

Young offender aftercare

Support for young offenders resettling in their communities after a period spent in a secure centre.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Mixed findings	 Strong	 Moderate	 Very strong	 Very strong	No information

Focus of the intervention

Aftercare programmes offer support to young offenders under the age of 18 who are resettling in their communities following a period spent in a secure centre for young people.

Aftercare programmes are typically community-based. They consist of both monitoring and supervision, and provide support in other areas (for example, counselling and education).

They are intended to promote successful resettlement into the community and reduce reoffending.

The focus of the review is on studies that evaluated the effect of aftercare programmes on offender outcomes, specifically reoffending.

This narrative is based on one meta-analytic review covering 30 studies. The primary studies in the review were all based on evidence from the USA.

Effect – how effective is it?

There is some evidence that aftercare programmes for young offenders have either increased or reduced crime, but overall they have not had a statistically significant effect on crime.

The meta-analysis found that aftercare programmes for young offenders had no overall impact on reoffending.

Two studies found that aftercare programmes for young offenders led to a significant increase in reoffending, four studies reported a significant reduction in reoffending and 25 studies found no evidence of effect compared to young offenders who did not receive an aftercare program.

The effect varied depending on the outcome measure used. When reoffending was measured through contact with law enforcement (for example, referral or rearrest) rather than self-report methods or court proceedings, youths who received an aftercare programme had significantly lower levels of reoffending compared to those who did not.

The review authors found that studies using a randomised control trial design found statistically significant reductions in reoffending.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that many forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

This evidence is taken from a meta-analytic review covering 30 studies, which demonstrated a high-quality design in terms of having a transparent and well-designed search strategy, featured a valid statistical analysis, sufficiently assessed the risks associated with publication bias, and conducted analysis to assess the effect of distinct evaluation research designs.

However, the review did not sufficiently consider the influence of statistical outliers, and did not quantify an overall effect for any unanticipated outcomes caused by the intervention.

Mechanism – how does it work?

Aftercare consists of reintegrative services designed to prepare young offenders for resettlement into their communities. This is done by establishing collaborative arrangements with community providers to ensure the delivery of services and supervision.

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which aftercare programmes for juvenile offenders might have an effect on crime. However, none of these potential mechanisms are empirically tested as the original studies did not provide the necessary information to do so.

The educational, skill building and therapeutic aspects of aftercare programmes may be particularly effective for older youth (between 16 and 18 years of age), due to their increasing maturity – leading them to participate in cultural and leisure activities.

Consequently, in the review it is suggested that programmes be tailored to the age of the participants and the age-specific factors associated with criminal risk.

The review authors cited evidence that suggested interventions for young offenders were more successful at reducing reoffending when they included young people's families in the interventions.

The review authors suggest it is possible that aftercare programmes are particularly effective in reducing antisocial behaviours, which might lead to reduction in later violent behaviour.

The review authors also suggest that the comprehensive nature of aftercare may be particularly effective at addressing the unique circumstances faced by ethnic minority youth as opposed to standard surveillance-orientated juvenile probation services.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

In studies where the age of young offenders averaged over 16.5 years in both the treatment and the control groups, the review authors found that those receiving an aftercare programme were significantly (approximately 21%) less likely to reoffend than those who did not receive an aftercare programme.

In studies with a large number of violent youth offenders in both the treatment and control groups, those receiving an aftercare programme were significantly (approximately 33%) less likely to reoffend than violent youth offenders who did not receive an aftercare programme.

In studies with a large proportion of ethnic minority offenders (over 70%) in both the treatment and control groups, those receiving an aftercare programme demonstrated lower rates of reoffending at a near significant level compared to those who did not receive an aftercare program.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review states that well-implemented aftercare programmes can notably reduce the likelihood that participants will reoffend.

Specifically, young offenders receiving a well-implemented aftercare program were approximately 18% less likely to reoffend than young offenders who did not receive an aftercare program (note that the majority of studies had a follow-up period of 12 to 24 months).

The review authors note a number of enablers of well-implemented programmes, as well as documented barriers that should be considered.

Enablers of well-implemented programmes include the presence of aftercare professionals who demonstrate their commitment to the wellbeing of the youths they are working with in a variety of ways. For example, energetically engaging in supervisory and mentoring activities, providing referrals to other service providers and regularly participating in organisational activities.

Documented barriers include:

- the level of contact between youths and professional staff during the aftercare program being less than initially anticipated
- youths feeling abandoned by staff due to inadequate contact
- staff turnover
- low levels of communication between relevant detention facility staff and community service providers

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

There is no information on the costs of aftercare programmes for young offenders.

General considerations

Additional evidence is required to identify the moderating influences of participant attrition, aftercare treatment design (for example, individual therapy, group therapy and a combination of the two), and

the proportion of participants who reportedly are involved in youth gangs.

Summary

There is some evidence that aftercare programmes for young offenders have either increased or reduced crime, but overall aftercare programmes for young offenders have not had a statistically significant effect.

Specifically, studies using a randomised control trial design found statistically significant reductions in reoffending.

A reduction in reoffending was observed with subgroups of older youths (over 16.5 years), violent youths and when the aftercare program was well-implemented.

The review also suggested a number of mechanisms by which aftercare programmes for young offenders might have an effect on crime, including factors that may be particularly effective for younger and older youth, those that are inclined toward violent criminal activities, and ethnic minority youth.

Reviews

Reference

- Weaver, R.D., & Campbell, D. (2014) 'Fresh Start: A Meta-Analysis of Aftercare Programs for Juvenile Offenders', *Research on Social Work Practice* 25: 2 201 – 212

Summary prepared by

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