



Centre for Forensic
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Working With At-Risk Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Young People in Australia:

Risk Factors, Programming, and Service Delivery

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Working With At-Risk Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Young People in Australia

- This study aimed to explore i) the unique sociocultural factors that may affect a CALD young person's ongoing contact, and interactions with the justice system, ii) the evidence for culturally responsive justice programming in Australia and iii) how service providers can best address the needs of justice-involved CALD young people.
- More than one third of youth in custody in Victoria self-identify as CALD (Shepherd et al., 2015). Estimates from other sources indicate that young people from African (19%, predominantly South Sudanese) and Maori and Pasifika backgrounds (15%) are overrepresented in custody (State of Victoria, 2018), an increase from previous years.
- Justice-involved CALD young people in Australia typically possess risk profiles that approximate those of justice-involved Anglo-Australian young people (Shepherd et al., 2015). Youth offenders from CALD backgrounds, like their non-CALD peers, typically come from environments of social strain, exhibit antisocial attitudes, use illicit substances, have disengaged from school, and associate with delinquent peers.
- Additional challenges face CALD groups that contextualize justice involvement. These include, but are not limited to, acculturation/culture shock, intergenerational discord/family breakdown, financial and housing challenges, limited access to services, mental health concerns, stigma and help-seeking behaviors, educational readiness and performance, disengagement from school, cultural attitudes and norms, and experiences of racism/discrimination. In addition, some young people from CALD communities may have limited awareness and understanding of the Australian law (including their rights and obligations), and a fear or distrust of authorities because of negative experiences in their country of origin, while others feel overpoliced and subjected to racial profiling.
- There have been repeated calls to develop culturally responsive programs to address the unique needs of justice-involved and at-risk CALD young people (Armytage & Ogloff, 2017; Forson, 2019; Onsando, 2019; Ravulo, 2019; Shepherd & Ilalio, 2016). Yet there exists no literature nationwide on the effectiveness of culturally responsive programming for justice-involved CALD young people. This is likely due to the small number of available programs, the lack of funding and support for such programs, and the subsequent inability to ascertain their utility and scalability through rigorous evaluation.
- Research indicates that programs should target the changeable characteristics of young offenders that are linked to offending, such as substance use, antisocial attitudes, and anger management (Andrews & Bonta, 2007; Armytage & Ogloff, 2017). Initiatives with research support include cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approaches; individual/ group counseling, family therapy/multisystemic therapy (MST) and interpersonal skills training (Lipsey et al., 2007). Justice-involved youth (particularly those in custody) would benefit from intensive clinical supervision. This may involve developing special treatment units for higher risk youth, the purpose of which is remedial with a commitment to sustained behavioral change (Lipsey, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2016). Although psychological concerns are not necessarily causing young people to offend, they do render correctional management difficult and they may prevent young people from benefiting from other interventions (i.e., drug treatment, vocational/educational programs). Moreover, such interventions are most effective when (a) part of a risk/needs/responsivity framework, (b) are delivered by clinically trained staff, and (c) have longevity beyond 6 months (Abt & Winship, 2016; Armytage & Ogloff, 2017; Fagan & Catalano, 2012; Lipsey, 2009).

- Unique sociological-environmental experiences may need to be considered when working with CALD young people to enhance effective client-provider communication and program delivery with specific regard to the following:
 - Culturally specific manifestations of illness and cultural idioms of distress, differing explanatory models of health and traditional remedies that may require accommodation in conventional health care settings;*
 - Precarious migration experiences and how they underpin contemporary social circumstances;*
 - A cultural group's family structures, social hierarchies and religious/spiritual conventions and how these may shape community/familial expectations and responsibilities;*
 - Partnering with community/faith leaders—who may be valued in the community, who are the respected persons, and the significance of elders for that community;*
 - Resistance or hostility in therapeutic or justice settings because of mistrust, fear, and perceived discrimination as a result of historical injustices committed in similar settings;*
 - Experiences of racism which may affect self-esteem, distress levels, cooperation with authority, adherence to clinical recommendations, threat perception, feelings of safety, access to services, and vulnerability to antisocial peer group membership;*
 - A need for interpreters or having bilingual staff. Even if a young person speaks English well enough to function on an everyday level, they may not possess the language skills to communicate complex problems. The year of arrival in Australia and preferred language should be routinely collected;*
 - The cultural context of behavior. Is placing the young person in a foreign environment by itself leading to symptoms? This involves taking into account diverse cultural backgrounds and practices while recognizing the young person's experiences of living in Australia.*
- Confidentiality may need to be explicitly assured for some CALD clients who may be concerned that members of their community will discover their involvement in the justice system or discreet utilization of legal, mental health, family violence, or health services.
- Cultural issues (if relevant) should be considered when rolling out interventions to engender legitimacy among clientele—that is, same-culture clinical/program staff, renaming programs to avoid cultural stigmas, and negative connotations associated with “treatment” or “mental illness,” employing culturally relevant forms of clinical interaction (i.e., discussing symptoms/feelings rather than explicit references to mental illness; understanding that some CALD individuals attribute an external locus of control for their behaviors which has ramifications for treatments focused on individually motivated behavior modification), including family members where possible and if safe to do so, and including cultural activities (or activities of interest) as complimentary, rapport-building exercises. Some young people may prefer to work with staff from their own cultural backgrounds, whereas others prefer to see staff from a different cultural background to their own (CMY, 2019; Simon-Kumar, 2019). In many cases, bicultural staff members are preferred as they are often perceived to be able to “relate” to younger clientele, and possess an understanding of, and strategies to, successfully navigate both mainstream and cultural minority societies (Forson, 2019; White et al., 2019). It is important that staff cultural flexibility is available, where possible.
- Engaging in routine structured prosocial activities in combination with therapeutic programs may offer an alternative to regular delinquent peer group congregation (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Wooditch et al., 2014). At-risk CALD youth require ongoing support through structured programming and mentorship to offset relapses. Evidence shows that mentoring programs which are well structured, with clear goals and expectations and implemented as part of a suite of interventions, are most effective (DuBois et al., 2011; New Zealand Government, 2016). There may be generative roles for older adolescent CALD youth (peer-to-peer networks), including young people—some who may have been involved in the youth justice system themselves and have successfully rehabilitated—to offer support and guidance to younger at-risk peers which in turn can be therapeutic for both parties (Maruna, 2001).

- The outcome of any program needs to be appealing to young people who undertake it. Therefore, some collaboration between young people and their communities when designing and implementing programs will be necessary to create relevant/appropriate initiatives. Interventions or programs have more integrity and cultural credibility if they are designed and delivered (in partnership with community members or community leaders; Shepherd & Ilallo, 2015; Vaughan et al., 2018). Intrinsic motivation is essential for treatment readiness and desire to change—and so identifying a young person's desired prosocial goals, aspirations, and skillsets helps create a personally meaningful treatment plan.
- Visits to CALD youth in custody from same-culture community members and organizations may help facilitate connections with (and back to) the community and extended family. For at-risk youth in the community, school mentoring, homework clubs, volunteer tutoring services, cross-cultural parenting/family support initiatives, migrant/refugee youth leadership programs, peer support programs delivered with community service groups and schools, free legal assistance and opportunities to improve legal literacy through community legal centers, sports/recreational clubs, and migrant-specific labor market intermediaries can all assist with skills development, networking, community integration, and employment preparation. The effectiveness of many of these programs, however, is unknown, given their short-termism (often reliant on small council and philanthropic funding mechanisms) recent adoption and lack of formalization (Bartels, 2011). Perhaps some combination of these programs with evidence-based approaches (CBT, individual/family-based therapy) may be worthy of consideration.
- Community-based cultural organizations (CBCOs), which are run by and for individuals from those communities are often best placed to oversee programming for justice-involved youth from CALD backgrounds (Forson, 2019; Muhammad, 2019). For example, CBCOs will often have inroads into, and have gained the trust of, a particular cultural group within the community. They are typically led by a respected individual who is often a member of the specific cultural group (or similar cultural group) and as such, may be viewed as more credible, less judgemental, possessing cultural knowledge, and having a better understanding of the local clientele. Moreover, and critically, CBCOs may be approvingly viewed as providing a more accessible, flexible, hands-on, informal, and intimate service—and more importantly, perceived to be ostensibly operating outside of government agencies or larger bureaucracies which may engender distrust or suspicion within some CALD communities.
- The strengths of CBCOs, however, are often compromised by a number of limitations, which can preclude their ability to effectively deliver services/programs, receive ongoing funding, and take a leading role in direct case management. These include limited professional diversity to ensure that their operations (governance, finances, marketing, program monitoring, and evaluation) are expertly managed. These deficits will often discourage government (and philanthropic) funding bodies from allocating CBCOs substantial ongoing amounts of funding, instead choosing to fund larger, generic mainstream organizations (GMOs) which are perceived to possess stronger “back of house” infrastructure and possess a proven track record of receiving funding and delivering projects. The flipside for GMOs is that they will often struggle to command community trust within specific CALD communities, and may not be flexible enough, nor have the cultural expertise, to anticipate or address pressing issues with the necessary cultural nuance required (even when they employ some CALD staff to run the funded projects).

The experiences and perspectives of African-Australian community service providers who work with at-risk and justice-involved youth

- This study aimed to explore and characterise the operational experiences of African-Australian community organisations which provide services to at-risk young people in Victoria. Through a series of in-depth interviews with the leadership of key African-Australian service providers who work with at-risk and justice-involved youth, we aim to identify, i) the key challenges and obstacles faced by the organisations, ii) the organisations' unique strengths and advantages, and iii) proposed strategies to realise key objectives and safeguard organisational stability. The study will also gather perspectives on the principal antecedents to justice system contact for young African-Australians.
- Key risk factors for justice-involvement included school disengagement, unemployment, family breakdown and peer delinquency. Study participants noted that negative peer groups were often formed as protective mechanisms for those who felt that they did not belong or were socially rejected. It was also acknowledged that membership of such groups was a key antecedent of criminal activity.

- Re-settlement conferred numerous challenges on many African families including parental separation, culture shock, financial difficulties and inter-generational tension (CMY, 2019a; Deng, 2017). Family members or caregivers enduring their own integration stressors may not have the capacity to monitor and support younger school-aged family members, some of whom lacked school readiness.
- Another key theme extracted from interview data was the limitations of mainstream organisations when working with at-risk African-Australian young people. Participants outlined four perceived drawbacks which were believed to inhibit rehabilitation and led to client attrition. These included i) a compliance model which was quick to penalise young people for minor transgressions such as missing appointments, ii) a lack of personal commitment/passion to working with African-Australian populations which can damage rapport and relatability, iii) a disconnection from the African-Australian community which compromises culturally relevant program design and community trust, and iv) a business-centred approach which prioritises finances and KPI's over building relationships and improving lives.
- The ostensible value of African-Australian service providers was conveyed by study respondents. The close proximity to communities and credibility and trust established, appears to be advantageous. According to study participants, the ability of African-Australian service providers to realise their objectives was somewhat comprised by a number of challenges. Key amongst them is a dearth of funding, which has operational ramifications within organisations (i.e., paying staff, renting/hiring facilities, program resources). Limited finances impede service provider expansion and induce a heavy reliance on in-kind/volunteer contributions, which can engender organisational uncertainty, high personnel turnover, and difficulties 'professionalizing' the service. Some participants recognised that governance structures and leadership capability in their organisations needed to be improved.
- Participants offered a range of program ideas for African-Australians based on their collective expertise. First, programs need to be co-designed with the target population to ensure their relevance and improve participant adherence. Community input has long been acknowledged as a key part of program development for youth and culturally diverse populations. Second, developing trust and rapport among clientele is prioritised. Hiring staff of African descent to enhance relatability, regularly engaging in outreach activities, and ensuring services are more flexible (i.e., accessible opening hours) can assist with the appeal and cultural responsiveness of the service. Third, interventions need to be structured, long-term and with a focus on personal and skill development aligned with the young person's interests and aspirations. Early intervention with a focus on education and employment was also stressed. Fourth, families should be informed about, and included in, programming where feasible. Programs can educate families on subjects including, i) the expectations of parents when guiding their children through school, ii) mental health literacy and help-seeking behaviours, iii) intergenerational relationship building, and iv) navigating the criminal justice system. Moreover, families must be informed so they can better support young people to comply with their Justice Orders. Last, participants recognised the need for more empowering and entrepreneurial vocational programs matched to their interests and skillsets.

Policy Implications

- Programming should employ evidenced based initiatives (i.e., CBT, RNR, pro-social mentoring) and target the criminogenic needs of justice-involved CALD young people. Consideration should be given to unique socio-cultural issues and use forms of engagement based around rapport development and trust.
- Develop/strengthen prevention, early intervention and post-release assistance programs. Tailored diversionary programs for African young people is recommended.
- Develop dedicated training and employment programs for at risk and justice-involved young people, including empowering and entrepreneurial vocational programs.
- Working with families of at risk and justice involved youth to re-build relationships, improve mental health and legal literacy and to ensure compliance with justice orders and reintegration in the community post release.
- Programs need to be co-designed with the target population to ensure their relevance and improve participant adherence. Programs must also be flexible, accessible, hands-on and relational rather than punitive and compliance focused. They must also establish credibility within CALD communities.
- CALD service providers often have built strong relationships with their communities. However improving governance structures and accountability measures may be required for some providers to increase confidence from funders. More cross-agency collaboration between mainstream and culture based community organisations is desirable.