

A multicomponent psychosocial intervention to reduce substance use by adolescents involved in the criminal justice system: the RISKIT-CJS RCT

Simon Coulton,^{1*} Olena Nizalova,² Tracy Pellatt-Higgins,¹ Alex Stevens,² Nadine Hendrie,¹ Catherine Marchand,¹ Rosa Vass,¹ Paolo Deluca,³ Colin Drummond,³ Jennifer Ferguson,⁴ Gillian Waller⁴ and Dorothy Newbury-Birch⁴

¹Centre for Health Services Studies, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

²School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

³Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neurosciences, King's College London, London, UK

⁴School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law, Teesside University, Middlesbrough, UK

*Corresponding author s.coulton@kent.ac.uk

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Plain language summary

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We explored how useful a psychological intervention was in reducing substance use among young people who had some involvement in the criminal justice system. We recruited young people aged between 13 and 17 years in four areas of England (i.e. South East, London, North West and North East). Young people were recruited from youth offending teams, pupil referral units and substance misuse teams. Those young people who were willing to participate were offered usual treatment and half, chosen at random, were offered an opportunity to take part in the RISKIT-Criminal Justice System (RISKIT-CJS) programme.

The RISKIT-CJS programme had four distinct parts. The first was a 1-hour session that used an approach called motivational interviewing to explore the young person's substance use and discuss different strategies to change their behaviour. This was followed by two group sessions delivered over 2 consecutive weeks. These group sessions addressed risks associated with substance use, what triggers use and the health and social consequences. In addition, young people were taught new skills to help them manage in situations in which they might normally use substances. At the end of the group sessions, the young people had another motivational interview.

Twelve months after participants started, we found that the frequency of substance use had decreased in both groups; however, the RISKIT-CJS intervention was no better than treatment as usual. When we spoke with young people who had taken part and staff involved with this population, we got a mixed picture. In some settings, particularly pupil referral units, the RISKIT-CJS intervention was well received by young people and staff, and staff felt that it was a useful additional resource to the work that they were currently undertaking. On the other hand, in the youth offending teams, the staff thought that the programme was too different from their normal work to be implemented easily and they considered the population they work with too established in their substance use and criminal activity to benefit from the programme.

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