

# Seeking Effective Interventions for Serious Young Offenders

Interim Results of a Four-Year Randomized Study  
of Multisystemic Therapy in Ontario, Canada



Funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre, Ottawa

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The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the National Crime Prevention Centre or the Department of Justice.

## **Dedication**

We extend our deepest appreciation to the young people and their families who participated in this project. This report is dedicated to them.



## Acknowledgements

Completion of the MST study in Ontario represents the efforts of many, many individuals. Patricia Begin, Lucie Léonard, and Mark Irving of the National Crime Prevention Centre have shown a keen interest in how research can promote community safety and we thank them for their vision and support. We also acknowledge the support of Brendan Stacey and Lee Tustin of the Ministry of Community and Social Services; Loretta Eley and Chantal Columbe of the Ministry of Correctional Services; Chris Hamel, Dan Edwards, and Keller Strother of MST Services Inc.; and Scott Henggeler and Sonja Shoenwald of the Medical University of South Carolina. At the London Family Court Clinic, Trish Dick, Karen Chalmers, Ann Hoffer, Lisa Hawkins, Jeanette Grimes, Karen Francis and Kristen Voss provided essential research support. Ema Strazimiri scored and input much of the testing data and Michelle Zerwer was always there to talk through the intriguing facets of data analysis. Wendy Gaffney and her staff at the London Police Services efficiently handled our great volume of requests for criminal record checks, an extraordinary effort without which this evaluation could never have been completed. We also thank Eldon Amoroso for organizing this important feature of the study.

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In London, our own community, four people have earned our respect for their commitment and dedication to finding a better way to help families: Jon DeActis, who supervised the MST team, Michelle Edwards, Roger Houghton and Jody Lake. Kristen Loft has twice joined the team to fill in for leaves. Program Supervisors for MCSS were at various points Jean MacDonald, Emilie Ross and Nadine Edmundson. The Executive Directors of the two involved agencies have been enormously supportive: Lothar Leihmann of Craigwood Youth Services and Barrie Evans of Madame Vanier Children's Services. The support of Heather Wice, of the Board of Directors at Craigwood Youth Services, and Nancy Miller of Madame Vanier Children's Services, has also been much appreciated. The members of the Youth Access Committee of the Safer Community Program are Emilie Ross of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Alice Lewis of the St. Leonard's Society, and Mary Packowski of the Children's Aid Society of London and Middlesex. Penny Loube of Craigwood has been invaluable in her work with families, competently assessing their needs and sensitively helping them decide about participation in the study. Deborah Deller aided greatly in the organization of the file material and making us feel welcome on our frequent visits. Several students have been involved in various capacities over the years: Dina Curvello, Jack Gill, Chantell Gregory, Tammy Mathews, Lindsay Moir, Kelly Richardson, Cathy Scott, Dawne Wahby, Tammy Willert, and Jennifer Woelk. Finally, Cate Urquhart was instrumental in launching the Safer Community Program in 1997.

In Mississauga, at Associated Youth Services of Peel, supervisors at different points were Kelly McDonnell and Lisa Bachmeier. John Choi, Chris Burt, Jennifer Watson, Joanne Williams, and Tammy Oakley were therapists at various points over the life of the project. Kelly Henderson, as Executive Director of Associated Youth Services of Peel, has been keenly interested and unfailingly supportive of the project. In the community, an enormous number of people have made their support known, including the probation officers in Brampton, Burlington and Mississauga, and especially John Rowe, the Supervisor of Probation Services in Mississauga, and Ray Mahoney, the Program Supervisor for MCSS. We also want to acknowledge the assistance of Brenda Finlayson and Shari Burrows of Peel Children's Centre, Dana Bidell of the Peel Board of Education, Barbara Smith of the Residential Placement Advisory Committee in Mississauga, Lisa Dodds of the Management Support Branch of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Detective Doug Turner, Judi Edwards of the Peel Children's Aid Society, Paul Taylor of the Crown Attorney's Office, and Jan Barr of Casatta in Burlington.

The Ottawa team was housed at Eastern Ontario Youth Offenders Services (EOYOS), made up of staff members seconded from Crossroads Children's Centre and the Youth Services Bureau as well as two staff from EOYOS: Vickie Jennings (EOYOS, Clinical Supervisor), Alain Corriveau (Crossroads), Rick Perley (Youth Services Bureau) and Vicki Grism (EOYOS). Past team members were Heather Jenkin, Ned Jackson and Catherine Carvell. Cam MacLeod was Executive Director at EOYOS, having taken the helm from Jane Fjeld in 1999. Melanie Gates provided invaluable assistance with the research-related tasks and Louise Comeau kept it all organized and made us feel so welcome on site visits. In the Ottawa community, the MCSS program supervisors were Laurent Couture and Kathy Neff. At the Ottawa Police, Louise Logue and Mark Houldsworth have been key supporters as have Angèle Bouchard of Co-ordinated Access, Cherry Murray and Barry Halden of Crossroads Children's Centre, Gord Boyd of Youth Services Bureau (formerly with William E. Hay), and David Taylor of MCSS Probation Services.

In Simcoe County, Stan Spiker and Barb Curwen were co-supervisors of the MST team, made up of John Fiddes, Laurie Teed, and John Moore. Past therapists were: George Sanders, Lana Wipf, Eric Kay, and Brad DeLong. Joanne Bednarz was the first clinical supervisor of the team. MST services were provided with the cooperation of two (formerly three) agencies. The Executive Directors of the original three agencies contributed enormously to get the project under way: Jeanette Lewis (then of) Kinark Child and Family Services, Glen Newby, then of the Robert Thompson Youth and Family Centre in Cookstown, and Ann Newroth, then of Catulpa Tamarac Child and Family Services in Orillia. The members of the local steering committee operationalized this inter-agency cooperation and provided valuable community input and guidance. They are John Hewer, Area Program Director of Kinark in Barrie, Gord Lugsdin of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Rex Findley, Supervisor of Probation Services, Glen Newby, Elizabeth Dayus, and Pat Malane. Marliyn Yeung was the most recent MCSS Program Supervisor

Lastly, we are aware that with every innovation in a complex system such as youth justice, many individuals must come forward to encourage the development and delivery of unique services such as MST. We extend our appreciation to the many judges, police officers, probation officers, children's aid workers, school officials and other community support workers in the four communities who have encouraged the delivery and evaluation of MST in Ontario over the past five years.

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## Executive Summary

This report contains interim outcome data from a four-year randomized study of Multisystemic Therapy (MST) in four southern Ontario communities. With therapy teams in London, Mississauga, Simcoe County and Ottawa, about 200 families received MST between 1997 and 2001. At the same time, about 200 families continued with the usual services available through the local youth justice and social service systems. These services typically took the form of probation supervision augmented as seen necessary by referral to specialized programming. Group assignment was determined randomly so the two groups were equivalent at the outset. That being true, the behaviour of the usual services group reflects the behaviour of the MST recipients, had they not received MST, and any post-intervention differences can be attributed to MST.

Ontario's Ministry of Community and Social Services supported the project because MST promised to be a cost-efficient way of reducing youth crime. Reductions in offending would, in turn, reduce both losses to crime victims and costs associated with criminal justice processing. The National Crime Prevention Centre (NCPC) in Ottawa supported the evaluation to learn if MST could be a cost-efficient intervention for youth crime and if it might be a viable alternative to custody for serious offenders. This is the final report to the National Crime Prevention Centre pursuant to that funding. Because each youth will be tracked for three years, the study will not be complete until 2004.

The multi-site nature of the project permitted comparisons across different types of communities under variable conditions of implementation. The intent was to implement the same intervention across the sites and all teams had the same training, were supervised by the same MST consultant, and met quarterly for boosters. A standard research protocol was used. Other important features of the study were intake screening against inclusionary and exclusionary criteria, a large sample, a valid measure of outcome, and long-term follow-up. The data collection strategy was specifically designed to answer research questions posed by stakeholder groups. Considerable care and expense were expended to ensure fidelity to the treatment model. The outcome measure involved real behaviour in the community, not in-program changes in attitudes or clinical symptoms. The research was designed and conducted by investigators independent of the method's developer, the funder, and the agencies delivering the program.

## Research Questions

The experimental design was needed to answer this question: Will MST be more effective in reducing criminal behaviour in serious young offenders than the services already available to youth in these four areas of Ontario? Outcome indicators focussed on criminal behaviour, specifically conviction and rates and length of custody sentences. The research questions of interest were these:

- are recipients of MST less likely to be convicted of offences than youth who did not receive MST?
- do recipients of MST who offend do so after a longer period?
- are recipients of MST less likely to be sentenced to youth custody?
- do recipients of MST spend less time in custody?
- are recipients of MST re-convicted of fewer offences than youths who did not receive MST?
- are those who drop out of MST more likely to offend than program completers?
- do recipients of MST commit less serious offences?
- will the cost of the MST intervention be recouped by savings to the correctional system?

Psychological testing was administered at intake and discharge to measure family functioning, caregiver depression, and several facets of youth functioning including social skills, behaviour problems and pro-criminal attitudes.

At the point of this writing, the youths have been tracked until September of 2001. The results presented here are interim, in that 93% have been tracked for six-months post-discharge but only 79% have been tracked for one year. The figures for two and three years are 47% and 20%. The follow-up ends in 2004.

## Interim Conclusions

Using multiple indicators of outcome, no treatment effect can be identified at this point. Four different conclusions could be made. Either:

1. the treatment effect of MST in Ontario is too small to be detected statistically with a sample of 409 (raising doubts about its practicality and cost-efficiency as an intervention), or
2. there is no treatment effect of MST that exceeds that of usual services in Ontario, or
3. neither MST nor the usual services were effective when criminal convictions is the outcome, or
4. MST might be effective in Canada under different conditions of implementation, with different clients, different outcome measures, and/or compared with different services

It is not possible to dismiss completely the fourth point unless this study is replicated elsewhere in Canada with a sample of 600 to 800. Also, it is possible that MST benefited youths and their families in ways not captured when outcomes are related to criminal convictions. On an optimistic note, the American research that showed the success of MST in that country was probably demonstrating the benefits of delivering a high quality service rather than no service at all. This suggests that a theoretically derived, intensive community-based service of high integrity delivered by well trained and supervised therapists and targeted appropriately – whether it is MST or something else – can make a difference.

Different observers may well have variable interpretations of these data. The approach adopted in this report is to present all the analyses using all the outcome indicators, so stakeholders are able to draw their own conclusions.

## Future Directions

We have learned a great deal that can and should inform the next steps in Canada.

### **! A great deal of taxpayers' money is spent on this group of youth so we can afford to look for good programs**

Almost \$6 million in youth custody costs so far have been spent since the follow-up began (excluding detention and the custody stays during the intervention). This amount will rise as the follow-up continues. This is an astonishing figure when considering that the 380 youth have collectively been convicted so far of fewer than 400 offences involving victims. Also, 18% of these youth had no criminal record at referral and have not been convicted thus far. Imagine the costs associated with police investigation and processing of criminal cases, pre-trial detention, prosecution and court costs, legal aid, probation and non-custodial correctional interventions, and adult incarceration. Add to that the losses experienced by crime victims and insurance companies, and the costs that will accrue as the follow-up continues, and it is plain to see that processing even a small group of young offenders can have an enormous fiscal impact.

It is worth spending some time to find out how to prevent crime among this group of youth. More custody is not the answer if crime prevention is the goal. The data here confirm that preventing the onset of youth crime is the best way to increase public safety. Among young people who share the profile of this sample, once a youth becomes involved with the justice system our current interventions are not working very well. For example, the length of time spent in custody before referral was correlated with likelihood and magnitude of convictions in the follow-up. The more time youths spent in custody, the more crimes they committed afterwards. The younger they were at first conviction, the more likely they were to offend again. We need to find interventions that can interrupt that pattern.

### **! Randomized field trials are challenging to implement but greatly aid our search for interventions that improve public safety**

It was the randomized nature of the study that created an accurate picture of MST's effectiveness. When the stage of development of an intervention dictates that an outcome or efficiency evaluation is necessary, only randomized methodologies should be used. Research that fails to attain a certain standard of scientific rigour will likely lead to the wrong conclusions about program effectiveness. Claims of evidence-based practice are hollow without a body

of sound research upon which to base those claims.

Internationally, the role of randomized field trials have been recognized as crucial in the crime prevention field and Canada should follow suit.

**! Funding should be targeted at interventions of high quality that are tested with the target population using agreed-upon indicators of outcome**

While MST was the first program ever put under such scrutiny, it should not be the last. This project should signal the arrival of a new standard in Canada, one where programs are selected and continue to receive funding based upon sound empirical evidence of their efficacy (from randomized trials) with the target client group. Interventions must have high levels of program integrity (manual, training regime, etc.), be well supervised, treat only clients that are appropriate, devote continuous attention to *attaining* and *maintaining* program fidelity, have continuous *monitoring* of fidelity, have clear and measurable outcomes derived logically from program goals, and document those outcomes by measuring post-program behaviour. Before widespread adoption of a new method, a multi-site randomized trial should be conducted.

MST was the first program in Canada to be put through this test but it should not be the last.

**! communities should work together to learn about the chronic offenders in their area and devise intensive efforts matched to the problem**

The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* will define a more differentiated approach to young offenders. Minor offenders will be diverted from formal processing whenever possible. On the other hand, there is a small sub-set of young offenders, probably less than ten percent, who are repeatedly processed by the justice system. Their profile may vary from community to community. It would be cost effective to identify these youth and devote intensive assistance to them.

Identifying the characteristics of chronic offenders should be a task performed by each community so a local solution can be crafted.

**! after programs are selected because of empirical evidence of effectiveness, continuous monitoring of program integrity and fidelity to the model should become routine**

Many features of the MST intervention are desirable and should not be lost as we move forward to find solutions to criminal behaviour in this group of youth. MST was empirically derived and tested. It had a rigorous training and supervision regime, required the hiring of highly skilled therapists and supervisors, explicitly acknowledged the importance of agency culture and support to treatment effectiveness, put the onus on therapists to “do whatever it takes,” and put the focus on outcomes and dared to be accountable for success or the lack thereof. These are program features which should become the norm, if we are serious about public safety. An extraordinary efforts was expended by the MST therapists and supervisors who were part of this project. We learned that what works is hard work.

Just because a program *can* work does not mean it will work. A poor program implemented well will not work. But neither will a good program implemented poorly. More attention should be paid to the conditions of implementation so program providers are supported by their ecology to provide the best service they can.



## Summary of Recommendations

- 1 Agencies and others considering the adoption of MST for young offenders should compare the alternative services in their jurisdictions to those available to youth in the South Carolina and Missouri studies, to assess the generalizability of the American MST research to their jurisdictions.
- 2 Agencies and others considering the adoption of MST for young offenders should compare the characteristics of their target client group to those studied in South Carolina and Missouri, to assess the generalizability of the American research findings to their jurisdictions.
- 3 Agencies and others considering the adoption of MST should assess their ability to devote on-going funding to MST Services Inc. for training, consultation and licensing.
- 4 Agencies and others considering the adoption of MST should do so only in the context of a randomized study comparing MST to local services and using outcome measures that are meaningful to the communities and to funders.
- 5 To advance our understanding about relative program effectiveness and efficiency, to ensure the best programs are funded, and to reduce erroneous supposition about effectiveness, experimental studies should be the norm in Canadian program evaluation.
- 6 Programs in youth corrections should be selected for and evaluated against their ability to affect target behaviour relative to a basis of comparison such as another program.
- 7 In Canada, we should continue to seek ways of intervening effectively with chronic young offenders by identifying, at the local level, the characteristics of chronic offenders and by devising a spectrum of strategies tailored to the community.
- 8 The federal government should promote the development and evaluation of programs that find non-custodial ways of preventing and responding to non-compliance with probation and other administration of justice offences.
- 9 The federal government should encourage research that investigates both the positive and negative impact of custody on youth, so judicial and correctional decision makers fully understand both the risks and benefits of placing youths in institutional environments.
- 10 The provincial government should audit the use of custody placements for adolescent women to ensure that custody and detention are not used in place of more appropriate residential placements.

