Evidence on the effectiveness of outreach programmes for at-risk youth in OECD countries is inconclusive

The evidence on outreach programmes to improve life circumstances and prevent further adverse developmental trajectories of at-risk youth in OECD countries is inconclusive.

In this review, we aimed to find evidence of the effectiveness of outreach programmes on improving at-risk youth’s life circumstances. However, the evidence is inconclusive because of the small number of studies.

What is this review about?
At-risk youth are defined as a diverse group of young people in unstable life circumstances, who are currently experiencing, or at risk of developing, one or more serious problems. At-risk youth are often very unlikely to seek out help for themselves within the established facilities, as their adverse developmental trajectories have installed a lack of trust in authorities.

A number of outreach programmes have been established seeking to help these young people on an ad hoc basis, meaning that the interventions are designed to fit the individual needs of each young person rather than as a one-size-fits-all treatment model.

What studies are included?
Included studies had to examine the impact of targeted outreach programmes on at-risk youth. Studies had to have a comparison group.

Sixteen studies analysing 17 different interventions were identified. Of these, only five studies could be used in the data synthesis. The studies were from the USA and Canada. There were four randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and 12 non-randomised studies. The studies contained data for 578 participants.

What are the main findings of this review?
The evidence was inconclusive. At most, the results from two studies could be pooled in a single meta-analysis. The outcomes drug (other than marijuana) use, marijuana use and alcohol use each at two different time points (one and three months follow up) were meta-analysed.
In addition, a number of other outcomes were reported in a single study only.

**What do the findings of this review mean?**

The current landscape of research on outreach programmes targeting at-risk youth in the OECD countries shows that it has yet to be evaluated thoroughly. The evidence was inconclusive because too few studies reported results on the same type of outcome.

Furthermore, all the available evidence used in the data synthesis was from the USA and Canada, and so the findings may not be generalisable to other settings and systems outside Northern America.

None of the studies used in the meta-analyses reported on long term impacts.

These considerations point to the need for more rigorously-conducted studies reporting a larger number of outcomes.

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**How up-to-date is this review?**

The review authors searched for studies published up to November 2021.

**What is the Campbell Collaboration?**

Campbell is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

**About this summary**

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