

PERFORMANCE AUDIT IN BRIEF

Addressing the needs of young offenders

Department of Juvenile Justice
NSW Police Force



THE AUDIT OFFICE
OF NEW SOUTH WALES

About the audit

The community expects the youth justice system to reduce reoffending. There are several ways to do this. One way is to divert the young offender away from the Children's Court, as higher reoffending rates are associated with court appearances. The *Young Offenders Act 1997* made this possible by giving the NSW Police Force (Police) an alternative means of dealing with juveniles who commit certain offences.

Another way is to provide support to help a young offender overcome the factors in their life that may have led them to committing the offence. If a young offender leaves the youth justice system without having factors such as homelessness, drug or alcohol abuse, or family dysfunction addressed, their risk of reoffending is high.

In this audit we wanted to find out whether the Department of Juvenile Justice (the department) and Police:

- identify young offenders' needs, that is, the factors that led them to committing the offence
- address these needs
- work with others to reduce juvenile reoffending.

We looked at three groups of young offenders:

- those supervised by the department either in detention or under community supervision orders
- those participating in a youth justice conference facilitated by the department
- those receiving a caution from Police.

Audit opinion

If a young offender's needs are addressed as early as possible in their contact with the youth justice system, they will have a better chance of overcoming the factors that led them to committing the offence and breaking the juvenile crime cycle.

Before agencies in the youth justice system can address a young offender's needs, they have to find out what factors may have led them to committing the offence.

The department and Police generally work together and with other agencies to identify and address the needs of young offenders. We found that this is done particularly well for young offenders who end up in detention and under community supervision.

Both the department and Police have put some practices in place to identify and address the needs of young offenders participating in a youth justice conference or receiving a Police caution. However, we found that they are not doing this systematically.

It follows that where the agency does not identify a young offender's needs, it cannot address those needs by referring the young offender to appropriate support services or rehabilitation programs.

Currently agencies may be missing the opportunity to help a young person who is at the first point of contact with the youth justice system. Early intervention could prevent both an escalation of the seriousness and frequency of offending by a young person in need of help. It should be pursued wherever possible.

Further information

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The full report is available on our
Internet site: www.audit.nsw.gov.au

Key findings

Are young offenders' needs identified?

The department uses a sound approach to identify the needs of a young offender who is sentenced by the Children's Court to detention or community supervision.

Both the department and Police have some practices in place to identify the needs of young offenders participating in a youth justice conference or receiving a Police caution. However, we found that they are not doing this systematically.

Are young offenders' needs addressed?

The department uses case management techniques to address the needs of a young offender sentenced to detention or community supervision. It also monitors whether support services have been provided and whether needs have been addressed for these young offenders.

Both the department and Police have put some practices in place to address the needs of young offenders participating in a youth justice conference or receiving a Police caution. However, as we found with how they identify needs, they are also not addressing needs systematically.

And in regard to whether or not a young offender who receives a caution from Police is referred to a support service or program, we found that this depends on local practice and service availability.

Do agencies work together to reduce reoffending?

The department and Police alone cannot address the needs of a young offender. They rely on other government and non-government agencies to provide support services and programs. Both claim limitations in doing this because of problems accessing some services and exchanging information.

In order to judge the success or otherwise of any intervention to reduce reoffending, data needs to be made publicly available.

Although there has been recent improvements in the data collected and published on juvenile reoffending rates in NSW, neither the department nor Police report publicly on the results of their programs to reduce reoffending for young offenders participating in a youth justice conference or receiving a Police caution.

Summary of recommendations

We made a series of recommendations designed to improve:

- outcomes for young offenders who participate in youth justice conferences and who receive Police cautions
- cross-agency issues such as:
 - access to services and programs by young offenders
 - exchanging information
- public reporting of results.

