

Police-led diversion of low-risk youth reduces their future contact with the justice system



Minor delinquent behavior is normative, particularly for boys

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the effects police-initiated diversion programs on delinquent behavior, compared to traditional system processing. The review summarizes evidence from nineteen high-quality studies, including 13 randomized controlled trials and 6 quasi-experimental studies.

Police-led diversion of low-risk youth who come into contact with the justice system is more effective in reducing a youth's future contact with the justice system compared to traditional processing.

What is this review about?

Youth misconduct and misbehavior is a normal part of adolescence and that misbehavior sometimes crosses the line from disruptive or problematic to delinquent. Nationally representative surveys of youth in the USA have indicated that minor delinquent behavior is normative, particularly for boys. The normative nature of minor delinquent behavior raises the question of how police should respond to minor delinquent behavior in a way that is corrective, but also avoids involving the youth in the criminal justice system beyond what will be effective in reducing future misbehavior.

Police diversion schemes are a collection of strategies police can apply as an alternative to court processing of youth. Diversion as an option is popular among law enforcement officers, as it provides an option between ignoring youth engaged in minor wrongdoing and formally charging such youth with a crime. Police-led diversion has the potential to reduce reoffending by limiting the exposure of low-risk youth to potentially harmful effects of engagement with the criminal justice system.

This review examined whether police-led diversion and traditional processing of youth have different effects on rates of official delinquency.

What are the main findings of this review?

This review includes studies that evaluated the effects of police-led diversionary practices compared to traditional processing for youth under 18 years of age. We identified a total of



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How up-to-date is this review?

Our search for eligible studies was completed in January of 2017, so only studies identifiable through January 2017 were included. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in May 2018.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by the authors of the Campbell Systematic Review 2018:5 “Police-Initiated Diversion for Youth to Prevent Future Delinquent Behavior: A Systematic Review” by David.B. Wilson, Iain Brennan, and Ajima Olaghere (DOI 10.4073/csr.2018:5). Tanya Kristiansen (Campbell Collaboration) redesigned and edited the summary. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



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14 manuscripts representing 19 evaluations. Of these 19 evaluations, 13 used randomized controlled designs (random assignment to conditions) and 6 used quasi-experimental designs (no random assignment to conditions). Many of these designs included two or more diversionary conditions compared to a common control (traditional processing) producing 31 treatment-comparison contrasts for analysis. These studies were conducted between 1973 and 2011, inclusively. Most were conducted in the USA (11) with the remaining conducted in Canada (4), Australia (2), and the UK (2).

The general pattern of evidence is positive, suggesting that police-led diversion reduces the future delinquent behavior of low-risk youth relative to traditional processing. Assuming a 50 percent reoffending rate for the traditional processing condition, the results suggest a reoffending rate of roughly 44 percent for the diverted youth. This overall benefit of diversion holds for the random assignment studies judged to be free from any obvious risks of bias. No meaningful differences were found across types of diversionary programs. Furthermore, we found no evidence to suggest these findings suffer from publication selection bias.

What do the findings of this review mean?

The findings from this systematic review support the use of police-led diversion for low-risk youth with limited or no prior involvement with the juvenile justice system. Thus, police departments and policy-makers should consider diversionary programs as part of the mix of solutions for addressing youth crime.

Many of the studies included in the review were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s. Newer high quality studies are needed to ensure that the findings still hold for contemporary juvenile justice contexts. Additional studies are also needed outside of the USA for this same reason. Finally, we recommend that research explore the usefulness of diversion for low-risk adult offenders.