THE INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE

There has been considerable international research into the impact of cognitive skills programmes. The first such study, in Canada, showed an 11.2% reduction in 1-year reconviction rates when comparing the treatment and control groups\(^1\). In the USA, research has found a significant difference in the percentage of those who reoffend between the treatment and control groups (23% against 36\%)\(^2\).

An evaluation of the Reasoning and Rehabilitation programme across four different countries (Canada, USA, UK and Sweden) found a 14% decrease in reconviction for programme participants compared with controls. The programme was effective in Canada, the UK and the USA\(^3\).

WHAT PROBLEMS DO COGNITIVE SKILLS PROGRAMMES ADDRESS?

In cognitive skills programmes, offenders learn about the influence of thinking on their behaviour and emotions, and are helped to develop better problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Through learning how to consider the consequences of different courses of action, offenders can develop new ways of thinking and behaving which will help them be less impulsive, better at making decisions and less likely to commit further offences. They consider all the different ways in which different people are affected by crime so they can apply this knowledge in the future if they find themselves close to offending again.

NOMS PROGRAMMES: THE EVIDENCE

All NOMS programmes are designed to address the risk factors known to be associated with reoffending: impulsivity, poor decision-making, forgetting to think about the consequences of one’s actions, and learning to think about other people’s perspectives.

- **Programmes in the Prison Service: ETS and R&R**

Two cognitive skills programmes have been widely delivered in the English and Welsh Prison Service: Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS), and Reasoning, and Rehabilitation (R&R). The first outcome study conducted on these programmes found a significant decrease in reconviction rates among medium-low risk and medium-high risk offenders\(^4\). However, further studies found no real differences in 2-year reconviction rates between those who had taken part in a programme and those who were part of the control group\(^5\) - although there were some signs that completers fared better than non-completers. It was unclear whether these mixed results reflected weaknesses with the research design, whether the programmes had been rolled out too quickly, or if there were other reasons why they seemed to be less effective than at the beginning.

More positively, the most recent study of the prison service ETS programme compared the impulsivity scores of a sample of offenders receiving the programme against those not receiving the programme, using a robust research design. Although impulsivity is not a measure of reconviction in itself, it raises the risk of offending behaviour. The study found that 47% of the programme participants showed a significant improvement in their impulsivity scores, while no significant change was evident in the control group who were still awaiting the programme. This study was the first large scale trial to be conducted in recent years and involved a
very strong research design\(^6\). Further work is currently underway to link these short-term changes in attitude over the course of ETS with longer-term reoffending outcomes.

Qualitative work into the effectiveness of ETS has also been supportive. Prison staff believe that most offenders benefited in some way from programme participation, with men who underachieved in education, who were impulsive, or who had addiction problems benefiting the most\(^7\). It is anticipated that these shorter-term benefits will in turn be reflected in reduced reoffending.

- **Programmes in the Community: ETS, R&R, Think First and One to One**

Independent researchers have evaluated the three main cognitive skills programmes delivered by the English and Welsh Probation Service, (ETS, Think First and R&R) and have consistently shown significant decreases in reconviction for male programme completers\(^8\). Studies have also demonstrated that when key differences between groups are statistically controlled for, programme completers are significantly less likely to be reconvicted than offenders in a comparison group. This impact is about the same across the three NOMS cognitive skills programmes\(^9\). Small-scale studies of the One to One programme have indicated impact on both short-term attitudes and longer-term reoffending outcomes for participants\(^10\).

A key finding from these evaluation studies is that lower rates of recidivism are found only for those who fully complete the programme. Non-completers are consistently reconvicted at a significantly higher rate than completers or the comparison (untreated) group\(^11\). Furthermore, NOMS cognitive skills programmes only seem to impact significantly on reconviction for offenders who are medium risk or above. Low risk offenders in the community do not show a benefit from attending cognitive skills programmes, with research showing little difference in reconviction rates between low risk completers and low risk comparison groups\(^12\). This is consistent with international evidence about What Works with offenders.

Home Office research concluded that actual re-offending rates were better than predicted for all groups of offenders sentenced to ETS, R&R or Think First in the community. This difference was much higher for completers than for either non-starters or non-completers\(^13\).

One criticism that has been levied at NOMS cognitive skills programmes is that they were developed primarily for male offenders and have had to be adapted for female offenders\(^14\). NOMS has examined this issue, and found that the majority of women interviewed after taking part in the pilot of the new Thinking Skills Programme felt that they experienced positive outcomes in relation to both managing impulsivity and developing an understanding of the impact of their behaviour on others\(^15\). The women reported some useful information about how the programme could be adapted to work even better for them.

**CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS**

The international research into cognitive skills programmes gives grounds for optimism, consistently finding reductions in reconviction for those who complete these interventions. While the evidence from the UK prison setting has not always been consistent, studies of ETS, R&R and Think First in the community have shown a significant impact where offenders are of the right risk level and they complete the programme - just as the What Works literature would indicate. NOMS continues to evaluate the impact of accredited cognitive skills interventions on reoffending and will be undertaking an outcome study for the new Thinking Skills Programme.
REFERENCES


