The Initial Transitional Support (ITS) service: Impacts of a 12-week

reintegration support service on recidivism and implications for best practice

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Abstract

Administered by Corrective Services New South Wales (CSNSW) since 2014, the ITS funds non-government partners to deliver reintegration support services to people under community supervision. The ITS prioritises service delivery to higher risk parolees who have recently been released from custody, although there is also scope to provide support to people serving community-based orders. This report outlines a program of studies that evaluated both impacts and processes associated with the service. An initial evaluation examined how participation in the ITS impacts reoffending and return to custody outcomes. Subsequent studies provided context to the impact evaluation by exploring service delivery outcomes and implementation processes underlying participation in the service. We conclude by reflecting on implications of the series of studies on best practice for the ITS and reintegration programs in general.

Introduction

It has been well established that people involved in the criminal justice system disproportionately experience a range of disadvantages and challenges that impact upon their reintegration into the community. These challenges occur in multiple domains, including structural factors such as access to accommodation and employment; physical and mental health; psychosocial functioning; disruption to family roles and support networks; and cultural disconnection and stigma (Berghuis, 2018; Gunnison & Helfgott, 2011; James, 2014; Kendall et al., 2018; Kinner & Wang, 2014; Moore, 2012; Sotiri, 2016). Such challenges may be pre-existing, or may arise from or be exacerbated by their experiences of the criminal justice system (Berghuis, 2018; Fox, 2014).

The term 'reintegration' is commonly used to describe the process whereby an individual is released back into the community after prison, but can also refer to people transitioning from community-based sentences (see Griffiths et al., 2007). While the majority of literature on reintegration focuses on post-release reintegration, research suggests that many challenges ex-prisoners face in the community are shared by those on community orders (e.g., Kenny & Nelson, 2008; Mazerolle et al., 2019). For example, recent data on adults in NSW serving parole or supervised bonds showed similar rates of alcohol or drug abuse (84% vs. 92%), mental health problems (82% vs. 88%) and poor prosocial behaviour (2% vs. 4%: Wang, 2019). Imprisonment is likely to have substantial additional disruptive impacts on multiple aspects of a person's functioning in the community, and ex-prisoners are particularly vulnerable in the immediate post-release period (Borzycki et al., 2003; Fox, 2014; James, 2014).

Correctional policy has increasingly recognised the challenges associated with reintegration and the importance of appropriate services to its success (Borzycki et al., 2003; Farabee & Zhang, 2014; Moore, 2012; Kendall et al., 2018). In recent years reintegration programs have been implemented in many jurisdictions in custodial, community, and mixed settings (Berghuis, 2018; Duwe, 2014). These vary in complexity, including the number and type of domains they target (Fox, 2014; Sotiri, 2016). Considering the diversity of initiatives available, an emerging body of literature has identified a number of principles of effective reintegration. These include programs that are based on the Risk Need Responsivity (RNR: Bonta & Andrews, 2016) model and address factors that have a causal

relationship with reoffending (Jonson & Cullen, 2015), and desistance theories, which attend to factors that enable participants to adopt a prosocial lifestyle and identity (e.g., Berghuis, 2018; Fox, 2014; McNeil, 2012). Strength-based approaches, which view participants as individuals who need help to build capacity to change and engage in reintegration, have also been emphasised (Berghuis, 2018; Fox, 2014). Reviews have also indicated that key social and structural factors in program success include access to social support, housing and employment, continuity of care before and after release from prison (throughcare), long-term personalised casework, and skilled caseworkers (Berghuis, 2018; James, 2014; Kendall et al., 2018; Mulmat & Burke, 2013; Sotiri, 2016).

Despite the widespread adoption of reintegration programs and the developing literature on best practice, there is relatively little empirical evidence for the effectiveness or optimum design of such initiatives (Jonson & Cullen, 2015). A recent review and meta-analysis of nine studies of reintegration programs for men (Berghuis, 2018) found a weak, non-significant effect on reoffending. The author concluded that understanding the effectiveness of reintegration programs is impacted by various factors including the limited quality of available research, the diversity of initiatives adopted across jurisdictions, and the inadequacy of recidivism for detecting and assessing the impacts of multimodal initiatives that seek to effect change across multiple domains (see also Kendall et al., 2018; Petersilia, 2004). Quantitative analyses of recidivism outcomes also give limited insights into best practice implementation of reintegration programs, which is relevant given that the few available process evaluations have found difficulties with program integrity (Berghuis, 2018).

The Initial Transitional Support service

In recognition of the complex reintegration needs of people who are recently released from prison or otherwise under supervision in the community, Corrective Services NSW introduced the ITS in 2014 as part of its Funded Partnerships Initiative (FPI). The ITS is a voluntary service that funds non-government, not-for-profit organisations to provide reintegration support for priority people under Corrective Services NSW Community Corrections supervision. The service is designed to be complementary to Community Corrections operations, in that referrals are originated by supervising officers and ITS activities are aligned with the supervisee's case plan, although may involve welfare-related needs or specialist interventions that are beyond the scope or capacity of routine supervision (see Tran et al., 2019). Supervisees are required to have an assessed medium-high to high risk of

reoffending to be eligible for the ITS, and parolees are prioritised for the service although people serving community orders may also be considered.

Under the ITS operational model, supervising officers refer prospective participants to the ITS service provider assigned to their office through a local 'gatekeeper' (a Corrective Services NSW staff member who coordinates the ITS at their office). In their referral, supervising officers specify a small number of tasks from the supervisee's case plan, each of which are broadly classified into ten domains of need: accommodation; alcohol and other drugs (AOD); mental health; education and employment; financial services; family and parenting skills; recreation and leisure; cultural support; living skills and social and personal development; and attitude. If the referral is accepted, ITS caseworkers then work to address the participant's needs by identifying and coordinating support in line with the assigned tasks. Support for one participant is funded for approximately 3.5 hours per week for 12 weeks, with the possibility of extension for an additional 12 weeks.

During its initial phase between 2014 and 2017, ITS service providers accepted referrals from 19 Community Corrections offices. These included 13 offices where ITS service providers operated directly, and 6 'Feeder' offices where prospective participants could be referred to the ITS service located at another nearby office. The program was then expanded in 2017 under the NSW Department of Justice (now Department of Communities and Justice) Strategies to Reduce Reoffending reforms. The program expanded into an additional 13 offices that largely serviced non-metropolitan locations, in recognition of the undersupply of reintegration support for people in regional NSW. In each case, an ITS service provider was assigned directly to the office, and no Feeder offices were added.   Along with the new sites, the ITS expansion made some modifications to the program delivery model. This included an explicit focus on ITS service providers' ability to support vulnerable populations, especially Australian Aboriginal people and women. Corrective Services NSW also encouraged increased coordination between ITS service providers and Community Corrections staff, and for ITS caseworkers to be co-located at their respective Community Corrections office where possible. Annual brokerage funding up to $15,000 per site was provided for ITS caseworkers to make purchases for participants to assist their pursuit of ITS goals, such as mobile phone credit to improve communication, or small household goods to improve stability.

Aims

Following implementation of the ITS, Corrective Services NSW commissioned the Corrections Research Evaluation and Statistics (CRES) branch to conduct a series of evaluations of the service. The initial focus of evaluation was effects of the ITS on participants' recidivism outcomes, in order to inform the evidence-base for expansion of the service to additional sites in 2019. Additional process evaluations were subsequently developed to examine the implementation and intermediate outcomes of the ITS. These studies were intended to provide additional context to the results of the impact evaluation, assess the evolving model and its operation following expansion of the service, and identify opportunities for continuous improvement. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the series of evaluations conducted on the ITS by CRES, which give a range of insights into barriers and facilitators to implementation, participant pathways through the ITS and service delivery outcomes, and impacts on reoffending and return to custody. By synthesising these multiple perspectives on ITS operations and outcomes, this paper also aims to reflect upon implications for best practice for the ITS and reintegration programs in general.

Does the ITS have an impact on recidivism outcomes?

As previously mentioned, an initial focus of evaluation was to examine whether the original iteration of the ITS had effects on recidivism outcomes among participants. To assess this, we (Morony et al., 2019) adopted an intent-to-treat (ITT) research design and identified an eligible sample of 684 people who had been referred to the ITS as part of their parole or community order between 2014 and 2017. Using propensity score matching (PSM), participants were matched with people who were otherwise eligible for the ITS but were serving orders at Community Corrections offices where the service was not available. Pairs were matched on their propensity for participating in the ITS, which was estimated from a range of observed characteristics including demographic and socioeconomic variables; criminal history; index offence features; recidivism risk and criminogenic needs; and prior program participation. Outcomes including reoffending, defined here as any finalised reconviction in NSW criminal courts, and return to custody, were compared between the groups using logistic regression and survival models. Given their differences in service pathways and implications for statistical modelling, people who were referred while on parole (n = 501) or on community orders (n = 138) were matched to the comparison group and analysed separately.

The results of modelling indicated that for people in the parole cohort, participation in the ITS was not associated with significant differences in reoffending or return to custody within 12 months of

release from custody, relative to people in the matched comparison group. Participation was also not associated with significant differences in survival time to reoffending or return to custody for this group.   In contrast, participants serving community orders had odds of return to custody within 12 months that were 38% (95% CI = .23-.62; p < .0005) of the odds for people in the matched comparison group, after adjusting for risk-related covariates including demographics, offence type, assessed risk of recidivism, residential location, and timing of survival period. Similarly, participants in this cohort showed significantly longer survival in the community prior to return to custody, relative to those in the comparison group (Hazard Ratio (HR) = .67; 95% CI = .50-.90; p < .01).

We also conducted additional exploratory analyses to examine whether the effects of ITS participation may differ for priority groups, including Aboriginal people and women. To do this we replicated logistic regression models for reoffending and return to custody within 12 months and included additional treatment by Aboriginal status and treatment by gender interaction terms. Results indicated that for the parole cohort, there was a significant interaction between treatment and Aboriginal status on reoffending outcomes (Wald χ^2 = 9.73; p < .01). The direction of effects indicated that Aboriginal people showed a significant effect of ITS participation in reducing reoffending whereas non-Aboriginal people did not.   While cell sizes precluded more formal analyses, the pattern of results also suggested that Aboriginal women may have been particularly likely to benefit from participation. A limitation is that our matching techniques did not account for equivalence between people in the treatment and comparison groups as a function of Aboriginal status or gender specifically, meaning that these models may have been affected by broken pair matches in those subgroups.

What are the intermediate outcomes of ITS participation?

In order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the activities and effects of the ITS, and in response to commentary about the dearth of literature examining outcomes of reintegration programs other than reoffending (e.g., Berghuis, 2018; Kendall et al., 2018), CRES subsequently designed a process evaluation to examine intermediate outcomes of the service. This study (Thaler et al., 2021a) aimed to develop a profile of participants' pathways through the ITS, including the reasons for their referral, the nature and outcomes of services delivered over the support period, and circumstances of exit from the service. This involved analysis of administrative throughput data for all referrals made between 2014 and 2017 (n = 1450 referrals), as well as review of case notes made about tasks within

the most prevalent domains of need over the support period for randomly selected samples of referrals.

We found that among all referrals, people were most likely to be referred to the ITS for support in domains of accommodation, AOD, and mental health (see Figure 1), which comprised a large majority of all services provided. Almost all (98%) referrals were accepted by ITS service providers. The average support period was 12 weeks for those who completed the service, although it was longer for the 13% of participants who had their service period extended (median = 20 weeks) compared to the remaining 83% who did not receive an extension (median = 9 weeks).

Figure 1. Prevalence of domains of need identified in ITS referrals (n = 1450 referrals)
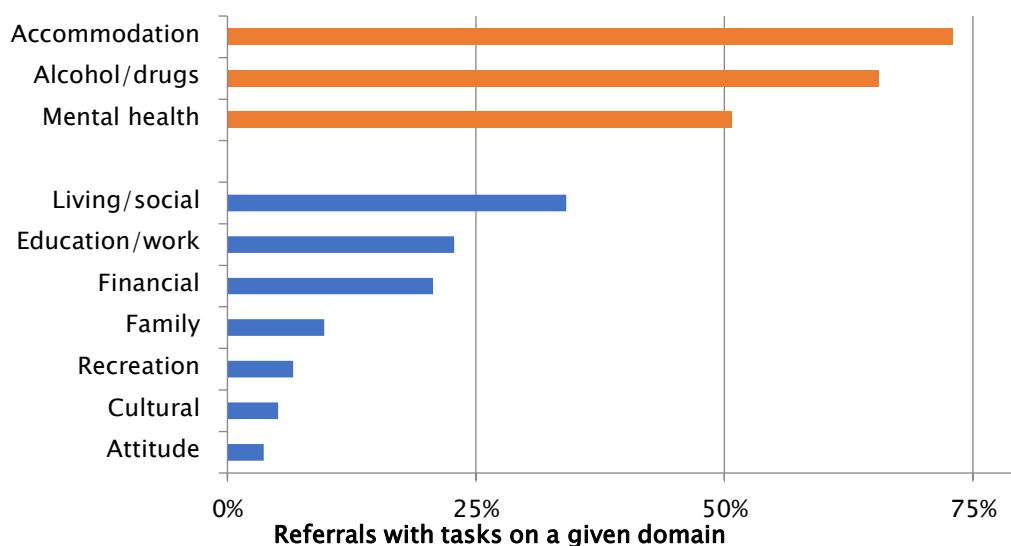
More than half of all referrals (56%) were marked as 'closed complete' in the administrative database, whereas the remainder did not complete for various reasons including return to custody, withdrawal of consent or other disengagement from the service, movement out of the ITS service area, or entry into alternative programs or services. It is noted that referrals marked 'closed complete' should indicate that all service delivery tasks associated with the initial referral were successfully addressed. However, review of the case notes for these referrals revealed more complex patterns in participants' pathways through the ITS. For each domain of need reviewed, non-marginal proportions of closed complete referrals also showed evidence of attrition. This most commonly

involved participant disengagement occurring at points of contact both with the ITS caseworker and with the third-party programs and services they were referred to, whereas other examples of completion referenced the participant's return to custody or relocation during the support period.

Review of case notes for accommodation-related referrals and tasks indicated that most involved requests to assist the participant find suitable accommodation, whereas smaller numbers related to supporting the participant in applications to or resolving disputes with housing agencies. We found that of the 200 case notes reviewed, 101 made reference to the participant finding temporary accommodation, and slightly more than half of these cases (n = 57) resulted in transition to a longer-term housing arrangement, with a total of 76 sets of case notes indicating that a stable solution had been achieved over the support period. Most examples of failure to find any accommodation over the support period were associated with participant disengagement and other attrition.

Case notes relating to AOD and mental health showed a similar pattern where participants were typically referred to assist them with accessing specialist programs and services to address their needs, and tasks completed by the ITS caseworker correspondingly involved onward referrals. Participants were also often referred to the ITS for support in maintaining their engagement in programs and services that they were currently or previously enrolled in. While large proportions of participants who required onward referral or reengagement with a previous referral were recorded as entering programs or services over the support period, a common feature of case notes was that very few reported on outcomes such as whether the participant completed the intervention or experienced change in the nature or severity of their needs. We concluded that because the ITS service period is relatively short compared to the often extensive interventions required to address needs such as substance dependence or mental health problems, it was typically unfeasible for the ITS to incorporate ongoing support until the successful completion of related tasks to address needs.
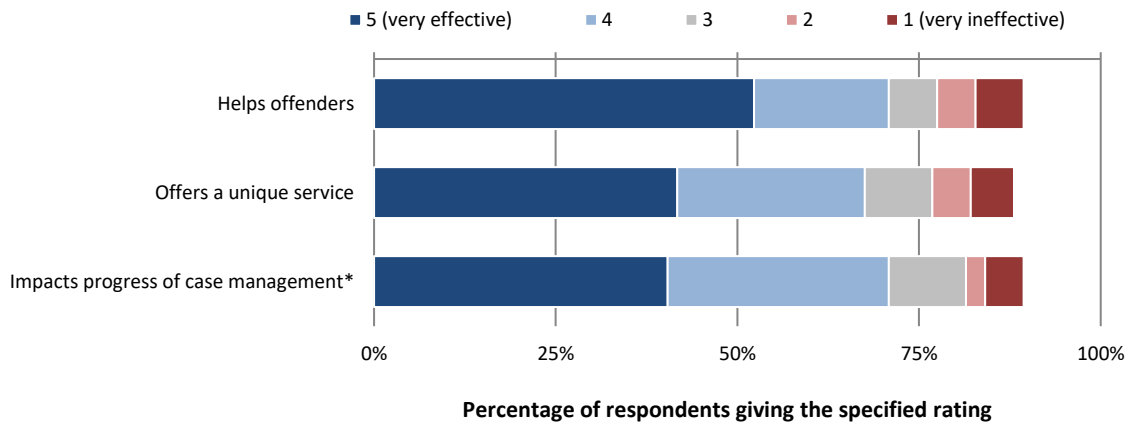
Barriers and facilitators to service delivery

Our second process evaluation (Thaler et al., 2021b) focused on staff experiences of referring to and delivering the ITS, to generate insights about potential barriers to implementation and avenues for

continuous improvement. We administered online surveys to supervising officers at all Community Corrections offices where the ITS was available (n = 179; response rate = 24.9%), and conducted interviews with ITS gatekeepers (n = 14) and ITS caseworkers (n = 14) at 15 sites across the jurisdiction. Sampling was intended to capture staff experiences across a range of metropolitan, regional and rural locations, and to permit analyses of differences between original ITS sites implemented from 2014 (referred to here as 'Original' sites) and those sites that were introduced as part of the service expansion from 2017 (referred to as 'Expansion' sites). We considered this distinction important because the Expansion sites were implemented following review of, and updates to, the ITS model, and were therefore expected to incorporate a developing understanding of best practice for the service.

Results of the survey indicated that the ITS had good acceptance and uptake among supervising Community Corrections officers, with 84% of respondents making at least one referral to the service and referring an estimated one in ten people under their active caseload on average. Almost half (48%) had referred both parolees and people on community orders, whereas fewer referred only parolees (20%) or those serving community orders (13%). Officers most frequently reported prioritising parolees and people with high assessed risk of reoffending for referral, and less commonly prioritised referrals on the basis of characteristics such as Aboriginal status or gender. Correspondingly, they tended to view the ITS as most effective for higher-risk people and those recently released from custody. Officers reported generally positive views about the value of the ITS in helping people under their supervision, and supporting the case management process by delivering services and supporting needs that were often beyond the remit or capacity of Community Corrections supervision practices (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Supervising officers' ratings of the ITS (n = 151)

Percentage of respondents giving the specified rating

Note. *For this item, 5 indicates 'very strongly' and 1 indicates 'not at all'

When discussing barriers and facilitators to the ITS, all staff repeatedly highlighted the importance of regular communication, information sharing, and coordination between supervising officers and ITS caseworkers. They also noted the value of related procedural elements such as co-location of caseworkers within Community Corrections offices, and regular formal and informal meetings between the staff groups. They described this as key to providing information and raising awareness about the service among supervising officers, increasing the likelihood of appropriate referrals, tailoring service delivery to support participants' dynamic needs, and promoting participants' engagement. Stakeholders also emphasised the utility of brokerage funding to address practical barriers to participation and as a motivational incentive. Relatedly, staff identified key challenges to implementation in the substantial opportunity costs and time required to manage participant disengagement, as well as practical difficulties with transporting participants to appointments and services, particularly in more regional areas.

Consistent with these experiences, we found that staff working at Expansion sites tended to give more positive perspectives about the ITS compared to those at Original sites. Supervising officers at Expansion sites referred people to the ITS more frequently, viewed the service as more effective in addressing various domains of need on average, and gave higher ratings of coordination and frequency of contact with ITS caseworkers. Interestingly, they were also more likely to prioritise referrals for certain priority groups, including Aboriginal people and those who were experiencing crises while serving a community supervision order. In contrast, perceptions of the ITS tended to be

poorest at the Feeder sites implemented during the initial phase of the service, which were associated with reports of poor coordination with ITS gatekeepers and caseworkers, and limited opportunities for contact between stakeholders.

Conclusions

The ITS has an important role in Corrective Services NSW case management by funding non-government organisations to support the complex reintegration needs of people under Community Corrections supervision. The service is intended to be complementary to Community Corrections operations by addressing welfare-related, and social support, needs that may be outside the remit of standard supervision. By providing the service to people recently released from prison to parole, as well as those on community orders, the ITS operationalises a broad definition of reintegration support. The aim of this paper was to outline a series of evaluations conducted on the ITS and reflect upon implications for best practice of the service and reintegration programs in general.

Consistent with previous research (Berghuis, 2018) we found that the ITS did not have significant impacts on reoffending for its primary target cohort, which is people recently released to parole. One potential contributing factor relates to the nature and complexity of needs among higher risk parolees at the time of release. Our analysis of ITS participant pathways (Thaler et al., 2021a) indicated that participants tended to have multiple co-occurring needs, and the time required to coordinate and deliver services to meet those needs often exceeded the standard 12-week timeframe of the ITS. This suggests that longer and more flexible periods of coordinated care may be beneficial for many participants. Parolees may also be more likely to have needs relating to accommodation specifically; however, our results indicated many ITS participants were unable to secure stable long-term housing over the support period. While 'housing first' is an important principle of reintegration (e.g., Sotiri & Russell, 2018) our findings highlight the significant logistical and resourcing challenges involved in meeting related needs. In a positive development, more recent Corrective Services NSW reintegration initiatives have incorporated formal partnerships with NSW government housing agencies to improve accommodation outcomes.

Another important theme to emerge involved challenges with participant engagement and attrition, which are expected to contribute to dilution of treatment effects. We found that in addition to

relatively high rates of ITS non-completion, task completions were often marked by participant drop-out at points of contact with the ITS caseworker and the programs and services that were the basis of onward referrals, as well as time-consuming efforts to contact and engage the participant in the ITS (Thaler et al., 2021a). Parolees may be particularly likely to experience difficulties with engagement due to the disruptive impacts of their recent imprisonment, as well as their transfer to new community-based case management personnel. Relatedly, we found that there was often a delay between parolees' release and referral to the ITS, which may have interacting effects with their capacity and willingness to engage in services during the critical immediate post-release period (Borzycki et al., 2003; Fox, 2014; James, 2014). Additional pre-release planning and throughcare support may be beneficial to address the logistical and motivational underpinnings of engagement by parolees, such as by helping to establish rapport, and allowing for advance preparation of timely service delivery once the individual enters the community.

Conversely, our impact evaluation (Morony et al., 2019) indicated that the ITS may improve return-to-custody outcomes among people who are serving community orders. A possible interpretation is that supervising officers may use ITS referrals as a means of addressing discrete crises or disruptions to functioning among supervisees who are already established in the community, with access to the service acting as an alternative to revoking the community order. Participation in the ITS may also be supported in these circumstances by existing rapport with supervising officers, which may improve engagement, and how well tasks are tailored to the participant's needs. In addition, we acknowledge that these participants may be relatively lower risk and have less immediate needs compared to parolees, particularly following a period of compliance with supervision and related interventions to address dynamic risk factors (e.g., Tran et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the pattern of results suggests interesting possibilities for avenues of reintegration support and how programs are targeted towards eligible participant groups and pathways.

There was also some evidence to suggest that the ITS may have an impact on reoffending outcomes for Aboriginal people serving parole. Australian Aboriginal people often have complex reintegration and social support needs (e.g., Richards, 2015; Willis, 20008), and it is possible that many may benefit from the more instrumental forms of support delivered by the ITS compared to non-Aboriginal people. In line with the rationale for expanding the ITS to additional regional offices in 2019, this result may also reflect the increased value of formal reintegration support for people living

in more remote areas, or who otherwise have limited access to services in their local community. Treatment effects of initiatives like the ITS are likely to be further diluted when supervisees are readily able to access community services by other means (Morony et al., 2019). Interestingly, however, surveys with key personnel indicated that Aboriginal people, as well as those serving community orders, were relatively infrequently identified as specific priority groups for ITS referrals (Thaler et al., 2021b). We note that the results of our subgroup analyses should be interpreted in caution, due to technical limitations of our matching approach in addition to small sample sizes for some groups, and it may be premature to make conclusions about causal mechanisms or apply the findings to policy recommendations. As observed elsewhere (Berghuis, 2018), there is a need for additional research to better understand who reintegration programs are effective for and under what circumstances, with lead-on effects for increased tailoring of program eligibility criteria and targeted service delivery.

Lastly, our implementation study (Thaler et al., 2021b) raised a number of insights about best practice in operationalising services such as the ITS. Central among these was the importance of coordination and information sharing between various case management personnel, and related structural innovations such as development of ITS gatekeeper roles and co-location of ITS caseworkers at Community Corrections offices. Some identified benefits were administrative, including generation of more appropriate referrals; however, key personnel tended to emphasise implications for improved participant engagement by better tailoring case formulation, leveraging existing relationships, and allowing for rapid responses to potential disruption. While it is understandable that non-government service providers may wish to retain independence from correctional agency operations, the various ITS stakeholder groups recognised the value of informal (e.g., established rapport) and formal (e.g., mandatory compliance requirements) features of the supervisory relationship on engagement.

Feedback about other ITS implementation factors also highlighted the importance of program design on logistical and motivational drivers of participant engagement, such as the availability of brokerage funding and capacities to provide participants with transport to appointments. Key challenges for the ITS such as participant disengagement (e.g., Berghuis, 2018; Angell et al., 2014) and servicing remote participants (e.g., Lurigio et al., 2016) have been identified as common barriers for reintegration services across jurisdictions, indicating the potential value of best practice principles of

implementation that impact upon these areas. In this regard, an acknowledged limitation of our evaluation agenda was that we were unable to explore participants' lived experiences of the ITS; further study using related methodologies would be particularly beneficial towards informing best practice in addressing such challenges.

The ITS model has continued to evolve since its introduction in 2014, and it is consistent with stakeholder feedback about implementation barriers and facilitators that staff at newer Expansion sites tended to report more positive perspectives about the service. This highlights the importance of continuous, evidence-based cycles of program review and improvement towards adoption of best practice at individual sites and across the jurisdiction. To this end, we also note that our impact evaluation (Morony et al., 2019) and evaluation of participant pathways (Thaler et al., 2021a) were conducted using data obtained from the initial phase of ITS implementation. Complementary cycles of research investigating service activities and outcomes over time, particularly following more recent developments to the operational model, would be beneficial to generate additional insights about ITS and reintegration best practice.

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