

## **POLICING AND PATHWAYS TO DIVERSION AND CARE AMONG VULNERABLE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO HAVE SUBSTANCE USE ISSUES**

Green R<sup>1,2</sup>, Bryant J<sup>3</sup>, Gray R<sup>3</sup>, Brown R<sup>3</sup>, Best D<sup>4,2</sup>, Rance J<sup>3</sup>, MacLean S<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centre for Health and Social Research, Australian Catholic University, Victoria Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Turning Point Eastern Health, Victoria, Australia.

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Social Research in Health, University of New South Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University.

**Introduction:** There is wide agreement that, for young people whose offences are related to alcohol and other drug (AOD) use, diversion into treatment is preferable to justice responses. This study examined the role of police in relation to the service system pathways of young people who offend and have AOD issues.

**Method:** This paper draws from qualitative interview data collected from three groups in Victoria and New South Wales: police (n=25), service providers (n=16) and clients of specialist youth AOD services (n=24) to examine the characteristics of police interactions and the barriers to referral and diversion of young offenders.

**Key Findings:** Young people and AOD staff reported that adversarial encounters with police were frequent and linked to expedited pathways to incarceration. Police reported inconsistent referral of young people to therapeutic programs, influenced by their workload, knowledge of services, attitudes about young offenders (e.g., prospects for change) and, in NSW, inefficient referral systems. Youth-appropriate practice and understandings about AOD use were learned 'on the job' by frontline police, and active collaboration with AOD and other therapeutic services was reportedly rare.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** The data highlight that future initiatives could focus on: decreasing unnecessary and violent altercations, improving police collaboration with AOD professionals, and improving multiple systemic issues relating to processes, service provision and programs available to vulnerable young people. Given the identified challenges of police workload and workplace stress, future strategies that aim to impact police practice should demonstrate the benefits to police as well as offenders.

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