

What Works



NATIONAL PROBATION SERVICE

for England and Wales

June 2004

NPD: PROGRAMME EVALUATION FINDINGS

Think First prospective research study: Effectiveness and reducing attrition.

By Giok Stewart-Ong, Louise Harsent, Colin Roberts,
Ros Burnett and Zainab Al-Attar

INTRODUCTION

Think First is a community-based offence-focused problem-solving programme for medium to high risk offenders, based on cognitive-behavioural principles. It was accredited by the Joint Prison/Probation Accreditation Panel in January 2000. A retrospective study carried out by the authors (Ong, *et al*, 2003) had shown that offenders who completed the pre-accredited form of 'TF' (called Offender Focused Problem Solving) showed reduced reconviction compared with offenders who failed to complete. This retrospective study adopted a 'closed box approach' so that the factors that may have effected this outcome were unknown. To evaluate whether this finding held good for the accredited form of 'Think First' and, if so, what factors contributed to this finding, an additional prospective research study was undertaken.

KEY POINTS

- The reconviction rate was significantly lower for offenders completing the programme than for the other groups at 6, 9 and 12 months follow-up from date of sentence. This result may indicate a treatment effect for offenders who manage to complete Think First. However, the results could also imply a selection effect in terms of who completes the course. This can only be disentangled by the creation of a non-treated comparison group.

CONTENTS

- Introduction
- Key Points
- Think First
- The Sample
- Methods
- Main Findings
- Other Issues
- The Retrospective Study
- Table 1 Attendance and Reconviction

- There was a tendency for non-completers to have higher reconviction rates than non-starters, suggesting that failure to complete Think First may be associated with increased reconviction.
- Offenders with a lower risk of conviction had high completion rates, but completing TF was not found to affect their reconviction levels.
- Improved targeting could reduce the high proportion of non-starters, by excluding offenders with the following characteristics; a recent history of custody/breach; those convicted of a high number of offences at their current court appearance; and those having considerable problems in communicating.
- Attendance at pre-group sessions was associated with both increasing completion and reducing reconviction rates.

- Good case management was associated with improved outcomes. Of greatest value were intense supervision around the start of Think First, supporting offenders with personal problems and frequent contact after completion of the programme, to assist offenders in using what they had learnt.

It proved difficult to obtain data within the Probation Areas to match cases in the intervention group adequately to create a meaningful external comparison group. Without a comparison group the treatment effect cannot be disentangled from a possible selection effect. Creating a meaningful external comparison group at a later date can rectify this important shortcoming of the current study.

THINK FIRST

Think First is a cognitive behavioural group work programme aimed at persistent offenders subject to supervision by the Probation Service in the community. It was introduced as part of the Home Office Crime Reduction Programme, aimed at developing evidence-based practice.

Think First consists of 22 two-hour sessions, focusing on cognitive risk factors linked to criminal recidivism, so as to improve faulty reasoning, improve interpersonal problem solving and reduce risk of re-offending. It is based on previous research, which had demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural interventions with offenders. It provides a sequenced series of structured exercises designed to teach a range of social and cognitive skills including self-management and social skills. There are also individual pre- and post-group sessions

Three Probation Areas were selected as 'pathfinders' to implement the programme and provided data for the current study. Think First is now available in 27 Probation Areas around the country.

THE SAMPLE

The research sample for the prospective study consisted of 650 offenders, who had been sentenced to Think First during the data collection period, of whom 506 were undertaking the TF programme for the first time. Fourteen cases had to be discounted because the programme they were attending was discontinued. The 492 cases that were attending TF for the first time were

predominantly medium-high risk offenders (mean OGRS=67), with an average age at which offenders might be expected to desist from or reduce their offending behaviour (mean age 27), predominantly white (98%) and predominantly male (90%). Some analysis has also been carried out on those attending for a second or subsequent time.

It was found that 42% of the sample did not attend any of the core group-work sessions ordered by the court (non-starters). A further 28% started these, but dropped out during the course of the programme (non-completers). Only 28% completed the group-work sessions (completers) and 2% did not complete because their group was discontinued.

METHODS

Data was collected before, during and after the sampling period to enable intermediate and final outcome differences to occur. Intermediate outcome measures in this study were attendance and reduction of psychometric deficits. The ultimate outcome measure was short-term reconviction (up to 12 months). A wealth of other information was collected on offenders, which was related to outcome: criminal history (including risk of reconviction), factors affecting eligibility for the programme, plus other offender- and programme variables.

This information was collected through various sources: Police National Computer; Offender Index; information extracted from Probation Areas by local research assistants on site; standard data compiled by court report writers; risk assessment tools (ACE/LSI-R); data normally collected for Think First (targeting matrix, self-report psychometrics, semi-structured interviews carried out by a psychologist); diaries completed by offenders; and questionnaires filled in by offenders, tutors, and case managers.

MAIN FINDINGS

The study was designed specifically to examine reconviction rates and attrition in relation to Think First. Overall the study showed:

- The reconviction rate was significantly lower for offenders completing the programme than for the non-starters or the non-completers at 6, 9 and 12

months follow-up from date of sentence (see Table 1). This was the case even when other important factors were taken into account, including the risk of reconviction as represented by OGRS. This result may indicate a treatment effect for offenders who manage to complete Think First. However, the results could also imply a selection effect in terms of who completes the course. This can only be disentangled by the creation of a non-treated comparison group.

- There was a tendency for non-completers to have higher reconviction rates than non-starters, suggesting that failure to complete Think First may be associated with increased reconviction. A similar finding has been found in previous research studies (including those of other programmes).
- Completion of TF was disappointingly low and, in particular, the percentage of non-starters was very high. Not only was there a high level of attrition but dropout tended to occur early during the programme. On average non-completers attended less than a quarter of the core programme and half completed fewer than 4 sessions. Just over a third of non-starters and non-completers were reallocated to new programmes following non-attendance.

Because completion rates appeared to be a problem and because of the apparent link between failure to complete and increased likelihood of reconviction, the research team investigated which factors were significantly associated with high completion levels and with reduced reconviction. They found that offenders with OGRS scores of 40 or lower had high completion rates, but completing TF was not found to affect their reconviction levels because these were naturally low. Improved targeting could reduce the high proportion of non-starters, by excluding offenders with the following characteristics; a recent history of custody/breach; those convicted of a high number of offences at their current court appearance; and those having considerable problems in communicating. Attendance at pre-group sessions was associated with both increasing completion and reducing reconviction rates.

The most important elements of the pre group sessions appeared to be: talking about the programme content; trying to solve barriers to attendance (e.g. transport, severe problems with accommodation, drug abuse); examining how Think First related to the overall supervision period; and developing offenders' motivation.

Some aspects of case management were associated with improved outcomes: more intense supervision around the start of Think First; supporting offenders with personal problems; attention to other issues such as living arrangements, employment/education and personal/family problems; and frequent contact after completion of Think First, to assist offenders in using what they had learnt.

OTHER ISSUES

It proved extremely difficult to obtain data within the selected Probation Areas to match cases in the intervention group adequately to create a meaningful external comparison group. This is a major problem in that without a comparison group the attribution of difference found to 'selection effects' cannot be discounted. Once core reconviction data for potential comparison cases is available to the Home Office (in about one year's time), the creation of a matched and meaningful external comparison group (i.e. one with similar risk of reconviction, needs and characteristics) will rectify this important shortcoming of the current study.

The researchers also drew attention to some of problems in evaluating programmes. They found there were weaknesses in data integrity of certain key data fields in the Criminal Justice System, including the reliability of reconviction data. Sample sizes were small, but shifts in the expected direction were found on a number of intermediate psychometric measures. However, the procedures and content of the psychometric testing needs to be further improved before they can be relied on to reflect improved outcome. The sensitivity, reliability and validity of the current targeting matrix needed further investigation.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

NPD is currently considering the full contents of the report and implications which stem from it in terms of case management, targeting strategies and programme change. The findings, in relation to reduction of attrition, suggest that targeting could be improved, but this might be counter-productive if offenders who would most benefit from the programme are excluded. There are a number of issues around case management and programme preparation which will inform the national strategy and local practice. This is, of course, only one

study based on relatively small numbers in three Areas at the time the programme was being implemented and it would be premature to make major changes when it is likely that much more evaluation data will become available in the next 12 months. The researchers note that it cannot automatically be assumed that implementing changes based on the findings would definitely improve outcomes. It is important that any changes are carefully monitored and evaluated. A copy of the full study will shortly be made available on the NPD web site.

Copies of the full Think First Study can be obtained from:

Razak Moghal
Room 223, Horseferry House
Dean Ryle Street
London, SW1P 2AW
Tel: 0207 217 0679
Fax: 0207 217 0693

THE RETROSPECTIVE STUDY

A retrospective study was carried out on the pre-accredited Offence – Focused – Problem - Solving programme, named 'retrospective' because all events had already occurred by the time the study was carried out. In March 2000 the PSU produced a preliminary report describing the findings of a retrospective study of the McGuire programme (based on pre-accredited programmes run between January 1997 and December 1998). That report concluded that the difference in reconviction due to the cognitive-behavioural treatment was significant in the short-term, when differences within the treatment group were investigated.

This result was deduced despite the finding that favourable reconviction results of offenders who completed the McGuire programme were partly attributable to an effect of self-selection. However, a significant difference in reconviction in the unexpected direction was found when an external comparison group was chosen (i.e. reconviction of the treatment group was significantly higher than that of the imprisoned comparison group). In order to make sure that these findings were not due to a variety of errors, it was decided to resubmit the retrospective cases again in order to computer generate updated reconviction data.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Danny Clark, NPD Interventions Unit

Email: Danny.Clark@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

Tel: 0207 217 0675

Table 1 Attendance and reconviction

	ATTENDANCE ¹					
	<i>Completer</i>		<i>Non Completer²</i>		<i>Non-starter²</i>	
Reconviction at 6 months						
% reconvicted	27%	31/116	45% *	52/115	40% *	70/174
% with more serious (A up to F) primary offence	12%	14/116	17% **	20/115	17% *	29/174
% receiving custody	1%	1/116	5% *	6/115	16% ***	27/174
Reconviction at 9 months						
% reconvicted	36%	39/110	64% ***	69/108	57% ***	98/172
% with more serious (A up to F) primary offence	15%	16/110	26% ***	28/108	25% **	42/171
% receiving custody	1%	1/110	14% ***	15/108	22% ***	37/172
Reconviction at 12 months						
% reconvicted	44%	28/63	77% ***	63/82	74% ***	90/122
% with more serious (A up to F) primary offence	18%	11/63	32% ***	26/82	29% ***	35/122
% receiving custody	3%	2/63	16% ***	13/82	24% ***	29/122
Onset of reconviction offence at 6 months						
% onset offence reconvicted	34%	39/116	65% ***	75/115	59% ***	101/171
% with more serious (A up to F) primary offence	13%	15/116	23% ***	26/115	28% ***	47/171
% receiving custody	2%	2/115	16% ***	18/115	21% ***	35/171
Onset of reconviction offence at 9 months						
% onset offence reconvicted	41%	45/110	69% ***	75/108	68% ***	115/169
% with more serious (A up to F) primary offence	15%	17/110	24% ***	26/108	29% ***	50/169
% receiving custody	2%	2/109	18% ***	19/108	24% ***	40/169

1. The reference category of attendance was 'completers'. This column is shown in italics

2. The number of stars (*) indicate significant (two tailed) departures from the reference category. *= P<0.05; **=P<0.005; ***=P<0.0005; Chi square were used.