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**AN ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL
FORENSIC REPORTS FOR JUVENILE
OFFENDERS**



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AN ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FORENSIC REPORTS FOR JUVENILE OFFENDERS

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Conceptual considerations underpinning juvenile forensic reports.....	2
Advice on report writing.....	3
Communicating psychological test results.....	3
Current study.....	4
Method.....	5
Report form.....	5
Report content.....	5
Report readability.....	5
Reporting test results.....	5
Results.....	7
Report form.....	7
Report content.....	7
Report readability.....	8
Reporting test results.....	9
Discussion.....	10
References.....	13
Footnotes.....	15
Collaborative Research Unit.....	16

Abstract

We analysed a sample of 81 forensic psychological reports prepared for juvenile offenders prior to sentencing in Children's Courts of New South Wales. Structured data coding was used to profile the format, content and readability of the reports. A similar procedure was used to describe and evaluate the manner in which psychological test results were communicated. Results revealed that the reports and the underlying assessment process were largely in keeping with recommendations in the relevant forensic literature. However, areas for improvement were noted and a number of recommendations are made to improve the quality of such forensic reports.

Introduction

Throughout the history of juvenile justice, courts have relied heavily on the guidance of mental health professionals. Psychosocial factors are known to play a significant role in the aetiology and course of delinquent behaviour. At the same time, psychologists are recognised as health professionals with expertise in the assessment and treatment of behavioural and psychological disorders. Thus, psychological reports are commonly requested by juvenile courts throughout Australia to assist in determining the most appropriate options for juvenile offenders. The written report is the major vehicle for psychologists to communicate their assessment procedures, findings and recommendations. Yet, it is a tall order to integrate and convey a wealth of assessment information in a report that is succinct, thorough, accurate and useful (Allan, Martin, & Allan, 2001). By examining a sample of reports, valuable insight can be obtained about assessment practices and communication patterns. The Department of Juvenile Justice, New South Wales made such an opportunity available through its forensic psychological services. There was a desire to reflect on psychological practice over the first two years of service delivery. Consequently, we were given access to forensic juvenile reports prepared by psychologists between 1996 and 1998 for the Children's Courts of New South Wales. Prior to describing the method and results, we highlight some of the relevant literature.

Conceptual considerations underpinning juvenile forensic reports

Sattler (1998) conceives of a forensic assessment as a special type of clinical assessment that serves the purposes of a legal process. Hence a forensic psychological assessment has much in common with a clinical psychological assessment, but the evaluation must relate to issues in the specific legal context. Experts are often criticised for failing to address key psycho-legal issues (McMain & Webster, 1990; Skeem & Golding, 1998). In juvenile justice, major principles that underpin the legal response to young persons are enunciated in relevant legislation and common themes prevail throughout western jurisdictions. Four dominant principles are: 1) fairness and protection of the legal rights of the young person, 2) protection of the public from juvenile crime, 3) attention to the special needs of juvenile offenders, 4) guidance and correction to help youthful offenders become responsible members of the community. It follows that the key psycho-legal issues that forensic reports might be expected to address are the needs and circumstances of the young person, risk for further offending and amenability to available interventions for reducing risk.

Several sources provide useful direction for clinical and forensic psychological evaluation with juvenile offenders. Sattler (2001) proposed four pillars of assessment of children (norm-referenced tests, interviews, observations, informal assessment procedures) and an eleven-step assessment process. Sattler (1998) also developed semi-structured interview protocols for exploring issues with adolescents and parents. When assessing and treating conduct disorder, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (1997) emphasised multiple methods of assessment in multiple settings with multiple informants. Others promote a structured approach to assessing young offenders that leans heavily on standardised psychological measures (Hoge, 1999; Hoge & Andrews, 1996; Kisel & Freeling, 1990). Grisso, Tomkins, and Casey (1988) identified nine important content areas (e.g., family functioning, delinquent peer influence, functioning in academic or work settings) that are pertinent when conducting assessments for juvenile courts. Melton, Petril, Poythress, and Slobogin (1987) assert that juvenile evaluations should address amenability to treatment in relation to criminal behaviour. Similarly, Rogers and Mitchell (1991) highlight the importance of

intervention recommendations for young offenders and stress that recommendations must be workable in the real world. Jaffe, Lescheid, Sas, and Austin (1985) provide a model for psychosocial assessment in which the needs of juvenile offenders are matched to intervention resources.

Advice on report writing

Sattler (2001) makes the fundamental point that a psychological assessment is not complete until “the obtained information has been organized, synthesized, and integrated” (p. 677). It can also be said that a psychological assessment is only as good as the written report that conveys the findings. The capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately is a standard competency for psychologists (Australian Psychological Society, 1996) but it is a skill that takes much practice. Many psychologists receive little detailed feedback on their written reports. Good advice on report writing exists in a number of recent sources. Sattler (2001) identified the qualities of a good report including section headings that can be used to organise content. He also detailed 22 principles designed to help psychologists write reports. These principles deal with strategies for including information, presentation of the information and writing style.

Other report writing recommendations have arisen from an analysis of written reports or feedback from consumers. Benn and Brady (1994) obtained feedback from a small sample of hospital consumers of forensic reports. Helpful reports were described as brief, used headings and simple language, answered the referral question and provided a summary. Apart from these structural and stylistic considerations, Ben and Brady stressed: 1) that the reader must understand the concepts and terms used in the report, 2) conclusions must be supported by data presented in the report, and 3) recommendations must be logically linked to key themes and conclusions. Brown and Steger (1988) interviewed legal professionals including judges regarding their expectations and evaluations of pre-sentence reports in Victoria’s adult and child courts. Brown’s central finding was that good reports must be well-organised and well-written and that the content must be logically and objectively reasoned. McMains and Webster (1990) used fifty juvenile forensic assessments to make recommendations about the assessment process and subsequent report. They recommend that clinicians be able to defend expressed opinions that should reflect a high degree of reliability and validity. McMains and Webster also make a plea for a degree of balance in reports with credible reference to the young person’s strengths and the consideration of hopeful future alternatives. Finally, Harvey (1997) analysed the readability of 40 psychological reports on children and adolescents. She concluded that psychologists often write reports at a level that is difficult to understand. Harvey offered a number of suggestions such as shortening sentence length, minimising the number of difficult words, reducing jargon and increasing the use of subheadings.

Communicating psychological test results

Psychological testing is a core component of clinical practice in psychology (Camara, Nathan, & Puente, 2000) and of forensic evaluations in particular (Borum & Grisso, 1995; Gudjonsson, 1985). Already we have referred to several experts who recommend the use of norm-referenced tests in the assessment of juvenile offenders. Available evidence indicates that this is common practice (Jaffe, Lescheid, Sas, & Austin, 1985; Martin, Allan, & Allan, 2001; Pinkerman, Haynes, & Keiser, 1993). However, incorporating test results in the forensic report is a challenge as the information is specialised and inherently technical. A number of sources

provide detailed advice about communicating and integrating psychological test results. Some of the recommendations are listed below.

1. Include justification for using a particular test (Heilbrun, 1992; Kissel & Freeling, 1990).
2. Include only test results that are pertinent to the examinee and the assessment issues (Melton, Petrila, Poythress, & Slobogin, 1987; Sattler, 2001; Tallent, 1992).
3. Explain, interpret and integrate test results; do not simply list test scores (Benn & Brady, 1994; Ownby, 1997; Prifitera, Weiss, & Saklofske, 1998; Weiner, 1999).
4. Acknowledge factors that could influence the validity of the test results such as cultural, linguistic, motivational and situational factors (American Psychological Association, 2001; Glutting & Oakland, 1993; Heilbrun, 1992).
5. Be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of including specific test scores either in the report or as an appendix (Groth-Marnat, 1997; Sattler, 2001; Tallent, 1993; Weiner, 1999).
6. Use an appropriate index when reporting specific test results that is readily understood by, or explained to, consumers (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1990; Kissel & Freeling, 1990; Sattler, 2001).
7. Avoid technical and statistical jargon (Sattler, 2001; Tallent, 1992).
8. Report areas of strength as reflected in test results not just deficits (Graham, 1993; Sattler, 2001).

Recommendations such as these can be refined further when specific psychological tests are considered. However, we are not aware of any research that has attempted to examine the way test results are communicated in psychological reports.

Current study

This study analysed 81 forensic psychological court reports on juvenile offenders. The reports were prepared between 1996 and 1998 by psychologists from Psychological and Specialist Programs, Department of Juvenile Justice for the Children's Courts of New South Wales. The identity of the young person and the author of the report were removed prior to our access. We aimed to profile the structure and content of the reports and detail the manner in which psychological test results were communicated. The study served the purpose of providing feedback to Psychological and Specialist Services during the early stages of its program development.

Method

Report form

The form of each psychological report was recorded. Specifically, we noted the length of each report, the number and nature of subheadings and whether the report was qualified as an abbreviated or limited assessment.

Report content

Categories were constructed for describing the content of the psychological reports. The major content areas were: 1) sources of information, 2) psychological tests, 3) problems of the young person identified in the report, 4) information domains addressed in the report, and 5) recommendations. A coding system was developed for these content areas and their subcategories. Most of the coding categories were self-evident, although coding of the information in each report was based on the information domains that Grisso, Tomkins, and Casey (1988) determined as relevant for juvenile court decisions. The first author and two psychologists from the Department of Juvenile Justice (NSW)¹ practised applying the coding system to five reports. Following discussion and some refinement of the coding system, the 81 reports in the target sample were coded. Each of the aforementioned coded 54 reports. Hence, each report in the total sample was coded independently by two people. For each report, the two coders compared their results and discussed any discrepancies to reach agreement.

Report readability

To sample the quality of writing, the recommendations from each report were identified and word-processed. Using the spelling and grammar-checking software of Microsoft Word 97, readability statistics were obtained for this part of each report.

Reporting test results

The communication of psychological test results was evaluated. Three commonly used tests were the focus of evaluation. These tests were: the Kaufman Brief Intelligence test (K-BIT; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1990, 1996), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – III (WISC-III; Wechsler, 1991, 1995), and the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI-A; Butcher et al., 1989). We developed evaluation criteria based on recommendations from the report writing literature as summarised earlier and from the manual of each test. We used eight criteria related to reporting K-BIT results, 10 criteria for WISC-III results, five criteria for MMPI-A results and four overarching criteria. Most of these criteria required a yes/no evaluation (e.g., Did the report provide a general overview of what the test measures?). Some criteria required judgements on a 3-point scale. For example, we used the categories “none”, “minimal” or “substantial” to evaluate whether test results were related to difficulties the young person had been experiencing or potential for change.

From the 81 forensic reports, a sub-sample of 64 reports was identified in which one or more of the target tests had been administered. In each of these reports, content related to the target tests was identified along with content covering formulation, conclusions and recommendations. This extracted information was

evaluated independently by two registered psychologists² who were trained to use the evaluation criteria. The results of independent judgements were reviewed and discrepancies discussed with the second author to achieve consensus.³

Results

Report form

In length, the forensic reports ranged from 3.00 to 7.75 A4 pages. The average length (median and mode) was 5.50 pages. Typically, each report included six subsections although the range was one to 10 subsections. The most frequently used subheadings were: current circumstances, background/history, offending history, assessment results, formulation/conclusions, and recommendations. In 16 (20%) of the 81 reports, the author drew attention to the fact that the assessment was abbreviated. Usually, this limitation resulted from time constraints or lack of cooperation from the young person.

Report content

These results were based on coding decisions following discussion of discrepancies. However, based on a sample of 10 reports, pre-discussion reliability between pairs of coders was good ranging from 68% agreement to 95% agreement, depending on the content area being coded. The results of the analysis of report content are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Forensic Psychology Reports for Juvenile Offenders

Report Characteristic	Percent reports (N=81)	Report Characteristic	Percent reports (N=81)
Information Source - Interviews		Identified Problems	
Young person	100%	Sexual abuse	14%
Family member	82%	Physical abuse	31%
School personnel	25%	Psychological abuse	33%
Juvenile Justice officer	65%	Alcohol/drugs	72%
Other agency	36%	Family dysfunction	69%
Other Juvenile Justice staff	52%	School problems	90%
		Suicide	48%
Information Source – Reports		Violence	70%
Psychiatric	16%	Sexual behaviour	17%
Psychological	20%	Mental health	47%
Juvenile Justice – Background	17%	Medical	57%
Juvenile Justice – Other	74%		
Other Agency	22%	Recommendations - Counselling	
Police	25%	Previous abuse	6%
		Anger/violence	15%
Psychological Tests		Sex offending	5%
K-BIT	48%	Alcohol/drugs	38%
MMPI-A	33%	Mental health	21%
WISC-III	22%	Education/vocation	21%
Achenbach YSR	16%	Family	27%
WIAT	11%	Various	61%
Issues Addressed		Recommendations - Other	
Motivation	86%	Medical	11%
Prior offending	86%	Psychiatric	16%
Mental health	84%	Psychological	7%
Family involvement	73%	Supervision/support	58%
Family functioning	91%	School/job	51%
Peer influence	80%	Parent support	14%
School/work	96%	Various	57%
Risk of re-offending	26%		

As indicated in Table 1, all psychologists interviewed the young person for whom the assessment was undertaken. Often, a family member and juvenile justice officer were also interviewed. Typically three or four sources (mode = 3, median = 4) were interviewed for each report (range = 1 to 6 interview sources). In addition, psychologists usually accessed at least one written source of information (mode and median = 1) about the young person (range = 0 to 5 written sources). Most often, documentation from the Department of Juvenile Justice was consulted, but in only 17% of the cases did this involve a Juvenile Justice Background Report. For 20% of the court assessments, previous psychological reports were accessed. Psychological testing was almost always conducted (91% of the reports). Most often the reports referred to administering two tests (mode and median = 2) but this varied from zero to 10 tests. A wide variety of psychological tests were used and the most popular tests are indicated in Table 1.

The figures in Table 1 show that the young people ordered for assessment experienced multiple problems⁴. The most frequently mentioned difficulties were behaviour or learning problems at school, alcohol or drugs, family dysfunction, and violence or physical acting out. On average, six problem areas (mode and median = 6) were identified for each young person (range = 1 to 9 problems). Regardless of the problems experienced, the reports were evaluated for coverage of eight pertinent issues or information domains. With the exception of risk of re-offending (see Table 1), these issues were covered most of the time (mode and median = 6 issues).

Psychologists made four recommendations, on average, at the end of their reports. Recommendations for counselling (either individual or group) were made often, as indicated in Table 1. The most frequent type of counselling was for alcohol or drug problems, family counselling, mental health issues and educational/vocational counselling. The category of counselling categorised as “various” included generic recommendations (e.g., for offending behaviour, for emotional difficulties) and a wide variety of specific recommendations (e.g., for grief, self-esteem, social skills, peer pressure, etc.). Apart from counselling, other recommendations related to medical, or psychiatric follow-up and further psychological assessment (see Table 1). Specific advice about school or employment options and about supervision/support was made in approximately half of the reports. Recommendations about supervision and support usually related to the Department of Juvenile Justice or the Department of Community Services. Support through mentoring schemes was also commonly specified. The category of “various” other recommendations related to options such as sporting and recreational activities, accommodation, income sources and programmes or options not previously covered.

Report readability

In the recommendation segment of the reports (N=78), the median number of words was 89 (range = 18 to 359 words) and the median number of words per sentence was 21 (range = 6 to 38 words per sentence). The Flesch Reading Ease score is based on the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence. Text is evaluated on a 100-point scale and higher scores reflect easier reading. The mean Reading Ease score was 26.13 (median = 26.55) with a range from 2.70 to 47.70. On the Flesch Reading Ease scale, 0-30 is the “very difficult” range and 30-50 is the “difficult” range.

Reporting test results

These results were based on coding decisions following discussion of discrepancies. However, pre-discussion reliability was good ranging from 72% agreement to 100% agreement, depending on the content being coded.

Some of the evaluation criteria were common to the three target tests and these are summarised in Table 2. The results show that the rationale for using each test was rarely explained. An overview of what each test measured was given more often, although in a majority of cases only when the K-BIT was used. When the overview was provided, it was rated as average to good approximately 45% of the time and rated as poor approximately 55% of the time. Most reports included a statement about test taking behaviour (e.g., motivation, attention, distraction). However, only occasionally did these statements make explicit the link between behaviour and validity of the test results. The link between test results and the young person's difficulties or potential for change was made more often, but in about 40% of the cases this was not addressed.

Table 2: Relative Frequency of Evaluation Criteria by Target Tests

Criterion	Test n (%)		
	K-BIT	WI	MMPI-A
Report explains rationale for using the test	5 (13%)	2 (11%)	1 (4%)
Report provides overview of what test measures	27 (69%)	7 (37%)	11 (41%)
Report includes statement about test taking behaviour	34 (87%)	15 (79%)	24 (89%)

Note. Total number of reports including K-BIT = 39, WISC-III = 19, MMPI-A = 27

It was found that reports incorporating results from the K-BIT and WISC-III rarely explained what the verbal, performance and full scales measured. At best, one in five reports using the K-BIT explained the vocabulary and matrices scales. IQ results were reported in most cases as a descriptive category (e.g., high average) and/or as a percentile rank. It was appropriate that single IQ scores were never presented in the reports and in a couple of instances where IQ scores were included, a score range was given. A Verbal IQ versus Performance IQ discrepancy was addressed in approximately half of the reports in connection with K-BIT results and in two thirds of reports in relation to WISC-III results. Reports in which this was not mentioned may have been cases for which there was no significant discrepancy. When the discrepancy was noted, the comments were judged to be of average quality twice as often as they were judged to be poor in quality. For the WISC-III, only one third of the time was subtest score or index score information discussed in the reports. For 27 reports that made use of MMPI-A results, only 10 included information about scale elevations and among those only half were judged to provide an average to good explanation.

Finally, the results of the overall evaluation criteria revealed the following. First, in only 15% of the cases was there any commentary on client strengths revealed in the results of the target tests. Second, the level of technical language related to test results was judged to be low in all instances. Third, 73% of the reports included reference to test results in the formulation or conclusion section of the report.

Discussion

This study provided a rare opportunity to examine in detail a sample of psychological reports ordered by courts for juvenile offenders. Although forensic psychology has been recognised as a specialty in Australia for 20 years, best practice is always evolving. It is facilitated by those willing to subject their work to scrutiny which was the case with Psychological and Specialist Services, Department of Juvenile Justice, NSW. Discussion of the results of this study will highlight positive aspects of the psychological reports and areas in which improvement should be considered.

This sample of forensic reports reflected an assessment process that is consistent with recommendations in the forensic literature reviewed earlier. Specifically, multiple sources and multiple procedures were used to gather information. In addition to the young person, two or three other sources were typically interviewed and in 93% of the reports, one or more pieces of written documentation were accessed. Kissel and Freeling (1990) have stressed the importance of collecting information from collateral sources. Similarly, the evaluation process described by Melton et al. (1987) considers the juvenile in the context of the home, the school or workplace and the community. Some evidence exists that forensic evaluations often fall short of accessing third party information (Otto & Heilbrun, 2002). The forensic reports we analysed did seek collateral information. However, apart from parents, they drew more heavily on information from their own departmental colleagues than schools or external agencies. A similar pattern was found when the written sources of information were accessed. It is likely that departmental colleagues and reports included information from other contexts. Nevertheless, direct external contacts ensure that information is current, unfiltered by intermediary sources and less vulnerable to institutional bias. **It is recommended that sources of information external to the Department of Juvenile Justice are adequately represented and incorporated into psychological forensic reports.**

Subheadings were used to organise the report content and the most frequently used subheadings conveyed a logical presentation flow from information gathered to formulation or conclusions and then to recommendations. Based on the work of Grisso et al. (1988), it can be said that the NSW forensic reports provided excellent coverage of all but one of the content areas considered pertinent when assessing juvenile offenders. The exception was risk of re-offending that was addressed in only one-quarter of the reports. It can be argued that risk for repeat offending is a central issue of concern to juvenile courts. Psychologists have contributed greatly to the conceptualisation and assessment of risk in the criminal context (Andrews, 1989; Borum, 1996; Hoge & Andrews, 1996). **It is recommended that forensic psychological reports incorporate risk evaluations, especially as the outcome is pertinent to intervention strategies and the level of service provided.**

Psychological tests were administered in nine out of every 10 forensic reports in the sample. This is consistent with specific recommendations about juvenile assessment (Hoge, 1999; Hoge and Andrews, 1996; Kissel & Freeling, 1990) and about psychological assessment in general (Meyer et al., 2001). Meyer et al. provide a compelling analysis of the contribution of psychological testing to psychological assessment. They have demonstrated that psychological test validity is strong and that psychological tests contribute unique and essential information to the assessment process. These authors also underscore the importance

of providing a rationale for using specific tests in specific instances. In this respect, the forensic reports we analysed were found wanting, at least for the three commonly used tests we examined.

It is recommended that forensic psychological reports make explicit the rationale for administering particular psychological tests and provide a brief statement about what each test measures.

The challenge of communicating psychological test results has been often noted but rarely examined in a sample of reports. Our analysis revealed that approximately 80-90% of the time, information about the young person's test taking behaviour was included in the report. Such information is central to the validity of test results (American Psychological Association, 2001; Glutting & Oakland, 1993; Heilbrun, 1992). This is especially the case for young persons ordered for assessment because they are vulnerable to many of the factors that can compromise test usefulness. However, links need to be drawn between observed behaviours and validity issues. **It is recommended that psychological forensic reports make explicit the relevance of cultural, linguistic, motivational and situational factors to the faith that can be placed in psychological test results.**

Several additional recommendations emerge from the analysis of psychological test results. The first relates to the finding that the main scales of the K-BIT and WISC-III were rarely explained. It also emerges from the finding that 40% of the reports did not make links between test results and the young person's difficulties or potential for change. **It is recommended that psychological forensic reports explain what test scales measure and relate test results to offending behaviour and change.** Many of the reports for which IQ testing was undertaken commented on discrepancies between verbal and performance scores. This suggests that a more fine-grained analysis of this practice would be worthwhile particularly as the analysis of scale and subtest differences is both complex and controversial (Lobello, Thompson, & Evani, 1998). **It is recommended that forensic psychological reports interpret intelligence sub-scale differences cautiously and in keeping with contemporary psychometric standards.** Finally psychological testing needs to be construed as an investigation of strengths not just liabilities. **It is recommended that forensic psychological reports highlight assets and strengths that are revealed through psychological testing.**

It is noteworthy that the forensic reports of this study revealed multiple problems among the young people who were assessed. On average, six problem areas were identified for each young person. This is consistent with the view that juvenile delinquency is multi-determined (Hawkins, 1996) and that a system of correlated risk factors leads to adjustment and behaviour difficulties (Farmer & Farmer, 2001). It is fitting that multiple recommendations were made at the end of each report with the average being four recommendations. This is also consistent with the multi-systemic approach to intervention for juvenile offending. Increasingly, however, it is being recognised that risk factors are often well entrenched and mutually sustaining (Farmer & Farmer, 2001). As a result, effort is required to facilitate engagement and coordinate efforts. **It is recommended that psychological forensic reports emphasise multi-systemic interventions and address issues of engagement, coordination and monitoring in order that sufficient momentum for change will occur.**

The analysis of reading level revealed that the recommendations in over half the reports were in the very difficult reading range. Harvey (1990) found almost identical reading level scores for psychological reports in schools, clinics and hospitals. Long sentences contribute to reading difficulty. Approximately 25% of the forensic reports had average sentence length between 25 and 38 words. Awkward expression, poor grammar and inconsistent punctuation were also noted in the reports. Recommendations are a key outcome of a psychological assessment and it is particularly important to communicate them effectively. **It is recommended that psychological forensic reports strive for good written expression throughout, but especially in sections of the report that are likely to be the focus of attention.**

In conclusion, the written report is the major vehicle for psychologists to communicate their assessment findings to courts. A sample of reports for juvenile offenders revealed much that was consistent with literature based recommendations for the assessment and reporting process. A number of recommendations have been made about improved assessment and written communication. It is acknowledged that several years have elapsed since this sample of reports was taken and that improvements are already likely to have occurred in assessment and report writing as part of normal continuing education in Psychologist and Specialist Services. Also, the findings of this study related to test results were restricted to the three most frequently used psychological tests. Nevertheless, this study highlights the professional development benefits that accrue when forensic psychologists engage in reflective practice.

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Footnotes

¹ We acknowledge the assistance of Rita Sosic and Kerrie McIntosh for their help in defining the categories and coding the reports.

²We acknowledge the assistance of Kylie Lander and Sandra Hausler for evaluating the reports.

³A copy of the evaluation criteria and further details about the coding process can be obtained from the authors.

⁴Relevant offences listed in the report were also taken into account when determining whether violent or sexual problems were identified in the report.

Collaborative Research Unit

The Collaborative Research Unit (CRU) is an initiative of the New South Wales Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ). The impetus for its establishment came from recommendations concerning Juvenile Justice in the "Burdekin Report into the Rights of the Mentally Ill". Funding was provided to the Department to implement recommendations in the report pertaining to its services. The unit now operates in collaboration with major universities and research institutions in New South Wales.

The establishment of the unit underscores the importance of researching the impact of various sentencing options on violent and sexual offending. In so doing, it accords with the recommendations of the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues into Youth Violence. It also highlights the department's commitment to achieving outcomes with its clients, which help them break their offending cycle.

The function of the Collaborative Research Unit is maintained through the Collaborative Research Unit Steering Committee (CRUSC). This is the core body of senior academics, clinicians and researchers from several Universities, Secondary and Tertiary Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services and the Department of Juvenile Justice, that, working in partnership, further the Department's Corporate Plan (Item 1.3).

The primary aims of the CRU are:

- To foster the development of a comprehensive, evidence-based body of knowledge regarding clinical services and management programs for young offenders.
- To facilitate the collection and analysis of quality data regarding the natural history of juvenile offenders and offending (antecedents, offences, short- and long-term sequelae).
- To promote prevention, early intervention, assessment and rehabilitation strategies based on appropriate research evidence.
- To ensure appropriate monitoring, evaluation and modification of such strategies as appropriate.
- To provide a professional resource centre, including professional development programs, for the Department as a whole.
- To ensure adequate resources in personnel and funding are provided to achieve the above outcomes.