clients matched with two people from the MHDCD Databank to enable comparative analysis of pathways and social and economic outcomes associated with CRC support

In summary, the quantitative component of the evaluation found that people leaving prison and receiving CRC support experienced a significant reduction in criminal justice system contact relative to a comparison cohort. It found that **CRC support had a dramatic impact on clients' trajectories, significantly reducing their contact with the criminal justice system (including time in custody and rates of reoffending)**. Interrupted time series analysis found the number of days in custody fell by 65.8% following CRC intervention, the number of new custody episodes fell by 62.6% and the number of proven offences fell by 62.1%. The comparison analysis found that there are **significant social and economic benefits to CRC programs, including savings to the criminal justice system of up to \$16 million over three years for an intake of 275 new clients**.

The evaluation identified key elements of CRC's service delivery model that contribute in significant ways to its success. The qualitative study highlighted that there is a need to understand the **practical and relational kinds of support people require within the context of structural and systemic disadvantage**. It found that incarceration disadvantage is itself located in the context of a lifetime of other kinds of disadvantage; that **meeting basic welfare, housing, health and support needs is fundamental to building a life outside of the prison system**, and that the way in which support is provided (**flexible, outreach, relational, long-term**) and the manner in which people who have experienced incarceration and disadvantage are treated by workers (**respectful, non-judgemental, compassionate, consistent**) is a fundamental factor in achieving change in a range of areas, including breaking cycles of recidivism and alcohol and other drug use.

## Implications for policy and practice

### List any changes that have been made the service/program as a result of this study (list)

The researchers look forward to working with all stakeholders to disseminate findings and work to formalise the service delivery model incorporating the findings from this research. We anticipate that the research will assist the programs under study to formalise their program structure and will also influence their capacity to report on outcomes.

### Wider implications for policy (list)

The dramatic success of the projects under evaluation in reducing criminal justice system involvement, alongside the economic and social benefits of supporting people in the community using the model, has policy implications for multiple government and non-government stakeholders in terms of the utility and efficacy of targeting people post-release, and working in a flexible, out-reach, long-term and person centred way with populations with complex needs and justice system involvement.

### Wider implications for practice i.e. services and programs(list)

There are implications for both NSW Health and NSW Justice cluster agencies in terms of designing programs for criminalised populations with multiple and complex support needs leaving custody. We look forward to sharing the findings of this research with a diverse array of stakeholders inside and outside of government to attempt to design programs that make a difference in terms of breaking cycles of justice system involvement and cycles of drug use that is related to criminalisation.

*Please comment on the particular significance of this project to NSW including customer focus*

## Research Impact

**Has this research study led to further investigations or collaborations that led to other funding applications?**

Not at the time of writing

**If yes, please detail what further investigations or collaborations this research study has led to.**

Add an appendix of a list of all dissemination activities of research findings (e.g. conference, publications, media and presentations to key stakeholders).

CRC, UNSW and the Justice Reform Initiative will work together to publish and disseminate these research findings broadly. At the time of writing we have presented these findings at EIIIF seminar and the NADA conference. We will also aim to share these findings at the Reintegration Puzzle Conference; the ANZSOC conference and other health related conferences in the coming year. We will look at publishing in a number of journals including Current Issues in Criminal Justice.

We are also very keen to build on the research findings and work with First Nations researchers to develop a piece of research that talks specifically to the experience of this populations.

***Please send completed reports to:***

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