ACT Government

EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS THAT REDUCE RECIDIVISM: LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE

Justice and Community Safety Directorate

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Evidence based programs that reduce recidivism: lessons from international evidence

Introduction

Recidivist offending causes harm to the victims of crime, places a financial burden on taxpayers and leaves families without partners, parents and children. While the drivers of re-offending are complex, a growing body of domestic and international research suggests there are factors that can make a difference to an individual's likelihood of re-offending and re-incarceration.

In 2024 the ACT Labor made an election commitment to *"Explore international evidence-based programs that specifically target recidivist offending, with the view to a pilot in the ACT"*[1].

This paper is the response to that commitment. It draws on international and local research to identify the underlying causes of reoffending and examine strategies that have proven effective in reducing reoffending. Its focus is on successful programs in jurisdictions with comparative criminal justice systems and incarceration objectives to Australia, including Norway, New Zealand, Canada, the United Kingdom, Finland and the United States of America.

It is important to note that this paper does not review evidence on criminogenic rehabilitation or treatment programs, such as those administered by Corrective Services. There is a large body of evidence that specifically addresses these programs, and the ACT has an established Rehabilitation Framework[2] (currently being reviewed) based on best practice principles informed by that evidence.

Instead, this paper focuses on broader programs and frameworks informed by international evidence, and highlights common themes found in successful strategies to reduce recidivism. In particular, this paper has drawn on the 2025 United Nations resolution on model strategies to reduce offending[3] and meta-analyses conducted by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy[4] (WSIPP).

The United Nations resolution notes the high level of recidivism across the world and reflects that 'breaking the cycle of reoffending requires a comprehensive, multisectoral and inter-institutional approach and the active participation of all sectors of society'.[5] The paper cautions that *'the problem cannot be solved by the criminal justice system alone. It is necessary to address the root causes of criminal behaviour, including poverty, social inequalities, marginalization, and racial and other forms of discrimination, as well as the*

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[1] ACT Labour, *Policy Position Statement* (2024) 95.
[2] ACT Corrective Services, *ACT Corrective Services Rehabilitation Framework: A summary of the framework* (Report, November 2019).
[3] United Nations, 'Prison Reform', *Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending* (Web Page) <Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice Reform - Model Strategies on Reducing Reoffending>.
[4] Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 'Benefit-Cost Results', *Benefit-cost methods last updated December 2024* (Web Page, December 2024) <Washington State Institute for Public Policy>.
[5] Economic and Social Council, *Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice,* ESC, UN ESCOR, 34th sess, Supp No 10, UN Doc E/2025/30-E/CN.15/2025/15 (30 May 2025) 11.

practical difficulties and stigma that impede the successful reintegration of offenders into society.'

Programs that have demonstrated success include a set of core features:[6]

- integrated case management and continuity of care
- strong community integration and family connection
- gender and trauma-informed design
- cultural safety and identity-based supports

These approaches are most effective when they are embedded in broader justice reinvestment strategies that prioritise early intervention, diversion, and community-led responses.

This paper identifies the common elements that underpin success, along with information about where the ACT is already implementing programs based on these elements. Insights are provided about opportunities to further embed or introduce these elements into local programs, with suggestions to inform future investment, policy and program design in the ACT.

Context

Recidivism remains a persistent challenge in the ACT, with 37.1% of adults returning to prison within two years of release.[7] This reflects broader systemic issues—such as housing instability, substance dependency, social disconnection, and the cumulative effects of trauma associated with family violence, abuse, discrimination, and other forms of disadvantage. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recidivism rates are also influenced by the ongoing impacts of colonisation and systemic racism, which should be explicitly recognised and monitored as a distinct factor.

Recidivist offending places a significant financial burden on the community and criminal justice system, including costs associated with police, courts and prisons and there are broader economic impacts such as through lost income tax.[8] Beyond the financial costs, recidivism increases pressure on health services, driven by links to mental illness, substance use and trauma.[9] It also undermines public confidence with persistent reoffending reinforcing perceptions of system failure.

There are challenges associated with using a blunt binary measure of recidivism (e.g. return to custody) as a measure of success. Recent research[10] highlights how an individual's trajectory from regular criminal activities to none is a complex journey whereby a reduction in crime is likely to be accompanied by pro-social activities, supporting gradual desistance from offending.

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[6] Will Von Geldern, *Never Going Back: An Evidence-Based Approach to Reducing Recidivism* (Web Page, September 2019) <Never Going Back: An Evidence-Based Approach to Reducing Recidivism - HKS Student Policy Review HKS Student Policy Review>; Omar Hamid, *Breaking the Cycle: Innovative Strategies for Reducing Recidivism* (Web Page, June 2025) <Breaking the Cycle: Innovative Strategies for Reducing Recidivism - PsyForU Research International>; Adiah Price-Tucker et al, 'Successful Reentry: A Community-Level Analysis' (2019) *Harvard University Institute of Politics*.

[7] Justice and Community Safety Directorate, *Annual Report 2024-25* (Report, 2025) 123.

[8] Mirko Bagaric and Morgan Begg, 'Let them work: How criminal justice reform can help address Australia's worker shortage' (Research Paper, Institute of Public Affairs, March 2023).

[9] Anna Bowring et al, *Australian Capital Territory harm reduction cost-benefit analysis* (Final Report, March 2025).

[10] Bianca Bersani et al, 'Moving Beyond Failure: Modelling the Multidimensional Conceptualization of Success After Prison' (2025) 11 *Springer* 260, 261.

Other measures of success in this desistance trajectory include reduced frequency of offending, reduced seriousness in the type of offending along with more positive measures such as an increase in pro-social activities.

The ACT is addressing recidivism through a justice reinvestment approach.[11] Justice reinvestment offers a strategic alternative to purely punitive responses by ensuring resources are invested into community-based supports that address the root causes of offending. Evidence confirms that this approach delivers measurable reductions in reoffending and improved social outcomes.[12] While justice reinvestment in Australia is generally community-led with the intent to improve justice outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the ACT has a uniquely broader approach that includes non-Indigenous people.

The focus of justice reinvestment in the ACT is early intervention, prevention and diversion initiatives, addressing the underlying factors driving involvement with the criminal justice system.[13]

Understanding the drivers of reoffending

Reoffending is rarely the result of a single factor. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay of social, economic, psychological, and systemic conditions.

There is a robust international body of evidence that identifies factors related to the causes of offending and reoffending. Justice programs respond to these factors on the basis that if effectively addressed, the likelihood of a person reoffending is reduced.

A broad range of individual, environmental and situational factors are drivers for reoffending.[14] Across Australian and international jurisdictions, the most common drivers include:

- unstable housing and homelessness
- alcohol and other drug (AOD) dependency
- poor access to education, training, and employment
- mental illness
- cognitive impairment
- trauma, including intergenerational and gendered violence
- social isolation and lack of community connection
- poor reintegration support post-release

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[11] Justice and Community Safety Directorate, *RR25by25 and Beyond: A Justice Reinvestment Strategy for the ACT* (Report, 2025).
[12] Justice Reform Initiative, *Alternatives to Incarceration in the Australian Capital Territory* (Report, 2024).
[13] Justice and Community Safety Directorate, *RR25by25 and Beyond: A Justice Reinvestment Strategy for the ACT* (Report, 2025).
[14] Community Justice Coalition, 'Recidivism: The Way Forward' (2022); Jason Payne, *Recidivism in Australia: Findings and future research* (Report, 2007); Lena Roxell, 'What contributes to fewer cases of recidivism? Treatment, education, and work in prison' (2024) 63(8) *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 480; Katherine J. McLachlan, *Trauma-informed Criminal Justice: Recognising the Relationships Between Trauma and Offending* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) pt 1.

These factors are often compounded for priority cohorts—such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, women, and individuals with cognitive impairments—who experience higher rates of disadvantage and systemic exclusion. Effective justice responses must therefore be tailored, holistic, and embedded within broader social support systems.

What the international evidence shows: core features of strategies that work

International evidence shows that a range of strategies can successfully reduce reoffending when they target the underlying drivers that commonly lead to repeat offending. While models vary, several consistent themes emerge.

Integrated case management and continuity of care

Across jurisdictions, integrated case management and continuity of care are foundational to successful strategies to reduce recidivism. These models provide coordinated, tailored wraparound support—such as housing, health care, alcohol and other drug treatment, education, and employment—delivered before, during, and after incarceration. The goal is to ensure individuals do not experience a sudden loss of services upon release, which can lead to instability, relapse, and increased risk of reoffending.[15] For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, case management should be culturally safe, culturally responsive and trauma-informed, recognising the ongoing impacts of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and disconnection from Country, culture, community and identity.

These approaches are particularly effective for individuals with complex needs, including mental health conditions, substance use disorders, cognitive disabilities, and trauma histories. Case managers act as navigators, ensuring services are coordinated rather than siloed, and support continues across custody and community settings. This sustained, relational support fosters stability, reduces risk factors associated with reoffending, and promotes long-term reintegration.

Why it works:

Integrated case management and continuity of care are effective because they respond to the complex, intersecting needs of justice-involved individuals. These models ensure that support is not fragmented or time-limited but instead coordinated and sustained across the transition from custody to community.

Case managers play a critical role in navigating systems, advocating for clients (to overcome systemic barriers or to address skill or knowledge gaps), and maintaining therapeutic relationships that build trust and accountability. People with lived experience of criminal justice in the ACT reported this kind of support to be valued and effective in sustaining

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[15] Caron Lett, *Prisoners recovering from addiction encounter 'cliff edge' with little support on release* (Web Page, 4 October 2017) <Prisoners recovering from addiction encounter 'cliff edge' with little support o - News and events, University of York>; Tresa Walker, 'Barriers Facing Former Inmates Post-release from Incarceration: A Systemic Review' (Dissertation and Theses, The University of Arizona, 2024); Johanna B. Folk et al, 'Behind Bars but Connected to Family: Evidence for the Benefits of Family Contact During Incarceration' (2019) 33(4) *J Fam Psychol* 1.

desistance from offending.[16] When support begins in custody and continues post-release, individuals are more likely to engage with services, avoid crisis, and pursue long-term goals. This is especially important for people with cognitive impairments, mental health conditions, or histories of trauma, who often struggle to access siloed or short-term services.

Evidence shows that programs offering coordinated, integrated wraparound support and continuity of care lead to improved housing stability, reduced substance use, better health outcomes, and significantly lower rates of reoffending. [17]

International examples:

- **United States** jurisdictions have implemented re-entry programs (Under the *Second Chance Act)* that integrate care coordination across justice, health, housing, and employment sectors. These programs begin pre-release and continue post-release, offering case management and wraparound services tailored to individual needs. Evaluations show that since the *Second Chance Act* was enacted in 2008, these programs have reduced recidivism by up to 23% nationally.[18]
- **Norway's correctional system** is well known for its progressive approach towards offender rehabilitation and reintegration[19] which has contributed to consistently low recidivism rates (from 65% prior to reforms in the 1990s to 20% in 2020). The Norwegian approach focuses on education and training and strong integration support, using a "normalisation" model, where prison life mirrors community life. Reintegration planning begins at the start of a sentence, with case managers coordinating access to housing, employment, and social supports. These elements collectively contribute to Norway's high rates of successful reintegration.
- **Finland** employs supported living communities and supervised probationary freedom to facilitate reintegration. These programs provide structured environments where individuals receive coordinated support in housing, education, employment, and health care. Case managers work across sectors to ensure continuity of care, while NGOs offer relational

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[16] Boxall H and Bartels L, 'Pathways Out of the Criminal Justice System, Listening to lived experience from the Australian Capital Territory'; Australian National University as part of a research collaboration with the Justice and Community Safety Directorate (not yet published).
[17] Andrew S. Denney, Richard Tewksbury and Richard S. Jones, 'Beyond Basic Needs: Social Support and Structure for Successful Offender Reentry' (2014) 2(1) *Qualitative Criminology* 39; Layla Edwards et al, 'A systematic review of post-release programs for women exiting prison with substance-use disorders: assessing current programs and weighing the evidence' (2022) 10(1) *Health and Justice* 1; Sheldon Cohen and S. Leonard Syme, 'Issues in the Study and Application of Social Support' (1985) *Social Support and Health* 3.
[18] CSG Justice Center Government Affairs Staff, *Bipartisan Group of 88 Lawmakers Push for Continued Funding for Reentry and Recidivism Programs* (Web Page, May 2025) <Bipartisan Group of 88 Lawmakers Push for Continued Funding for Reentry and Recidivism Programs - CSG Justice Center>; CSG Justice Center, '50 States, 1 Goal: Examining State-Level Recidivism Trends in the Second Chance Act Era' (Pdf) <50 States, 1 Goal: Examining State-Level Recidivism Trends in the Second Chance Act Era>.
[19] Aise Gul Akkoyun, 'The Norwegian Model of Correlation Rehabilitation – Bridging the Gap between Incarceration and Society', in Correctional Facilities – Policies, Practices and Challenges, Edited by Nikolaos Stamatakis, November 2024; Pratt J, Eriksson A. Contrasts in Punishment: An Explanation of Anglophone Excess and Nordic Exceptionalism. 1st ed. Routledge; 2013.

and practical support. Electronic monitoring is used to maintain accountability while promoting autonomy.[20]

ACT context:

In the ACT, justice programs that embed integrated case management and ensure continuity of care are demonstrating tangible benefits for individuals transitioning from custody to community. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, culturally safe and culturally aligned programs, including the Yarning Circles funded through the First Nations Justice Branch and delivered by Yeddung Mura, play an important role in supporting reintegration. By maintaining connection to culture, community and support networks, these initiatives complement broader housing, health and social supports and contribute to reducing recidivism.

- The **Intensive Case Management (ICM) program** was piloted in 2024 under the ACT Government's *Reducing Recidivism by 25% by 2025* (RR25by25) strategy with a clear aim to provide a culturally informed, evidence-based pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exiting custody. The ICM is now an embedded program within the directorate and aligns with the Government's commitment to Closing the Gap, RR25by25, and recommendations from the *Independent Review into the overrepresentation of First Nations people in the ACT criminal justice system*[21] (the Jumbunna Review). The ICM works intensively with the individual, their kin and community. An interim review, conducted by ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) in 2025, found the program to be effective during its first 12 months, demonstrating positive impacts on reducing risks associated with recidivism and reoffending, and improving engagement and compliance with Community-Based Orders (CBO). Case management, delivered by Yeddung Mura, functions as a support mechanism for individuals navigating the justice system, using a coordination and brokerage model that integrates justice, health, housing and community-based support for specific individual needs.
- As part of the broader Reintegration framework within ACTCS, the **Extended Throughcare program** provides voluntary case management support to detainees returning to the community following their custodial sentence. The program is delivered through two streams, including a dedicated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stream delivered by a local ACCO, ensuring culturally safe and responsive support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through coordinated and continuous support, the program assists individuals to reintegrate into the community and reduces the risk of homelessness, poor physical and mental health, drug and alcohol misuse, ultimately reducing the likelihood of reoffending. An independent evaluation found a 23% reduction in return to custody episodes among participants compared to the pre-program baseline, highlighting the value of sustained, coordinated support.[22]
- The **Justice Housing Program** provides transitional housing with wraparound case management for people exiting custody. Supports include mental health and AOD

[20] Eeva Jarvelainen, Teemu Rantanen, and Timo Toikko, 'Finnish Supervised Probationary Freedom as Support for a Desistance from Crime' (2024) 16(2) *European Journal of Probation* 115.
[21] ACT Government, *Final Report of the Independent Review into the Over-representation of First Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System: The Jumbunna Review* (Final Report, September 2025).
[22] Andrew Griffiths, Fredrick Zmudzki and Shona Bates, *Evaluation of ACT Extended Throughcare Pilot Program* (Final Report, January 2017).

services, transport, clothing, education, and employment pathways. A 2023 independent evaluation found stable housing, combined with tailored support, reduces reoffending and homelessness. Participants also reported improved wellbeing and reduced justice system contact.[23]

[23] Helen Taylor et al, *Process evaluation of the Justice Housing Program* (Final Report, October 2023) 101-102.

Strong community integration and local connection

The transition from prison to the community is a time of major risk for recidivism often triggered by lack of access to accommodation, employment and support networks that can support sustainable change. Community integration and local connection is a justice approach that embeds support within the everyday lives of individuals—through peers, families/friends, and local networks. It recognises that people are more likely to succeed when they are connected to others, have a sense of belonging, and receive support that is both culturally safe and locally grounded. This support might be through formal mentoring programs, professional supports or friends and family.

People released from prison require significant community support to navigate the challenges of re-entry, particularly at the early stages of re-entry.[24] Much of the research on re-entry has emphasised the role of families—partners, parents, children—as key sources of emotional and instrumental support.[25] Family support has been linked to the attainment of housing, employment, health, and reduced risk of substance use and reoffending.[26] British research found offenders with limited family support or attachment are more likely to reoffend.[27]

These models prioritise relationships and community-led responses, offering tailored support that addresses the underlying causes of offending. By fostering pro-social engagement and reducing stigma, they promote reintegration and long-term behavioural change – critical in reducing reoffending.

Why It Works

Community-based justice models are effective because they reduce social isolation, which is a known risk factor for offending. These models build trust, promote accountability, and rebuild social capital by leveraging local knowledge and relationships. Peer support offers lived experience and credibility, helping individuals navigate challenges with guidance from those who have walked similar paths. Connection to family and/or friends provides emotional stability and strengthens relational networks, which are essential for reintegration and desistance from offending. Together, these elements foster resilience, reduce stigma, and are particularly important for people attempting to desist from crime as they make positive links to community resources which in turn increases their social and personal capital.

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[24] Christy A, Visher and Jeremy Travis, 'Life on the Outside: Returning Home after Incarceration' (2011) 91(3) *The Prison Journal Supplement* 102S, 111S.
[25] Thomas J. Mowen, Richard Stansfield and John H. Boman, 'Family Matters: Moving Beyond "If" Family Support Matters to "Why" Family Support Matters during Reentry from Prison' (2018) 56(4) *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*; Rebecca Naser and Christy A. Visher, 'Family members' experiences with incarceration and reentry' 7(2) *Western Criminology Review* 18.
[26] Mark T. Berg and Beth M. Huebner, 'Reentry and the Ties that Bind: An Examination of Social Ties, Employment, and Recidivism' (2010) 28(2) *Justice Quarterly* 382; David J. Harding et al, 'Making Ends Meet After Prison' (2014) 33(2) *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 440; Thomas J. Mowen, Richard Stansfield and John H. Boman, 'Family Matters: Moving Beyond "If" Family Support Matters to "Why" Family Support Matters during Reentry from Prison' (2018) 56(4) *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*; Jennifer L Skeem, Sarah M Manchak and Jillian Peterson, 'Correctional Policy for Offenders with Mental Illness: Creating a New Paradigm for Recidivism Reduction' (2011) 35(2) *Law and Human Behaviour* 110.
[27] Toni Makkai and Keenan Veraar, *Final Report on the South East Queensland Drug Court* (Final Report, Series No 6, 2003); Malcolm Payne, *Modern Social Work Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan, 3rd ed, 2005); Hansard, *Social Exclusion* (Web Page, 2002) <Social Exclusion (Hansard, 9 January 2002)>.

Expanding these models aligns with international best practice and strengthens justice outcomes by embedding support within the communities where people live and return to, creating environments where individuals are supported to make lasting behavioural changes.

International examples:

- In the **United Kingdom**, the Jobs, Friends and Houses program combines vocational training, housing, and peer support for people with histories of offending and addiction. Participants renovate homes they live in, creating visible recovery communities. One year post-release, the program reported a 94% reduction in reoffending [data.justice.gov.uk] [28]

- Also in the United Kingdom, two prisons have piloted an asset-based community development model[29], which offers a **strengths-based continuity of care approach to rehabilitation**, using a relational framework based on building connections and mobilising resources to afford more sustainable and effective opportunities for reintegration for prisoners as they reach the end of their sentences. Asset-based community development offers guidance on how communities can identify resources and use them to create stronger communities by linking local groups and activities together to support marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

  Although there is no available long term recidivism data from this model, this strengths-based approach has considerable potential for building bridges and for creating circles of support around prisoners to support their return to the community.

- In Scotland, restorative justice conferencing—structured dialogue between victims and offenders—has reduced youth reoffending by up to **50%**, especially when supported by family and community mentors. These approaches rebuild social capital and promote accountability through relational repair [gov.scot].

- In the United States, Youth Advocate Programs (YAP) work with high risk/high needs young people through a youth justice model based on core principles including community-based programming, individualised service planning led by participant and family, unconditional caring, strength-based approach, culturally responsive, neighbourhood-based staffing and partnering with parents and guardians[30]. YAP is a well-established organisation with a sister program in Ireland that incorporates a wraparound practice and mentoring. Evaluations[31] have shown it to be an effective program structure. Specifically, a study of a New York Program in 2018 showed that only 10% of the 229 participants were re-arrested, compared to the expected 40%.

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[28] Russell Webster, *Jobs, Friends and Houses* (Web Page, 2016) <Jobs, Friends and Houses>.
[29] Amy Musgrove and David Best, 'Building communities by mapping the assets and strengths that lie within and beyond: An Asset-Based Community Development model in HMP Kirkham and HMP Wymott' (2019).
[30] Youth Advocate Programs Inc, *Youth and Young Adult Justice* (Web Page) <Youth and Young Adult Justice>.
[31] Youth Advocate Programs Inc, *Evidence Supporting YAP's Model* (Report, 2020).

ACT context:

In the ACT, the principles of community integration and local connection are reflected in the reintegration, justice housing, extended throughcare and transitional release programs.

Culturally safe Yarning Circles support the transition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from custody into the community.

Participation in transitional release provides detainees with opportunities to access external services that support successful reintegration into the community. These may include housing and accommodation, Centrelink services, employment, external health care supports and community organisations. The Alexander Maconochie Centre (AMC) Transitional Release Centre (TRC) offers detainees the opportunity to access group courses, community-based services and activities and approved work placements in the community. Female detainees can participate in the program, however the TRC accommodates only male detainees.

The ACT also has an established Restorative Justice Scheme that diverts offenders from the criminal justice system. Recent reviews[32] have found that the Scheme provides a valuable alternative to traditional justice processes. The downstream impacts of restorative justice include costs saved through diversion, reduced recidivism rates and improved feelings of victim safety and empowerment. ACT and other Australian jurisdictions generally find that young people who participate in restorative justice are less likely to reoffend or to reoffend as often, and that any seriousness of any reoffending behaviour is reduced.

Additionally, a number of community organisations such as Detention Exit Community Outreach (DECO) - Wellways, Prisoners Aid ACT Prisoners Aid ACT, Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services (www.winnunga.org.au) provide outreach and support services including supporting reintegration into the community.

Trauma-Responsive and Gender-Informed Design

Trauma-responsive design refers to approaches that recognise the prevalence and impacts of trauma among people involved in the justice system. These approaches seek to create environments that promote safety, trust, choice and healing, while avoiding re-traumatisation and supporting positive engagement with rehabilitation and reintegration. Trauma-responsive practice is relevant across diverse cohorts, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, victim-survivors of violence, and others who may have experienced significant trauma.

Gender-informed design complements this approach by recognising the distinct pathways women may take into the justice system, which are often shaped by experiences of trauma, poverty, caregiving responsibilities and relational disconnection. Gender-informed services tailor interventions to women's lived experiences, ensuring responses are safe, respectful and responsive to their needs.

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[32] ACT Government, 'Terms of Reference: Independent Review of the ACT Restorative Justice Scheme and *Crimes (Restorative Justice) Act 2004*' (Pdf, 2025) Siobhan Lawler, Hayley Boxall and Christopher Dowling, 'Restorative Justice Conferencing for Domestic and Family Violence: Evaluation of Phase Three of the ACT Restorative Justice Scheme' (Research Report No 33, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2025).

Trauma-responsive practice involves creating environments that avoid re-traumatisation and promote healing. This includes staff training, therapeutic settings, and integrated supports that build trust and empower women to engage with rehabilitation and reintegration efforts.[33]

Strong family ties and support from partners have consistently been identified as key elements of successful reintegration and female prisoners who are visited by their families or friends have been found to be less likely to reoffend than those who do not receive visits.[34]

Why It Works

Gender-informed programs are designed to reflect the unique experiences and pathways that lead women into the justice system. These approaches recognise that women's offending is often shaped by trauma, social disadvantage, and gendered expectations—not just their roles as caregivers, but as individuals navigating complex social structures.

Unlike generic models, gender-informed programs respond directly to these realities. They offer trauma-informed care, build relational support networks, and provide services tailored to women's lived experiences. This includes integrated access to trauma therapy, parenting support, housing stability, and vocational training—elements that are critical to rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. [35]

By addressing the root causes of women's offending, gender-specific approaches are more effective than one-size-fits-all interventions. They acknowledge the impact of social exclusion, caregiving pressures, and systemic inequality, offering a pathway to recovery that is both responsive and restorative.

Gender-responsive justice approaches are more effective because they directly address the specific needs and experiences of women in the criminal justice system. These initiatives—including trauma-informed correctional practices and relational support models are designed to reduce reoffending and support safe reintegration by recognising the distinct social, emotional, and psychological factors that contribute to women's offending.

Research shows that women are more likely to engage with services when they feel safe, respected, and understood. Programs that are built around women's lived experiences— rather than treating them as a subset of male-focused models —are better equipped to foster behavioural change and support long-term reintegration. This includes creating environments that prioritise emotional safety, offer consistent relational support, and provide access to services that reflect women's realities, such as trauma recovery, parenting support, and pathways to economic independence.[36]

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[33] Emily J. Salisbury and Allison Crawford, 'Gender-responsive treatment to improve outcomes for women and girls in correctional settings: foundations, limitations and innovations' (2025) 13(11) *Health & Justice Journal* 1, 2-3.
[34] Lorana Bartels and Antonette Gaffney, *Good practice in women's prisons: A literature review* (Report, 2011).
[35] Layla Edwards et al, 'A systemic review of post-release programs for women exiting prison with substance-use disorders: assessing current programs and weighing the evidence' (2022) 10(1) *Health & Justice Journal*.
[36] Emily J. Salisbury and Allison Crawford, 'Gender-responsive treatment to improve outcomes for women and girls in correctional settings: foundations, limitations and innovations' (2025) 13(11) *Health and Justice* 1, 1-9.

International Examples

- **United States**: The *Female Integrated Treatment Program* provides trauma-informed care, parenting support, and vocational training. It has demonstrated a 31% reduction in reoffending among participants by addressing co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders and supporting re-entry through a holistic, gender-responsive model. (U.S. Bureau of Prisons) [bop.gov]
- **Norway**: Gender-specific correctional units offer therapeutic environments and continuity of care, with staff trained in trauma-informed practice. Norway's rehabilitative model contributes to one of the lowest recidivism rates in the world—approximately 20%—by focusing on reintegration, education, and maintaining family connections.[37] The VINN program is a rehabilitation initiative in Norway designed specifically for women in prison. It helps participants build confidence, set personal goals, and develop life skills through structured group sessions and individual support. By focusing on motivation and practical planning for life after release, VINN supports women to make positive changes and avoid reoffending. It's been accredited by the Norwegian Correctional Service and has shown success in helping women reintegrate into society.[38]
- **Canada**: The *Stride Program* at Grand Valley Institution for Women builds community support networks for federally sentenced women through in-prison activities and post-release mentoring. Evaluations show the program reduces social isolation and strengthens reintegration, contributing to lower reoffending rates.[39]

Canada's social integration program for women supports federally sentenced women released from custody by addressing gender-specific barriers to reintegration. It provides individualised case management and wraparound supports focused on employment readiness, parenting, healthy relationships, and personal goal setting and is designed to promote independence and reduce vulnerability to reoffending. Women participating in Correctional Services Canada reintegration programs show strong outcomes, with 94.3% **not** returning to custody within five years of sentence expiration.[40]

ACT context:

ACT Corrective Services (ACTCS) commitment to gender-responsive, trauma-informed, and culturally safe service delivery is set out in the **Walking with Women on the Pathway to Change Framework**. It sets out principles for rehabilitation and reintegration tailored to women's pathways into the justice system, including relational support, continuity of care, and holistic case management.[41]

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[37] Meagan Denny, 'Norway's Prison System: Investigating Recidivism and Reintegration' (2016) 10(10) *A Journal of Student Research* 22, 22.
[38] Torunn Hojdahl et al, '"VINN" – An accredited motivational program promoting convicted women's sense of coherence and coping' (2013) 2(3) *EuroVista* 177, 178-179.
[39] CJI, *Stride - Supporting People in Prison* (Web Page) <Stride Programs - CJI - Community Justice Initiatives>.
[40] Government of Canada, *Social Programs* (Web Page, 2024) <Social programs - Canada.ca>; Correctional Service Canada, *Response to the 50th Annual Report of the Correctional Investigator 2022-2023* (Annual Report, 2023).
[41] ACT Government, *Walking with women on the Pathway to change - Working together to reduce reoffending and meet the needs of women: A framework for ACT Corrective Services* (Report, February 2021) 1-4.

Women's Empowerment Yarning Circles, delivered by Yeddung Mura Aboriginal Corporation, offers a series of culturally safe yarning circles for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exiting the Alexander Maconochie Centre. The program focuses on enabling participants to stay in the community and successfully rebuild their lives by addressing trauma, rebuilding cultural identity, strengthening personal resilience and reducing the risk of reoffending. It provides a supportive, non-judgemental environment where participants can share experiences, learn from Elders and peers, and develop practical strategies for long-term wellbeing.

ACTCS have previously introduced temporarily funded initiatives that reflect gender-informed and trauma-responsive principles, aimed at supporting women in custody and reducing reoffending.

- **AMC Women's Mentoring Program,** delivered by the Women's Justice Network, is a peer-based initiative that connects women in custody with trained mentors to support their transition back into the community. The program builds trust, resilience, and practical life skills. Participants reported stronger engagement with services and increased readiness for release—protective factors known to reduce reoffending.[42] Funding for this program ended in December 2025.
- **The Women's Healing Program,** run by Clybucca Dreaming, has provided intense case management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at risk of being incarcerated. Funding for this program also ended in 2025.

There are significant challenges in delivering programs for women in the ACT, most notably the fluctuating number of women in custody or on community orders, which translates into a disproportionally high cost to support a small number of women.

Cultural safety and identity-based supports

Culturally safe justice programs recognise the role of identity, history, and systemic exclusion in shaping contact with the justice system. These approaches affirm cultural identity, promote dignity, and offer therapeutic alternatives to mainstream justice responses. They are particularly effective for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrants, and racialised groups, whose experiences of racism can lead to alienation and mistrust in conventional systems. By embedding cultural practices, involving community leaders, and tailoring support to lived experience, these models foster healing and reduce reoffending.

Why it works
Culturally safe programs improve engagement and outcomes by recognising the impact of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and systemic disadvantage. They build trust, reduce stigma, and promote accountability through culturally relevant processes. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, cultural connection is central to healing and desistance. For migrants and racialised communities, culturally responsive services enhance participation and reduce barriers to reintegration.

[42] Bageshri Savyasachi, 'New prison program for women aims to keep them out forever', *The Canberra Times* (online, 15 September 2025) <New mentoring program offered to women in Canberra jail | The Canberra Times | Canberra, ACT>.

International Examples

- **Canada's Indigenous Healing Lodges** offer culturally appropriate rehabilitation through Elder support, traditional ceremonies, and community governance. A comparative study found that Indigenous offenders released from Healing Lodges demonstrated greater improvements in reintegration potential and lower recidivism rates than those in mainstream facilities.[43]
- **New Zealand – Rangatahi and Pasifika Courts**
  These culturally adapted youth courts involve Elders and embed Māori and Pasifika practices. Since their establishment, Māori youth court appearances have dropped by 47%, and participants were 11% less likely to commit new offences.[44]

ACT context:

The ACT has implemented several culturally safe justice programs, each demonstrating measurable success in reducing reoffending and improving justice outcomes.

- The First Nations Justice Branch deliver a range of culturally safe programs, including **Empowerment Yarning Circles** provided by Yeddung Mura, **Galambany Court Support** provided by Yeddung Mura, **Yarrabi Bamirr** provided by Winnunga, Clybucca and Yeddung Mura and **Young Bruthas Healing Mens Group** provided by Worldview.
- The **Galambany Circle Sentencing Court** provides a culturally appropriate restorative sentencing process for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who plead guilty. Elders participate in sentencing, and offenders receive case-managed support addressing housing, employment, health, and behavioural change. Evaluations have shown that it contributes to reduced reoffending rates, improved social outcomes, and significant cost savings to the justice system. A Cost-Benefit Analysis found that every dollar invested in the court returns over three dollars in community benefits, including an estimated $5 million in justice system savings over a decade.[45] The Jumbunna Review further confirmed the court's positive role in reducing incarceration and supporting culturally appropriate sentencing.[46] Following a successful trial, the Galambany court has recently been expanded to the Supreme Court.
- Culturally appropriate sentencing is also available through the Warrumbul Children's Circle Sentencing Court.
- The **Ngurrambai Bail Support Program** provides culturally safe case management and supervision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on bail in the ACT. It supports compliance with bail conditions and reduces remand through tailored support addressing housing, health, and legal needs, with participants reporting increased trust, reduced stress, and stronger engagement with services.[47]

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[43] Saksham Deep Wadhwa, 'Integrating healing lodges into Canada's correctional system to mitigate recidivism' (2025) *Justice Institute British Columbia* 1, 1.
[44] Justice.govt.nz, *Rangatahi Court wins award for judicial excellence* (Web Page, 9 March 2020) <Rangatahi Court wins award for judicial excellence | New Zealand Ministry of Justice>.
[45] ACT Government, *Independent Cost Benefit Analysis of Galambany Circle Sentencing Court* (Report, 2021).
[46] Chris Cunneen et al, *Independent Review into the Over-Representation of First Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System: Strategies and Recommendations for Reducing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Over-Representation in the ACT Criminal Justice System* (Final Report, July 2025) 268-273.
[47] Ibid 255-257.

- The **Yeddung Mura Reporting Site** is a culturally grounded case management and reporting service for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients on parole or community-based orders. Operating in partnership with ACTCS, it provides trauma-informed supervision in a community setting, offering practical supports such as transport and employment assistance, alongside access to cultural programs and mentoring. An independent evaluation found the site fosters a relaxed and respectful environment, where clients feel safe, supported, and more willing to engage. It strengthens relationships between clients and supervising officers, reduces stigma, and helps individuals address behaviours linked to reoffending. The service plays a key role in supporting compliance and rebuilding connections with family, culture, and community.[48]
- The **Intensive Case Management (ICM)** program was piloted in 2024 under the ACT Government's *Reducing Recidivism by 25% by 2025* (RR25by25) strategy with a clear aim to provide a culturally informed, evidence-based pathway for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people exiting custody. The ICM is now an embedded program within the directorate and aligns with the Government's commitment to Closing the Gap, RR25by25, and the Jumbunna Review's recommendations.

These initiatives are part of the ACT's broader **Justice Reinvestment Strategy**, which aims to reduce incarceration and reoffending through community-led, culturally safe approaches. While these programs are delivering strong outcomes, continued investment in co-design, expansion, and evaluation is needed to ensure their reach and impact are sustained across the criminal justice system.

ACT-specific evidence

There is a growing body of evidence specific to the ACT which identifies local justice related needs, gaps in services and information about what is working well.

JACS has recently invested in activities to build evidence and develop capacity to address recidivism in the ACT, this includes the Co-design of a Justice Futures Fund [49] and a research collaboration with the Australian National University (ANU).[50]

These projects provide Government with current, ACT-specific evidence from which to set future directions in investment and activity.

The ACT's evidence base is also informed by contemporaneous work progressed under the RR25by25 and Beyond – A Justice Reinvestment Strategy for the ACT including the Jumbunna review and the First Nations Justice Branch commissioning process.51

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[48] ACT Corrective Services, *Yeddung Mura External Reporting Site Pilot – Evaluation Report* (Report, 2025) 27.

[49] Justice reinvestment strategy - ACT Government Transparency Portal

[50] Justice reinvestment strategy - ACT Government Transparency Portal

[51] Justice and Community Safety Directorate, *RR25by25 and Beyond: A Justice Reinvestment Strategy for the ACT* (Report, 2025); ACT Government, *Final Report of the Independent Review into the Over-representation of Frist Nations People in the ACT Criminal Justice System: The Jumbunna Review* (Final Report, September 2025); ACT Government, *First Nations Justice Branch* First Nations Justice Branch - ACT Government

The evidence base provides information about the strengths and gaps in the ACT, along with broader issues raised consistently about the criminal justice system. There are also consistent recommendations for service delivery and investment.

Analysis of administrative data by the ANU as part of the research collaboration found, consistent with various other studies undertaken in Australia and the ACT, further evidence of the over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at every stage of the ACT criminal legal system. Although the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females involved in the ACT criminal legal system may be relatively small, the intersection of their gender- and culture-specific needs reinforces the importance of targeted approaches that respond to their needs. Analysis of age of first offence indicates targeted interventions for girls at risk of contact with the legal system are required.

Strengths in the ACT

The First Nations Justice Branch, within the ACT Justice and Community Safety Directorate, works in partnership with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to design, deliver and support justice-related initiatives that improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Branch is committed to reducing the overrepresentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the justice system, including reducing rates of incarceration, through culturally informed and community-led approaches.

A key focus of the Branch is advancing self-determination by partnering with Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) to develop and deliver programs and services that respond to community needs and priorities. The Branch also plays an important role in strengthening the ACT Government's capacity to listen to, understand and respond to justice-related concerns raised by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Through collaboration, advocacy and policy leadership, the First Nations Justice Branch drives meaningful justice reform that supports improved wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and contributes to a more equitable and inclusive justice system for the broader ACT community.

The reviews and research noted above identified strengths in the ACT's justice-related services.

- Services which were culturally appropriate, strengths-based or therapeutic, were reported to be highly regarded and effective.
- Approaches creating personal connection and service continuity were well regarded by people during reintegration from custody into the community.
- Diversion programs were reported to be promising and would benefit from expansion. It was noted they were not proportionally applied to Indigenous youths.
- The ACT's Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List (DASL) is an example of internationally recognised best practice approach to addressing recidivism for serious offenders with a drug or alcohol dependency. The DASL provides intensive targeted supports and intervention as part of a Drug and Alcohol Treatment Order as an alternative to incarceration. The pilot ran from 2019 – 2023 and evaluation showed promising results.[52] Preliminary figures suggested that DASL had improved recidivism, with an

[52] Meredith Rossner et al, *ACT Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List: Process and Outcome Evaluation Final Report* (Final Report, June 2022).

overall reduction of 61% in fresh charges while participants were on the program, compared to the 12 months before program commencement. In June 2023 the program was expanded from 35 to 42 places, with another three years of funding.[53] A cost-benefit analysis in 2024 demonstrated the program is achieving significant avoided costs and economic benefits.[54]

- Reintegration programs in the ACT such as the Extended Throughcare Program have been successful in continuing support from prison to post release. Importantly, reintegration programs should be voluntary without imposed conditions on accessibility and should use case management to address the underlying factors of crime (including homelessness, mental health and substance abuse). In the ACT, the Extended Throughcare Program has had positive evaluations over a three-year period, including the overall cost-benefit and reducing the return to custody rate by around 22%.[55] This program starts around 3 to 4 months prior to release through early case management and continues for a year after release to ensure effective reintegration into the community.

Gaps in the ACT

- Self-determination: the ACT needs to improve how it ensures the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is engaged in the design of programs, selection of providers, design of data and evaluation metrics and measurement of the effectiveness of government responses. Essentially the ACT has some way to go in ensuring services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are controlled and delivered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- Cultural Safety: a lack of culturally safe programs and cultural activities was identified along with a need for more services controlled and delivered by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.
- Issues with service design: insufficient service duration relative to client needs; eligibility criteria that excludes justice-involved people with complex needs; narrow cohorts for programs (limited to specific offence types, or offered for Indigenous people only); services focussed on siloed issues operating with poor coordination (suggesting a need for navigation, advocacy and integrated "hub" models - particularly in relation to mental health, substance use, housing, relationships and finances). It was noted that design issues often arise from restrictions imposed under funding parameters.
- Reintegration: a need for strengths-building, cultural and therapeutic programs inside AMC and Bimberi, as well as during the transition to community. Offerings should include low-barrier, early engagement options to build self-efficacy; opportunities to develop pro-social roles; and strategies to stabilise housing and finances.
- Limitations on service capacity: reports noted insufficient funding to meet demand; short term/insecure funding; and insufficient responses for certain cohorts (for

[53] ACT Government, *Statutory Review Report: Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List Provisions* (Report, August 2023) 7.
[54] ACT Government, *Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Drug and Alcohol Sentencing List* (Final Report, August 2024) 33-41.
[55] Andrew Griffiths, Fredrick Zmudzki and Shona Bates, *Evaluation of ACT Extended Throughcare Pilot Program* (Final Report, January 2017) 3.

example programs responding to the unique needs of women, LGBQTI+ community, youth and those from non-English speaking backgrounds).

Principles for the ACT

Six key principles for the ACT, consistently identified through local consultation, reviews and research have been identified. These are also consistent with the design principles identified in successful international programs.

1. Acknowledge the importance of community reintegration and incorporate this into practice.
2. Support most vulnerable cohorts and recognise the unique needs of different cohorts.
3. Offer case management and wrap around services.
4. Invest in community-controlled decision making at all stages of the decision-making process.
5. Invest in culturally safe, culturally relevant and community-controlled services.
6. Invest early - in holistic prevention, diversion, and youth focussed responses.

Conclusion and implications for the ACT

Across international jurisdictions, several shared features appear to underpin successful initiatives:

- Tailored case management that coordinates services and builds trust.
- Place-based delivery that embeds programs in communities.
- Cultural safety and community leadership.
- Gender-informed and trauma-responsive design.
- Community integration and family connection.
- Continuity of care across custody and community.

These elements are not program-specific—they are design principles that can be embedded across initiatives.

These approaches are most effective when embedded in broader justice reinvestment strategies that prioritise early intervention, diversion, and community-led responses – which is strongly aligned with the findings of local research.

The ACT has made significant progress through initiatives such as the ICM, Justice Housing Program and DASL, but opportunities remain to strengthen integration, expand cultural and gender-informed supports, and embed continuity across the justice system.

There is evidence that the ACT is making efforts to adhere to best practice but does not have the economies of scale that larger jurisdictions have, which can lead to an inability to fund services for priority cohorts.

The ACT Government's election commitment to '*Explore international evidence-based programs that specifically target recidivist offending, with the view to a pilot in the ACT'* anticipated piloting a program that integrates the core elements of successful justice reinvestment strategies, tailored to the ACT context and cohort needs.

Local evidence has highlighted that while the ACT has adopted best practice features in several initiatives it faces complex challenges, being a small jurisdiction with a fluctuating detainee population and limited available funding.

Further, recent reviews and consultations have identified the importance of providing consistent long-term services that are place based and informed by the community. The current fiscal environment calls for efficiency and prioritisation of successful programs that target priority cohorts.

Examples of programs that include the shared elements of success and address priority cohorts include the ICM, Women's Mentoring Program, DASL and Ngurrambai bail support program. These programs have been shown to reduce reoffending, improve social outcomes, and deliver better value for money than incarceration. Careful consideration needs to be given to the value of developing a new pilot program in the ACT when the core features of successful initiatives are already embedded in current programs.

Reducing recidivism requires a long-term, strategic approach to understanding and responding to offending. International evidence shows that justice reinvestment strategies grounded in community, culture, and care are delivering measurable results. The ACT is well-positioned to build on existing strengths and lead the next phase of reform through targeted enhancement of successful programs.

In listening to calls from the community and government agencies to focus on continuity and long-term support, the ACT has an opportunity to support programs that have been designed for the ACT and have demonstrated success rather than piloting an experimental program in the ACT.

Future investment should focus on scaling what works, co-designing with communities, and embedding evidence-based principles into all aspects of justice reform. By doing so, the ACT can lead the nation in building a justice system that is rehabilitative, inclusive, and effective—reducing reoffending and strengthening community safety.