



research into practice brief

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What does program effectiveness mean in relation to drug diversion initiatives?

Katie Willis

‘Program effectiveness’ is a term frequently used by researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to describe how well a program is performing; however, what this actually means to different professional audiences varies markedly. For example, what is understood to be program effectiveness in relation to illicit drug diversion differs according to the point in the criminal justice system from which an offender is diverted. This brief provides some insights into this issue and suggests that a shared understanding of a program’s effectiveness contributes to the overall success of that program.

Illicit drug diversion initiatives

In essence, illicit drug diversion initiatives involve the redirection of offenders away from conventional criminal justice processes. This has the dual aims of minimising levels of contact with the formal criminal justice system and providing offenders access to services to assist in the treatment of their illicit drug use (with the intention of not only improving the well-being of regular drug users, but of minimising their future re-offending). In Australia, these types of initiatives were first implemented on a large scale in the late 1990s. While most were initially focused at the level of police diversion, these initiatives evolved to encompass a broader range of interventions targeting offenders at different levels of the criminal justice system. These can now be divided into three major clusters of interventions, including:

- police diversion initiatives (that typically target first-time, or low-level drug offenders – and often cannabis offenders)
- court-based diversion programs (ranging from pre-court and pre- and post-sentence diversions, as well as interventions that include intensive pre- and post-sentencing drug court options, such as long-term intensive treatment)
- drug treatment correctional centres, which operate at the custodial level (Payne et al 2008)

Perceptions of effectiveness

Police, magistrates, court personnel and service providers have differing views about what constitutes effectiveness in the context of drug diversion, which can sometimes be linked to a lack of explicit statements about program goals and objectives. It is critical to articulate clearly what an intervention is designed to achieve because it assists those administering drug diversion interventions to understand how their own activities contribute to overall program



goals. It also aids in the evaluation of these interventions. There is little point, for example, in measuring post-intervention recidivism levels if the intervention being assessed was never designed to impact on the criminal behaviour of its participants (Wundersitz 2007).

The following summarises views expressed by criminal justice and health professionals as part of a review of Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative (or IDDI)¹ interventions in rural and remote Australia (AIHW 2008). The examples provide a useful illustration of the differing views held by these professionals of drug diversion effectiveness.

Police

When asked how they would define or measure an ‘effective’ or ‘successful’ IDDI program, police most commonly noted that a successful outcome for them would be:

- apprehending a drug user who is early in their drug use and criminal career
- offering them a drug diversion option and having no further contact with them (that is, no re-apprehension)

However, a small number of police, particularly those in contact with juvenile justice diversion initiatives that involved residential rehabilitation, had a broader view of success, including:

- reductions in contact with police while on the program
- reductions in the level of seriousness of criminal activity and frequency of contact with the police following the program

Magistrates

Magistrates involved in court diversion programs often expressed the view that:

- the very availability of any programs to divert offenders towards drug treatment, rather than a punitive sanction, was a good outcome
- the holistic approach that diversion processes bring to offenders, most of whom have multiple and complex problems, was also a positive outcome


Magistrates’ support for diversion appeared to be based on their frustration with traditional sanctions (such as fines, custodial or noncustodial sentences) as mechanisms for dealing with drug-related offenders. Magistrates were not so concerned about the total number of successful outcomes from diversion. Rather, they tended to see diversion programs as successful even where they produced successful outcomes for only a small proportion of people referred to them.

Service providers

Service providers were generally of the view that successful IDDI programs resulted in:

- reductions in substance use and associated harms
- reductions in criminal behaviour
- increased awareness of IDDI initiatives among stakeholders and the community more broadly

¹ IDDI interventions, funded under an agreement by the Council of Australian Governments, were introduced to provide a nationally consistent approach to drug diversion. Each Australian state and territory has now implemented at least one police-based diversion program targeted at the use or possession of cannabis and/or cannabis implements.



It was generally considered that the complex issues faced by many of their clients meant that elimination of drug use and criminal behaviours would be unlikely in at least the short-term and may follow one or more periods of relapse. Most service providers believed that successful programs were those that addressed offenders' broader social issues (for instance, by linking offenders into a range of support mechanisms that could assist them in the short- and long-term).

A way forward

As noted above, one of the most critical aspects of program success is a thorough, shared understanding among key stakeholders of a program's philosophy, often articulated as a program's high-level goals. Program goals contrast with program objectives as the latter may only relate to a given professional sector's *contribution* to the greater program goals. Program objectives can easily be confused with program goals because it is these that agencies are specifically required to achieve and where most (if not all) work effort is focused.

The views outlined above by criminal justice and service provider professionals range from what can be described as short-term objectives through to longer-term program goals, with short-term objectives focused on 'getting people through the door' (best illustrated by police perceptions of program effectiveness) and longer-term goals focused on minimising health harms and re-offending (best illustrated by service provider perceptions of program effectiveness). As already noted, both are important as short-term objectives are a necessary step to fulfilling long-term program goals.

Research findings suggest that there may be a limited understanding among some criminal justice professionals of what the important program objectives and high-level goals are in relation to illicit drug diversion initiatives (Wundersitz 2007, AIHW 2008). The risk of not having a shared understanding of program goals and objectives is that it can lead to lost opportunities, duplicated effort, work practices that are inconsistent with overall program needs, and wasted resources (Gottschalk 2010). As such, it is critical that policy-makers clearly articulate what these high-level goals and objectives are when enhancing current, or developing future, drug diversion interventions. They need also to identify the various staff roles and responsibilities. Effective communication of both of these things ensures that operational/front-line staff and others understand and can articulate an initiative's rationale, and their own, and others, particular roles and responsibilities in program delivery.

References

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