

Evaluation of a Family Justice Program: A Case Study from an Employee Perspective

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By: Chloe Hunt

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Supervising Professor: Mira Kapetanovic

Trent Community Research Centre Project Coordinator: Sarah Khaki

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Suite 3.10, Trent University Student Centre

1600 West Bank Drive

Peterborough, ON K9L 0G2

Phone: [\(705\) 748-1093](tel:(705)748-1093)

Email: tcrc@trentu.ca

Website: trentu.ca/tcrc

Abstract

A youth in conflict with the law can be defined as the failure of a child to show expected behavior in society to the point where legal action must be taken. Under the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA), youth justice programs have been established to address such behavior. Youth Justice programs are designed to reduce youth crime and recidivism by focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment to contribute to overall community safety. This research examines the Peterborough Youth Services (PYS) Family Program from an employee perspective. A mixed-methods research design was employed, incorporating surveys and interviews with employees from PYS as well as from another Ontario-based youth organization offering a family program. This research explored best practices when working with youth in conflict with the law, focusing on intervention types, mental health support, and community engagement strategies. Key findings highlight the prevalence of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) as an effective intervention method. The research also underscores the importance of personalized goal setting and community involvement in youth rehabilitation. It also supports that both PYS and external organization family programs are perceived as efficient and accessible by employees. However, there are areas for improvement, particularly in inter-organizational communication.

Key Words

access: the quality of being able to be reached and/or used

caregiver: a person who provides care to people who need help taking care of themselves ex. Child, elderly, disabled person.

community: a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common views, interests, and goals

confidentiality: the state of keeping or being kept secret or private

effective: successful in producing a desired or intended result

efficient: achieving maximum productivity with minimum wasted effort for expense

family: a group of one or more parents and their children living as a unit together

family reconciliation: the process of reconnecting with family members after a separation or disagreement

inclusivity: the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized such as those having physical or intellectual disabilities or belonging to other minority groups.

recidivism: the likelihood of a convicted criminal to reoffend

rehabilitation: the action of restoring someone to health or normal life through therapy and/ or training after imprisonment, addiction, illness or period of disfavor

mental health: a person's condition regarding their psychological and emotional well-being

youth: the period between childhood and adult age.

youth in conflict with the law: someone between the ages of 12 and 18 who has been accused or suspected of breaking the law

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Introduction

A juvenile delinquent also referred to as youth in conflict with the law can be defined as the failure of a child to show expected behavior in society to the point where legal action must be taken. Typically, this refers to individuals between the ages of 12 and 17 who have committed a criminal offense, ranging from minor infractions to more serious crimes. Youth crime is a complex social issue influenced by various factors, including socioeconomic status, education, mental health, and family environment. The presence of these risk factors can significantly increase the likelihood of delinquent behavior, often shaping the trajectory of a young person's life.

One of the most influential determinants of juvenile delinquency is family dynamics. Family plays a key role in the determination of juvenile delinquency as a youth family is the first foundation of socialization in a child's life. It is where they learn basic skills as well as develop their physical, mental and moral abilities (Shailja et al. 2022). Parents and/or caregivers are responsible for teaching a child right from wrong and guiding them how to interact with society (Shailja et al. 2022). If a child experiences a family unit that does not provide this and instead sets bad examples of relationships and socialization behaviors, this can lead to a higher chance of delinquent behavior and patterns in the future (Shailja et al. 2022). Moreover, if the family unit exhibits harmful habits such as: smoking, drinking, or abuse, this can be passed down onto the youth at a very young age, increasing risk of illegal behavior during adolescence and adulthood. (Shailja et al. 2022). If a child also doesn't have a constant family unit, i.e kids in foster and group homes, it can often cause the child to look elsewhere to socialize and build relationships in an anti-societal environment (Shailja et al. 2022). It is the relationship between the child and caregiver that is considered to have the most impact on the determination of juvenile delinquency (Shailja et al. 2022). As a parent and/or caregiver, it is their job to practice healthy disciplining and supervising customs and create a healthy home environment to increase the prevention of antisocial behavior in their child (Shailja et al. 2022).

When it comes to trying young people in conflict with the law, the Canadian legal system distinguishes between youth and adults, recognizing the developmental, mental and physical age between the two. Rather than being tried in adult court, young offenders between the ages of 12 and 17 are typically subject to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). This legislation provides

a framework for dealing with youth who have been charged with criminal offenses (Justice Laws Website, 2002). It was created in 2003, replacing the Young Offenders act that was created back in 1984. The YCJA recognizes that youth are in a developmental stage in life and that they have different needs and potential for rehabilitation compared to adults (Justice Laws Website, 2002). Its aim is to hold youth accountable while still supporting their rehabilitation and reintegration back into society (Justice Laws Website, 2002). It refers to and recommends programs and services that aim to improve the outcomes for the youth while keeping physical, mental, and emotional development in mind (Justice Laws Website, 2002).

Youth Justice programs are designed to reduce youth crime and recidivism by focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment, ultimately contributing to community safety. (Government of Ontario, n.d.). These programs operate within a restorative justice framework, offering young offenders to develop essential life skills, build positive relationships, and successfully reintegrate into society. Unlike retributive justice, which emphasizes penalties and legal consequences, restorative justice seeks to address the root causes of criminal behavior. Research suggests that punitive approaches alone are often ineffective in reducing recidivism and may even increase the likelihood of future offenses. Instead, youth justice programs prioritize personal growth, accountability, and social reintegration. By encouraging young individuals to understand the consequences of their actions, take responsibility, and work toward positive change, these programs help break cycles of criminal behavior and support long-term rehabilitation.

According to Veronica et al. 2017, roughly only 5% of adolescents who have committed a criminal offence will continue this life path and commit it again. It has also been shown that the use of programs and interventions with the goal of reduced recidivism has a greater and more profound effect on youth rather than adults (Veronica et al. 2017). The four main goals according to ministry standards of what youth justice programs should result in are: to reduce the chance of reoffending, contribute to community safety, and prevent youth crime through rehabilitative programming.

Across Ontario, a range of youth justice programs are in place to support rehabilitation and reduce reoffending among young people. Among the most common are attendance centres, which offer structured daily activities and tailored rehabilitative programming. Mental health

initiatives play a crucial role as well, addressing the psychological and emotional challenges that often underlie delinquent behaviour. Youth justice committees bring together community members to guide young offenders in taking accountability for their actions within a supportive, restorative framework. Additionally, community involvement programs promote positive social engagement and help youth build valuable life skills for a more constructive future.

Peterborough Youth Services (PYS) is a nonprofit youth organization located in Peterborough Ontario. It was established in 1976 and provides a variety of different services and programs for its local youth. It offers youth justice programs including Community Support, Intensive Supervision and Support, Youth Justice directed Counselling and the Family program. The Ontario Ministry provided PYS, along with several other youth organizations across the province, with funding to develop a program that supports both youth and their family dynamics, while still aligning with the ministry's standards. As a result, the PYS Family Program was established to provide comprehensive support not only for youth involved in the justice system, but also for their families. The program seeks to improve relationships and dynamics between youth and their parents or caregivers, offering a range of services, including reintegration programs, counseling, interventions, and assessments. Its goals according to the Ministry's Youth Justice Division are for the child to have improved social behavior, increased skills and abilities, increased youth engagement with support systems and an overall decrease in the chance of recidivism. This program aims to do that by establishing better relationships between the parents/caregivers and the youth.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of family-focused interventions in youth justice, there is limited empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of these programs. Understanding how these programs impact recidivism rates, social reintegration, and family relationships is critical for shaping future policies and program development. While existing studies support the effectiveness of youth justice programs, further research is needed to assess how family involvement influences long-term outcomes for justice-involved youth.

The aim of this research was to evaluate Peterborough Youth Services family program through a case study approach. This research aimed to analyze the effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility and inclusivity of its services by gathering insights from employees of PYS, as well as individuals from other organizations running similar initiatives in Ontario. This research was

to ensure that this new program follows best practice when working with youth in conflict with the law while following Ministry standards, with the ultimate hope of reducing recidivism and making a notable contribution to today's youth.

Methods

Project Agreement

The first step of this study was devising a goal, research question, and general timeline for this project in the form of a project agreement. This agreement was signed by Amie Kroes, the organisation head for Peterborough Youth Services, Mira Kapetanovic the Community Based Research course instructor and Jessica Marlow, the Trent Community Research Center Coordinator at the time. This agreement was sent by email to Mira Kapetanovic on October 5th.

Internet Searches

Google and Firefox were the primary search engines when conducting this literature review.

Examples of search phrases included:

Factors affecting Recidivism

Types of Youth Justice Programs

Juvenile Programming

The RNR Model vs The Good Lives Model

Youth Justice Programs

Adverse Childhood Experiences

Family dynamics and Youth Justice Programs

Youth Criminal Justice Act

Ontario Ministry Standards on Youth Justice Programs

Conduct disorders and Youth criminal behaviour

Mental Health and Juvenile Criminal Activity

Employee perspectives on youth justice intervention types

All sources of information collected from these searches were in the parameters of being between the years of 2017-2024 to ensure information gathered was up to date. Majority of studies and articles reviewed were Canadian based or looked at Canada in their study to ensure relevancy related to the aim of this research.

Ethics Approval

An ethics application was submitted to the Trent University Research Ethics Board on December 4th, 2024. An ethics application was submitted given that this study would be dealing with human participants and that the nature of study had minimal risk. Attachments that were submitted with the application included a signed project agreement, an employee consent form, survey questions, interview questions and a copy of mine and Amie Kroes's TCPS.2 Core Certificates. Some considerations that were considering when devising the application was keeping the raw data secure, what risks could the study pose to participants and the data collection process. The application was sent back on the 23rd of December with minor edits regarding confidentiality. The research was approved on January 7th by the Trent University Research Ethics Board through the Forensic Science department.

Participants

Participants of this study were chosen based on two criteria. The first set of participants consisted of past employees that worked in Peterborough Youth Services family program and the second set of participants consisted of employees from external organizations with family programs in Ontario. The intended sample size was 8 participants with 3 being from PYS and 5 from external organizations.

Consent Process

Emails of interest, along with corresponding consent forms, were sent out to seven family program employees. Three were sent to Peterborough youth service employees and five were sent to external Ontario Youth organizations that offered a family program or similar programming involving family dynamics. For the three PYS employees, initial referral emails were sent by PYS's coordinator Amie Kroes and the emails to external organizations were sent

by me. From these emails of interest, responses were received from all three PYS employees and one external organization.

Surveys

Surveys were sent out through an electronic link via email to all participants. The surveys were created using the data analysis program Qualtrics. The surveys were created following a Likert Scale Format with option ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly disagree (Appendix A). The set of questions in the surveys were edited and approved by Amie Kroes. The employee surveys consisted of also 8 questions that asked employees their thoughts on their corresponding program (Appendix A).

Interviews

Interviews were held through the end of February to beginning of March over the platform Zoom. Each employee's interview lasted about approximately 15-20 minutes long and consisted of questions asking about their program's services, what it offers, and thoughts on future improvements (Appendix B). This was done to compare differences and similarities in programming between organizations from an employee perspective.

Confidentiality

A main concern that was considered during the methodology of this research was upholding the confidentiality of its participants. The Youth Criminal Justice Act protects the privacy of young people who go through the system to limit stigmatization and to prioritize rehabilitation. Because of this, the name of the youth or family members that employees worked with were not included nor were questions insinuating their identity were asked. Employees also had the option to stay anonymous in this paper if they so chose given the discreetness involved in their profession. All employees did decide to stay anonymous and will be referred by the term Employee and a number based on the order of interviews conducted.

Data Analysis

The survey data collected through Qualtrics was manually entered into Microsoft Excel to create a bar graph, with the questions displayed on the X-axis and the responses on the Y-axis (Figure 1). The interviews underwent went a thematic analysis where the software NVivo was

used to identify common themes and phrases that appeared in participant transcripts. With these themes identified, the information was manually imputed into Excel where a pie chart illustrating the themes and frequency of responses was created (Figure 2).

Possible Limitations

Some possible limitations that arose from this methodology was the reduction in the original sample size from 8 to 4 as well as the difficulty in communicating and getting in touch with participants during the data collection process.

Literature Review

The current literature review was conducted using search engine Google Scholar and online engine Trent Omni. Articles were selected based on several factors. These factors included juvenile factors contributing to youth criminal behavior and recidivism, types of youth justice programming, employee perspectives, and characteristics of family programs to determine what is considered best practice when working with youth in conflict with the law. All the articles chosen are between the years 2017-2025 and are either Canadian based or can be related back in a Canadian Context.

Adverse Childhood Experiences and Juvenile Behavior.

The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) defines a youth in conflict with the law as an individual aged 12 to 18 who is suspected of committing a criminal offense. Shailja et al. (2022) characterizes these youths as individuals who fail to meet societal behavioral expectations to the extent that legal action is deemed necessary. This framework highlights the importance of contextual and environmental factors, particularly family dynamics, in influencing juvenile behavior and involvement with the justice system.

One of the most notable variables in familial dynamics is Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). The ten types of ACEs identified by Drozak et al. (2021) include physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, family violence, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation, and the incarceration of a household member. All ten of these ACEs can be strongly linked to an increased risk of behavioural issues and criminal

involvement in youth. A review conducted by Astridge et al. (2023) analyzed the prevalence, effect size and the mediating variables of Adverse Childhood experiences among youth offenders. Their narrative synthesis and meta-analysis covered 31 studies with data ranging from the USA, Canada, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia and Japan. They categorized ACEs dichotomously, developing cumulative ACE scores ranging from 0 (no exposure) to 10 (exposure to all types). Their findings concluded that cumulative ACEs and physical and emotional neglect are the most associated with youth recidivism and physical and sexual abuse were not as significantly associated. Moderating factors identified as crucial in preventing the effects of these experiences includes positive childhood experiences, strong social bonds, and the development of empathy (Astridge et al. 2023). They also mention how the mediating effects of these experiences were mental health, welfare placement, behaviour issues and drug use (Astridge et al. 2023).

The impact of ACEs is particularly pronounced among Indigenous youth. A Canadian study conducted by Muir & Viljoen (2022) examined a sample of 187 justice-involved adolescents of both white and Indigenous descent.). Using justice files and taking information such as ACE's, demographic data and re-offense records they found out that Indigenous adolescents had much greater ACE scores than other ethnicities both for males and females (Muir & Viljoen, 2022). These elevated scores indicate disproportionate exposure to trauma and systemic barriers, further contributing to their overrepresentation in the youth justice system.

Recidivism Rates in Ontario

All of these factors not only contribute to a youth's initial involvement with the justice system but also significantly increase the likelihood of recidivism. Recidivism can be described as an individual's return to criminal after previously being sanctioned or rehabilitated for a prior offense (Stewart et al., 2019). This term is often associated with the phrase's new arrests, new convictions and reincarceration. (Stewart et al. 2019). Among young offenders, there is a particularly high severity rate of recidivism. In an Ontario study, it indicated that 51% of youth with police contact reoffended, compared to 34% for adults (Research and Statistics of Division, 2020). Additionally, youth whose cases went through the court system had a 60% reoffending rate, compared to 34% for adults (Research and Statistics of Division. 2020).

Youth Justice Programs and their Characteristics/Considerations

To address and prevent high rates of recidivism among youth in conflict with the law, the Youth Criminal Justice Act has implemented a range of Youth Justice programs focused on rehabilitation, community safety, and reducing reoffending. According to Veronica et al. (2017), these programs are significantly more effective for adolescents than for adults, with only 5% of treated youth continuing a pattern of delinquency.

There are several youth justice programs available to young offenders. Some well-known intervention types are anti-bullying, family therapy, mentoring, child skills training, bootcamps and parent training (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022). A systematic review conducted in 2022 analyzed these interventions along with six others for their effectiveness in reducing juvenile offending and antisocial behaviour (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022). From their systematic review, they concluded that the most effective intervention types were parent training, focused deterrence, child skills training, cognitive behavioural therapy, mentoring and family therapy (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022). The interventions found to be the least effective in reducing offending and/or antisocial behaviour were school exclusion reduction, after-school programs and boot camps (Farrington, Gaffney & White, 2022).

There are several different characteristics that have been considered in the effectiveness of youth justice programs. Pooley (2020) through a literature and systemic review on juvenile programming, examined the key characteristics of young offender programs that aid in the rehabilitation and lower the risk of recidivism in its participants. The fidelity in programs characteristic was seen with positive results with Pooley (2020) determining that programs that were implemented and adhered to protocols led to better more effective outcomes. However, Anyon et al. 2019 argues that a high-fidelity approach could be viewed as mutually exclusive and limit the choices of what the youth wants to receive from the program. They suggest a balance of adaptation to fidelity that allows program protocols to be implemented but with room for change and modification that allows youth to have a voice and receive what they would like from the program (Anyon et al. 2019).

Dosage/length of time in program was also deemed an effective characteristic to youth justice programs (Pooley, 2020). Higher treatment dosage (i.e longer hours, increased number of

days in a treatment program) has been viewed as beneficial for high-risk offenders while lower treatment dosage (less days, less hours) is more suitable for lower risk offenders (Kwok, n.d.)

According to Pooley 2020, the characteristic deemed as most effective was the Risk, Need and Responsivity assessment otherwise known as the RNR model. The RNR model is a framework that is used for the treatment and assessment of offenders (Public Safety Canada). Risk focuses on the fact that criminal behaviour is reliably predictable, and treatment should focus on higher risk offenders. Need is the importance of criminogenic needs in design and delivery of treatment. Responsivity describes how treatment should be provided (Public Safety Canada). These principles are considered effective as they apply an objective and reproducible method to identifying programs that are addressing and best meeting the needs of youth in the justice system (Pooley, 2020).

However, although the RNR model is a concept that has had many meta-analyses and has been analyzed in many literature reviews, it has also had no recent definitive proof of its effectiveness. Bijlsma et al. 2022 notes that there is very little reviews comparing the RNR model to its actual definitive studies. They also analyzed the principle of the RNR model in family interventions and found no empirical support of the model in the effectiveness of these interventions (Bijlsma et al. 2022). Walls (2015) also found that while although there was lots of research and evidence showing the effectiveness and utilization of the risk and need principles in the youth justice system, there was very little evidence in the responsivity aspect of the model. In light of these limitations, alternative frameworks have been developed, most notably, the Good Lives Model (GLM). Unlike the RNR model, which focuses primarily on reducing risk, the GLM integrates both risk and need assessments while emphasizing a more strength-based, restorative approach to rehabilitation. It maintains the belief that that all humans fashion their lives around core values and primary goods (Ward, Yates & Willis, 2012). The model believes that by enhancing personal fulfillment it will lead to a reduction in criminal behaviour while the RNR model posits the opposite with their main goal being to target their specific criminogenic needs that aim to just reduce risk rather than encourage good promotion and a better life (Ward, Yates & Willis, 2012, Lutz et al. 2022). However, within both these models there is a lot of variations and conceptualization of terminology (Barnes- Lee and Petkus 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to highlight both the risks and strengths within a recidivism model. This includes focusing on the

factors that reduce the likelihood of criminal behavior by addressing the relationship between risk factors and criminal activity as well as a person quality of life (Barnes-Lee & Petkus, 2023, Ward, Yates & Willis, 2012)

Another important factor that is considered regarding Youth Justice Programs is past and ongoing disorders that the youth may have. For instance, deficiencies in both language comprehension and expression, along with cognitive disorders, are common among 60-90% of youth in the justice system (Anderson et al., 2022). Cognitive and language disorders can often be one of the underlying causes of youth involvement in criminal behaviour resulting in social naivety, misunderstanding of social cues, verbal reasoning etc. (Anderson et al. 2022). Anderson et al. (2022) highlights that, due to this, Speech-Language Pathologists (S-LPs) are a vital necessity in the criminal justice system and Youth Justice Programs. Their review, which examined S-LP involvement across various countries, found strong support for the need for S-LPs in youth justice sectors, including communication screening, rehabilitation, and education.

Conduct disorders could also be tied back to the youth in the justice system. (McMahon, Goulter, & Frick, 2021). Conduct disorders can include a wide array of acting out behaviours including temper tantrums, stealing, and aggression (McMahon, Goulter, & Frick, 2021). Many children who experience conduct issues will often experience chronic antisocial difficulties/behaviours as well as several mental health problems including anxiety and depression. These disorders often result in criminal behaviour in the future. McMahon, Goulter, & Frick, 2021 stresses the importance of Youth Justice programs that provide support for conduct disorders. They address from their report on intervention response moderators, the benefit of family-based interventions for conduct problems mentioning the positive effects and research backing up parent management training. They also mention the need for more concrete evidence on skills training interventions, and the specificity of interventions across subgroups as youth experience conduct disorders in several different ways so a one size fits all approach is not considered as effective (McMahon, Goulter, & Frick, 2021).

Professional Standpoint on Youth Justice Programs

When talking about best practice when working with youth in conflict with the law it is also important to look at things from a professional point of view. Regarding the literature, there is little documentation on what intervention types they think are best, how they are delivered and

the efficacy of these intervention types. A 2023 study conducted by Hodgkinson et al. conducted an assessment analyzing 14 youth justice case workers from Wales, UK to examine common themes of how staff perceive the youth's level of resilience, interventions selected, delivery and their outcomes. From their results they concluded that recognizing the youth individual risks and encouraging positive activities, social resilience and behavioural reinforcement were all effective methods (Hodgkinson et al. 2024). Goal setting was also viewed as an extremely effective method according to workers as it provides hope and resilience as well as an internal locus of control (Hodgkinson et al. 2024). Dir et al. concluded from their study assessing caregiver navigation programs, that Juvenile justice personnel as well as caregivers thought that these program types could provide all aspects of social support (emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal). Parent involvement in rehabilitation methods and the court process is considered crucial (Dir et al. 2023). JJ personnel also highlight the challenges of communicating and partnering with the parent to make the best choice for the youth while beneficial, can be an extremely uncomfortable and invasive process for the caregiver (Dir et al. 2023).

This literature articulates that there are several factors that are considered beneficial to youth justice programs when it comes to reducing recidivism. According to the literature, there is varying accounts to what could be considered best practice when working with youth in conflict with the law. Some of the key takeaways in relation to this study's research questions were whether the PYS family program offers accessibility and personalized support to youth with diverse disorders and circumstances; whether its intervention or reintegration methods align with the RNR model, the GLM model, or an alternative approach; and whether the program ultimately aims to reduce recidivism and enhance overall quality of life by strengthening family dynamics.

Results

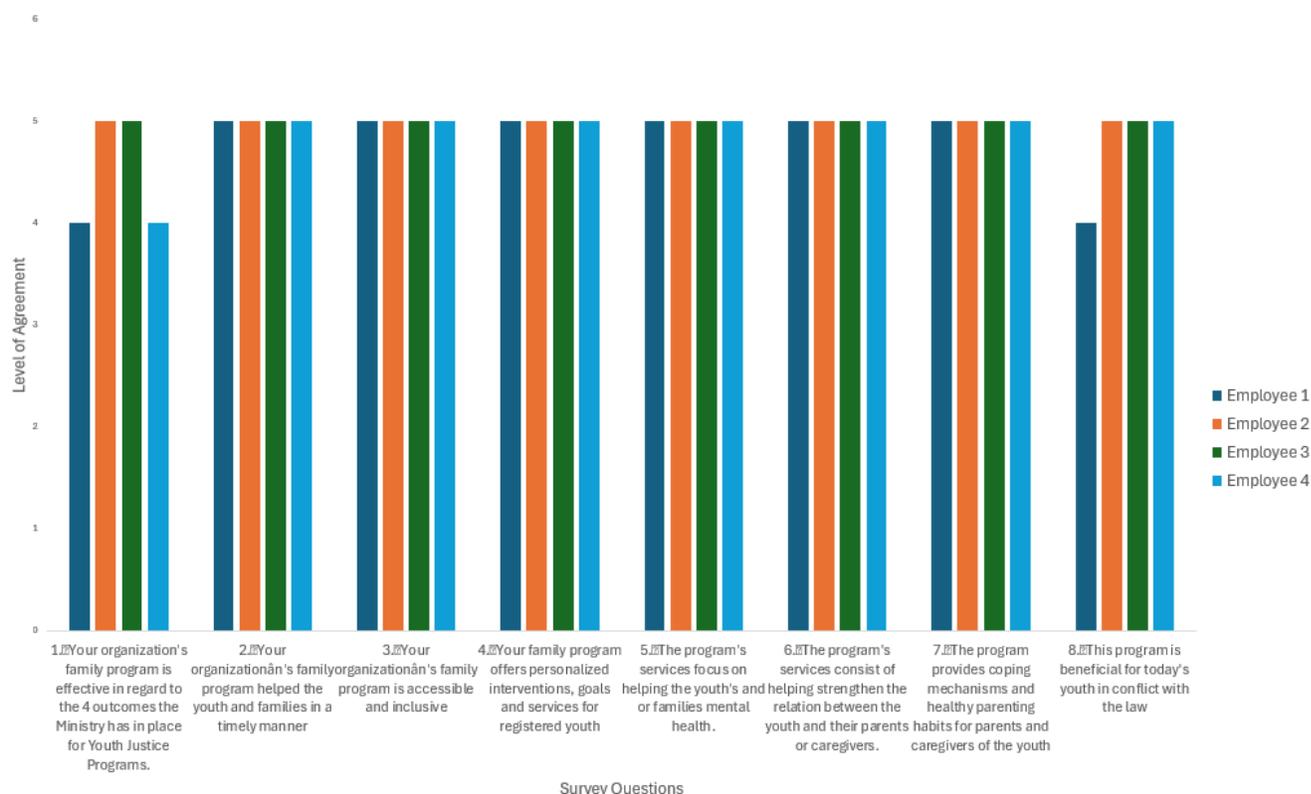


Figure 1: Survey results from four Youth Justice employees evaluating their respective Youth Justice Family programs. Respondents 1, 3, and 4 are affiliated with Peterborough Youth Services, while Respondent 2 represents an external organization within Ontario. The X-axis displays the eight survey questions related to program effectiveness, engagement, accessibility, and outcomes. The Y-axis reflects their responses using a 5-point Likert scale: 5 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Somewhat Agree, 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, and 1 = Strongly Disagree.

The survey results indicate a strong overall agreement among employees regarding the efficiency and inclusivity of family support programs (Figure 1, Appendix A). Employees 1, 3, and 4 responded specifically about the Peterborough Youth Services Family Program, while Employee 2 provided responses regarding their youth organization's family program. Across most questions, Employees 1, 3, and 4 answered almost every question as a 5 (Strongly Agree), demonstrating confidence in Peterborough Youth Services accessibility, efficiency and support for its youth and families (Figure 1, Appendix A). However, Employee 1 rated Question 1 (Figure 1, Appendix A) and Question 8 (Figure 1, Appendix A) lower at 4 (Somewhat Agree)

suggesting some uncertainty about the program's impact in these areas (Figure 1, Appendix A). Employee 4 also rated Question 1 at a 4 (Somewhat Agree) (Figure 1).

Employee 2, representing an external Ontario organization, also gave strongly positive ratings (5/5) across all questions, indicating a high level of satisfaction with their program's accessibility, services, and effectiveness (Figure 1, Appendix A). Interestingly, their responses closely aligned with those of Employee 3, who also rated all aspects of the Peterborough Youth Services Family Program as 5 ("Strongly Agree"). The only variations observed were in Questions 1 and 8 for Employee 1, and in Question 1 for Employee 4 (Figure 1).

Overall, both the Peterborough Youth Services Family Program and the other youth organization's program received highly positive feedback, with 87.5% of responses being "Strongly Agree" (5/5) (Figure 1). While Employee 1's lower ratings for certain areas suggest potential areas for further assessment within the Peterborough program.

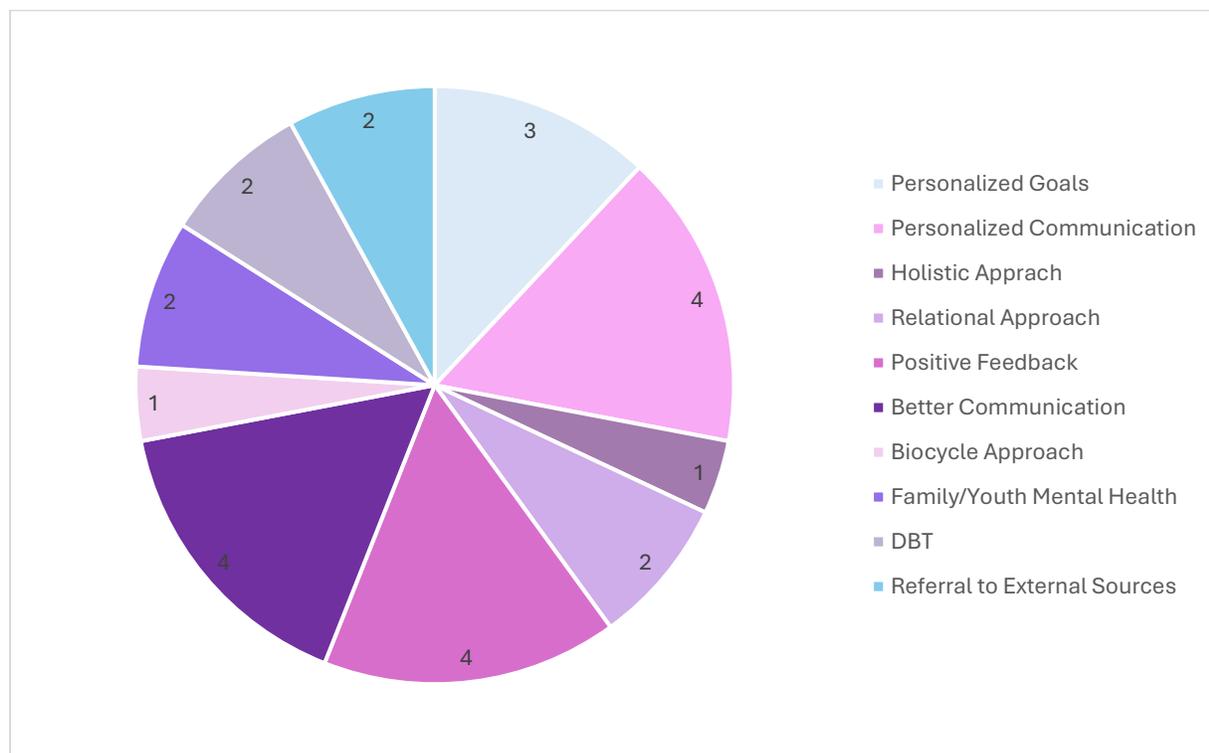


Figure 2: Key phrases and themes identified in the thematic analysis of four qualitative interviews conducted with Youth Justice employees. The interviews focused on the participants' experiences and perceptions of their respective Youth Justice Family programs. The chart displays the frequency with which specific phrases or general themes emerged during the discussions, with numbers representing the total mentions of each theme across the interviews.

Each color-coded section corresponds to a distinct theme identified, as outlined in the accompanying legend.

This thematic analysis of four interviews identified key phrases and recurring themes related to youth justice programs, as illustrated in Figure 2. The accompanying pie chart visually represents how frequently these themes appeared across the interviews.

When asked about the most effective intervention types for youth in conflict with the law, two approaches emerged most frequently: Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT) and the Relational Approach with both appearing twice in the interviews.

Themes of personalized goal setting and community engagement were also prominent in discussions of program-specific services. Personalized goals were referenced three times, while community engagement was mentioned as a key program attribute in all four interviews.

Regarding when asked about mental health there were two common concepts that were mentioned among the 4 participants. The first being referrals to external sources meaning that often an outside source from the program would help with their mental health concerns. This concept was mentioned by two of the four employees. The other concept that came up was family and youth mental health. This term is to represent that they would address both the youth and the family's mental health concerns and provide trauma training. This was reiterated by two of the other employees.

Positive feedback was another recurring theme. In response to a question about families' perspectives on the programs (Figure 2, Appendix B), all four employees reported receiving positive comments, either through phone calls or word of mouth. However, none of them had access to completed family feedback surveys (Figure 2).

Other notable themes included the holistic approach and the biocycle approach, each mentioned once in relation to effective interventions for youth in conflict with the law (Figure 2, Appendix B). The holistic approach emphasizes addressing interconnected, broader life circumstances rather than focusing solely on isolated issues. In contrast, the biocycle approach acknowledges the complexity of delinquent behavior as being shaped by biological, psychological, and social factors.

Finally, the research highlights the critical need for better communication among youth justice organizations and their employees. All four participants identified communication as an area requiring improvement (Figure 2, Appendix B). This suggests that stronger communication and collaboration could strengthen areas where employees expressed less confidence in the effectiveness of their respective youth justice family programs (Figure 1, Appendix A). One participant noted, "Since Covid and everything shifted to web-based training, we don't really communicate with each other anymore," underscoring the challenges posed by virtual platforms in fostering effective collaboration. Improving communication channels could facilitate a more unified approach to youth justice programming, ultimately benefiting both the youth and their families. Strengthening interagency collaboration and ensuring regular communication between organizations could help address gaps in service delivery and foster a more supportive, cohesive system for youth in conflict with the law.

Overall, the results highlight a strong focus on a wide variety of intervention types, community engagement and personalised goals in family programming. Both programs seemed to receive positive family feedback accruing to employee responses and better communication is suggested for improvement in the program.

Discussion

From the results, it can be concluded that the Peterborough Youth Services Family Program is both highly efficient and accessible to all its participants, with all three PYS employees selecting "Strongly Agree" for those two criteria (Figure add1). Based on employee responses, the program can also be considered strongly mental health-oriented, emphasizing the importance of establishing healthy relationships between youth and their family members to improve the youth's overall well-being. The same can be said for the external Ontario organization, whose representative also selected "Strongly Agree" for all listed criteria. However, the varying responses from two PYS employees regarding the program's overall effectiveness suggest that there may still be areas for improvement.

From the interviews, DBT or Dialectical Behavior Therapy was seen as one of the most common intervention types with two out of four employees stating that it's the best method when working with youth in conflict with the law (Figure 2). DBT is an evidence-based intervention model that focuses on 4 main criteria: emotional regulation, distress tolerance, interpersonal

effectiveness and mindfulness (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). Its aim is that by focusing on these targets, it will reduce the overall destructive and maladaptive behavior of the youth as well as provide the tools to repair family relationships (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). In 2023, a study was conducted to synthesize and review the research on the effectiveness of DBT for treating externalizing problems in adolescents such as impulsiveness and rule-breaking behavior (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). In their methodology, they extracted data from 17 studies looking at factors such as sample size, intervention type, duration and outcome measures (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). From the results, Jakubovic & Drabick determined that DBT intervention types did have an effect on the overall reduction in external youth problems. They determined that the duration of the therapy gave the youth more time to learn skills and practices to help mitigate criminal externalizing symptoms (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). It was also shown that it was a much more effective approach on young people experiencing more severe, adverse effects in comparison to individuals with much milder symptoms (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023). Compared to other interventions like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), DBT offers a more balanced framework by helping youth accept themselves while also promoting change. In contrast, CBT focuses solely on identifying and eliminating maladaptive thoughts and behaviors (Jakubovic & Drabick, 2023)

The relational approach emphasizes the critical role of positive, supportive relationships in promoting behavioral change and social reintegration. It focuses on building trust, enhancing communication, and fostering meaningful connections between the youth and their family members, peers, and/or professionals. These connections are essential in shaping the youth's sense of belonging, accountability, and motivation for change. Similarly, the holistic approach views youth within the broader context of their lives, recognizing the interplay between mental, emotional, physical, and social dimensions. Rather than isolating specific individual behaviors or symptoms, this perspective seeks to understand and address their root causes and look at the big picture. It promotes comprehensive programming that supports mental health, education, life skills development, and strong family relationships. Both approaches, alongside DBT, align closely with the principles of the Good Lives Model (GLM). As previously discussed, the GLM is a strength-based rehabilitation framework that focuses on helping individuals achieve personal fulfillment by pursuing "primary goods," such as relationships, autonomy, competence, and well-being (Ward, Yates & Willis, 2012). Rather than focusing solely on risk reduction, the GLM

seeks to build the internal and external resources necessary for individuals to lead meaningful, pro-social lives. DBT's integration of emotional regulation, mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, and distress tolerance fits well within this model, as it provides youth with practical tools to manage emotions, navigate social relationships, and make positive life choices. These findings suggest that both PYS and the external organization family programs apply the Good lives model and are more restorative than punitive.

Personalized goals and community engagement were also seen as prevalent methods utilized in both the Peterborough youth services and the external organizations family program (Figure 2, Appendix B). In regard to personalized goals, these strategies involve collaborating with young individuals and their families to establish tailored objectives, ensuring that interventions address the unique needs and aspirations of both the youth and the caregiver. They addressed how they would often sit down with the youth and the family members to determine what they wanted out of the program and work together to make and achieve those goals. This coincides with the Youth Justice policy that states that employees of youth organizations sit down with the youth and address the goals that youth would like to accomplish and what strategies will be implemented to get there (Justice Laws Website. 2002). This individualized approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, which is crucial for successful rehabilitation. A study by Finseth et al. (2022) underscores the significance of incorporating individual strengths into rehabilitation plans for youth on probation. The study used a quantitative research design to assess the relationship between 261 youth on probation's strengths (e.g., resilience, coping skills, and community support) and recidivism. From their analysis, they found that personalized interventions, which focused on youth strengths, had a mediating effect on recidivism, meaning that when programs aligned with the youth's strengths, the likelihood of successful engagement and completion increased (Finseth et al. 2022). This is consistent with personalized goal-setting practices in youth justice, where youth, along with their families, collaboratively identify personal goals and objectives that reflect their individual circumstances. This can be seen as aligning with the RNR model as the model emphasizes the importance of conducting thorough risk and needs assessments for each youth and making goals based off these needs and risks.

In regard to community engagement, each youth worker addressed that they would talk to the youth to determine what they enjoyed or what deterred them from criminal behavior to help start reintegrating them into the community as per Ministry Standards. They provided examples including getting the youth involved in activities such as basketball camp, art and a seasonal YMCA pass. Pennington, in their 2023 study, conducted a comprehensive analysis to shed light on the effectiveness of community-based alternatives to incarceration. From their analysis, they determined that community-based alternatives result in lower recidivism rates in comparison to traditional incarceration. It addressed how educational and vocational programming, while not as common as therapeutic approaches, can allow the youth to present models of virtuous behavior and levels of fidelity and charity (Pennington, 2023). One of the standout examples from Pennington's study, was the use of theater troupes as a rehabilitative tool. Theater-based programs enable youth to contribute positively to their communities, allowing them to engage in something enjoyable and creative while also fostering social skills, empathy, and personal expression (Pennington, 2023). Participating in a theater troupe also provided a sense of accomplishment and belonging, as the youth contributed to a communal project, reinforcing positive engagement and pro-social behavior (Pennington, 2023).

In regard to mental health, there was varying response in how it would be dealt with if a youth or family member exhibited mental health related concerns. Employees 1 and 2 talked about looking at both the family and youth mental health concerns as well as teaching the parents crisis management skills, assessing what risks are present and doing roleplaying scenarios. This method is effective. In a review conducted in 2024, the authors address the effectiveness of trauma-focused interventions (Malvaso et al. 2024). From an analysis of nine systematic reviews across the globe, these interventions resulted in a decrease in trauma-related symptoms and justice involvement (Malvaso et al. 2024). There was, however, less evidence regarding the outcomes of organizational shift to fully implement these interventions. This suggests that while individual trauma-focused approaches are effective, broader systemic changes to adopt trauma-informed practices remain under-explored and require further development for youth justice programming.

Employee 3 and 4 regarding mental health, talked about the use of referrals to outside sources to help participating youth regarding mental health concerns (Figure 2, Appendix B). A

Canadian study by Macdonald et al. (2024), examined the use of mental health services among youth in child welfare. Specifically, they looked at youth charts from ages 11-18 in Ontario and Quebec. From their results, they determined that 83% of youth had a least one mental health service contact during their participation in a welfare service with 45% having multi-setting use (Macdonald et al.2024). Emergency departments were the most common setting for these services, highlighting the need for youth justice programs to provide accessible and immediate outside mental health support for youth in crisis (Macdonald et al.2024). The research also identified that youth with multiple placements and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to utilize mental health services across various settings (Macdonald et al.2024). These findings emphasize the importance of proactive mental health referrals within the youth justice system. By connecting youth and caregivers to appropriate mental health services, justice professionals can address underlying issues that may contribute to delinquent behavior, promote rehabilitation, and support successful family relationships and reintegration into the community.

Finally, from this research's findings, the need for better communication among youth justice organizations and their employees is crucial. With all 4 participants stating it as something to be improved upon (Figure 2, Appendix B), it is something that could help strengthen the areas that employees did not answer with full confidence from the surveys in regard to their corresponding youth justice family programs (Figure 1, Appendix A). One employee reflected on this shift, noting, "Since Covid and everything going to web-based training, we don't really communicate with each other anymore." This suggests that while both programs demonstrate strong restorative and evidence-based practices, continued efforts toward external communication through meeting and conferences is crucial for maximizing program effectiveness and youth outcomes. Ensuring these improvements will better equip organizations to support at-risk youth and promote lasting change.

Limitations

A major limitation that possibly minimized the variability in the data collected in this study was the number of participants. The intended number of participants for this study was seven employees, which was already quite a small sample size. However, of these seven, only four agreed to participate. This reduction in an already limited sample size definitely created a

loss in variability that the study may not have experienced if it had reached the original number. One reason contributing to this small sample size is the fact that the number of family youth justice programs in Ontario is quite limited. The Ministry of Ontario only began funding these programs a few years ago and provided funding to only a handful of them, making the potential for a larger sample size at this time quite slim. Another limitation was that employees from PYS made up 3 out of the 4 participants. Utilizing employees from the organization being evaluated could have introduced bias into the study and limited the results regarding what is considered best practice when working with youth in conflict with the law, as there was little variation among PYS employees in their views on the organization's family program. A further limitation was that data was obtained only from employees, providing a one-sided perspective on the program. Not having data from families who have participated in the program limits the scope of understanding. Including their perspectives would likely have revealed greater variability, as each family's situation is unique—bringing different experiences, challenges, and successes that employees may not have recognized or considered. However, under the Youth Criminal Justice Act, youth names are protected from being released or shared in any form, which makes data collection quite difficult.

Future Directions

For further research, some analysis that could be conducted includes examining the results from this study—specifically the need for more widespread communication among youth organizations regarding which methods and approaches are working best, and whether any notable differences or improvements have emerged within the PYS program. These analyses could involve interviewing employees again, as well as engaging with families to ask what has changed since the improvement in communication. Another avenue for research could be examining more Ontario Youth Justice programs to determine whether there is variability in their responses concerning their program's effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility, and inclusiveness, as well as identifying what types of interventions they offer and what they consider best when working with youth in conflict with the law. This study could also be conducted again, but instead of comparing the PYS family program on a province-wide scale, it could be expanded to a national or even global scale to explore how varying demographics, and economic conditions influence the operation of different family programs around the world.

Conclusions

In conclusion, both Peterborough Youth Services (PYS) and the external Ontario organization demonstrate a strong commitment to restorative youth justice practices. Their use of evidence-based methods such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), personalized goal setting, community engagement, and holistic and relational approaches align well with the Good Lives Model (GLM) and Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) framework. These approaches reflect a clear focus on building strengths, fostering supportive relationships, and promoting long-term rehabilitation and community reintegration for youth in conflict with the law. However, despite the overall positive feedback, there are areas that require improvement. Variability in employee responses regarding the program's overall effectiveness suggests some inconsistency in how the services are delivered or experienced across staff members. Additionally, the varied strategies used to address mental health concerns, ranging from in-house support and family crisis management training to referrals to external agencies, indicate a lack of standardized mental health protocols across the organization. This inconsistency could affect the quality and timeliness of mental health support received by youth and their families. All interviewed employees also emphasized the need for improved external communication, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and the transition to web-based training, highlighting a significant barrier to collaboration and consistency across programs. To strengthen these already promising youth justice services, it is essential to prioritize better communication among staff, develop standardized procedures for addressing mental health concerns, and regularly assess the consistency of program services.

Appendix A

Survey Questions for Employees

1. Your organization's family program is effective.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

2. Your organization's family program helped the youth and families in a timely manner

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

3. Your organization's family program is accessible and inclusive

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. Your family program offers personalized interventions and services for registered youth.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. The program's services focus on helping the youth's and or family's mental health.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. The program's services consist of helping strengthen the relation between the youth and their parents or caregivers.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

7. The program provides coping mechanisms and healthy parenting habits for parents and caregivers of the youth.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

8. This program is beneficial for today's youth in conflict with the law.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Neutral

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Appendix B

Interview Questions for Employees

1. What is the name of the organization you work at?
2. What is the name of your family program?
3. When was your program established?
4. How long have you been working with this program?
5. What kind of services do you provide?
 - Are they personalized to each situation
 - Do they focus on the youth's mental health? If so, in what way?
 - How do you work on building a better relationship between youth and parents/caregivers.
 - Does your program get the youth involved in community activities?
6. How many families have been part of your program?
7. Did you have families fill out a survey after their time in the program? Are the survey results more positive or negative?
8. In your opinion what kind of interventions do you think are best when working with youth in conflict with the law?
9. Do you think anything should be changed or improved in this program?

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