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New responses to vulnerable children in trouble: improving youth justice.

Emmeline Taylor

Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) is an accredited offending behaviour programme that attempts to address thinking and behaviour patterns associated with offending. Its key objective is to reduce reconviction rates. ETS is targeted at medium-high/high risk male and female offenders with a need for cognitive skills intervention. The design of the programme stipulates that it should consist of 20 two-hour interactive sessions, delivered three to five times per week for four to six weeks, with two facilitators and a maximum of ten participants.

This report, as part of the Ministry of Justice Research Series, presents findings from an assessment of the impact of the ETS programme on the one-year reconviction outcomes of 257 prison-based participants between 2006 and 2008.

Previous research has provided inconclusive and often contradictory findings. The author asserts that this is possibly due to a failure to control for potential selection bias due to differences in unmeasured dynamic risk factors between the participants and their comparators. As such, a key element of the methodology was to evaluate the HM Prison Service ETS in terms of reconviction outcomes, whilst controlling for the different characteristics, needs and risk factors of offenders. In the study, offenders were matched on the basis of dynamic risk factors (for example, drug use, accommodation, motivation to stop offending, attitudes, education, marital status) and additional static risk factors (for instance, family criminal history) in addition to the standard static risk factors.

The sample comprised 2,771 (87% men and 13% women) prisoners sentenced to between one month and four years. The treatment sample comprised 257 (9%) prisoners who participated on ETS between March 2006 and September 2008, including 20 (8% of participants) that did not complete the course. The remaining 2,514 prisoners did not participate on ETS and were used to select a matched comparison group.

A retrospective quasi-experimental research design was used to compare the one-year reconviction outcomes of offenders with the matched comparison group. Three outcome measures of proven reoffending were used: the proportion of prisoners that were reconvicted; the frequency of reoffending; and the proportion that were reconvicted of a 'severe' offence.

The overarching finding was that ETS was effective in bringing about a statistically significant reduction in both the reconviction rate and frequency of reoffending in the year following release from custody for the participants on ETS.

Whilst the findings provide support for ETS (and by extension its replacement, Thinking Skills Programme) in custody, a secondary finding of the research was that there was a low adherence to the suitability targeting criteria amongst those prisoners receiving the programme in the period assessed. This suggests that the programme was not always administered to individuals that have been identified as the most suitable group of prisoners,

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which may be impacting on the efficacy of the programme. On the one hand, stricter application of the targeting criteria could further enhance the effectiveness of the programme in reducing reoffending, but on the other, the significant reduction in reconviction rate and frequency of offending amongst this cohort might suggest that the targeting criteria requires adaptation to officially include those that were found to benefit from it. National Offender Management Service practitioners report that the accuracy of targeting has improved over time, and so a similar evaluation on a more recent cohort might provide greater clarity.