

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT...?

Reducing recidivism among Aboriginal offenders

Close the Gap Research







Proposition

Aboriginal Australians are more likely to go to prison than non-Aboriginal Australians. Most Aboriginal people who are in prison have been there before, and many will return. Do we know what types of programs work best at reducing recidivism for Aboriginal Australians who have been released from prison?

Do we even have the information that we need to evaluate and compare different programs?

Background

Aboriginal Australians are over-represented in the criminal justice system. Aboriginal people comprise around 3.8 per cent of the Australian population, but around 33 per cent of the prison population.

Aboriginal incarceration rates have been increasing over time, and the incarceration gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians has been widening.

At 30 June 2023, the age-standardised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoner rate was 2,266 per 100,000 adult population, relative to 149 per 100,000 for non-Aboriginal Australians.

Aboriginal men have a higher imprisonment rate than Aboriginal women (4,129 per 100,000 and 425 per 100,000, respectively, in 2023). The highest rate is among Aboriginal people aged 35 to 39 years (4,110 per 100,000 in 2023).

Incarceration rates differ between jurisdictions. In 2023, Western Australia had the highest Aboriginal incarceration rate (3,605 per 100,000), and Tasmania had the lowest (811 per 100,000).

Incarceration rates vary by geographic location, with Aboriginal people from remote and very remote areas having the highest rates.

At 30 June 2023, 78 per cent of Aboriginal prisoners had experienced prior adult imprisonment, relative to around 53 per cent of non-Aboriginal prisoners. Reducing recidivism is a crucial part of reducing Aboriginal over-representation in prisons.

Understanding recidivism

What factors contribute to recidivism?

Criminal offending, incarceration, and recidivism among Aboriginal Australians are associated with a complex, inter-related and often inter-generational set of factors.

These include developmental history (e.g., growing up experiencing/witnessing violence and abuse, family dysfunction, unstable living environment), social disadvantage (e.g., limited education, unemployment, poverty), health (e.g., chronic physical health conditions), psychological distress and mental health problems, substance dependence, cognitive impairment (e.g., Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder), unstable/inadequate housing, social circumstances (e.g., limited positive support networks) and home community dysfunction.

These challenges frequently persist for individuals post-release from prison, and contribute strongly to re-incarceration.

What are the main types of programs that aim to reduce recidivism?

A number of programs try to reduce recidivism by diverting Aboriginal offenders from the 'mainstream' criminal justice system, often through restorative justice approaches such as 'circle sentencing' or 'yarning circles.'

These programs may be perceived positively and can benefit victims and offenders (e.g., by helping to restore relationships). However, evidence for whether they reduce recidivism—especially whether they have real or lasting effects on keeping offenders out of prison—is not compelling.

Many community-based services try to address risk factors, such as substance dependence and homelessness, that are associated with offending.

However, relatively few programs and services specifically work with offenders after they have been released from prison. Fewer programs still specialise in working with Aboriginal offenders post-release.

Many post-release support programs are short-term, operate in only one location, and/or may not be accessible to prisoners who serve frequent, short-term sentences.

As a result, they may be unable to meet the often highly complex needs of clients.

Do we know what works to reduce recidivism?

There is relatively little research into what models of support and types of programs may be most effective at reducing post-release recidivism for Aboriginal offenders.

Existing research often uses broad quantitative measures, such as overall incarceration/recidivism statistics over time. Those high-level measures



cannot take into account whether or not an individual participated in any programs designed to reduce recidivism.

Some studies use qualitative measures, such as asking participants whether they found a program acceptable or useful. These studies typically do not consider longer-term outcomes, such as whether individuals who completed a program were less likely to return to prison than those who did not.

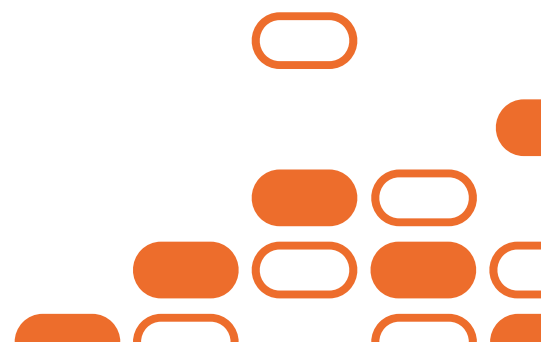
Research that attempts to measure program impacts by comparing individuals who did and did not participate is often hampered by methodological limitations such as small sample sizes, non-representative populations (i.e., only some 'types' of offenders are eligible for a program), lack of generalisability to different locations/settings, and lack of long-term measurement.

A small number of studies use large administrative datasets and link different datasets to overcome some of the above problems. However, these studies are not often able to examine individual-level factors that may influence recidivism but are not captured in the datasets.

This includes factors like overall well-being and quality of life and the level of 'engagement' with a program versus simply 'completing' a program.

Independent evaluations are not commonly undertaken. When they are, they often focus on processes (e.g., how well a program was implemented) rather than outcomes (e.g., what impacts the program had).

This impedes services' ability to tailor their practices to best meet the needs of their clients and means that we are not able to make well-informed decisions about which programs to invest in to deliver the greatest benefits to individuals and communities.





What do we need to know?

To better understand what works to reduce recidivism, we first need to know if a program collects data about whether participants stayed out of prison in the longer term.

We also need to know about other factors affecting recidivism, such as whether an individual remained 'substance-free' or obtained employment. Finally, to draw any inferences about cause and effect, we need to know what happens to individuals who do not complete a program (e.g., people who drop out after one or two sessions) relative to those who complete a program.

Without this information, we cannot evaluate what outcomes programs may be achieving, or whether any apparent effects can be attributed to a program rather than to something outside the program. Until we know this, we cannot assess which programs work best to break the cycle of incarceration and improve outcomes for Aboriginal Australians.

What are we going to do?

The ultimate goal of any program seeking to reduce recidivism should be to keep people out of prison. This is the key measure of success.

Knowing what type of information services collect about their programs is the necessary first step in assessing whether a program successfully reduces recidivism and, if so, how.

Close the Gap Research aims to support policy development and service delivery by identifying what types of data services collect about their programs, and developing a framework to support publication of that information.





Close the Gap Research

Close the Gap Research (CtGR) is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to making a positive impact on the lives of Aboriginal people facing adversity. Our mission is to alleviate poverty, suffering, and hardship among Aboriginal communities in need.

Need. Not race.

CtGR will assess the efficacy of existing and proposed models for addressing the needs of Aboriginal people and work with partners to provide direct, impactful relief to those who really need it. We want to partner with program providers willing to publish proof of success in the following areas:

- School scholarships
- Employment in remote communities
- Prisoner rehabilitation





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