

On Country

Insights

An outcome evaluation completed by the Queensland Council of Social Service in 2023, found that all stakeholders were supportive of the On Country program and felt it had strong potential to reduce reoffending. Stakeholders also felt On Country program was successful in reconnecting young people with culture, family, community, and country.

Additional key findings of the evaluation:

- confirmed young people with healthy and strong social, cultural, physical, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing are less likely to offend.
- design of Youth Justice programs for First Nations young people should take a health and wellbeing approach and focus on holistic needs of the family (beyond just the young person).
- ongoing community engagement between provider/department and community beyond initial program implementation needs to occur to ensure the program continues to meet community expectations and needs.
- duration of support for young people needs to be extended beyond 6-8 weeks in order to build relationships and deliver intensive support.

Key finding from further analysis undertaken by the department:

- The On Country program has contributed to reducing reoffending in the community.
- Young people who participated in On Country program, compared with those who did not, were proportionally *less likely to reoffend* 6 months after program completion [58% (n = 99) compared with 64% (n = 305)].
- Young people who participated in On Country program, compared with those who did not, were proportionally *less likely to reoffend* 12 months after program completion [66% (n = 112) compared with 73% (n = 349)].
- 70% (n = 59) of young people participating in On Country, with a completed risk assessment, are rated as a high or very high risk of re-offending (13% are rated as serious repeat offenders)
- 30% *improvement* in behaviour, emotional regulation, effective communication, managing conflict and family circumstances.
- Case studies show *positive progress* from young people who continue in the program and those who have completed the program, including:
 - re-engaging with education;
 - engaging in alcohol and drug counselling programs with support from mentors;
 - accessing health checks; and
 - accessing family support payments for the first time.
- Male On Country program participants, compared with females, *were more likely to reoffend* 6 months after program completion [65% (n = 63) compared with 46% (n = 26)] and 12 months after program completion [72% (n = 81) compared with 54% (n = 31)].
- The proportion of youth justice young people with *serious offending reduced* from 37% (n = 44) to 30% (n = 36), 12 months post program completion.

The proportion of youth justice females with *serious offending reduced* from 30% (n = 17) to 21% (n = 12), 12 months post program completion.

On Country evaluation

March 2023

About QCOSS

Queensland Council of Social Service (QCOSS) is Queensland's peak body for the social service sector.

Our vision is to achieve equality, opportunity and wellbeing for every person, in every community.

We bring people together to help solve the big social issues faced by people in Queensland, building strength in numbers to amplify our voice.

We're committed to self-determination and opportunity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QCOSS is part of the national network of Councils of Social Service lending support and gaining essential insight to national and other state issues.

QCOSS is supported by the vice-regal patronage of Her Excellency the Honourable Dr Jeannette Young AC PSM, Governor of Queensland.

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QCOSS acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the original inhabitants of Australia and recognises these unique cultures as part of the cultural heritage of all Australians. We pay respect to the Elders of this land; past and present.

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Executive Summary

All stakeholders who were interviewed about the On Country programs in Cairns, Mount Isa, and Townsville highlighted that they are very supportive of the program model and believe that it can reduce reoffending if it is resourced appropriately and considers the holistic needs of each young person. There was also agreement that there should be acknowledgment of the additional goals achieved by the On Country program.

Across community members and other stakeholders, evaluation participants agreed that the program is successful in its aims to connect and reconnect young people to culture, family, community, country, stories and Elders. When delivered in conjunction with the provision of relevant culturally appropriate case management services, On Country is helping to address problematic behaviours.

Evaluation findings highlight that young people who have healthy and strong social, cultural, physical, spiritual and emotional wellbeing are less likely to offend. Therefore, programs targeting justice-involved First Nations young people should be designed from a health and wellbeing perspective, acknowledging the challenges many First Nations young people face due to the impacts of colonisation and intergenerational trauma.

The evaluation focused on the following key lines of enquiry, which highlighted:

Implementation

- More time and active communication is required from service providers to engage with community. This will require additional resources to enable stronger relationships between community and service providers.
- Ongoing design and implementation of the On Country program should be informed by place-based governance structures, including embedded dispute resolution processes that are co-designed with community.
- To improve referral processes, On Country service providers need increased capacity to work with referrers, other services and the community to raise awareness of the program.
- Increasing the duration of support would provide more stability for clients with a history of disengagement from services.

Appropriateness

- All stakeholders agree that On Country programs promote cultural connection as a protective factor.
- Appropriate funding and resourcing is needed to cater for young people with complex needs.
- Programs targeting justice-involved young people need to consider the young person's holistic needs and focus on working with the entire family unit. All three service providers are delivering case management support to the young person and their family beyond what they are funded for.
- Community awareness and involvement in the ongoing development of the program is limited. Community members expressed that quarterly [or half yearly] forums that require the service provider to report progress to community and obtain feedback about the program design would be a beneficial way of ensuring that all voices are heard. This would require adequate resourcing.

Effectiveness

- Service providers across all regions are fully staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, which helps young people and their families feel more comfortable engaging with the program.
- On Country programs are effective at connecting young people to culture. Conversations also take place between mentors and young people about what their goals are, what they want for their future and to help young people understand that there are positive pathways they can take in life.
- Young people feel comfortable to speak to the cultural mentors about what they were going through, and report that the relationship with On Country staff was a positive experience.
- Community members believe the On Country program results in significant outcomes, and feel the program needs to be implemented as a long-term measure.
- The community strongly believe in the On Country model as a tool for justice involved First Nations young people.
- When designing the length of programs, funding bodies need to consider the trauma and abandonment many First Nations young people have experienced in their lives and ensure that programs are resourced well enough that they can work with young people over a longer time frame.
- Based on quantitative data sets provided by the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (DCYJMA), the percentage of young people who reoffended within six months of completing the program is 56 per cent. The percentage of young people who reoffended within twelve months of completing the program is 74 per cent.

Future Improvements

Through the evaluation, stakeholders identified ways the On Country programs' design or delivery could be improved:

- Measuring impacts that are not specific to youth justice
- Extended length of contracts
- Incorporating an expanded model of care
- Improving the structure of the program and communication pathways
- Supporting a process of community co-design and ongoing consultation
- Supporting service providers with governance
- Adopting a culturally appropriate procurement process.

Background

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people are disproportionately represented in statutory systems. The over-representation of justice-involved First Nations young people is due to the impacts of colonisation, past government assimilation policies, systemic racism and removal of children, which have created a cycle of intergenerational trauma.¹

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are significantly over-represented at all points in the justice system.³ In 2020-21, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children accounted for 46 per cent of all child defendants who had a charge finalised in a Queensland court.³ This is despite the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children comprise around only 8 per cent of all children aged 10-17 years in Queensland.³ These statistics reflect the inequity experienced as a result of poverty, a lack of safe, stable housing, disconnection from education, disconnection from family and disconnection from culture.² In 2021, the Queensland Youth Justice Census surveyed a total of 1,642 young 'offenders'.³ Of these:

- 18 per cent had an Active Child Protection Order
- 32 per cent had been living in unstable and/or unsuitable accommodation
- 51 per cent had experienced or been impacted by domestic and family violence
- 52 per cent were disengaged from education, training or employment
- 31 per cent had at least one parent who spent time in adult custody
- 15 per cent had an assessed or suspected disability (cognitive/intellectual, physical, or sensory disability), including 14 per cent who had a cognitive or intellectual disability
- 45 per cent had at least one mental health or behavioural disorder (diagnosed or suspected).

While the above statistics are not specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, they highlight the need to reframe youth justice responses to focus on a health and wellbeing framework. This acknowledges that justice-involved First Nations young people often experience complexities in their lives that need to be addressed in order to understand the root cause of the problematic behaviour.

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture is the gateway to healing. Positive connection to one's culture helps children and young people to develop their identities, fosters positive self-esteem, emotional strength and resilience, and increases the number of secure attachment relationships around the child.¹ Programs such as On Country support young people on this journey, and harness the resilience of First Nation communities.

First Nations community members who were interviewed throughout the evaluation highlighted the resourcefulness and capability of young people in their community. Community members indicated that young people know the system they are part of and want to be involved in decisions relating to their lives. All children and young people have a right to self-determination and a say in the decisions about their lives and their futures.

The On Country program provides communities with the opportunity to use their knowledge, values, and agency to collectively respond to issues that are impacting their communities. The program is designed to work with justice-involved First Nations young people to prevent ongoing offending by the transfer of cultural knowledge to young people through mentoring relationships with First Nations adult mentors, Elders and Traditional Owners. As per the service delivery specifications developed by the Department of Children, Youth Justice and Multicultural Affairs (DCYJMA) (Appendix B), this takes place at camps and in individualised case work.

The On Country experience, referred to as "camps", provide young people with the opportunity to connect to lands, waters, rivers, nature, Elders and community. The On Country, or camp, experience is to feel, hear and be in country, among the cultural and spiritual connection and healing it brings.

Each young person entering the program is expected to receive support, which is made up of an on country culture experience and integrated case work. Case work includes access to welfare, education and training services, health, wellbeing and other specialised community-based supports.

The purpose of this report is to present the findings of an evaluation of the On Country program. Overall, the On Country evaluation investigated the following lines of enquiry:

1. implementation
2. appropriateness
3. effectiveness
4. future improvements.

It should be noted that the period prior to the funding of service providers is outside the scope of the evaluation and therefore information about the development of the program itself is not included in this report.

It is also emphasised that the value and importance of transferring cultural knowledge is not contested and benefits associated with the same are in no way limited to potential for reducing the risk of young people being justice-involved. This evaluation sought to value and elevate the perspectives of the First Nations Peoples and communities in Mt Isa, Cairns and Townsville. When considering the results of this evaluation, the voices and perspectives of local First Nations Peoples should be elevated.

Methodology

The findings from this report have been developed from qualitative interviews with relevant stakeholders. Verbal consent was obtained from each individual that participated in an interview, as well as consent to record the interview. The purpose of interviews, as well as how information would be used in the evaluation report was clearly explained to all participants.

Across the service delivery regions of Mt Isa, Cairns and Townsville, a total of 38 people were interviewed from a range of services involved in the On Country program. This included the On Country service providers, staff from Youth Justice Service Centres in each On Country region, community members and other stakeholders, including community organisations and the Queensland Police Service. Of the 38 people interviewed, 22 identified as First Nations.

A further 22 First Nation community members participated in a community forum in Mt Isa in December 2022. This forum explored issues related to On Country along the four lines of enquiry. A follow up community forum took place in February 2023 to report back to community what had been heard from community members and to acknowledge how their perspectives had informed the recommendations. Recommendations were reviewed at this follow up forum and refined based on feedback. A total of eight First Nation community members attended the follow up forum, with the majority (five) having also attended the December community forum.

This report also includes the perspectives of young First Nations people who have completed the program in Mt Isa, Townsville and Cairns. A total of 20 young people were interviewed, as well as four family members of young people who participated in the program.

The process of interviewing the young people was developed in collaboration with the On Country service provider in each region, due to the trusting relationship On Country staff have with the young people they work with. Each On Country service provider spoke with young people/families that access the program to determine if they were interested in participating in an interview.

Interviews took place in the service provider's office as this was a space all young people were familiar with and comfortable in. In Mount Isa, the interviews were led by a First Nations community member and a QCOSS employee with registration as a social worker.

Interviews were conducted in family groups. In Mount Isa an adult family member was present during each group interview. In Cairns and Townsville, adult family members of the young people did not attend the interviews. However, interviews were still conducted in family groups where possible. Where this occurred, the young people who had siblings or other family members that were also involved in the program informed the service provider that they were happy to be interviewed in a group setting with their family members. At the beginning of each interview/group interview, the QCOSS interviewer explained their role, the purpose of the interview and how the information would be utilised.

In total, 87 people were interviewed across the three service delivery areas of Mount Isa, Cairns and Townsville. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Analysis of interviews were completed by two QCOSS staff members. The development of the final report also included input from the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak (QATSICPP).

Limitations

The following limitations impacted the On Country evaluation findings:

Timeframes

The evaluation timeframe enabled QCOSS to engage with service providers and youth justice staff within each region. However, engagement with other services, community members, and young people was impacted due to the tight timeframe of the evaluation. In particular, the timeframe limited the ability to reach a more representative number of local First Nations Elders and Traditional Owners in each service delivery region. This was further impacted due to the evaluation occurring over the December and January holiday period, which significantly restricted participant availability.

The timeframes also reduced QCOSS' ability to establish appropriate working relationships with service providers and community members to enable a culturally safe evaluation process. As a result, not all aspects of the proposed project governance framework were able to be implemented and this had a significant impact on application of the project principles.

Engagement with the young people who have completed the program also required more time to engage in a more culturally appropriate manner. Due to limited timeframes, transcripts from interviews were not able to be provided back to interviewees to verify. As per Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles, including the right of Indigenous peoples to govern the collection, ownership, and application of data about Indigenous communities, evaluation timeframes need to allow adequate time for this verification process to occur. This would ensure the evaluation accurately reflects the perspectives of First Nations community members.

It is highly recommended that any further engagement in relation to On Country must provide adequate time to engage widely and meaningfully with local First Nation communities. Any further evaluations must prioritise cultural safety.

Data analysis

The data received from the Department of Children, Youth Justice, and Multicultural Affairs (DCYJMA) provided insights into the referrals and reoffending rates of young people in the On Country program from program reports. Community-wide data also provided insight to the offending rates and demographic profiles for each region. The reporting periods for these data sets did not align therefore direct comparisons were unable to be drawn, although trends could be identified to provide context for the On Country data.

The only data received to measure the effectiveness of the program was reoffending rates. However, recidivism data alone is not an appropriate measure of success for an On Country program as it does not address or measure other aspects of a young person's life. No data is available to compare young people in the program to young people who are not in the program. Therefore, there are limitations in measuring the effectiveness of the program using the data provided.

Evaluation findings

The evaluation questions (Appendix A) provided the framework for the evaluation and all associated stakeholder engagement. The evaluation findings are structured against each of the following key lines of enquiry.

Implementation

Summary of findings

1. More time and active communication is required from service providers to engage with community. This will require additional resources to enable stronger relationships between community and service provider.
2. Ongoing design and implementation of the On Country program should be informed by place-based governance structures, including embedded dispute resolution processes, that are co-designed with community.
3. To improve referral processes, On Country service providers need increased capacity to work with referrers, other services, and the community to raise awareness of the program.
4. Increasing the duration of support would provide more stability for clients with a history of disengagement from services.

Implementation seeks to understand how successfully the program was implemented in relation to the initial program design. Evaluation findings have highlighted the following points related to implementation.

Community perspectives

Community members expressed that community engagement throughout the design, development, procurement and implementation of the program is critical to achieving successful outcomes. In particular, they highlighted that the engagement of Traditional Owners, Elders and First Nations communities must be designed into all phases of the program to build respectful and collaborative relationships for the program to build upon. There were clear expectations that for the program to be successful, the funding body must respect cultural protocols and cultural authority, and co-design procurement and ongoing engagement processes with each community.

Feedback from stakeholders across each region indicated that increased time and more active communication was required from service providers. Supporting the capacity for service providers to engage with First Nations communities would have enabled stronger relationships for the On Country program during the implementation phase.

Community members highlighted that co-design with Traditional Owners is an ongoing process. During the implementation phase, a co-design process is needed to develop collaborative governance that includes dispute resolution processes that would aim to resolve tensions that may arise beyond the implementation phase. Community members also expressed the importance of the funding body being actively involved in supporting On Country service providers to engage with Traditional Owners, Elders and existing service providers so that true collaboration can occur.

In each region, there were challenges for the On Country service providers to lead the implementation process within short timeframes and with minimal knowledge of the program across the community. These timeframes were set by the funding body, and both service providers and

youth justice workers stated that as soon as the service providers were successful with obtaining the funding, there was an immediate expectation for youth justice workers to refer young people to the program. However, community members and service providers highlighted that at this stage, there was a continued need for ongoing community and cultural engagement. Further collaborative support was required to connect, communicate, and clarify how programs can be best delivered with cultural authority in the context of each location.

Without this ongoing community consultation, some regions have experienced a breakdown of trust. Community members highlighted a lack of transparency with the program, as several community members interviewed knew little detail about how the program was operating.

Community members acknowledged that despite these issues, they know that there are likely positive outcomes on young people who have participated in the program. Community members indicated they would like to be regularly updated on how the program is going. They continue to remain engaged and want to ensure community has input into ongoing implementation.

Competitive procurement

The process of competitive tendering has had a significant impact on the First Nations communities within the On Country service delivery areas and has created tension.

“The fight between small not-for-profits for the very limited resources that are doled out, grant by grant, year by year, from George Street, to these groups. All of that adds to the tension that may already exist with different groups coming together into one area. And if we just maybe thought a bit more about things upstream when we first design these programs, and how they should be badged and who should be involved and who should be consulted, maybe that would help some of the tensions in regional areas.”

When discussing the procurement process, there was clear agreement that the context of community and the voice of community should be an integral part of the procurement and tendering process. To reduce tension and conflict regarding procurement decisions, community need to be actively included and involved in the process.

A youth justice staff member highlighted that during the procurement process for On Country, an assumption may have been made that Aboriginal community controlled organisations would have natural links with the First Nations community. However, this has not been the reality for all On Country service providers.

Several stakeholders highlighted that during the procurement process, community should be consulted to determine what organisations may be best placed to provide an On Country program.

“If community could see there was a fair and just process, there wouldn't be all this whinging.”

To resolve the tension that has been created, community members suggested that holding forums on a quarterly or half yearly basis so that the service provider can report progress to community and obtain feedback about the program design would be a beneficial way of ensuring that all voices are heard. However, due to ongoing tensions in some communities, the service provider would need to be adequately supported by the funding body to embark on this process. Community members also identified that service providers could send out a newsletter to community to keep them updated on what the program is achieving, including the positive outcomes and “good news stories”.

Referral pathways

In some regions, there continues to be little knowledge of the program among community and other community service providers, reflecting a lack of clarity and understanding of On Country. This may be influenced by limited referral pathways into the program. Service providers identified challenges that arise from referrals with limited or insufficient information for them to complete the required intake processes.

Increased capacity for On Country service providers to reach other services and raise awareness of the program would improve referral processes and deliver benefits to efficient service delivery.

Community service organisations across all regions expressed that an On Country program could be very beneficial for some of the young people they work with. However, many community organisations were not aware of the eligibility criteria, what the program involves or how to refer a young person to the program. Several community organisations had not heard of the On Country program at all.

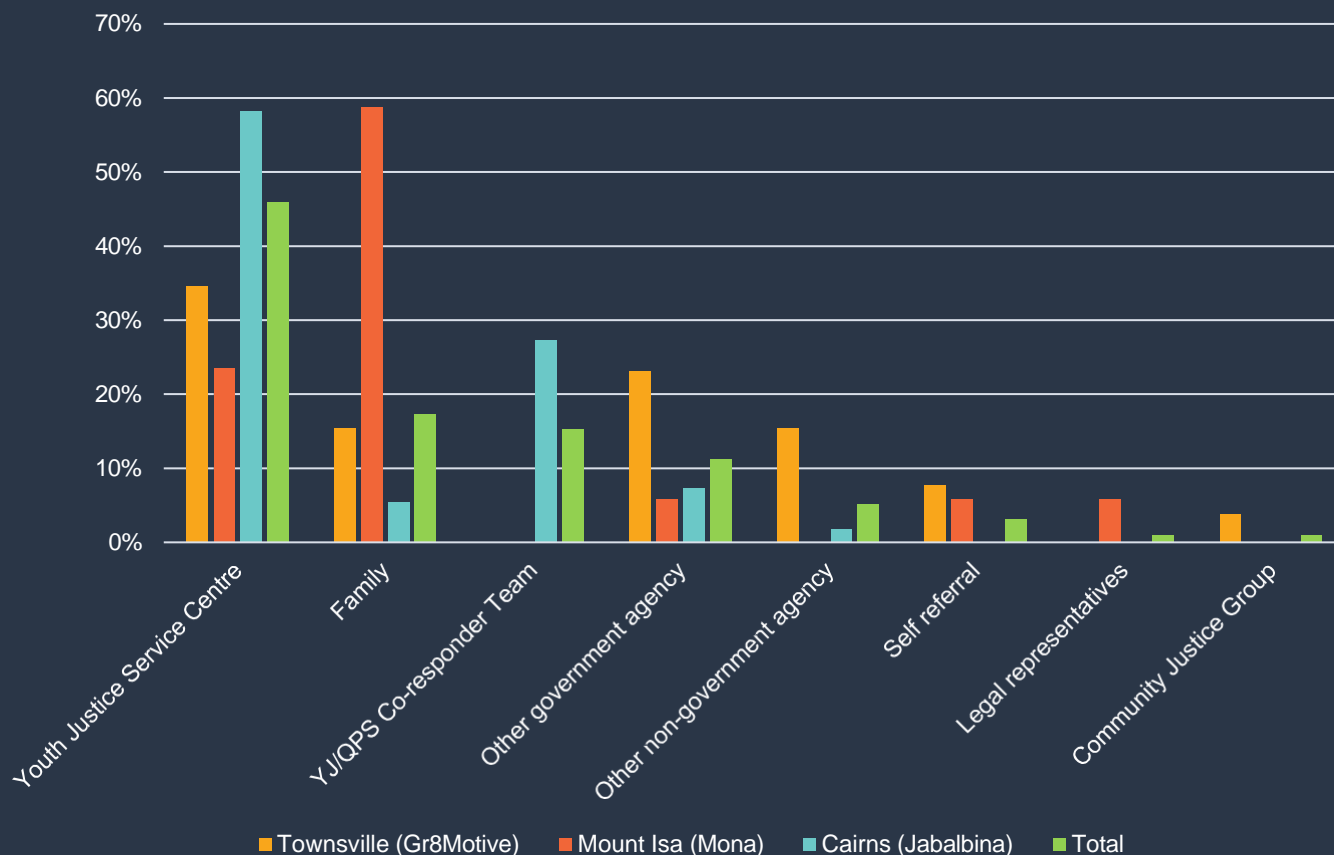
“No referral form. She just gave me her little card with her number on it and she never explained how, who to refer. Like who was eligible for referrals, or a form or anything like that.”

As per the service delivery specifications (Appendix B), referrals from the Queensland Police Service are a number two priority. Queensland Police Service reported that they regularly refer young people to the On Country program and, while they are very supportive of the program, staff expressed that they would like more regular information about the program's capacity to take on referrals as well as information about how they plan to support each young person they accept a referral for.

“We feel that [service provider] deliver. We have trust in the program, and [service provider] engage with us. But we need a better idea of their capacity and what they plan to do with that young person. For example, when they're going to pick them up and start doing activities with that young person. We need to know that it's the right referral for that particular young person.”

Further community engagement is needed across all three regions to raise awareness of the program, and clear information about the eligibility criteria, referral process and what the program entails needs to be disseminated.

Based on the reported data from 1 April 2022 to 20 December 2022, the predominant referral source in Cairns and Townsville is the Youth Justice Service Centre with 58 per cent and 35 per cent of referrals (Figure 1). In Cairns, the Youth Justice and Queensland Police Service Co-responder team is the second highest source of referrals with 27 per cent of referrals. Mount Isa reported receiving referrals from a variety of sources, including referrals for young people who are not connected to a Youth Justice Service Centre. Of the Mount Isa referrals, 59 per cent were from family, compared to 15 per cent for Townsville and 5 per cent for Cairns.



In contrast to the service delivery specifications, Mount Isa is more recently receiving an increased number of referrals from Child Safety in an effort to divert young people from the youth justice and court system. They have also received referrals from the education system for young people who are disengaging from school. As noted above, self-referrals are also regularly received due to word of mouth among families who have accessed the program. The variety of referral pathways reported in Mount Isa is important to note as the outcomes for justice-involved young people are going to be different to the outcomes for young people who are not engaged in the youth justice system.

Youth justice staff from some regions (particularly Townsville and Mount Isa) reported hesitancy in referring to the On Country programs, which is reflected in the referral data. While the service delivery specifications note that the service provider must work in partnership with the referrer and collaborate to achieve better outcomes for the young person, it was felt that this is not always taking place in practice.

Youth justice staff reported that the hesitancy to refer to On Country is due to inconsistencies with staffing, a lack of understanding about what the program entails and, at times, non-responsiveness to referrals.

“I know at different times referrals have been low from our office. I think it’s a combination of case workers losing trust in the program. So, making referrals that are not picked up, there’s no follow through. You keep telling the young person, the mentor will be in contact soon, and then it doesn’t happen. So when you’re saying something’s going to happen and it doesn’t happen, they [the young person] doesn’t trust you either.”

Staff from a Youth Justice Service Centre that refer to the program highlighted that the camp component only appeals to a specific type of young person who is interested in rural operations such as farming, learning to ride bikes and horses, looking after animals, etc. Young people who are not interested in this lifestyle generally do not accept a referral to the program. This is particularly the case for young females. As well as this, they also felt that the service delivery model is not currently flexible enough to meet the interests and needs of each young person. Some youth justice staff also reported that there does not seem to be predictability or a consistent approach to when camps are scheduled.

“There’s a bit of a gap. They did do a girl’s program last year and that was run by a nurse. They did a bit of a almost like a yarning circle style of program talking about health and sexual health and primary health. So it had a bit of a health-based focus. So they do art and have a chat. So they were getting girls to that and it did seem to be effective, but once that staff member left it stopped. Like I’ve not seen girls go out On Country. And the girls typically say that they’re not interested in...that they’re clearly not interested in that kind of work, in farm work.”

The service delivery specifications note that the program must include a case work relationship with each young person referred, working in partnership with the referrer and collaborating to achieve better outcomes across multiple categories.

Partnership with Youth Justice

In some regions, youth justice staff noted that the service provider’s plans around the case work component of the program appear to be quite informal and noted that the program needs to incorporate a stronger case management model. However, the informal approach used is due to the difficulty in engaging the cohort who are referred to the program, which requires the service provider to deliver case work flexibly.

One youth justice staff member articulated positive outcomes they have seen from the On Country case management support, including improved attendance at school, linkages to a flexible learning centre, and support to enter into traineeships/apprenticeships. However, they also indicated that feedback from the service provider stating what the casework component seeks to address, as well as how frequent the service provider plans to engage with the young person post-camp is often not provided to the referrer. This would ensure that supports being provided are not duplicated.

Service providers also reported that they get minimal information when a youth justice worker refers a young person to the program. This creates additional workload for the service providers, as they require in depth information about each young person before they can take them on a camp.

It was noted that communication pathways between the service providers and DCYJMA are also impacted by the staff turnover among Youth Justice Service Centre staff. Service providers highlighted that there have been several instances where information they have provided is lost in the process or overlooked, due to Youth Justice case managers resigning or new Youth Justice staff commencing who have not been briefed about what On Country is.

While most youth justice staff highlighted the benefits of a case management model that focusses on linking young people with education and employment, one youth justice case manager felt that, given it is an On Country program, case management work should be culturally focussed. They noted that when different services provide an element of case management, it creates duplication of supports or gaps between services. They highlighted that this barrier could be addressed by ensuring that each service involved focusses on separate areas of case management, and On Country programs could focus on linking young people with their families, key community contacts, and cultural activities when back in community.

“I guess from my staff's perspective, if we are referring young people to the On Country program, we are really referring them because we want them to increase their cultural connections and be involved in cultural activities and receiving cultural support...we wouldn't be referring a young person to On Country if we wanted them to receive some support around employment training. I think certainly incorporating more of that cultural element in terms of linking young people and families with other activities or contacts in the community. There's certainly lots of things happening from a cultural perspective in the community, whether it's through the arts sector, through sporting areas, but linking young people with people in the community and organisations and things that are already happening so that when their engagement with On Country finishes or with Youth Justice finishes, they've built a cultural connection with someone in the community.”

Feedback received from Youth Justice staff indicates that there is a lack of awareness about what an On Country program is. There was a belief that conversations were needed so that clarity can be sought about what the government's expectation of an On Country program is, as well as community's expectation, and the service provider's expectation. This was also viewed as a lack of cultural competency of youth justice staff as there was no understanding of what a cultural camp actually entails and how it would benefit a young person. All of these issues highlight the need for collaborative practice and working to strengthen communications within Youth Justice Service Centres so they can better support the On Country programs.

In some regions, the Youth Justice Service Centres have asked On Country service providers to have a cultural mentor co-locate at the service centre for a few hours each week, so that youth justice staff can develop a relationship with On Country staff that may translate into referrals. The co-location model also provides service providers with the opportunity to update youth justice staff about particular referrals, what might be happening with the program and changes in staffing. A youth justice staff member reported that they have noticed higher referrals to service providers that consistently co-locate with them each week. Youth Justice staff who were interviewed reported that the co-location of On Country staff has not happened consistently due to the staffing issues some of the service providers have been experiencing.

“It impacts on our staff's trust in the program because they feel like they'll refer a young person and then someone will finish and there seems to not be a handover of information, or a bit of a gap between a new mentor coming on and so that young person's not picked up or that relationship's not built. It's not just the relationship between the young person and family and the mentors, but also the case workers. It's probably both.”

Youth Justice staff reported that without a comprehensive understanding of the program they also struggle to encourage and motivate young people to participate in it.

“I think it needs to be a lot more visible and identifiable. There needs to be a better connection for both programs with Elders and Traditional Owners. And I would like to see even the camp components...in terms of promoting the program and giving our staff confidence, it [timetable of activities] doesn't say, “Okay, we're cooking damper or we're cooking kangaroo,” or whatever, “And we've got Auntie or Uncle coming along to...” you know what I mean? Like that's the difference that would tell people “great”. If we can get staff motivated then that will help us to motivate young people to participate in that program about tomorrow's cooking and, “Uncle Alfred is coming along and you guys are going to cook kangaroo.” As opposed to just, “Yeah, they're doing some cooking”. [They] just need to be a bit more explicit about it because otherwise people lose confidence in the program. And I think that's where some of our staff are out there sort of struggling with what these programs actually provide. And I think the providers have lost a bit of content, a bit of direction about what the intent of the program is.”

When the relationship between service provider and Youth Justice staff was strong, staff have been able to leverage the relationships and build trust between On Country staff and young people, which has in turn increased young people's engagement in education, employment and case management.

Most Youth Justice staff across all regions highlighted that each of the service providers are doing well in building a relationship and connection with the family members of the young person. The service providers are also keeping family members informed about the activities the young person is taking part in. Youth Justice staff across all regions were also happy with the fact that the service providers are working from a model of outreach, visiting young people and their families in community and at their homes. It was reported that this model is needed for the young people that engage with youth justice.

It should also be noted that during the implementation phase, the funding body was having fortnightly meetings with the service providers. Over time, these meetings gradually became less frequent and they are now held on a quarterly basis. Service providers found these meetings helpful, although also reported that they would have benefitted from an increased level of support and guidance from the funding body, particularly during the implementation phase. One service provider felt that quarterly meetings do not allow sufficient time to talk through experiences, issues and trends. This service provider indicated they would like to see these meetings occur on a more regular basis, as well as for a Community of Practice to be set up where the three On Country service providers can meet for a full day on a quarterly basis to workshop ideas and hear from each other about what is working well and what they might need support with. This would help service providers to continually deliver best practice services by leveraging the knowledge and support of each other. It is also important for the funding body to provide On Country service providers with the financial resources to attend these meetings.

Communications during the implementation phase also created additional challenges for service providers with multiple requests for information from the same funding body decreasing capacity and clarity of reporting lines. Stakeholders reflected that the service providers had to respond to an unnecessary increase in requests to external parties, including media attention, while implementing the initial components of the program.

It was reported that as soon as the service providers secured funding for the program there was an expectation for Youth Justice Service Centres to identify young people to participate. Service providers highlighted the pressure they faced to implement the program quickly, recruit suitable staff, all while trying to involve community in the process.

Partnerships with other community organisations

The On Country service delivery specifications note that one of the success factors involves strong partnerships that are established in response to locally recognised need and driven by local stakeholders. Other success factors identified include environmental factors such as proximity to support services and supported referrals to available services. In each of the regions the partnerships and level of collaboration between the On Country service provider and other community organisations differ.

On Country service providers acknowledged the importance of working in collaboration with other services to address the complex needs of the justice-involved young people. However, there were challenges in all regions with regards to working with other community organisations.

“What you need is the wrap-around service to actually support. You need the other services like your NDIS's and that to come on board. Well, yeah and we did put it out to other services to invite and have them On Country. We've actually asked ATODs to come on board. A lot of other services. We've had a whole heap of meetings with other services around On Country. No one's come to the table around supporting any of that.”

Service providers reported that they would like other health services, mental health services and addiction services to visit young people on camps, and have approached these services to gauge their interest in attending camps, but no consistent agreement has progressed. This is also a reflection of funding, as many organisations are not provided with additional funding for youth work and have prescriptive funding agreements. Many organisations also struggle to meet the demand for their services. These factors may have an impact on whether organisations have the capacity to work alongside the On Country service provider.

“We've invited others out to our program that we do on country. We've invited health services out. So the young people say, “Oh, they do this and that.” So they're seeing a face and building rapport. They build that rapport with someone, then they know who that person is in that organisation. They're not afraid to go and have a yarn with them. So it's about building their networks.”

Attendance at multi-agency coordination panels was also highlighted as a challenge for On Country service providers. With the current funding agreement, staff have been unable to attend the frequency of these meetings as they need to prioritise their direct support with young people. One On Country service provider reported receiving up to 15 coordination meeting invites per week.

All service providers highlighted that they would like to work in partnership with other organisations so that they can more appropriately address the complex needs of the young people they work with. However, building relationships with community organisations takes time and service providers need to be adequately resourced to do this work.

Voluntary versus mandatory program

There were differences in opinion between stakeholders as to whether On Country programs should be voluntary or mandatory for First Nations young people who are engaged with youth justice. Several stakeholders were supportive of On Country programs being a mandatory requirement, especially for high-risk young people who are on youth justice orders, as stakeholders felt that these young people would benefit from the program but may be less motivated to accept a referral.

One interviewee mentioned that the young people they have seen access the On Country program are young people that were already motivated to change their behaviour. The stakeholders who were supportive of On Country being a voluntary program identified that, for a program that focusses on cultural connection to be successful, it is important for a young person to want to be there and to engage with it. Interestingly, it was noted in some regions that attending the On Country program was set as a bail condition for certain young people, which they had to comply with, effectively making it a mandatory program for these young people.

This condition of a mandatory program was not supported by the On Country services providers. Setting program attendance as a bail condition may motivate some young people to attend the program, however, there is risk involved with regards to how the court and youth justice system will respond to a young person failing to comply if that failure was beyond their control. Mandatory and bail conditioned attendance to On Country would need to be thoroughly thought out, with a legal and justice system lens applied.

Services and activities offered

As a six to eight week program designed to support young people with complex needs, stakeholders in all three regions identified the need for longer support timeframes due to the intensive support required to build trust, rapport, and effective working relationships with young people and their families.

In discussion with each service provider, three phases of program supports were identified in practice. These are pre-camp engagement, On Country camp delivery and post-camp case management. Agreed by all service providers was that the core component of the program is the relationship and connection to culture built between the service provider, clients and their family, which begins in the pre-camp phase and strengthens throughout the program.

Feedback from stakeholders identified that being able to provide a longer duration of support would provide more stability for clients with a history of disengagement from services. This would provide a unique opportunity to strengthen engagement in pro-social activities and exceed the expected positive impact of the program on young people.

In all regions, the post-camp phase has extended beyond the program design timeframes due to the significance of the relationship and rapport built by the On Country service providers. This connection has improved the engagement of young people with other services including other Youth Justice programs, Child Safety, education, employment, Alcohol and Other Drug supports, and mental health services.

The On Country program in some regions also included day programs delivered outside of camps as well as direct case management in supporting clients to access practical supports. These include cooking activities and daytrips where young people can engage in fishing and swimming. The day programs and camps also give mentors time to talk about real life issues, which young people are more comfortable to discuss when they are calm and taking part in these activities.

The On Country camps also provide a safe space for young people to focus on cultural connection away from negative influences such as peers and substance use. The programs in some regions focused on delivering camps in a place-based way depending on connections with Traditional Owners, the cultural authority of kinship lines and capacity for numbers of young people to attend. However, due to the diversity of young people accessing each On Country program, cultural

supports provided were not always able to specifically align with the young person's cultural identity. Some service providers were able to address this by finding an appropriate cultural mentor for the group of young people they were seeking to support, although service providers noted the challenges in sourcing mentors with cultural knowledge. Each region also identified challenges in delivering regular camps due to resource limitations such as staffing and camp equipment.

▪ Pre-camp

Service providers reported that a core component of the pre-camp phase involves building a relationship with both the young person and their family to develop rapport, establish expectations and begin to build trust. By having a relationship with the family members, the young person is more likely to engage in the program. It also helps when family members are supportive of the program, as the young person is generally organised and ready to go when they are picked up for a camp.

“The thing is when we go out and we sign up a young person, we tell them who we are, where we come from...”Tell that little young fellow how we're connected,”...they'll [the parent] say, “When you go out On Country, you behave yourself, because that's my cousin, or this is how we connected”.”

Another part of the pre-camp phase involves screening the young people to determine their suitability to go on camp. Prior to accepting a referral, a screening assessment is completed to ensure the appropriateness of the program. This enables the cultural mentors to understand the holistic needs of the young people they are supporting as well as to determine that the mix of young people on each camp are well-matched. This takes into consideration the age, gender, and cultural mix of the group. As highlighted by one service provider, “The group dynamics of the camp are essential to deliver the most effective outcomes.”

Service providers acknowledged that a significant amount of logistical work makes up the pre-camp phase. Conversations take place with the young person and family members about whether a young person is comfortable to go on country for a few days. Risk management is also a core component of the pre-camp phase, which involves inspecting equipment and vehicles to ensure they have everything they need for the camp, as well as being able to provide appropriate support to the young people. Some service providers reported that they are unable to take young people on camp who are on certain medications, such as medication to treat schizophrenia, due to health and safety issues.

“Everything's all pretty much screened. So, we actually screen the kids and ask them if they got any problems, or if they're afraid of the dark, all that type of stuff. So, we usually have those conversations with some of the parents...We had conversations with [a] grandmother [who said], “You'll never get that kid to go out Bush because he's afraid of the dark.” He might be sitting up there saying, “Yeah, I'll go out Bush, this and that,” but it's because other services are pushing them to come out, or he wants to come out, but it's like, you'll be back in town by the time he goes out. So, but it's just around that and just having those small little bits and yarn, it's probably just around finding the right person to come out with that other young person that comes out. Like what makes him feel comfortable. So, there's all that background check too that goes into before we take any kid down On Country.”

“Because with camps, you've got things like you've got to make sure you've got all the equipment, you've got all the pegs. There's all that equipment maintenance that has to happen. Yeah, there's a lot of preparation just in terms of the equipment, and then there's also you've got to work with the young people, get them ready, get them excited about camp, and how are they going to manage those challenges of not having any substances to use while they're on camp, which are really challenging for them.”

In some regions, a variety of day programs are also offered for young people both pre- and post-camp including cultural engagement, physical activities, AOD sessions, service connections and case worker supports.

▪ **Camp**

The camp component operates differently between the three service delivery regions, with varying levels of focus on cultural connection. Some service providers indicate they have a strong focus on cultural connection involving interactions with the Elders. This collaborative approach enables cultural authority in the delivery of the camp and is facilitated through well-developed relationships between the service provider and the Elders.

Service providers identified that they offer a fun, leisure component to the camps in addition to the life skills and cultural component to make the program appealing to young people.

“I went on the camps a few times. We played dodgeball. One activity we did... we built a tiki. My favourite one was when we went to the beach and one Uncle talked about culture. There was this one thing, this orange thing...it's like a clay. He [cultural mentor] got it off the rock. It's like paint. He just put water on it and you can put it on, that paint... they did put a fire on and we talked. And after that, when we finished with the fire, we watched a bit of a movie on the stream projector. It's set up on the wall.”

“When us, me and a man went up to the creek, we made the boomerang. We learned how to throw and mine came back. That was my favourite activity.”

The cultural mentors deliver tailored camp activities depending on the mix of young people and their cultural identity. When there is a significant number of young people from the one cultural group, the camps can focus on their specific cultural protocols. However, camps are otherwise adapted to provide a mix of both cultural development and personal development and teach young people about their cultural obligations.

“Getting them to understand their cultural obligations...And the sooner they get to realise and understand that and understand where they sit in the scope of time and history as representatives of their ancestors at the point in time. Really getting them to understand that core scope of their ancestors, their bloodline, their family lines, and their tribal lines.”

The cultural element of the program can also occur during “downtime” while young people and mentors have conversations around the fire. However, it was also acknowledged by one service provider that connecting with culture on a deep level is the responsibility of the young person's family.

“The majority of our kids in this community, their culture comes back more around their parents... So that cultural component actually sits with the parents... We can make them aware of where they come from and their connections back there, and give kids the opportunity to ask the right questions, or cultural questions.”

Multiple service delivery regions identified that female participants were more difficult to engage. Service providers were actively designing activities to engage young females. This has included a weekly day program or camp that involves cooking, weaving, yarnning circles, building healthy relationships and also self-care activities with the aim of building self-esteem and confidence. Female Elders are invited to be part of this program so the young female participants can develop a relationship with the Elders.

Camp activities were also highlighted as a good way to connect young people with key community leaders. By bringing in community leaders and Elders to teach specific activities, young people can build a relationship with and learn about cultural respect.

“So it’s that culture, that community and cultural respect we’re building. They’re knowing the key people in community. And hopefully when those key people walk around community the young people will think about their behaviour more. It’s a flow on effect, and then community in a sense out there managing that behaviour in public and having that positive influence.”

▪ **Post-camp**

Service providers identified the post-camp phase as focusing on case management. Case management is individualised and could involve transition planning, learning life skills, linking with training or employment opportunities, obtaining identification and getting a learner’s license. In each region, service providers work with the young person to identify their goals, including cultural development goals and support the young person to develop and implement changes from their connection with cultural mentors.

“One day I’d like to cook a healthy meal with them [service provider]. They were talking to me about getting my license and helping me do that...the program has helped me work on my anger. Because sometimes I can’t control myself when I get angry. I’m not that social so it [the program] helps me with socialising.”

In practice, this phase extends for a significantly longer period of time than stated in the On Country service delivery specifications. This is because the On Country program builds trust and rapport with young people through the consistency of engagement and working through practical challenges for young people through case management support. As a result, service providers have struggled to refer young people to other programs within the specified time frame and therefore young people are remaining as active participants of On Country for longer than initially anticipated. It was also reported that in some regions, young people attend more than one camp and receive ongoing case management support between each camp, effectively making the program much longer than six to eight weeks.

Service providers noted that a critical component of the On Country program was in establishing trust with the young person. With this trust, they were able to support the young person to engage with other support services, education and employment opportunities. They could also work alongside Youth Justice to ensure they were attending required meetings and the young person’s goals were being met.

“They helped me with going to court and with the youth justice review. They write down what I’m planning to do and send it to the judge.”

Young people perspectives of On Country camps

The young people and families who were interviewed identified the following ways that the On Country program could be improved.

▪ **Sport**

Several young people and family members in all regions highlighted that they would like to see the inclusion of sport and health-promotion based activities in the On Country programs. Most young people said that they love sport. They felt that team sport would be a good way for young people to get engaged in the community.

“I would like to do more fitness, gym stuff and outdoor activities like sports, soccer, go for walks to look outs, or out to the dam. By doing team sport, you learn how to work in a team and communication skills.”

▪ **Involvement of family on camps**

Many young people also said that they would like family members/significant people in their life to get involved in the program, either by attending part of the camp or by attending a day program with them. Young people said that they feel proud of what they achieve and learn on camp and would like to share this with significant people in their life. One young person also said that some young people feel homesick while on camp, so having a family member visit them would help to alleviate this.

“Some of the boys feel a bit homesick out there and want to come home early...I'd like for Dad to come out and visit and see what we do.”

▪ **Expansion of the female program**

Many females who participated in the On Country day programs reported that they enjoy the program, but would like to see it expanded so they can attend a camp and participate in a variety of activities. In one service delivery region, the female participants can complete a weekly cooking program, and also sometimes go on day trips where they cook a barbeque and go fishing. They said that they would like to attend a camp for a few nights, and learn more about culture, as well as engaging in activities such as doing hair and makeup, swimming and learning how to ride a horse.

“We would like to go swimming at the pool and learn to ride a horse. And we'd like to do more beauty, and going out bush to the station...We'd like to learn more about culture, and learn how to make damper on the fire. We all like sport as well, so we'd like to be in a team. They got that AFL starting up here. They should start making girls' teams. They could put a team in this competition.”

▪ **Longer camps**

All young people who were interviewed also identified that they would like for the camp component of the program to be longer. Most young people said they went on a camp for approximately three days, with a few stating that the camp they went on was five days.

“It's better to go out for a longer time, because it's a long trip.”

“A little bit longer would be good. Longer for like a week or even two weeks.”

Challenges in implementing the On Country camps

The On Country camps provide a safe space for young people to focus on cultural connection away from negative influences such as peers and substance use. Service delivery organisations highlighted challenges that need to be considered for the successful operation of the camps. This

included recruitment and retention of highly specialised staff, resources such as camp equipment and vehicles.

“In some ways it would be nice to have more camps, and we've tried to work out how to do that, but there's so much pre and post work that happens within that, that it can be really difficult, especially when you're limited with the number of staff that are available because there's limit of funds.”

On Country service providers across all regions acknowledged that finding staff with cultural knowledge and expertise, as well as the skills to work with high-risk young people, is challenging. For the program to be effective, service providers are seeking staff who are connected with culture, and also connected with their community. However, it was noted that people who are connected culturally have a high obligation to their families and therefore managing cultural obligations alongside the organisational and service delivery obligations can be difficult.

Service providers also highlighted the importance of having enough staff to run the program so that the wellbeing of staff can be appropriately managed through adequate time off following camps. The camp component of the program is very intensive for staff and service providers report that their staff could be at risk of burnout if they are not supported to take time off. Currently, across all regions, there is not sufficient funding to employ enough staff to manage these risks.

Camp location was also a theme identified across each region. Service providers believed that additional time and resources are required to access suitable camp locations and to engage with communities outside of the program catchment area. All regions identified the benefit of camps being held outside of the catchment region to deliver an environment isolated from negative peer influences, however this creates additional workloads of community engagement, logistics and support. Other factors affecting camps included weather events, COVID-19 restrictions, schedule clashes with other appointments for young people and insufficient staffing.

As well as this, service providers noted challenges in working with young people who may have disabilities that have not yet been diagnosed, and therefore information on how to appropriately work with that young person, and the relevant supports, are not available.

Appropriateness

Summary of findings

1. All stakeholders agree that On Country programs promote cultural connection as a protective factor.
2. Appropriate funding and resourcing is needed to cater for young people with complex needs.
3. Programs targeting justice-involved young people need to consider the young person's holistic needs and focus on working with the entire family unit. All three service providers are delivering case management support to the young person and their family beyond what they are funded for.
4. Community awareness and involvement in ongoing development of program is limited. Community members expressed that quarterly [or half yearly] forums that require the service provider to report progress to community and obtain feedback about the program design would be a beneficial way of ensuring that all voices are heard. This would require adequate resourcing.

Appropriateness relates to the program design and how this meets the needs of the young people and the wider community. Evaluation findings have highlighted the followings points related to appropriateness.

Community perspectives

All stakeholders interviewed agreed that On Country programs promote cultural connection as a protective factor in supporting justice involved First Nations young people to participate in pro-social behaviours within their community. A First Nations stakeholder that was interviewed said:

“I think culture is so important for these young people...connection to culture. A sense of belonging, I think, is what a lot of young people are craving. And unfortunately that belonging comes with the group of young people that they hang out with and commit crimes with. Because that's their family.”

While community members were very supportive of an On Country model in general, community perspectives of the cultural appropriateness of the program being implemented in each of the regions differed.

Of community members interviewed, in some regions it was felt that the cultural connection aspect of the program was missing, and this could be enhanced by bringing in Elders and facilitators who have strong knowledge of culture. They expressed the importance of sourcing Elders that the young people connect with, who can support and mentor them.

“Well, it's [program] missing a lot. I mean, we've got some great people in the community...they know what culture is, what it looked, what it felt like. That's the people that we need today. I don't know where they are, but that's the people that we need today in this program.”

The mother of a young person who accessed On Country expressed a similar belief. Although they were happy with the program, they would like to see more of a focus on cultural activities.

“I want to see them do different things. Like taking the girls and going out bush. They can learn and see how to survive out bush. Learn how to make damper, and you know, how to make fire with a stick. That’s what we want to see, something different. More of those cultural things they can learn, and getting mob together.”

An Elder expressed what she would like to see in the program:

“Having Elders being there as well and the mentors being there really is critical. Because then they’re seeing that not all men are coming from that life too. It’s some very positive role models that they should have had there. Then they’re learning to make the didgeridoos, learning them’s about not just if you’re going to play it, what does that mean? Having someone that had the knowledge to be able to pass that down. Or making the boomerangs and going out, locating the wood. Like a cultural program. That’s why you have a diverse group of people that were doing that including the Traditional Owners from there, include the other people of the families that are going there...But also having the [young person’s] mother and father or the grandparents to come out and they do a visitation, out on country. Then they can be saying, “oh look here mum, I made this by myself” ...or “we caught all these fish down the river” ...but then also...finding out what’s your future? What are you interested in? All of that sort of thing and getting them other people to come in so they can have a bit of diversity with other people. Bringing stakeholders out there. If you’re taking kids out, if they’ve got mental health or they’re not sleeping, or they’ve got schizophrenia or whatever. Then you’re working in with [other services]...that come out there and service some of these kids coming into town. Take the services to them so they’re not moving away from that country.”

Young people with complex needs

Many of the young people who access the program have complex needs and experience significant vulnerabilities as a result of poverty, a lack of safe and stable housing, mental health issues, disability and substance use issues. Many young people are exposed to domestic and family violence and are products of intergenerational trauma. Holistic and intensive modelling of the program is required to ensure that it achieves the intended outcomes and caters for the complexities many justice-involved First Nations young people face.

Currently, each service provider feels they lack the appropriate level of funding and resources to be able to cater for young people with complex needs. However, all three service providers reported that the On Country model could be appropriate for young people with complex needs, if it was resourced accordingly.

Each service provider spoke about the level of risk involved in taking a group of high-risk young people on camps. Under current funding arrangements, there are significant challenges finding staff who possess cultural knowledge, are skilled in working with high-risk young people, can provide case management support and have expertise in risk management. With additional funding, services proposed they could split roles to hire staff specifically to be cultural mentors, and other staff specifically to be case managers. This would improve the program’s ability to cater to the needs of young people with complex needs.

All service providers noted that many young people they work with have underlying conditions or disabilities that have not yet been diagnosed at the time of referral. Therefore, the On Country staff do not have access to the necessary information about the young person's condition and how to work with that young person. This poses a significant risk to other young people and staff who attend the camps. A service provider outlined this issue, and identified the need for increased funding for training and professional development for cultural mentors around aspects such as mental health:

“A lot of the information within our referrals that come to our program, especially Child Safety or Youth Justice, don't provide enough information for us to know and identify, “Oh, this young person is asthmatic.” We don't know about that, or he's on medication and we don't know about that. They have suicidal thoughts and ideations. Funding would then give us that professional development to take on board doing training...training for substance abuse, mental health, that sort of stuff.”

A high level of collaboration with other services including the sharing of assessments and information, as well as increased funding to enable the service provider to employ highly skilled workers are needed for the On Country model to be appropriate for young people with complex needs. Service providers also identified that they would benefit from the funding body providing them with practical resources, such as pre-populated templates for risk assessments and other documents that DCYJMA require.

Given the difficulty service providers have faced in recruiting highly skilled workers who possess cultural knowledge, there needs to be further exploration into how various roles can be built into the program. To promote self-determination of First Nations communities, building the capacity of communities to deliver elements of the program and provide support to justice-involved young people should also be incorporated into the program.

One service provider noted that the current funding arrangements made the program more suitable as an early intervention model to prevent offending. They indicated that increased resourcing is needed for a program that works with young people identified as at high-risk and charged with multiple offences.

Need for a holistic approach that works with families

Connection to family and the broader social network is a strong component of the On Country program. Each service provider said that it is not appropriate to work with a young person without incorporating and working with the whole family. However, it was also felt that the current funding arrangements do not adequately allow for this to occur. This was echoed by a local Elder:

“Where did the families fit in? Because you can't heal children alone. They belong to a family.”

Service providers reported that many of the young people and families they work with do not feel comfortable engaging with any other service providers, and therefore the On Country service provider have often needed to step in and provide support. As a result, all service providers have been required to deliver case management support to the young person and their family beyond what they are funded to do. This is due to the strong trust and relationship the service provider has built with the family of the young person. One service provider stated:

“...the majority of our young people are like that, they won't engage in other programs but this one.”

Non-service delivery stakeholders also supported this approach, stating that a program targeting justice-involved young people needed to consider the young person's holistic needs and focus on

working with the entire family unit. Youth justice workers highlighted that there have been some very positive outcomes for the young people whose family were involved in the process.

“There's been some positive shifts with a few young people that we've talked about as case examples in terms of building on that young person's relationships with their family. Just that their attitude and behaviour improved within the home. There's been some positive changes for some young people.”

“The ones where we've seen parents go on camp or day programs with parents...we actually... that's where we see a change in relationship.”

Many stakeholders highlighted that the root cause of a young person's behaviour is often the result of an unstable and unsafe environment at home, and it is difficult to create change in a young person's life if they are going back into the same home environment when the camp is finished.

“You have to work with the family as well because there are things that are happening at home, in community, that impact on why they're going out and committing offenses. But also, why they just want to go back to detention. What's happening at home? Is there drinking? Is there no food there? Because a lot of the young people, when they're breaking in they're stealing, and they're taking food.”

Furthermore, one of the service providers acknowledged that if you do not have the support of their family, it can be very difficult to successfully engage a young person. Working with a young person and their family takes time and significantly adds to the service providers' workload and needs to be taken into consideration for future funding arrangements.

Expanded model of care

Service providers suggested that a rehabilitation-based model delivered on country with accommodation and cultural connection occurring over a longer time frame would be appropriate for young people with complex needs. This would include the provision of wrap around services such as family wellbeing services, health services, mental health supports, addiction services, education and pathways to employment, which service providers indicated needs to be included.

Several stakeholders identified that each young person should be referred for a social and emotional wellbeing assessment and health assessment upon entry to the program, and that this should be a mandatory requirement. Many young people accessing the program have physical health and mental health issues, and stakeholders highlighted that addressing this should be a priority before they are linked with education and employment opportunities.

The parent of a young person who engages in the On Country program also identified the need for wrap-around services, and expressed the difficulty she and her son were experiencing by having multiple service providers involved with him:

“That's why he was getting into trouble because nobody was on the page, like everybody was on a different page. And it was just stuffing me up a lot too because I was trying to do the right thing and then here, I've got these workers over here doing another thing. Another one over here saying something, another one over here doing something. It's like, who are you here for? Are you here for me or the child?”

Several other stakeholders agreed that an expanded model that supports a holistic and collaborative approach needs to be taken, with one stakeholder stating:

“Because that child might need to see a mental health service and need to have that management around their mental health and things like that. Because the only way you can find out is when you unpack that child and if you're going to do programs like this, you got to unpack the child as well...He or she's only coming because they got one concern. When you unpack that child and unpack that family, you got 20, 40 concerns. Then you got to deal with one at a time, but you do it right, and you do it culturally appropriately.”

One of the service providers also identified a strong need for additional funding to employ a trauma-informed clinician/counsellor who could be involved in the program and work with both the young person and family to potentially address what could be the root cause of the offending behaviour.

Data sets provided by DCYJMA show that across Cairns, Townsville, and Mount Isa, a significant percentage of young people at the Youth Detention Centre (between 1 July 2021 and 30 June 2022) have mental health issues and substance abuse issues (Table 1).

Table 1. Proportion of mental health/substance abuse issues amongst young people in youth detention (between 1 July 2021 and 30 June 2022)

	Mental health issues (%)	Substance abuse issues (%)
Mount Isa	17	61
South Townsville	30	64
North Townsville	37	49
Cairns	29	65

While this data is not specific to On Country participants, it highlights the complexities of young people that engage with youth justice and demonstrates that programs like On Country need to address various needs in order to be successful. All three service providers said that they want to work more holistically with the young person and their family but need to be resourced adequately to be able to do this successfully.

“Most of these young people, they're in trouble because they've got other issues going on. A lot of their issues, if they're treated as a health issue rather than as, “You've been naughty,” if their issues are treated as a health problem, whether it's substance misuse, whether it's trauma, and that's actually generally a really complicated picture of lots of things, then you are going to be helping because this generation's going to make the next generation. There's going to be a positive flow and effect from that.”

Length of program

The consensus among the On Country service providers, young people and families who were involved in the program, and other stakeholders is that the program length (six to eight weeks) is insufficient to create impact for the high complexity cohort the program aims to support. Youth justice workers also agreed that the timeframe is not appropriate, with one worker stating the following:

“I think locking it down to a, “you're referred and then you're on the program for six weeks and then you exit”. I think it's not realistic for the young people that we're working with. It's not long enough to sustain any real change for those young people.”

Each service provider said that, for most young people, it takes a significant amount of time to build rapport and trust with them and therefore they are not able to adhere to the timeframes set by the funding body.

One service provider summarised the journey of building rapport with young people and the fact that many of these young people have dealt with constant turnover of workers throughout their life:

“It takes you six months, at least, to build that kind of trust. Well, for some of my young people that I've been working with, I'm just the constant. I might only see them once a week but I'm their constant, I'm always there. We're the same face to young people and families and community. The young people we work with, different people change all the time. They start from scratch again and that's when the frustration comes in with young people. I feel like sometimes there's a lack of recognition in their experience in the past with any of the systems in terms of that, of changing faces...they're (young people) like “Yeah, whatever, I've heard this all before”.”

The length of the program has had an impact on all service providers as they are not adequately resourced to work with young people over a longer time frame. This also impacts on the services ability to accept new referrals.

“You can't get results within eight weeks. Sometimes we have kids on our program longer than eight, ten months. There's some kids on our program now that have been over a year now, and we're finally starting to see results within those kids. We do have referrals at the moment that are just on hold because [mentor] and myself don't have the capacity to work with them.”

First Nations community members who attended the On Country forum also felt that a six to eight week program is not enough to target young people identified as at high-risk.

“Six to eight weeks is a waste of time... It needs to be longer and link them with traineeships and work towards a career path.”

One community member identified that the program could be split up into two streams, with the level of intensive support offered based on the young person's contact with the youth justice system.

Service providers reiterated that some young people are in and out of the youth detention centres so frequently that they are not in community for six to eight weeks to complete the program. The young people that engage in the On Country programs have experienced a significant amount of loss in their lives and therefore require a program like On Country to be individualised and not bound by timeframes.

All aspects of On Country take time, and service providers spoke about the need to work to a timeframe that the young person is comfortable with. They expressed the importance of engaging with the young person and the family in community first, and that a relationship needs time to develop before a young person feels comfortable enough to go on a camp. Each of the service providers, community members, and other stakeholders believe that On Country should not be set to any timeframes and should be provided as a continual support that a justice-involved young person can access at any point.

Cultural responsiveness and safety

The three On Country programs aim to create a program that is culturally responsive and safe for a young person to access. Each location is unique in that there is significant diversity among the young people who access the program, with young people participating from various parts of Queensland, the Northern Territory and the Torres Strait Islands. Each service provider noted that there are challenges in delivering an On Country program to a diverse group of young people.

Each service provider took a different approach to building a culturally responsive program. This included activities such as:

- using a compatibility methodology to ensure the program considers the needs of Aboriginal young people, Torres Strait Islander young people, and ensuring cultural activities are age appropriate
- having an appropriate facilitator for women's business and men's business and considering the location of the camps
- working with young people to make them aware of where they come from and who their connections are
- cultural mentors engaging young people in various activities and having conversations to encourage them to share what their Elders have taught them. The mentors then encourage the young people to teach them and other participants about how their mob does certain activities
- empowering families to talk more about their culture
- tailoring the program and utilising a different approach depending on the gender of the young person, their cultural needs, and also considering their reason for referral.

The service delivery specifications outline that the model of On Country should be run in partnership with local community leaders, young people and families. This partnership approach will increase the cultural responsiveness of the program, however this is not happening in practice in all regions. In some regions, multiple stakeholders who were interviewed felt that the service providers lacked the cultural authority to deliver an On Country program.

One stakeholder in particular felt that the cultural authority to deliver an On Country program should not necessarily be given to one service provider.

“I don't think it should just be up to one organisation to have that cultural authority so to say. So I think, again, it comes down to the location, the community coming together and having those conversations.”

Stakeholders that were interviewed clearly indicated that On Country service providers need to have a genuine connection with local Elders and Traditional Owners, in order to gain the support and respect from community members to deliver an On Country program.

This support and respect requires active and ongoing development. This has been demonstrated by one service provider that regularly attend First Nations cultural group meetings to provide updates on the On Country program and discuss feedback from the community to ensure that ongoing communication pathway exists. This approach has enabled the service provider to communicate their work with the community and provide a channel of feedback from the community to voice their perspectives. In regions where this is not occurring, community members have indicated that mechanisms that support regular communication would resolve and prevent any conflict from occurring, with one community member stating:

“We know good things come out of it, but we don't know about it.
We wouldn't be in this position if we got regular updates.”

Effectiveness

Summary of findings

1. Service providers across all regions are fully staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, which helps young people and their families feel more comfortable engaging with the program.
2. On Country programs are effective at connecting young people to culture. Conversations also take place between mentors and young people about what their goals are, what they want for their future, and to help young people understand that there are positive pathways they can take in life.
3. Young people feel comfortable to speak to the cultural mentors about what they were going through and that the relationship with On Country staff was a positive experience.
4. Community members believe the On Country program results in significant outcomes and feel the program needs to be implemented as a long-term measure.
5. The community strongly believe in the On Country model as a tool for justice-involved First Nations young people.
6. When designing the length of programs, funding bodies need to consider the trauma and abandonment many First Nations' young people have experienced in their lives and ensure that programs are resourced well enough so they can work with young people over a longer time frame.
7. Based on quantitative data sets provided by DCYJMA, the percentage of young people who reoffended within six months of completing the program is 56 per cent. The percentage of young people who reoffended within twelve months of completing the program is 74 per cent.
8. The On Country program is considered a cost-effective service that also delivers efficiencies for other programs funded by the DCYJMA.
9. Service providers highlighted that:
 - a. insurance is a large expense
 - b. they need to offer a competitive wage and good working conditions in order to attract and retain highly skilled staff with specialist skills.

Effectiveness seeks to understand the impact the program has had on young people participating. Evaluation findings have highlighted the following points related to effectiveness.

Young peoples' engagement with the On Country program

Service providers reported that most young people that are referred to them are engaging in the On Country program. They also reported that many young people they successfully engage with have not engaged with other services previously. Each service provider reported that persistence is key to building a relationship with justice-involved young people, and that building a relationship with the young person's family is also important. Other stakeholders also mentioned that young people are more likely to engage in a program if they connect with the workers and if the program/workers deliver what they say they are going to deliver. This was also echoed by the service providers who emphasised the importance of finding suitable workers. The fact that the service providers across all

regions are fully staffed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people helps young people and their families to feel more comfortable engaging in the program.

All young people who have been interviewed have reported that being involved in On Country has been a positive experience for them. Most of the young people had attended an on country experience several times. One young person highlighted the different activities he engaged in on the camps.

“On the camps we’ve done swimming, fishing and that. It was nice out there. We looked for a piece of wood to make a shape, and then made a boomerang...we cooked damper, and meat on the fire...we talked about culture in yarning circles.”

Some of the young people reported that they learnt a lot about culture by attending the program. It was clear that some of these young people felt a sense of pride in what they achieved and learned on camp, as they were eager to talk about the different activities they engaged in during the interview.

While each On Country program offers different activities, all young people interviewed highlighted that they enjoy the On Country program, that they get along well with the workers, and feel comfortable to open up to the workers about their life experiences.

“I feel a lot better after having yarns with the staff here. It’s helped me because I can go out and do activities. Because otherwise all I do is sleep. I sleep all day. [The program] gets me out of the house and occupies my mind. It’s kept me out of trouble. I don’t jump in cars anymore. Because I know that I can make a change.”

Each young person also identified that the On Country staff have contact with them between camps, and some young people said that the On Country staff visit them in their home environment. It is highly likely that young people feel more comfortable to engage in meaningful conversation with staff as they are having the conversations in a safe and non-clinical environment while doing activities.

“We went to the beach there, and they did put a fire on and we talked.”

“We go for a walk and talk and go to the lookout. I’ve asked them if we could do a gym session. They took us to the creek on a day program.”

One young person who participated in the On Country program summarised their experience and the impact of the program on them.

“Four times I went to the camp. I’ve turned around...changed a lot. They’re [service provider] very kind people. We had conversations with [cultural mentors], and with the other boys that go out with us. We talk to them. [Cultural mentor] took us around and helped us hand out resumes... We did work there and then went back to the [On Country program]. One of the staff still connects with us when he’s in town.”

One service provider spoke about a young person who completed the program and is now on a positive path. This young person has since been invited back to a few camps to mentor the other young people. Seeing a role model who the young people can relate to has had a big impact on them.

“We’ve had a successful story from a young person I used to work with. He’s now got two jobs. He’s done modelling. And he’s also a member of a dance school...we’ve invited him to a couple of camps to do mentoring as well too. He used to be involved with youth justice and child safety. The kids that come on the camp used to hang out with him as well too, and do stuff like jump in cars, stolen cars. They did all that stuff

with him. But then to see him like he is now...I think he played quite a big role in some of them. Because I know that with [young person], she refused two cars that came to her house and she refused to jump in.”

On Country service providers would like to invite more young people and community members who have similar lived experience to attend the program as mentors and role models. However, obtaining blue cards for these individuals is a significant barrier.

Stakeholders acknowledged that since On Country is a voluntary program, the motivation of a young person to change their behaviour plays a significant role in whether they engage with the program or not. They also highlighted that the support of family members is important. If a family member endorses the program, encourages the young person to attend, and supports the young person to be ready for when the service providers pick them up, the young person is also more likely to engage.

A parent whose children engaged in the program emphasised the positive experience the program has been for them and their children:

“Yeah, I found it good. It helps me because I’m trying to keep them out of trouble and that, off the streets and all of that. And we didn’t have [service provider] at the time when all those things were going down. But as soon as this came along, yeah, it started like lifting these boys up a little bit. But we’re just happy for it.”

Protective factors

Sense of belonging

Stakeholders expressed that young people are craving a sense of belonging, and that many justice-involved young people find that sense of belonging and acceptance through peers who are engaging in offending behaviour. All interviewees agreed that On Country provides a pro-social environment where young people feel they belong, and that somebody cares about them.

“I think a lot of these kids are just looking around for somewhere to be, just somewhere to belong and somewhere to feel, I don't know, stable. Structure. Even if it's just for a moment in their time. And they appreciate the structure... So, when you take them out and give them a bit of structure, they like that sense of belonging. Rather than just feeling like they're being pushed to one side.”

“With the camps I like to see the young people just be themselves in their creative cultural safe place and just be kids.”

Across all regions, young people are involved in the decision-making process about what activities they would like to do on camp. This gives them a sense of ownership in the program. Young people who have attended the camps a few times are given the task of teaching newcomers about what the camp involves, such as showing a new young person how to do certain hands-on activities or letting them know what the general schedule is. This gives them a sense of responsibility and leadership.

“I often say “So if you don’t know something you can always ask one of these fellows because they’re seniors here. They’ve been here before. They know what they’re doing. They know how things work. So go talk to them.” Because they might be too ashamed to ask us. So they’d be more comfortable talking to the young fellows they knock around with in the street. So we try and give that little bit more responsibility in leadership around stepping up, and they do, they like it. They’re very proud about themselves when they do that.”

One of the service providers facilitated an opportunity for young people to work at the local rodeo. The young people spoke about how rewarding this opportunity was, and how great it felt to be given a uniform and work as part of a team.

“We were at the back of the area...we opened the gate for the bulls and cows and untied the rope from the neck. They [service provider] taught us how to do all that. It would be good to have it every year to volunteer at the rodeo.”

A mother of a young person who volunteered at the rodeo also mentioned that the young people felt proud of themselves when family members and community members came up to them and told them they were doing a good job.

“They go out the back and family come to the rodeo and they see them and are proud of them.”

In this case, young people also established a connection with their fathers, grandfathers and uncles who had worked as a jackaroo and grew up on stations. Because of this, many of the young people aspired to do this as well. A father whose sons have completed the On Country program highlighted that the rural operations activities his sons completed on camp helped to create a connection to their family and Elders.

“When they were kids, when we used to drive in the car, they used to see the mustering mob go past...and I would say one day you fellas could be doing this. Most of our mob, like even my father, have worked on a cattle station. These boys...they grew up watching family members go to work in the morning from the community to the station.”

Connection to culture and formation of identity

An Elder spoke about how being on country is healing for young people:

“Making a fire, sitting around a fire, yarning, because a yarn and a fire, it's really calming. That smoke is actually very... it actually goes through our bodies, and we use that as a platform of healing.”

The On Country programs help young people to learn about culture, understand where they are from, who their mob is and what their cultural obligations are.

“We try to make it [the camps] fun, but also it's a learning and cultural safe place for these young people where we actually mentor them in regards to traditions and the culture today. Give them that balance to be involved in both, rather than just the one. I guess helping them find their identity in a world that's hard to mesh the two cultures sometimes. They don't know where they come from, where they fit in, whether it's in this community or outside of the community.”

Several young people spoke about feeling better and feeling a sense of calmness when they were out on country, with one young person stating:

“My families, they drink and stuff. When you're out bush you clear your mind.”

Service providers also spoke about the sense of pride a young person feels when they accomplish something on camp, which in turn helps to build their confidence and self-esteem. Learning respect is also a core component that the program instils in young people, as well as their responsibility in passing on cultural knowledge to the next generation. The service providers spoke about the importance culture plays in giving a young person capacity to understand the consequences of their actions and behaviours.

Role modelling and building positive relationships

Being on country provides an environment where young people feel they can open up about their lives and experiences in a safe space. On Country service providers agreed that young people are much more likely to have meaningful conversations while sitting around a fire having a yarn. A parent of a young person who completed the program emphasised the importance of the cultural mentors as role models:

“I think it was when [male mentor], he sits down with them. I’ve got a photo at home with the boys around a campfire and have a talk with them. And he always explain to them and tell them in a good way, that’s why they listen to him and respect him.”

Community members who were interviewed said that many of the young people involved in the youth justice system do not have positive role models to look up to. On Country programs show young people what a positive role model looks like. Conversations take place between mentors and young people about what their goals are, what they want for their future and to help young people understand that there are positive pathways they can take in life.

“If they feel like they’ve lost their identity and they don’t really know what they’re supposed to be doing finding it...I think showing kids and youth and just people in general that there is two sides to everything. You can go down the path, or there is a positive path and if they’ve only ever seen the negative path that’s all they’re going to know. So, these programs are to try and show them, “Hey, you can actually do this positive stuff and have a great life”.”

Young people who were interviewed mentioned that they felt comfortable to speak to the mentors about what they were going through at the time, and that the relationship with On Country staff was a positive experience for them. A stakeholder noted that due to the trusted relationship the mentors have built with young people, the cultural mentors are able to support young people to connect with other services and reinforce to young people the importance of connecting with these services.

Structure, stability and life skills

The camps provide young people with an opportunity to learn life skills. The service providers report that some of the young people they work with reside in dysfunctional environments that lack structure, safety and stability, with one service provider noting the following:

“ There’s more of that routine and structure and all that type of stuff. Stuff that they’d never get basically in their own home. So, they’ve got no knowledge around what that looks like to be, I suppose, in a functioning family... So, it’s more around that first-time opportunity that they know what it’s like to actually sit down at the table as a family group and have a meal.”

On camps, each young person has a responsibility to contribute in some way to the running of the camp, including helping to make meals and clean up. Young people are supported to get into a routine while on camp, including waking up at a regular time, making their bed and having regular meals together. Mentors and case managers have conversations with young people about coping skills, strategies to handle change and the impact of decision making.

Some of the service providers also incorporate a day program element during weeks when camps are not running, where young people can engage in a day cooking program and build on the life skills they learn during camps. Following a routine while on camp and having responsibility gives the young people a sense of purpose, which many young people lack outside of the program.

Improved life trajectory

Community members believed the On Country programs are resulting in significant outcomes and feel the program needs to be implemented as a long-term measure. While the On Country programs are funded to reduce offending rates of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, a variety of stakeholders indicated the outcomes of the program extend to many other areas of a young person's life. Service providers hope that these can be measured alongside reoffending rates.

One service provider spoke about a young person's journey with the On Country program and the positive outcomes that occurred. The young person was considered high-risk of continued engagement with the youth justice system and did not engage with any services. Over a long period of time, the On Country staff built rapport with the young person and their family, and continued to build a relationship with the young person even while he was remanded. The young person's offending behaviour gradually reduced over time, and the young person is now working full-time and On Country staff supported him to reconnect with his family.

The service provider noted that there are many aspects of this young person's journey that have not been measured, including the impact of the program on him as a person and how he now feels about himself. When the service commenced working with the young person, he was withdrawn and lacked the confidence to engage in tasks while on camp. The young person now feels proud of himself, and his level of confidence and self-esteem has increased. This particular young person engaged with the On Country service provider over a two-year period, which reinforces the importance of making On Country a longer-term program so that it adequately meets the needs of high-risk, justice-involved young people.

All service providers spoke about the changes and positive outcomes they have seen in young people who have engaged in the program, with reduced offending rates being only one of many outcomes. Young people who engage in the program become more confident and proud individuals.

A young person who accessed the On Country program spoke about how the program is giving her confidence and helping her plan for her future.

“It's been helpful. It's good. I get along with the workers well. They've [service provider] helped me go back to school. I'm in grade 8 this year and you can do courses at school. They [service provider] were helping me decide what I'd like to do. When I was in grade 7, I was thinking about becoming a lawyer because there's not many Indigenous lawyers. The workers all said that I can do this. I think it's better for me to go back to school because then I can graduate and I'll have more opportunities.”

A mother of a young person summarised the impact the program has had on her son and that it reduced his offending behaviour:

“It's the talks and the outings and that with him, made him get his head together. It's good. Yeah, [he's] proud of himself. I'm proud of him. He got a job, got his Ls, getting his license and that...They spoke to him and got him to where he needs to be and help him more to be not shame and that, to get a job and wanting to do things. When he came in town [he had] a bit more respect towards me as well. Came in town, didn't really go out as much as he used to with the boys and that and stealing and whatever...it did slow him down a lot.”

Service providers reported that some young people they have worked with have re-enrolled into education, and others have secured employment or are on the path to searching for employment with the support of their On Country case worker.

“I'll give you an example of a young boy that I work with. He wasn't doing programs at all, wouldn't go out. He was a child safety referral. He was getting in trouble with his

mum, not at school, but he wouldn't do anything that child safety planned for him with his work. He suffered from social anxiety, would never leave the house until I started working with him, and then now he's out of the house every week ringing me up. He's the main one ringing me for when we're going to go to see him...From where he was when I first got him not doing anything with anyone to where he is now. Now he's in a course. He's doing a civil construction course.”

Another parent of a young person said that her son comes back from the camps and is calmer, more mature and that having a male role model to look up to has helped him greatly. Across all regions, service providers acknowledged that outcomes which may seem small can often be very significant for that young person and their family.

Perspectives on the On Country model reducing reoffending

All stakeholders who were interviewed are very supportive of the On Country model and agree that it can lead to an improved life trajectory for participants. While stakeholders acknowledged that in each of the locations there are elements of the program delivery that need to be improved, the community strongly believe in the On Country model as a tool for justice involved First Nations young people. A youth justice worker summarised the importance of On Country programs:

“A lot of the young people out here don't actually have a whole lot of opportunity to connect with their culture or connect with positive role models or connect with their peers in a pro-social environment. Just in being able to increase their contact through a perfect On Country model program would reduce their risk of recidivism and help them build pro-social ways of dealing with their behaviour. So, just increase their contact with positive role models so they can identify with the community. Also be able to reconnect with their culture, learn cultural practices. It'll also help them with their wellbeing as well.”

Across all regions, community members believe that On Country has the potential to reduce reoffending if it is resourced appropriately, if a holistic approach is utilised and if it is funded as a long-term program. According to interviewees, a holistic approach would need to take every aspect of a young person's life into consideration and work collaboratively with other services to ensure their individual needs are being addressed.

The On Country program service delivery specifications note that the purpose of the program is to “destigmatise young people as ‘offenders’ and reposition young people as proud cultural people with a purpose to contribute positively to their local community and mainstream society through ultimately an elimination in offending and greater participation in education and economic life”. However, stakeholders noted that the aim of elimination in offending is not a realistic objective for one service provider in each region with a small scope and very limited funding. The six to eight week timeframe for supporting each young person also makes the aim of reducing reoffending more difficult and unrealistic to achieve, particularly since all service providers are working with young people who have complex needs.

All stakeholders felt that rather than a focus on reducing reoffending, program objectives should focus on improving the overall social and emotional wellbeing of young people through connection with culture and culturally appropriate casework. It was also noted that, when designing the length of programs, funding bodies need to consider the trauma and abandonment many First Nations young people have experienced in their lives and ensure that programs are resourced well enough so they can work with young people over a longer time frame.

The young people who participated in the On Country program strongly endorse it and both they and their families identified positive changes and outcomes from their engagement in the program. This was emphasised by a father who had sons that participated in the program.

“They were mucking up a bit, so we had to find a way to get these boys on the track of how to be good and all that, to learn and stuff. This mob here helped these boys, changed them. Since they came back, there is a good change. I watched the boys work at the rodeo ground. I don’t have to tell them to do this, do that. They help.”

Outcomes (reoffending rates)

The data provided to QCOSS demonstrates that young people who have engaged in the On Country program across the regions are less likely to reoffend, particularly if it is assumed that the existing path of young people referred to the program would involve future reoffending were diversionary services not provided.

According to the data, there are 57 young people in total across Townsville, Mount Isa, and Cairns, who completed a program prior to 31 December 2021. Of these 57 young people, the percentage of young people who reoffended within six months of completing the program is 56 per cent (Table 2). The percentage of young people who reoffended within twelve months of completing the program is 74 per cent.

The data is limited as it does not compare young people in the program to young people not in the program to determine the difference in reoffending after six months and twelve months. However, on review of reoffending rates for all young people who completed a custody stay at Cleveland Youth Detention Centre in the 12-month period ending 30 June 2019, 91 per cent were alleged to have committed another offence. This was amongst a cohort of 327 distinct young people.⁴

Table 2. Reoffending rates of young people completing an On Country program

	Number of distinct young people	% who reoffended within 6 months of completion	% who reoffended within 12 months of completion
On Country (total)	57	56%	74%
- Cairns	25	52%	76%
- Mount Isa	17	65%	82%
- Townsville	15	53%	60%

Recidivism was clearly stated as an inappropriate measure of success for the On Country program, particularly due to the level of disadvantage experienced by many young people who access the program. Many young people are returning to homes that are poor, lack structure, and where there is domestic and family violence. Many young people have complexities such as trauma and undiagnosed mental health issues that are not being treated. As the program is only funded for a short-term intervention, and is not structured to address the levels of poverty, disadvantage and complexities young people face, it is not realistic to expect the program to reduce reoffending as the primary goal.

A youth justice staff member highlighted that the young people who access the On Country program present with complex needs and are very difficult to engage. Due to this, all positive outcomes or

changes that are seen in these young people are significant wins. This was echoed by all service providers, who noted that they see many outcomes in young people that cannot always be measured through data. These outcomes may be a young person wanting to attend a second camp, a young person showing respect to staff members or a parent providing feedback on a positive change in their child's behaviour. All stakeholders agreed that while outcomes such as these may seem small, in the context of working with these young people, they are significant wins. However, due to the complexity of young people who access the program, there need to be several indicators that measure various aspects of a young person's life, in order to gather a true understanding of the impact and effectiveness of the program. Stakeholders emphasised that On Country programs should not solely focus on outcomes of reducing reoffending, with one stating:

“From our perspective, yeah, our interest is in these kids living a healthy, happy life and feeling loved and safe. The reduced reoffending is almost like a proxy measure for that. But it's a means to an end. It's not the end in itself. It shouldn't be. Maybe we get further if we stop thinking about this as reducing crime and started thinking about it as from a health and wellbeing, or a rights and a wellbeing approach. What rights are we trying to uphold by conducting these programs? What aspects of a child's life are we trying to improve by conducting these programs?”

The majority of stakeholders interviewed argued that the outcomes of On Country would be greater if the program engagement timeframes were expanded, and the holistic needs of each young person were supported through coordinated responses across services. As noted throughout the report, all stakeholders interviewed agreed that service providers should be enabled to support the young people to access the program for whatever time period is necessary for them to address their goals and support needs.

Furthermore, service providers highlighted that measuring other outcomes alongside reoffending rates is important, as it will show different ways the On Country programs are positively impacting young people. This should also consider the different impact of the program on young people depending on their age or gender.

Cost effectiveness (service provider perspectives)

Across all regions, stakeholders indicated the On Country program is providing services beyond their funded requirements due to the needs of young people who access the program, including addressing complex underlying causes of problematic behaviour.

Each region identified the On Country program as a cost-effective service that also delivered efficiencies for other programs funded by DCYJMA by leveraging the strong trust and relationships between On Country staff and young people to increase engagement in education, employment and case management activities.

Service providers highlighted that insurance is a large expense, as well as the importance of finding suitable staff who possess cultural knowledge, skills in case management and the ability to connect with high-risk young people. One of the service providers acknowledged that, in order to attract highly skilled and suitable staff, they need to ensure they are offering a competitive wage and good working conditions. Service providers also noted that staffing costs at the camp is a significant cost for them as they need to staff the camp 24/7, which involves penalty rates and overtime rates.

Future improvements and recommendations

Summary of findings

1. The On Country program could be improved by:
 - a. measuring impacts that are not specific to youth justice
 - b. extending length of contracts
 - c. incorporating an expanded model of care
 - d. improving the structure of the program and communication pathways
 - e. supporting a process of community co-design and ongoing consultation
 - f. supporting service providers with governance
 - g. adopting a culturally appropriate procurement process.

Future improvements aim to identify how various stakeholders believe the On Country program could be improved. Findings have highlighted the following points related to future improvements and recommendations.

Expanded model of care

An expanded model of care is needed for the On Country programs to improve its effectiveness and impact on reoffending rates. The young person's family unit needs to be supported and incorporated throughout the whole process. The length of the program needs to be extended to enable On Country staff to build a trusting relationship with each young person, acknowledging the complexity of the cohort that accesses the On Country programs. Wrap-around supports should be incorporated into the program to address the complex needs of justice-involved young people.

Recommendation 1: Expand the model of care to enable the On Country program to:

- a) extend service delivery support to families.
- b) extend the length of time a young person and family is supported.
- c) provide support to young people with more complex issues. This will require additional staff including senior case managers who can provide supervision to mentors and Elders.
- d) include an ongoing community engagement component that aims to strengthen and maintain connection to local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and services.

Governance support

Support with governance was identified as a way the delivery of the On Country program could be improved. Throughout the stakeholder interviews, First Nation community members stated that the funding body should play a more active role in supporting On Country service providers to have robust governance in place.

Recommendation 2: On Country service providers should be provided support to ensure local communities are confident that appropriate governance mechanisms are in place. Specifically, local communities would like to be sure that:

- a) the values and purpose of the program align with service delivery specifications
- b) staff who are employed in the On Country program have the appropriate skillset to work with high-risk young people and go through the necessary criminal history checks
- c) appropriate supervision is in place to oversee case management practice
- d) the board of directors reflect the cultural diversity of the community.

Culturally appropriate procurement process

The current procurement process puts First Nations organisations in competition with each other, which then causes tensions in community. Many organisations also do not have the skillset to write applications in a traditional, “western” method. This often results in larger companies winning funding while smaller, grassroots community organisations get overlooked. Culturally appropriate procurement processes that are place-based need to be implemented, and the way funding is distributed in small communities needs to be reconsidered. Procurement processes need to be co-designed and allow sufficient time for local community engagement and genuine consultation, to ensure that funding is going to First Nations organisations that are respected and endorsed by the community.

Recommendation 3: The funding body should conduct extensive community consultation with local First Nations Peoples in each region to determine:

- a) which First Nations organisations/groups have the support of community and would be best placed to deliver an On Country program
- b) whether it is appropriate for funding to be distributed between a few organisations.

Structure of program and communication pathways

Stakeholders who refer to the On Country programs identified the importance of sharing the casework plan with the referrer so that services or supports being delivered are not duplicated. They also highlighted that communication pathways between referrers and the On Country service provider should be improved. Referrers reported they would like to be provided with a detailed calendar of activities so they will be able to determine if the program is suitable for a young person they are working with. This will also help referrers explain to young people what each program involves. On Country service providers reported that they would like to be provided with more detailed information about each young person who is referred, so they can ensure that they meet the needs of each young person.

Recommendation 4: Improve communication between referrers and the On Country service providers by ensuring:

- a) On Country service providers provide referrers with a detailed summary of what the program entails, including monthly calendars indicating when camps are being scheduled and what activities are on offer. These summaries should outline what camps/activities are tailored according to a young person’s cultural identity and gender.

- b) a co-location model occurs consistently, and by setting up regular stakeholder meetings where Youth Justice case managers and the On Country service provider can discuss the needs of each young person who is referred. Adequate funding will need to be built into funding arrangements so that service providers can allocate sufficient time for this.
- c) service providers have capacity to attend collaborative panels to coordinate support for complex cases. This should be built into the service delivery specifications as a requirement for On Country service providers, and adequate resources should be provided for them to engage in this process.

Long term contracts

Longer term contracts were identified as a means to strengthen the connection between the funding body, service providers and First Nations communities. Acknowledging historical challenges of short-term programs, long-term funding agreements would signal the intention for this program to be embedded in communities and continue to build on the positive foundations of cultural connection for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

Recommendation 5: In line with other government NGO contracting arrangements, funding should be secured for a minimum five-year period.

Ongoing community engagement and co-design

Each location experienced challenges during implementation to engage with Elders and Traditional Owners in the catchment regions, as well as the On Country camp location. In some regions, tensions exist between the service providers, Traditional Owners and the First Nations community, limiting the support for, and community connection to, the program. Well implemented and culturally appropriate co-design processes that aim to develop governance mechanisms that include dispute resolution processes would enable First Nations voices and strengthen the delivery of the On Country program.

Recommendation 6: The funding body should work in partnership with the service providers to involve local First Nation communities in the ongoing design and delivery of the program. This should include:

- a) further (and ongoing) consultation with local First Nations communities, including Elders and Traditional Owners, to clearly identify what the program aims to achieve and what their expectations are of an On Country program.
- b) specific engagement with young people and their families, ensuring the voices of young people are at the centre of the conversation.
- c) establishing dispute resolution mechanisms, with ongoing support to resolve disputes.
- d) quarterly community forums hosted by the service provider and funding body that aim to inform and update local First Nation community members on program outcomes and future priorities, as well as provide an opportunity for community feedback on ongoing program design and delivery.
- e) the payment of Elders and other First Nation community members who develop cultural content and contribute to the program to ensure it is culturally appropriate for young people from diverse backgrounds. Service providers must be resourced appropriately to ensure cultural knowledge is acknowledged, valued and respected.

Measures of impact

Recognising that the young people involved generally present to the service provider with low engagement and a lack of trust in government funded services, improved and co-designed data collection would provide richer insights into the outcomes achieved through service delivery.

While the On Country program is funded to reduce offending rates of justice-involved First Nations young people, the long-term complexities of trauma, substance use, peer influence and negative previous experiences require stable and incremental supports to allow clients to develop new strategies to engage in pro-social behaviours that reduce offending rates over time.

A clear theme identified across all regions was the lack of effective data to understand the impact of the On Country program on young people with complex needs.

Recommendation 7: Improved set of indicators to measure program outcomes are required.

Throughout stakeholder interviews, the following measures were suggested:

- a) levels of engagement with the On Country program.
- b) levels of engagement with other service providers including government programs.
- c) levels of engagement with education and employment.
- d) wellbeing indicators including mental and physical health (including reduced substance use).
- e) self-reported surveys from family members and young people.
- f) relationships between First Nations communities and other programs funded by DCYJMA.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the On Country programs delivered in Mount Isa, Townsville and Cairns was conducted by QCOSS and focussed on implementation, the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program and how it could be improved. Currently, there are some issues in all regions with regards to the implementation and delivery of the program that need to be considered.

Evaluation findings highlight the support that stakeholders have for the On Country program in all service delivery regions. There is consistent agreement that the program is beneficial for young people, this includes stakeholders from Youth Justice service centres, service delivery organisations, local First Nation community members, as well as the young people and their families.

Many justice-involved young people with high levels of trauma would be reluctant to access counselling or clinical mental health support. In the *Make Healing Happen* report from the Healing Foundation, healing was recognised as an ongoing process that needed to be addressed in a variety of ways, including through individual counselling, intergenerational healing strategies, collective healing approaches such as healing camps and on-country programs. The On Country experience provides a safe and culturally appropriate space where young people can commence the journey of healing.

To improve the effectiveness of the On Country program, local First Nation communities must be involved as co-design partners at all stages of program design and implementation.

On Country service providers must be resourced appropriately to deliver holistic services and supports that consider the complexities of justice-involved young people. Service providers need to be supported with improved governance processes and required to engage in meaningful and ongoing community consultation.

All stakeholders who were interviewed agreed that On Country programs are a culturally appropriate youth justice response to provide young people with a sense of belonging, connection to culture and support to form an identity, which in turn has the potential to reduce reoffending.

Appendix A. Evaluation questions

Line of enquiry	Evaluation questions
Implementation	<p>Is the On Country Program being implemented? Is it being implemented as intended?</p> <p>How successfully is the program being implemented across the different locations?</p> <p>What services and activities are being offered to young people?</p> <p>What have been the challenges in implementing the program?</p>
Future improvements	<p>How can programs' design or delivery be improved?</p> <p>What is On Country telling us about the importance of cultural connection and culturally appropriate supervision as protective factors?</p> <p>Could the model (or elements of the model) be applied in other services and/or locations?</p>
Appropriateness	<p>Are the programs culturally responsive and safe?</p> <p>Is the model appropriate for young people with complex needs?</p> <p>Are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities being empowered to offer support and report progress?</p> <p>Does the evidence base support the activities or supports that are being delivered through the program?</p>
Effectiveness	<p>What levels of participation are being reported through the program? Are young people engaging with the On Country Program?</p> <p>Are the On Country programs achieving their intended outcomes? Are young people more connected to their culture as a result of the program?</p> <p>How do the On Country programs connect young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with education and employment opportunities?</p> <p>Does participation in the On Country programs lead to an improved life trajectory for participants, compared to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people at risk of offending/ reoffending? Is there a measurable effect on reoffending?</p> <p>Which cohorts have benefitted most from the programs? What supports or models of engagement are most effective?</p> <p>Are there any unintended outcomes/consequence?</p>
Cost effectiveness / return on investment	<p>What are the costs and benefits of the On Country Program?</p>

Appendix B. Service delivery specifications

According to the service delivery specifications, On Country is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-led cultural support response to address young people's connection to culture, positive self-identity, and also reflect positive social and emotional wellbeing. The On Country model is developed and run by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations in partnership with local community leaders, young people and families.

It aims to promote positive outcomes of:

- pro-social behaviour and reduced offending
- improved and sustained school attendance, employment and training opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people with complex and challenging needs
- stronger connections with family and community
- stronger cultural connectedness and self-identify as proud Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young people
- improvements in mental health and wellbeing (including a reduction in self-harm, drug and alcohol use)
- improved community safety where the young person lives.

Its purpose is to destigmatise young people as 'offenders' and reposition young people as proud cultural people with a purpose to contribute positively to their local community and mainstream society through ultimately an elimination in offending and greater participation in education and economic life.

The On Country program is designed for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10 to 17 years who have been assessed by Youth Justice as having a high or very high risk assessment rating. Program participants can also include other young people, with referrals being priorities into the following categories:

Priority one: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10 to 17 years with a high or very high risk assessment rating (complex needs) referred by Youth Justice Service Centre (YJSC) staff.

Priority two: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 10 to 17 years with high or very high risk of reoffending referred by community, families, Queensland Police Service and courts.

Priority three: If the target cohort is exhausted then other young people can be included, if a need is demonstrated, and by negotiation with the contract manager.

Each young person referred will be supported for approximately six to eight weeks. The On Country program is not limited to an away from home experience that may include a camp or support in other locations away from the young person's support network. Support away from home must include 24 hours a day supervision and care of young people. The program must have capacity to support young women and men, but not always together.

The program must involve the following additional elements:

1. a case work relationship with each young person referred, working in partnership with the referrer and collaborating to achieve better outcomes across multiple categories of need
2. measurement of the cultural benefits to the young person from the On Country participation.
3. a detailed, individualised cultural support plan and case plan during and at the conclusion of the program for implementation by other agencies
4. active effort to link or find an alternative school program for the young person
5. active effort to support the young person in employment and training programs through a partnership with specialised agencies in the “learn and earn” sector
6. integrated partnerships with existing youth support, youth justice and child safety programs (where eligible) in the young person’s community of origin
7. the On Country experience will do no harm – all critical incidents will be reported to the Youth Justice referrer/case manager; extensive risk management processes should be in place
8. willingness to participate in an external evaluation.

Case work by the On Country provider includes the assessment of young persons’ needs, risks and the coordination and delivery of direct support services, relevant to the identified need for both the young person and their family. The On Country program is to be guided by the following principles:

- Community authority – design and delivery
 - On Country programs will be designed and delivered only by Community
 - Not all On Country programs can be delivered on the young person’s family Country of origin, and special consideration is required for young people with connections to the Torres Strait Islands and discrete communities
 - A young person’s supportive family members will be encouraged to participate in the service delivery including active efforts to create partnerships with the family that ensure a young person follows through with post-support actions
- Trauma informed and community-driven support and partnerships
 - Programs will be trauma informed and provide non-punitive support to young people with complex needs.
 - The young person’s family should be the primary source of information about the young person’s family history and cultural connections.
 - On Country is available to young people with a dual youth justice and child protection order
 - Each young person should leave a program with a cultural support plan for ongoing implementation. Education, training and employment opportunities should feature, and are likely to be achieved through integrated service system delivery locally with other Youth Justice-focussed programs and community-based health, welfare, family support and education programs.
 - The On Country process should feature immediate physical contact with country, ongoing contact and sustainable support beyond a young person’s involvement with the service.
 - The service response will not be a residential program for the entire six to eight weeks.
- Positive communication with community and young people
 - This initiative will be a partnership and collaboration with community and young people.

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