

RESEARCH REPORT 32: CAN WE LEARN ANYTHING FROM BOOT CAMPS?

**Mary Sheehan
Consuelo Reed**

An evidence-based response to the challenges of Youth Justice in Queensland

Systemic changes that will respond to the complex and underlying contributors to youth offending deserve methodical consideration, particularly for Indigenous youth, who are most vulnerable. Simple components of the system presented below may start to address the underlying causes of offending for long term individual, family and public health benefits.

Program strengths for consideration include targeted initial assessments that identify the young person's deficits (for example, mental health and literacy problems) which are mapped to outcome targets set for future management.

Location of rehabilitation centres in regions close to the young person's community, small group interventions and strategies increase experiences of self-effectiveness. Likewise, positive influences and protective factors that are specific to the needs of Indigenous youth need serious consideration. Lastly, the involvement of Indigenous community members such as specialist health workers and elders in design, implementation and delivery is an important component which may be retained from the model for the boot camp initiative.

Background

The current context of high levels of incarceration of Indigenous people and of youth suicide indicates that there is a need to look at policies of youth incarceration and rehabilitation.

The 2012-15 Queensland LNP government, as part of its law and order focus, introduced policies which could impact on young people in the Queensland youth justice system. Funding to restorative justice models such as youth conferencing, police warnings and specialist diversion courts were either ceased or reduced.

LNP 'Boot camps' legislation: a 'one size fits all' military model?

The LNP government introduced and implemented the Sentenced Youth Boot Camp legislation for young offenders. The boot camps were for 13-17 year olds considered to be a high risk of reoffending (had reoffended within a 12-month period) were to be sentenced to one of five locations in north, central or south-east Queensland (Cairns, Townsville, Rockhampton, Sunshine and Gold Coasts). Based on American military training models, the objective of boot camps is rehabilitation through compliance, discipline, punishment

and physical activity. Presented as a cost-effective diversionary strategy, the camps were a 'tough' response to a general (misinformed) perception that youth crime was skyrocketing. Despite being overtly targeted at youth who were at risk of reoffending, those with extensive offending histories, or charged with violent or sexual offences were excluded from the program.

The effectiveness of youth justice policies in Queensland has not until now been subject to formal evaluation, and as such an evidence base is lacking. Following change of government in February 2015, and in light of the severe crisis identified for Indigenous young people, there is now an opportunity to improve Juvenile Justice processes in Queensland by consideration of long-term system changes. Such a review should involve at least three issues:

- (a) the state's obligation to respond to youth crime;
- (b) the over-incarceration of Indigenous youth; and
- (c) the development of a model program based on current evidence of best practice.

The addition of boot camps to the youth justice system's capacity to address these issues has not as yet been demonstrated to contribute to any of these issues in a meaningful way.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2012) report on trends in youth detention

On any given night approximately 1,000 young people are in the custody of Australian youth detention centres, three-quarters of whom are awaiting sentencing. In Queensland between 2008 and 2012 there was an increase in the number of youth in detention who were un-sentenced (from 85 to 114) and a decrease in youth serving a sentence (from 58 to 39). The increase in un-sentenced youth in detention was mainly due to the rate of incarceration for Indigenous young people rising from 1.77 to 2.50 per 1,000 young people. Indigenous youth are up to 31 times more likely to be detained compared to non-Indigenous young people.¹

Clearly, boot camps, and the current system of youth detention in Queensland disproportionately affect Indigenous young people who are often relocated many hundreds of kilometers from their rural or remote communities to serve out remand or sentencing.²

When boot camps were implemented in Western Australia in 1995 they were criticized by some for being inappropriate to Australian and in particular, Indigenous culture.³ The WA camp 'Kurli Murri' was similar to the Queensland, and earlier, Northern Territory initiatives in that they were rapidly established in response to community concern relating to juvenile offending. The camp was closed down after just 17 months of operation involving 42 sentenced offenders, following a critical evaluation by ex-magistrate Kingsley Newman.

¹ AIHW. (2012). *Juvenile detention population in Australia (Juvenile Justice Series No. 11)*. Retrieved from <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publications/youth-justice/>

² Atkinson, L. (1995). 'Boot camps and justice: A contradiction in terms?' *Australian Institute of Criminology: Trends and Issues* (No. 46). Retrieved from http://aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/tandi_pdf/tandi046.pdf

³ Atkinson, *op cit*.

The findings were delivered to the then WA government, and noted particularly its isolation, poor cost benefit and use of traditional, military boot camp reform strategies.⁴

Criminology experts have continued to reject the model as a 'shock treatment' response with very little evidence for effectiveness. An important problem of the model is the attribution of crime (and presumably reformation) solely to the individual characteristics of the young person, a view which neglects social factors such as poverty, geographical isolation, dysfunctional families, educational disadvantage and alienation from the main stream community.⁵ The use of discipline and punishment as the means for reform for young offenders, who mostly belong to the most marginalized groups, offers little economic or social advantage and fails to address the root causes of offending behavior. Criminologists raise the risk of the one size fits all approach leading to 'net widening' – young people with minor offences inadvertently becoming involved with serious offenders in the youth justice system through boot camp style programs.⁶

Although they vary in quality, in general, investigations into the effectiveness of boot camps have not produced evidence that these models reliably reduce reoffending by those who have completed the program.⁷ A consistent finding in research into boot camps is that most are ineffective in reducing recidivism.⁸

Evidence-based interventions

An exception has been those programs that incorporate evidence-based interventions, and individualized treatment plans. While their objective is to enhance the values and social respect of young offenders, criminologists⁹ have claimed they '*run counter to the basic principles of learning and human behavior*'. Others claim they are likely to have the opposite outcome, reinforcing anger and aggression, and even increasing involvement with the youth and possibly adult justice system.¹⁰ In general, boot camp models take a simple and narrowly focussed approach to addressing offending behavior, which is most often driven by multiple, interacting factors. The alternative holistic approaches to assessing and sentencing young offenders span a variety of domains including substance misuse, mental health, physical health and family and social functioning.

⁴ Omaji, P. (1997). 'Critical issues in managing youth offenders: A review of Western Australia's recent initiatives'. Paper presented at the Juvenile Crime and Juvenile Justice: Towards 2000 and Beyond Conference AIC, Adelaide, SA. Retrieved from: http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/20-detention/rehabilitation-through-detention#_ftn40

⁵ Dwyer, A.E., Richards, K., Carrington, K., & Hutchinson, T.C. (2013). (Unpublished). Retrieved from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/66878/>

⁶ Hutchinson, T.C. & Richards, K. (2013). 'Scared straight: Boot camps for Queensland'. *Alternative Law Journal*, 38(4), pp. 229-233.

⁷ Wilson, D., MacKenzie, D., & Mitchell, F.D. (2005). 'Effects of correctional boot camps on offending'. Oslo: Campbell Collaboration. Retrieved from <http://campbellcollaboration.org/lib/project/1/>

⁸ Hutchinson, *op cit*.

⁹ Mathlas, R.E.S. & Mathews, J.M. (1991). 'The boot camp program for offenders: Does the shoe fit?' *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 35 (4), 322, p.325. McGuire, J., & Priestley, P. (1996). 'Reviewing what works: Past, present and future' In J McGuire (Eds.), *What Works: Reducing Reoffending – Guidelines from Research and Practice*. John Wiley & Sons: Rochester.

¹⁰ Dwyer, *op cit*.

Youth detention programs that have been evaluated as most effective are tailored to meet each offender's individual needs based on assessment of multiple possible contributing factors.¹¹ Most detention centres in the Eastern states of Australia try to meet these needs by ensuring that young people attend an education and training centre located onsite and separate to their living quarters. The teachers who are members of the state educational system offer individualised learning experiences up to senior school and vocational training qualifications. Each young person is supported by a case worker and has access to specialist support such as medical, alcohol and drug, and where possible, geographically available cultural and community engagement and family support. However, providing these supports in the real world detention centre environment for children who have low literacy and numeracy levels is very difficult. Australia's remote geography creates a further challenge to providing effective youth justice initiatives that meet the family, community and cultural needs of offending young people who live in rural and remote communities. In Queensland, youth who are sentenced by the courts to periods of detention are sent to one of two facilities in the state, often long distances from their families and communities. In particular, the remoteness and isolation of communities in Australia, and lack of appropriate local youth justice services means that Indigenous youth are further disadvantaged. The distance between services prevents or seriously reduces connection to family and social supports, health and legal services and involves costs and resources to individuals and communities that are often not available.¹² The removal from familiar environments is a factor identified as working counter to reducing youth crime.¹³

Policy makers, criminology experts, youth justice practitioners and members of the general public often hold conflicting viewpoints on the most appropriate youth justice interventions. They range from punitive 'tough on crime' responses to investment in early, personalised intervention and prevention programs. One way we can aim to improve Australian youth corrections is through rigorous inquiry into these, and various other international models.

Northern Territory evaluation (2012)

A recent independent evaluation was conducted on the 2012 implementation of boot camps in the Northern Territory.¹⁴ Benchmarks for evaluating program effectiveness were identified as:

- (a) program elements: duration, intensity, therapeutic content, and style of delivery;
- (b) the principals that are understood to underpin the change process; and
- (c) individual participant characteristics.

¹¹ Murphy, P., McGinness, A. & McDermott, T., (2010). *Review of Effective Practice in Juvenile Justice: Report for the Minister for Juvenile Justice*. Noetic Solutions: Canberra

¹² Nuffield, J. (2003). *The Challenges of Youth Justice in Rural and Isolated Areas in Canada*. Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada.

¹³ Raymond, I., Lappin, S. (2015). *Northern Territory Early Intervention Youth Boot Camp Program 2014 Program Implementation Review Summary Report* (Chapters 1, 2 & 5). Northern Territory: Connected Self.

¹⁴ Raymond and Lappin, *op cit*.

The report concluded that the program was poorly integrated with the youth justice system, did not sufficiently respond to the multifaceted needs of, or provide follow up care, to the young people who completed it.

The authors suggested that a key design flaw was the involvement of multiple contract service providers and that 'benchmark slippage' was the result of poorly prioritized quality assurance systems (staff training, supervision and recruitment). Their summary explicitly recommended two intervention models; a short term (8-10 day) early intervention for at risk young people, and a long term (6-18 week) intensive therapeutic program for young, repeat offenders with co-morbid issues – both of which incorporated follow-up support across multiple systemic levels (school, family, community etc.).

Canadian evaluation

The Canadian youth justice system has recently undergone reform to focus on the complexity of the individual's needs by incorporating comprehensive needs assessments, evidence based interventions and progress mapping. All of these strategies are worthy of consideration in Queensland. The Canadian Youth Justice Custodial Facilities model¹⁵ starts with a comprehensive assessment that is performed at intake into custody. It is a type of triage system comprising multiple instruments that assess various domains (aggressive, hyperactive and disruptive behavior, symptoms of anxiety, depression, psychosis, self-harm, risk to others, personal strengths, cognitive functioning, school, family and peer factors). The assessment identifies risks that trigger individual 'Action Plans' - evidence based interventions and support mechanisms. A comprehensive one-stop intake process means that young people are assessed early and without having to repeat their histories can be efficiently provided with the services they need. The model uses technology which stores rehabilitation goals and treatment success and allows young people to be tracked across relevant intervention systems over time. It assists personnel at intake to make decisions for the young person's initial care and ongoing treatment needs across a variety of service delivery agencies. In-built evaluation and quality indicators support agencies to track the individual's program outcomes and the comprehensive data collected can be used to inform funding decisions.

Queensland

The Canadian approach meets many of the recommendations from a **federal Australian ?** inquiry into crime which aimed to address shortcomings in Queensland's current system.¹⁶ In the report, QPS Acting Assistant Commissioner, Paul Taylor (Mt. Isa) states 'we do not have a process where we look at complex situations and really triage them in a way where we can get best value for our buck' and ideally, '... we would have one repository of information...working collectively there would be key pieces of information that we need to collect...'

Recommendations called for networking a 'coordinated wraparound service that is focused on the individual ...' This is remedied in the Canadian model by sharing participant's

¹⁵ Stewart, S. L., Currie, M., Arbeau, K., Leschied, A., & Kerry, A. (in press). 'Assessment and Planning for Community and Custodial Services: The Application of interRAI Assessment in the Youth Justice System'. In R. Corrado & A. Leschied (Eds.), *Serious and Violent Young Offenders and Youth Criminal Justice: A Canadian Perspective*. (in press)

¹⁶ Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee, Queensland Parliament. (2014). *Inquiry on strategies to prevent and reduce criminal activity in Queensland* (Report No. 82). Brisbane: Queensland Parliament.

information and response to targeted changes across and between different geographical and public systems (eg, education, health, and housing). The Australian inquiry also tabled the possibility of partnerships to manage evidence-based interventions across government and non-government organizations, a function embedded in the Canadian initiative.

The strengths of Queensland's geographic model

One of the strengths in the recent boot camp model in Queensland is the provision of sentencing options in five local regional areas. Geographical isolation is also faced in Canada¹⁷ and alongside the comprehensive assessment and treatment planning, is addressed in their youth justice reforms through the construction of localized service centers in remote communities. The model makes number key contributions for consideration by the review, some of which can be retained from the boot camp model. They include the potential for a system of geographically localized responses that target small groups, with individualized treatment plans and linkages to community services and family and cultural groups such as elders through education, health, risk screening and tailored treatment programs.

While the Canadian prototype may require substantial investment and resources, it is innovative and has the apparent validity of acknowledging the complex factors and individual needs of offenders. It sits in contrast to the boot camp model which demands unquestioning compliance, discipline and structure, in a one-size-fits-all response.

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