

# Examining the Effectiveness of Youth Diversion Programming

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## Introduction

The implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), in 2003, drastically altered the way youth crime is dealt with in Canada (Department of Justice, 2016). As a result of this Act, community based programs, or diversionary measures, are gaining in popularity.

An analysis of youth court statistics from 2014/2015 found that 26% of all cases were referred to a diversionary measure (Miladinovic, 2016). The significant number of cases that are referred to diversion programs formed the rationale for this research. This research took a two part approach. First, the elements of diversion programing was examined. Secondly, diversion programming was examined to determine if they are effective in reducing recidivism rates among young offenders.

## Background

The YCJA applies to youth, aged 12-18, who are alleged to have committed criminal offences (Department of Justice, 2016). Both the Preamble and Declaration of Principle state that youth should be referred to community programming and agencies to hold the youth accountable for their actions and prevent further reoffending (Department of Justice, 2016). Community agencies can provide diversion programming for the young offender.

## Methods

The research took a qualitative approach; containing both primary and secondary research. A literature review was conducted through the Justice Institute of British Columbia (JIBC) Library database, EBSO*host*, to gain an understanding of the present themes and trends in the field of youth diversion programming. Three separate search terms were analyzed “youth diversion” resulted in 1605 hits; “mentoring and youth crime” resulted in 347 hits; and “youth restorative justice participants resulted in 138 hits.

The primary research came from a semi-structured interview with a Lower Mainland Youth Diversion Coordinator. Ten questions were asked, based on the findings from the literature review. As a result of the interview, several key elements of youth diversion programming were identified.

Prior to seeking any primary research, ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board at JIBC. Moreover, the interviewee was promised anonymity and signed an Informed Consent Form.

## Results/Findings

This research answered two questions relating to the effectiveness of youth diversion programming.

### What are the essential elements of youth diversion programming?

Three themes resulted when the youth diversion literature was examined. The first theme stated that in order for youth diversion to be effective, it must be a collaborative process containing numerous elements (Wong, Bouchard, Gravel, Bouchard & Morselli, 2016; Rogers, 2011). The second theme identified mentoring as a beneficial component of youth diversion (Miller, Barnes, Miller & McKinnon). The third theme stressed accountability from the offender and the police must see the value of diversion programming (Marinos & Innocente, 2008). The interview responses corroborated many of these findings.

### Does youth diversion programming reduce recidivism rates?

The research analyzed found that when youth diversion programming contains the elements listed above, it is effective in reducing recidivism rates among youth. Wilson and Hoge (2013) suggest, “diversion is significantly more effective than the criminal justice system in reducing recidivism rates” (p.512).

Similarly, research by Seroczynski, Evans, Jobst, Horvath and Carozza (2016) found youth participation in a diversion program reduces the chances for recidivism. Their research found that mentoring played a significant role in diversion programming success rates (Seroczynski et al., 2016).

## Discussion

An analysis of the YCJA, academic literature and interview responses indicated that youth diversion programming is only effective if the youth accepts accountability for the offence. This accountability is demonstrated to the community through the successful completion of a diversion program.

Moreover, diversion programming should be collaborative, have peer mentoring and be viewed from a positive perspective from the police.

Limitations include a lack of Canadian content, challenges in an agreed upon definition of youth diversion and the small sample sizes used for this research study.

## Conclusions or Recommendations

Both the academic literature and interview responses support the finding that youth diversion programming is effective at reducing recidivism rates among youth.

Further research is required on the effectiveness of youth diversion programming from a Canadian perspective. The majority of sources examined for this research were American content. The United States has a unique and different Youth Justice System than Canada; consequently, one cannot assume the positive results on youth diversion programming in the United States would be replicated in Canada.

Additionally, an analysis of youth reoffending rates who participated in diversion programming would be beneficial. Statistics Canada only released numerical indicators on the number of youth who are referred to the diversion program. If statistics were provided on the number of youth who did not reoffend after participating in the program; it would provide greater credibility to diversion programs.

Ultimately, this research paper has completed a two part analysis. In order to determine if youth diversion programs are effective in reducing youth crime, one must analyze the elements of the diversion program. Successful elements of diversion programming include: a community centered collaborative approach, mentoring, youth accountability and responsibility and police acceptance of diversion programming.



## References

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