

Residential alcohol and drug treatment programs can help reduce youth crime, says study

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The study found those most likely to be convicted of a future crime had reduced convictions post-referral. Credit: Unsplash.

Therapeutic communities could reduce future recidivism in young

people with drug and alcohol problems who have a history of criminal convictions.

Drug and alcohol treatment could make the community safer from youth crime, according to new research.

The findings, published in the *Journal of Criminal Justice*, found residential drug treatment programs may reduce future criminal convictions among young people who have an increasing conviction history prior to referral for drug dependence.

The study is one of the first to show a decrease in crime over the long term following a youth drug treatment program and was funded by an ARC Linkage Grant and Ted Noffs Foundation—the country's largest drug treatment provider for young people.

Researchers from UNSW Sydney, Charles Sturt University, Griffith University and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) examined the impact of the Ted Noffs Foundation Program for Adolescent Life Management (PALM)—a residential drug and alcohol treatment service focusing on adolescents with drug and crime-related issues—on more than 3,000 young people referred to Ted Noffs Foundation for serious drug-related issues with different conviction trajectories prior to referral.

Using trajectory modeling based on administrative records from the program and the health and justice system, they found young people with a history of being convicted more than once for criminal offenses at a young age benefited the most in terms of future crime reduction.

"The impact on serious conviction was marked, with an average of four fewer convictions five years after treatment compared to those who dropped out early before 30 days. This is a massive win for these young

people and the community," says chief investigator and co-author of the study, Associate Professor Sally Nathan from the School of Population Health, UNSW Medicine & Health.

Diversion from the criminal justice system

Diverting young people from the criminal justice system to services that address their underlying needs is integral to reducing youth crime, says Mark Ferry, an expert in youth residential treatment who is a co-author of the study and Chief Operating Officer at Ted Noffs Foundation.

"It's so easy for governments to increase spending on detention centers. They are far from being a silver bullet. Youth detention is expensive and does not significantly reduce recidivism," Mr. Ferry says. "This study shows that treatment not only saves money and lives—it reduces crime and makes our community safer."

Many studies show that young people with problematic drug use often experience cumulative disadvantages across multiple life domains, including poverty, trauma, interrupted schooling, unstable living arrangements, [mental illness](#) and disability. Programs to address young peoples' complex intersecting issues, including building their [life skills](#) and community connections, can have a major impact.

The Program for Adolescent Life Management (PALM) is a modified therapeutic community run by the Ted Noffs Foundation. It provides young people with problematic drug use with services and support that can divert them from the criminal justice system. The program is "holistic" in its approach, focusing on broader issues in young people's lives beyond their drug use and involvement in crime. It's tailored for each young person to develop skills and support for life outside the program.

A/Prof. Nathan says the findings come at a critical time, given rising concerns about crime as well as mental health, homelessness and alcohol and drug issues among young people.

"The findings are a call to move away from 'tough-on-crime' approaches towards a health and harm reduction response. In particular, more attention should be placed on addressing [social determinants](#)—the factors around young people that may lead them to commit crime," A/Prof. Nathan says.

Other evidence from the research team suggests that as little as one month in a therapeutic community may help reduce drug use, psychological distress, and involvement in crime more generally.

"This study contributes to the body of work showing residential alcohol and [drug](#) treatment programs for young people have a range of benefits—improving mental health, reducing suicides and self-harm as well as hospitalizations, and now evidence they can reduce criminal convictions if [young people](#) stay 30 days or more in the program," A/Prof. Nathan says.

While recommendations are often made for continuing support post-discharge to ensure the benefits of the formal treatment program are sustained long-term, the evidence is scarce. The next stage of the research will investigate whether ongoing care may further impact convictions and other outcomes post-treatment.

"It's easy to underestimate just how difficult and significant a study of this nature is. Dr. Whitten, A/Prof. Nathan and their team at UNSW have worked for several years on this, and Ted Noffs Foundation is incredibly grateful," Mr. Ferry says.

More information: Tyson Whitten et al, Influence of a residential

drug and alcohol program on young people's criminal conviction trajectories, *Journal of Criminal Justice* (2022). DOI: [10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.102026](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2022.102026)

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