



**ABS House, Canberra, Australia**

**6-7 June 2005**

## **CONFERENCE PAPER:**

### **LINKING RESEARCH TO POLICY: THE U-TURN EXPERIENCE IN TASMANIA**

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This conference was organised by the Australian Institute of Criminology in conjunction with the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the issues and challenges associated with the implementation of the U-Turn program in Tasmania, and its transition from a pilot project to an ongoing program.

By way of background, the theft of older vehicles by young people for transport, or to commit another crime, is the most common form of vehicle theft in Australia. One of the aims of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council (NMVTRC) is to reduce the involvement of young people in vehicle theft. Consequently in 2002, the NMVTRC published a 'best practice' model (BPM) for a young recidivist car theft offender program. The BPM draws on the lessons learned from the review and evaluation of motor projects in the United Kingdom and Australia (Sharley and Associates, 2002).

Before discussing the BPM and the U-Turn program in more detail, I would like to provide a brief overview of the history of motor projects.

## **MOTOR PROJECTS**

Motor projects were originally developed in the 1970s by the probation service in the United Kingdom, and aimed to change the attitude and behaviours of offenders via a "hands-on" approach which combined practical activities such as vehicle maintenance and "banger" racing with group work (Smith, 1999). Over time, the focus of the project shifted away from car racing towards educational rehabilitation, improving employment prospects and the development of life skills (Smith, 1999).

The findings in relation to the effectiveness of motor projects have been mixed (Linden and Chaturvedi, 2005). In a Home Office review of the literature on motor projects, Alaster Smith (1999) reports that while four major overview studies of motor projects painted a disappointing picture, the results from six specific project evaluations were more encouraging. Smith concluded that motor projects can and do work, but "need to be carefully targeted, managed and run professionally, according to exacting criteria" (Smith, 1999:1).

Interestingly, a review of the literature on youth crime prevention titled *What Works in Reducing Young People's Involvement in Crime* (Sallybanks, 2002) and published by the Australian Institute of Criminology in the same year as the NMVTRC published the BPM, concluded that motor projects are ineffective. This finding was based on one of the overview studies reviewed by Smith (1999). Smith points out that the overview studies do include some very good projects but the conclusions are tempered by less well-managed projects. He also notes that programs fail through weakness of management more than any other reason.

## **THE BEST PRACTICE MODEL**

As stated previously, the NMVTRC's best practice model draws on the lessons learned from the review and evaluation of motor projects in the UK and Australia. In particular, the BPM incorporates the best features of two Australian programs, Street Legal and Hand Brake Turn. In both programs, training in mechanics provides a 'hook' for young people to participate in the program and this is combined with case management to address the underlying causes of their offending behaviour (Sharley and Associates, 2002).

The BPM is a comprehensive document which outlines the key elements required to establish and operate a young recidivist car theft offender program. In particular, the BPM covers the following aspects of the program:

- the program aims, objectives and guiding principles;
- the program components;
- the target group and eligibility criteria;
- the program structure and staffing;
- the assessment and referral procedures;
- the evaluation model; and
- the business plan, including an indicative budget.

## **THE U-TURN PROGRAM**

U-Turn is a diversionary program (motor project) for young people aged 15-20 years with a history of involvement in motor vehicle theft, or who are 'at risk' of becoming involved in motor vehicle theft. The program is based on the BPM and delivered by Mission Australia under contract to Tasmania Police. U-Turn is located in the suburb of Moonah in Southern Tasmania.

The program was piloted in Tasmania over two years with funding provided by the NMVTRC and the Australian Government's National Crime Prevention program. The pilot project commenced on 17 January 2003.

The aims of the program, as outlined in the BPM, are to:

- reduce the rate of motor vehicle theft by young people;
- prevent recidivism and chronic career offending by young people;
- address anti-social behaviour;
- address life issues of participants and link participants to a comprehensive network of support; and
- assist young people to maximise their potential so that they can offer a positive contribution to society.

The core component of U-Turn is a structured ten-week automotive training course in car maintenance and body work, delivered in a mechanical workshop environment. Other components of the program include: case management and personal development; links to employment and further education; recreational activities and post-course support. The BPM specifies that post-course support will be provided to participants for up to 2 years after they complete the program to try and reduce the possibility of a relapse into offending behaviour.

The recreational activities include go-karting. One of the objectives of the program is to re-direct the thrill-seeking associated with motor vehicle theft into positive, legal, safe and fun motor sport activities (Sharley and Associates, 2002).

## **Tasmanian Features**

### **Restorative Justice**

A key emphasis of the U-Turn program in Tasmania is restorative justice, with participants undertaking projects such as servicing vehicles for community organisations, and repairing damaged vehicles for presentation to victims of motor vehicle theft. The general practice is for each course of participants to work on a vehicle with a view to presenting it to a victim of crime at the conclusion of the ten-week course.

### **Supported Accommodation Service**

Early on in the life of the pilot project, the Steering Committee identified the need to make the program accessible to young people from regional areas in Tasmania. Options were explored and it was determined that a dedicated supported accommodation service was needed.

With funding provided by the Tasmanian Community Fund, Mission Australia established a supported accommodation service to enable young people from the North and North West of the state to participate in the program. During the pilot period, three young people per course were accommodated in the group home with a paid carer. Participants travelled to Hobart each Monday of the course, lived in the group home while they attended U-Turn from Tuesday to Friday, and then returned home again each Friday afternoon for the weekend.

### **Program Staffing**

As recommended in the BPM, U-Turn is staffed by a program manager (full-time), a youth worker (full time), two automotive trainers (0.8 of full time each) and a part-time administrative officer.

### **Additional Information**

U-Turn is overseen by a Steering Committee which consists of representatives from the Crime Prevention and Community Safety Council and the business, industry, education, welfare, youth and justice sectors. The Commissioner of Police is the Chair of the Steering Committee and the Project Sponsor. A project manager appointed by Tasmania Police has responsibility for the day-to-day contract management activities, and works closely with the program staff.

It is important to note that in the very early stages of the pilot project, the Steering Committee made a commitment to try and secure ongoing funding for the program.

U-Turn has also been piloted in New South Wales and is currently being piloted in Western Australia and Queensland. The Australian Government Attorney-General's Department is funding a meta-evaluation across all four pilot sites.

### **Local Evaluation**

The Tasmanian Institute of Law Enforcement Studies (TILES) was contracted by Tasmania Police to conduct the local evaluation of the U-Turn pilot project. The local evaluation comprised a literature review, in-depth semi-structured interviews with program participants, a stakeholder survey, interviews with program staff, a stakeholder survey, interviews with a small sample of parents/significant others, interviews with program staff and an analysis of police charge and conviction data.

As the evaluation report is currently being finalised, it is not possible to publicly discuss the findings from the local evaluation in detail. However, it is possible to report that the overall conclusion of the report is that the implementation of U-Turn in Tasmania closely followed the BPM and that there was a high level of success in achieving the aims and objectives of the program.

## **IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

A number of issues and challenges arose during the implementation of the pilot project and the transition from a pilot project to an ongoing program.

### **Gaps in the Best Practice Model**

While the BPM provides a lot of guidance in relation to program delivery and evaluation, there are some gaps.

Firstly, the BPM model specifies that post-course support should be provided to participants for up to two years after they complete the program but does not specify what form this should take. As the number of program participants grows, the obligations in relation to post-course support become more onerous for the Youth Worker. One of the workshops at U-Turn has been dedicated as an area where past participants can work on their own cars or project vehicles. This encourages ongoing contact with the program, and enables past participants to take on a peer support role for new participants. However, participants from the North/North West do not currently have access to a similar facility.

Secondly, the BPM does not incorporate two of the most successful features of the Tasmania pilot project: the emphasis on restorative justice and the supported accommodation service. According to the literature review conducted by TILES, there are no other programs in Australia for young offenders that offer supported accommodation outside the formal juvenile justice or shelter systems. Thus, the U-Turn supported accommodation service may well be unique in terms of its operation and focus.

Thirdly, the BPM does not provide a definition of recidivism or include any advice on how to measure it. The recidivism analysis conducted by TILES has been very difficult and time consuming and the methodology used may be different to the methodology which will be used in the meta-evaluation.

### **Defining Program Success**

Another set of issues has emerged in relation to the way program success is defined. The evaluation relies heavily on qualitative data to demonstrate the impact of the program on participants in terms of behavioural change. However, many of the stakeholders have expressed the need for 'punchy' statistics to quote. Achieving the right balance of quantitative and qualitative measures to meet the stakeholders' needs and still do justice to the program is difficult.

Not surprisingly, given that the NMVTRC was one of the funding bodies for the pilot project, a strong emphasis has been placed on being able to demonstrate the program's impact on motor vehicle theft. However, while the vast majority of the U-Turn graduates (94%) had a prior conviction for a serious offence on entry to the program, only 24 of the 52 graduates (46%) had a prior conviction for motor vehicle theft. Thus, arguably there is a need for a broad definition of recidivism because most of the target group are crime generalists rather than specialists in vehicle theft.

The Steering Committee members and key stakeholders have high expectations of the program in terms of its impact on recidivism, but there is a need to be realistic about what can be achieved in a ten-week program. Also, with such a strong emphasis being placed on recidivism, there is a risk that there will not be adequate recognition of the significant impact the program has had on other aspects of the participants' lives (e.g. health, motivation, self-esteem, relationships).

### **Critical Success Factors**

Two of the critical success factors for the U-Turn pilot project were the high level of stakeholder (including ministerial) and community support and the ability of the program staff to engage with the program participants. No matter how good the program model is, or how sound the research underpinning it is, the program would not have succeeded without those critical success factors.

The program has been through some turbulent times in relation to staffing and management. Soon after being awarded the contract to deliver U-Turn during the pilot period, Mission Australia lost a major employment contract in Tasmania which led to some restructuring and created some uncertainty for a couple of months. Both of the senior Mission Australia representatives who had been involved in the tender process left the organization and new relationships had to be established between Tasmania Police and Mission Australia personnel. Also, within 6 months of the pilot project commencing, three of the program staff resigned and replacement staff had to be recruited. The importance of recruiting the right staff cannot be stressed enough. As the program team is comparatively small, it is important that the group dynamics work well.

### **Timing**

The timing of a number of key milestones in the program's life has not been ideal, but this is perhaps unavoidable in the context of a pilot project. These timing issues relate to the need to prepare a submission for ongoing funding at an early stage and the ability to incorporate the lessons learned from the evaluation of the pilot project into the ongoing program.

As a 2004/2005 budget initiative, the Tasmanian Government committed \$1.5 million to enable the program to continue for a further 2.5 year period beyond the pilot period, which ended on 17 January 2005. To fit in with the budget cycle, the budget submission had to be prepared in November 2003, ten months after the program commenced. At that stage very limited data was available from the evaluation. It was only possible to rely on the evidence emerging from the interviews with a small number of program participants. Obviously at that time it was also difficult to predict what changes to the program might be recommended in the final evaluation report.

The ongoing funding commitment to U-Turn formed part of a \$100 million Budget Social Package, the biggest social package in the State's history, targeting members of the community with special needs, and focusing on the fundamentals of health, education, transport and community safety. U-Turn linked in well with the Government's social policy.

The Steering Committee will be formally considering the recommendations from the evaluation report in July this year, some six months after U-Turn entered its new phase funded by the State Government. The report contains recommendations which relate to the length of the program and the program staffing and have significant cost implications. There are also aspects of the program which require further evaluation, including the supported accommodation service and the impact of the program on young females.

The final report for the meta-evaluation will not be available for some time because the pilot projects all commenced at different times. The New South Wales and Tasmania pilot projects have concluded, the Western Australian pilot concludes later this year and the Queensland project does not finish until next year. It is not unrealistic to anticipate that the meta-evaluation report may also recommend significant changes to the program. By the time these recommendations come to light the Tasmanian program will have been operating for over three years.

## **CONCLUSION**

A number of conclusions may be drawn from the experience of trying to link research to policy in the context of a pilot project.

Firstly, based on the U-Turn experience, flexibility, timing and marketing are very important. The flexibility to incorporate additional features into the program, such as the supported accommodation service and the restorative justice focus, was vital to the success of the program in Tasmania. The timing of the budget submission was opportune in the circumstances because of the strong link to the Government's social policy. A significant amount of time and effort was dedicated towards marketing the program which helped to raise awareness and secure stakeholder and community support.

Secondly, care needs to be taken in defining and measuring program success. In the case of U-Turn, a narrow focus on recidivism and motor vehicle theft could obscure a whole range of other potential benefits from program participants and understate the value of the program.

Thirdly, having a good program model does not necessarily guarantee success. Factors such as program staffing and stakeholder support are also critical success factors.

Finally, a two-year pilot period may not be long enough to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of a program. It can take a long time to establish a program and resolve all the teething problems. Also, to really gauge the benefits of the program, the participants need to be tracked over a reasonable period of time.

## REFERENCES

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