



# The Effectiveness of Sexual Offender Rehabilitation and Reintegration Programs: Integrating Global and Local Perspectives to Enhance Correctional Outcomes

## *Summary of Findings*

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## Background

In 2018, Dr Nadine McKillop and her team from the University of Sunshine Coast were awarded a QCS Research Grant to undertake an investigation of sexual offender rehabilitation programs. The aim of the project was to identify the most successful pathways from rehabilitation to reintegration for males convicted of sexual offences in Queensland.

More specifically, the study investigated the pathways through rehabilitation to successful reintegration, for sexual offenders, exploring combined effects, in order to inform best-practice. The findings will help identify areas of strength and areas for enhanced effectiveness for offence-specific rehabilitation and reintegration programs to support prisoners who have offended sexually to reintegrate successfully into the community and reduce their recidivism.

The project aimed to answer the following primary research question:

- *What are the most effective pathways for successful rehabilitation and reintegration for reducing recidivism by sexual offenders?*

To address this primary research question, several sub-questions were considered:

- What is the current state of scientific knowledge internationally regarding the impacts of correctional programs for supporting perpetrators of sexual offences, to reduce their offending and remain in the community?
- How well do QCS correctional programs for sexual offenders map to current best practice and innovations?
- For whom, and under what circumstances, are these programs most effective?

## Methodology

These research questions were examined in three stages, using a mixed-methods design:

### Stage 1: Global literature review

The global literature review explores best-practice standards for correctional programming, exemplar programs, and outcome evaluations of rehabilitation and reintegration programs for sexual offenders. This review considered impacts of individual-level (e.g., cultural heritage, risk, age) and program-level (e.g., program type, design, delivery, dosage) factors on correctional outcomes, where measured.

## Stage 2: Local program mapping and analysis

Available program documentation on QCS rehabilitation and reintegration programs for sexual offenders was assessed for alignment with best-practice evidence and current innovations highlighted by the global literature review. Focus groups and interviews with QCS program staff, who have direct involvement in delivering custodial-based SOTPs, were also conducted. Both were analysed, and findings integrated, to identify key strengths of current QCS correctional programs, factors that increase chances of success, as well as potential areas for enhancing effective and efficient service delivery.

## Stage 3: Post-release outcomes for rehabilitation and reintegration

The third stage examined post-release outcomes for prisoners who were sentenced for a sexual offence and were released from custody between 1 January 2010 and 31 December 2017 (n = 2,407). The key focus of this stage was to identify the most effective pathways through the correctional system, including transition from custody to community. As such, the study examined post-release outcomes for those prisoners who had completed a re-entry program (Transitions or similar) during their contact with QCS and for the most recent episode for which they were released. Comparisons of these outcomes occurred controlling for individual-level (e.g., cultural heritage; risk; age) and program-level (e.g., program type and dosage; program location) factors to identify the pathways that had the most successful outcomes in terms of supporting individuals to reduce reoffending and remain in community.

## Key Findings

Twelve key findings emerged from the present study.

**Key finding 1:** Overall, the weight of current evidence (globally and locally) indicates that engagement in sex offending treatment programs (SOTPs) can produce appreciable reductions in sexual and non-sexual recidivism, and that savings from these programs should exceed costs.

**Key finding 2:** Re-entry programs (in the absence of any treatment) appear to have some appreciable effect on breaches and reoffending, when transitioning from custody, at least in the short-term.

**Key finding 3:** There remains a paucity of research in Australia evaluating the effectiveness of SOTPs that addresses the diversity of the sexual offending population, to answer the question ‘what works, for whom, in what respects, and how?’

**Key finding 4:** Key components of successful SOTPs appear to include a combination of cognitive-behavioural therapies, focussed on self-regulation and accountability, and multisystemic features that incorporate family and system support particularly for relapse prevention and supported re-entry.

**Key finding 5:** QCS’s current suite of programs is consistent with the risk-needs-responsivity (RNR) model and best-practice principles but would most likely benefit from being updated to reflect evidence produced in the past decade.

**Key finding 6:** Recent innovations in the application of situational principles to sexual violence and abuse may enhance current QCS SOTPs, particularly in terms of ‘extending guardianship’ and ‘assisting compliance’.



**Key finding 7:** Therapeutic rapport, program flexibility, and offender insight and self-awareness were identified by practitioners as key mechanisms for producing intended outcomes.

**Key finding 8:** The Queensland data suggest that a combination of SOTP plus reintegration appears to produce the best overall outcomes in terms of proportion of returns to custody (breaches and/or new offences) and time to reoffend.

**Key finding 9:** A sequential pathway that combines the SOTP 'trilogy' (preparation program, SOTP, and maintenance program) plus reintegration appears to produce the best intended effects, for reducing breaches and new offences.

**Key finding 10:** The chance of success for incarcerated offenders appears to be improved through a combination of programs delivered in custody and community.

**Key finding 11:** A combination of system-level (e.g., correctional processes and culture), program-level (e.g., group dynamics; dosage), and individual-level (e.g., motivation) factors, and factors external to QCS (e.g., relationships; connection to community), appear to be moderators of program success.

**Key finding 12:** Program resourcing, staffing and staff training were identified as key considerations for implementing programs as intended.

