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PréCrimAdo Program

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In recent years, three youth centres (Québec, Chaudière–Appalaches and Montérégie) and a team of researchers from Laval University collaborated to examine the results of the PréCrimAdo Program (preventing the criminalization of high-risk adolescents).¹ The program strives to prevent the criminalization of high-risk adolescents by implementing an intervention based on the mediation approach with a category of youth particularly at risk of engaging in a criminal trajectory, namely, youth aged 12 to 15 who have been reported under Section 38(f) (serious behavioural disturbance) of the Quebec *Youth Protection Act*. The tested approach relies on a negotiation process that is based on the interests of the participants. It focuses on identifying the participants' needs and choice of options, and leads to the proposal of a fair agreement that is satisfactory to all parties. This *interest-based negotiation* process is one in a range of approaches to alternative dispute resolution, and more specifically, mediation-based approaches.

Evaluative research seeks to better understand the processes and effects of the intervention program by looking at the program's implementation from a youth-protection context specifically, and by gauging the extent to which the effects of the program are achieved. This research also includes a cost-benefit evaluation of the program.

¹ Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Strategy funded the PréCrimAdo Program from September 2008 to March 2011 and the evaluation from October 2008 to July 2013. The opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Government of Canada. The Public Safety Senior Evaluation Analyst responsible for this file is Danièle Laliberté, Ph.D.

Program Description

The PréCrimAdo Program strives to prevent the criminalization of youth aged 12 to 15 who have been reported under Section 38(f) (serious behavioural disturbance) of the Quebec *Youth Protection Act* (YPA). The program's intervention work focuses on two major sets of risk factors: parent-adolescent conflict and the factors of compromise that led to reporting the youth (e.g., offending actions, substance abuse, violence, absence from school, etc.).

The general objectives are to: (1) improve family functioning; (2) improve the family members' sense of competence; (3) reduce the youth's behavioural problems; and (4) mobilize parties involved in protective measures. In the medium term, the program seeks to improve the trajectory of young people in youth protection services, and in the long term, improve their criminal trajectory.

The PréCrimAdo Program is one of the services available through Quebec's youth protection service, the Direction de la protection de la jeunesse (DPJ), which provides services more specifically for assessment/orientation (AO) and measures implementation (MI). The program activities lead to family meetings that can vary based on the difficulties the family is experiencing. Implementing the mediation approach calls for a three-step clinical process: (1) intake (presentation of the program); (2) *interest-based negotiations* which are divided into two sub-steps: (a) needs (decoding, validating the needs of the parties involved, and establishing shared needs); and, (b) options (seeking and selecting the options most likely to respond to the shared needs deemed a priority); and, (3) a proposed agreement between the parties. It is recommended that the content of these exchanges be recorded in a chart on which the caseworker enters the needs expressed by each of the parties involved and the means chosen to protect the youth reported.



Evaluation Objectives

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PréCrimAdo Program among adolescents recruited in three youth centres. It contains three components: the first focuses on the intervention process set out in the program, the second looks at the results its implementation has achieved for clients, and the third covers the cost-benefit ratio associated with its implementation in the facilities.

More specifically, the evaluation results must answer the following questions:

- **Intervention process**

1. To what extent do the participants' profiles correspond with the program's target clients?
2. To what extent does the intervention comply with the program's underlying principles and steps?
3. What do the caseworkers who use the mediation approach think?

- **Intervention results (effects)**

1. What effects does the intervention have on the youth and parents?
2. What effects does the intervention have on the trajectory of young people in youth protection services?
3. What effects does the intervention have on the criminal trajectory of at-risk youth?

- **Cost-benefit ratio**

1. What is the relationship between the effects observed among clients and the cost of implementing the program?

Evaluation Method

A quasi-experimental design was used with a non-equivalent comparison group: (a) to ensure observation in a natural environment, and (b) because it was not possible to randomly distribute the participants among the conditions. The evaluation design contains three measurement phases. The first two measurement phases (pre-test and post-test, P1 and P2) were carried out with parents and youth. The pre-test was administered at the

end of the assessment/orientation phase of the youth protection process. The post-test was administered on average six and a half months after the pre-test. The third phase (P3) was completed by querying the youth centres' electronic databanks directly, without contacting parents or adolescents. The follow-up period is just over three years (ranging from 23 to 50 months, $M = 38.1$ months), depending on each youth's date of entry into the study. It is based on service trajectory indicators gleaned from the Quebec youth client system, the *Système clientèle jeunesse* (SCJ).

To be eligible, the youth's situation must meet the following **criteria for inclusion**:

1. The youth is between 12 and 15 years old at the time of reporting;
2. The youth is the subject of a new report (file not active in the DPJ computerized system at the time of data collection);
3. The report was accepted, and the assessment indicated that the youth's safety and development were compromised.

Three **criteria for exclusion** were provided in the protocol:

1. Situations to be handled through a multi-sectoral agreement² (with police, hospitals or schools);
2. Situations in which the youth was being actively monitored under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) at the time of orientation;³
3. Situations in which the parents or youth were unable to participate in the research or experiments (serious mental health issues, absence of parental collaboration, inability to reach the parents).

The final sample comprises 253 families followed in P1, including 93% who were reached in P2. The majority of the youth in the sample are boys (55%) and the

² The multi-sectoral agreement is an engagement to collaborate in situations involving children who are victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse or an absence of care that threatens their physical health where it is reasonable to believe that the safety or development of these children is compromised and that a crime has been committed against them. This agreement comes under provincial jurisdiction.

³ Among the youth in the sample overall, 20.2% have had prior contact with the YCJA or contact concurrent with entry into the study. As a result, this criterion was not met for the entire sample.

average age is 14.3. Aside from behavioural disorders (an issue experienced by all of the participants), the most frequent issues are negligence (45.9% of the sample) and psychological abuse (12.7%).

Measurement Tools and Data Collection

- **Youth and parents**

Data was collected (P1 and P2) from youth and parents through a questionnaire that includes a series of closed questions and a few open questions. This instrument was administered in-home by an interviewer; completing it took about 30 minutes for the youth and 45 minutes for the parent. The key indicators measured relate to family functioning, parent-youth relationships, educational practices, youth's behaviour, sense of competence, parental satisfaction, engagement in the intervention (understanding and trust/participation/satisfaction), and changes in the parent-youth relationship.

The instruments in P1 were administered again in P2 using the same procedure. In P2, questions on the intervention received and perceived changes in the parent-youth relationship were added.

- **Caseworkers**

Online questionnaires on implementation of approach

Data on the implementation of the principles and steps of the interest-based negotiation process was collected from self-administered online questionnaires completed by caseworkers in the three youth centres. With these questionnaires, information was compiled on the use of the mediation approach and on the socio-professional characteristics of the participating caseworkers. Similar questionnaires were sent to caseworkers who are not trained in the implementation of the mediation approach, in order to compile information and compare their socio-professional characteristics and other approaches used.

Discussion groups

Information about the caseworkers' perception of the mediation approach used and its effects on clients was compiled from four discussion groups organized in the three participating youth centres. The key topics addressed were the caseworkers' appropriation of the approach, the perceived effect on clients, the benefits and disadvantages, and the caseworker's role in the mediation process.

- **Système clientèle jeunesse (SCJ)**

Non-identifying data used to study the medium-term effects of the intervention on the trajectory of youth in protective services and on the criminal trajectory of youth were extracted from the SCJ data warehouse further to requests made to the IT services of each youth centre.

- **Financial and statistical reports**

Data on the costs of various youth centre activities come from AS-471 reports. Report AS-480 was used to understand the clinical-administrative activities of the youth centres.

Classification of Groups

In order to be part of the experimental group, the report needs to have been assessed by a caseworker trained to use the mediation approach as part of the National Training Program (NTP) in each of the three participating youth centres. The file was then to be transferred to the measures implementation service (except where a minimal terminal intervention was warranted) and handled by a caseworker trained in the mediation approach. The other files handled through the usual intervention method during these two phases were considered as part of the comparison group. During the collection, a portion of the files assessed through mediation to assessment/orientation was found to have been transferred to a caseworker who was using the standard approach. The opposite also occurred: files assessed by a caseworker not trained in the approach were later transferred to a caseworker trained in the mediation approach. This discontinuity created two additional groups in which the mediation approach was only partially applied.

Consequently, the participants were divided into four groups based on the caseworkers' training in the mediation approach in the assessment/orientation (AO) and measures implementation (MI) services:

1. **Mediation group** (files of youth seen by a caseworker trained in the mediation approach at the AO and MI phases ($n = 70$));

2. **Mixed mediation and usual group** (files of youth seen by both a caseworker trained in the approach at AO and by a caseworker not trained at MI ($n = 61$));
3. **Mixed usual and mediation group** (files of youth seen by both a caseworker not trained at AO and by a caseworker trained in the mediation approach at MI ($n = 37$));
4. **Usual group** (files of youth seen by a caseworker not trained in the mediation approach at the AO and MI phases ($n = 85$)).

These four groups were compared to verify the effects of the program. In addition to caseworker training, the families' exposure to the mediation approach was also considered.

Evaluation Limitations

This study contains limitations that need to be considered when interpreting results. These limitations concern a potential bias in selection during the recruitment of parents, youth and caseworkers, a design that does not help to establish causality and the subdivision of groups, which diminishes the strength of the analyses. Moreover, the mediation approach was in the process of being implemented at the time of collection. Lastly, the data on youth and parents was collected at the orientation phase of cases, once families had already been in contact with youth protection services for a number of weeks, rather than at the outset of the service trajectory.

Results

• Implementation of mediation approach

Compliance with the principles and steps in the interest-based negotiation process

- The majority of AO and MI case workers (96% and 92%) reported at least one meeting with all of the stakeholders involved;
- The presence of activities specific to the mediation approach was reported in the majority of situations; the frequency of activities was higher at AO than at MI.

Notes recorded concerning the approach in the orientation reports and intervention plans

- Notes regarding the mediation approach were recorded in 42.5% of the orientation reports reviewed and in 42.6% of the intervention plans;
- The "table of needs" was present in 26.4% of AO files and in 12.5% of MI files.

Rate of participant exposure, by service sector in AO and MI

- 80.9% of caseworkers in AO who are trained implemented the mediation approach with the youth and his or her family, and 59.2% of caseworkers in MI who are trained implemented it;
- In AO services, the trained caseworkers implemented the approach more frequently with youth demonstrating aggressive behaviours based on the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) ($M = 20.1$ vs. 17.0 , $p = .05$). There was no other significant difference between youth who were exposed or not exposed, both in AO and MI.

Caseworkers' perception of the implementation of the approach

The caseworkers met during group discussions and unanimously agreed that the mediation approach is very suitable for adolescents being seen for serious behavioural disorders. According to them, use of the mediation approach is beneficial to the relationship between parents and adolescents. Family meetings are viewed as key events in which parents and the adolescent experience a positive moment together. Everyone felt more respected and understood, which can help youth and their parents view the situation differently.

The caseworkers also expressed positive opinions with respect to the mediation approach. They feel that this way of working makes contact with parents and youth easier and leads to closer collaboration with partners, enhanced credibility in court, and better identification of intervention objectives.

• Effect of mediation on indicators measured among youth and parents

P1-P2 measurements among parents

The analyses of the indicators measured among **parents** show that, overall, all of the groups improved following the intervention, particularly in terms of general family functioning, the perceived conflict with the youth, the youth's behavioural issues (externalized,

aggressive and offending), the sense of competence and parental satisfaction.

However, compared to the other groups, the parents in the **mediation group** reported a significantly greater improvement in the general functioning of their family (improvement of 18% vs. 7 to 11% for the other groups). These parents also reported a significantly higher reduction in the number of conflicts with their youth (reduction of 18% vs. 7 to 13% for the other groups), and their sense of competence also improved (improvement of 13% vs. 3 to 9% for the other groups).

P1-P2 measurements among youth

In terms of **youth**, the results also show that the majority of groups improve following the intervention. Compared to the other groups, the youth exposed to **mediation** at the measures implementation phase report a significantly higher reduction of conflict with their parent(s) (reduction of 12 to 14% vs. 8 to 9% for the other groups).

P2 measurement among youth and parents

Lastly, in terms of the measurements taken at P2 only, no significant difference was observed between the groups among youth and parents with regard to the indicators measured, with the exception of parents exposed to mediation at the AO phase who reported a significantly greater improvement in their relationship with their youth (88 to 91%) compared to other groups (71 to 78%).

• **Effect of intervention on service trajectories**

In assessment/orientation services, the mediation approach is associated with a lower probability of a youth receiving final placement in a family-type resource (10% vs. 36%).

However, the number of youth placed in an institutional environment is neither higher nor lower, using either the mediation approach or a more conventional approach. No other difference was observed between the groups in terms of duration of the intervention, the prevalence of voluntary or legal measures, the prevalence of a new report, or agreement with the objectives of the intervention plan and their level of achievement.

• **Effect of intervention on criminal trajectory of at-risk youth**

The analyses show that the mediation approach does not directly affect the trajectory of youth being monitored under the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA). More specifically, the mediation approach is not associated with

the prevalence of a service received under the YCJA or with another indicator verified (number of requests under YCJA following the decision in YPA orientation, time of commission of the offence associated with the initial YCJA request, number of offences associated with this initial request).

• **Exploratory moderation analyses**

Additional moderation analyses were conducted to determine whether a youth's initial delinquency could affect the extent of the changes observed following mediation. These analyses did not show that the benefits observed following mediation varied according to the severity of self-reported delinquency and the presence of youth contact with the YCJA prior to the study.

• **Validation of logic model**

A series of multiple correlations was completed using the data available from the 253 files (youth and parents) to explore the logic model empirically and to explain the expected impacts of the mediation intervention on the precursors to and occurrences of offending actions.

In general, the analyses reveal that mediation encouraged improved family functioning marginally ($R = 0.25$, $p = .12$), and reduced placement in foster care ($R = 0.21$, $p < .05$) significantly. These measures are associated with a reduction in aggressive and offending behaviours ($R = 0.38$, $p < .001$) which reduces the risk of future new contacts with the YCJA ($R = 0.27$, $p < .05$).

Cost-benefit Analysis

The estimated potential savings related to implementing the mediation approach is derived from the calculation of the cost of intervention associated with the only benefit that can be gauged by dollar value for which significant effects were observed, namely, a reduced number of placements in foster care. The data indicates that the introduction of mediation practices is associated with a reduction of approximately \$521,438 in the annual cost of services provided by an average youth centre to youth seen for behavioural disorders in 2011–2012.

This estimate is applicable only to the monitoring period and indicators measured in this study, based on extrapolations made from the results obtained in our sample. These results have not been generalized with regard to the population overall.

In addition to placement, a number of indicators of family relationships and functioning are linked to the implementation of the program. These benefits, which cannot be gauged by dollar value, can be associated with an improved trajectory of youth services and could lead to a reduction in costs relating to intervention. Although they cannot be incorporated into our cost-benefit analysis, these aspects must nonetheless be considered in the equation.

Conclusion

The results achieved are sufficiently promising to recommend that the PréCrimAdo Program continue to be implemented in the province's youth centres, and possibly, in other facilities involved in the "Jeunes en difficulté" program. That said, we need to be mindful that this study contains limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report, please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre by e-mail at prevention@ps-sp.gc.ca

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