

College of Forensic Psychologists



Information sheet 1: Offender Rehabilitation

In the past decade there has been a significant investment in the development and delivery of offender rehabilitation programs across Australia, in both prison and community corrections settings. Although there is no clear legal mandate for correctional services to deliver rehabilitation programs, offender rehabilitation programs are now well established, with each jurisdiction (there are seven, each of which has its own legislative and correctional system) offering a range of offence focussed programs. The similarities between States and Territories are great; most, if not all, have programs dedicated towards the reduction of re-offending risk in sexual and violent offenders, along with other programs which have been designed to address some of the more general causes of offending.

Does rehabilitation work?

Although criminal justice policy in Australia has over the last few decades been dominated by a "get tough" approach to offenders, the evidence shows that punitive responses to offending have failed to reduce criminal recidivism. Rather it is now clear that rehabilitation programs can have a significant impact on reducing rates of recidivism.

Programs which are well grounded in psychological theory and research are likely to produce better outcomes than those which are not. Such programs have been developed in the areas of drug and alcohol use, violence, sexual offending and general offending. All of these programs make sense in that the targets they address contribute directly to offending. These include beliefs and values that support offending, psychological and personality factors that lead to impulsive or aggressive behaviour, and low levels of pro-social functioning.

When comparing effectiveness of offender treatment with criminal justice sanctions, police clearance rates, and a few medical interventions for serious health issues, offender rehabilitation programs are remarkably effective. If the average effectiveness of an offender rehabilitation program is estimated at 15% (and the most successful programs have been shown to reduce recidivism by as much as 40%), then a recidivism base-rate of 50% for a group of offenders will be reduced to 35% for those who successfully complete a program. Of course not every offender can be successfully rehabilitated and careful assessment is required in order to determine if a particular individual is suitable for treatment.

How do I find out more?

Forensic psychologists are the only professional group who receive intensive training in the development and delivery of offender rehabilitation programs. For more information contact the Australian Psychological Society's College of Forensic Psychologists (www.psychology.org.au) for a list of College members in your area.

Further reading

Andrews, D.A., & Bonta, J. (2010). *Rehabilitating Criminal Justice Policy and Practice. Psychology, Public Policy and Law*, 16, 39-55.

Heseltine, K, Sarre, R., & Day, A. (2010). *Prison-Based Correctional Offender Rehabilitation Programs: The 2009 National Picture in Australia*. Report for the Criminology Research Council (www.aic.gov.au).

Howells, K. & Day, A. (1999). The Rehabilitation of Offenders: International perspectives applied to Australian correctional systems, *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, 112, Australian Institute of Criminology: Canberra. (www.aic.gov.au).