



Centre for Forensic  
Behavioural Science

# Brief Report

May 2022

**Group Conferencing Effects on Youth  
Recidivism and Elements of Effective  
Conferences**

Prepared for The Children's Court of Victoria

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#### Suggested Citation:

Bonett, R.J.W., Lloyd, C.D., & Ogloff, J.R.P. (2022). Group Conferencing Effects on Youth Recidivism and Elements of Effective Conferences. Centre for Forensic Behavioural Science, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne Australia.

#### Acknowledgments:

We would like to acknowledge and thank the following persons and organisations for their collaboration and oversight of this research: Judge Amanda Chambers, the Children's Court of Victoria, Jesuit Social Services, the Crime Statistics Agency, Victoria Police, Youth Justice and Corrections Victoria. This research was funded in part through the Australian Government Research Training Program.

We would also like to acknowledge all the young people, families, victims, police officers and service workers whose experiences and efforts were the basis of this research.

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*Swinburne University of Technology recognises the historical and cultural significance of Australia's Indigenous history and the role it plays in contemporary education. We therefore acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land that Swinburne occupies, the Wurundjeri people, and pay respect to Elders past and present.*

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# Key Findings



Group conferencing was associated with substantive reductions in the likelihood of ongoing recidivism.



Reductions were consistent across person-based and property crimes.



Conferences without victim attendance are as effective as conferences attended by a primary victim.



Recidivism reductions were further enhanced when conferences were attended by an investigating police informant and secondary victims (individuals indirectly harmed by the crime).

## Background

Group conferencing rose to prominence in the 1990s as an innovative way to achieve justice system aims among young people who commit crime.

In a group conference, a young person who has committed a crime is brought together with their family and/or support people, an arresting officer, and victim(s) to engage in a facilitated discussion about the impact of the crime, how to best address the harm caused, and how to prevent it from happening again.

Group conferencing has found wide application as a mechanism in youth and adult justice settings, alongside schools, workplaces, and other community settings, as a process to manage conflict and harms.

### Previous research studies

Typically, conferencing elicits small reductions in youth recidivism, while the mechanisms that explain the relationship between conferencing and recidivism are still unclear. Findings are inconclusive due to several factors.

First, studies have predominantly focused on very low-risk cohorts in youth-diversion programs (e.g., first-time shoplifters) which typically have a low base-rate of recidivism. Second, in the literature, conferencing has been treated as equivalent to other programs, such as victim-offender mediation and circle sentencing. This obscures the distinct characteristics of conferencing. Third, many studies have used short follow-up times and methodologies that do not provide information about recidivism patterns beyond the first recidivism event, which, coupled with very low-risk cohorts studied, make conferencing effects very difficult to detect.

# Aims and Research Questions

## Research Aims



The aim of this research was to address gaps found in the literature by:

- 1 using life-course methodologies to examine the longitudinal effects of conferencing on youth recidivism among a cohort including high-risk young people,
- 2 exploring different conference elements, including different types of victim, family and police participation, and
- 3 determining whether conferencing effects were consistent across different types of crime.

## Research Questions



Does conferencing reduce recidivism among young people?



What program ingredients are associated with less or more recidivism?



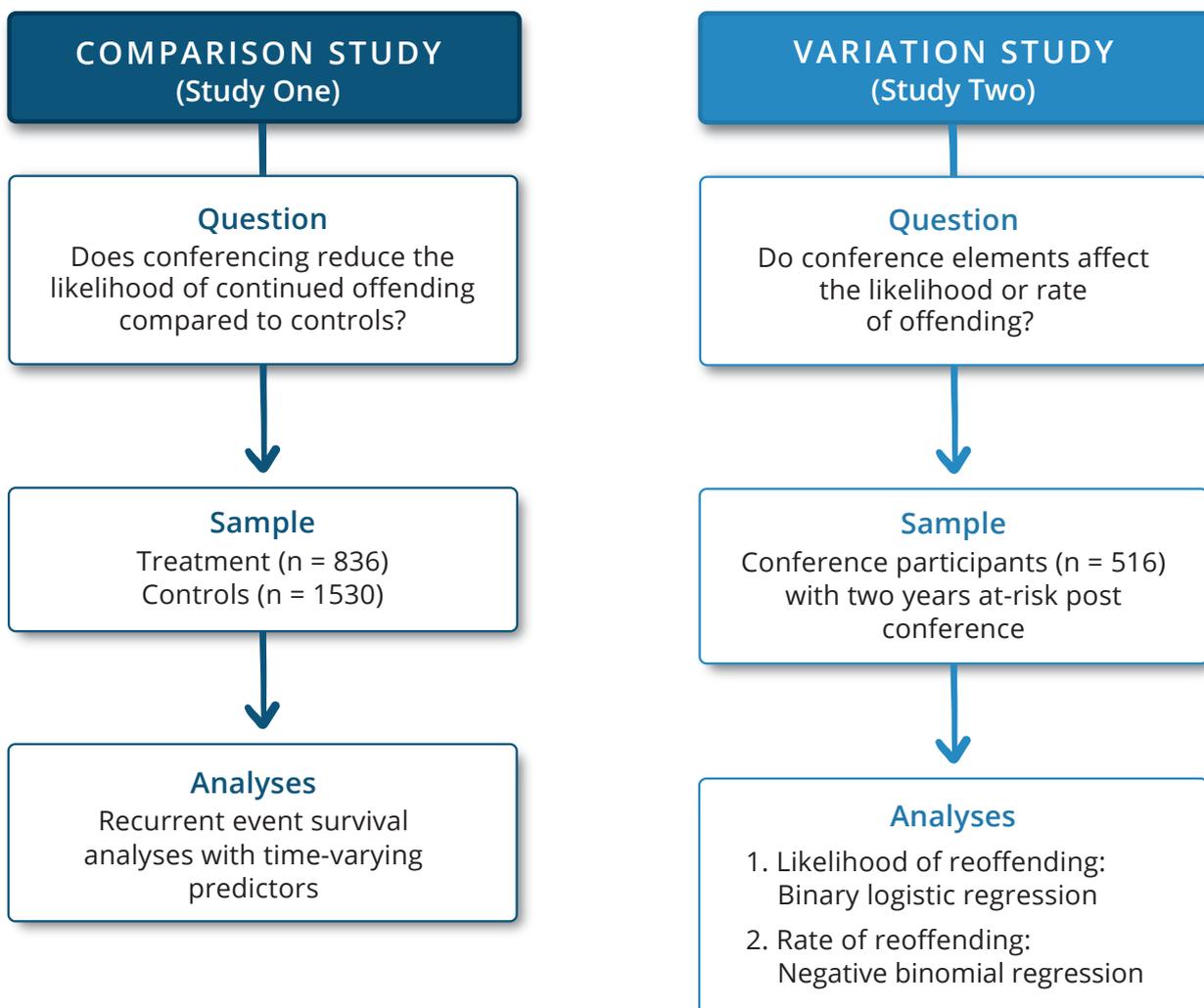
Are the findings consistent across different types of crimes?

# Methodology

- Treatment sample: 836 youth processed through the metro Melbourne conferencing program (2012 - 2018).
- Control sample: 1530 youth who appeared in the Children’s Court Clinic during the same period, with similar characteristics to program participants (age, gender, and most serious charge).
- Full criminal histories were obtained and additional information coded from case files.

We conducted two studies:

1. A comparison of recidivism patterns between the treatment and control sample, examining recidivism from age 10 to young adulthood.
2. An examination of the relationship between conferencing elements and recidivism among conference completers who has a least two years follow-up data.



## STUDY ONE

### Predictors:

-  Gender (female)
-  Age at first charge
-  Prior charges events
-  Conference referral
-  Conference completion



### Outcomes:

-  Recurrent recidivism
  - *Any recidivism*
  - *Crimes against the person*
  - *Property & deception crimes*

## STUDY TWO

### Predictors



#### Individual Characteristics

Gender  
Living in Out of Home Care  
Age at first charge  
Age at conference  
Poor conference compliance  
Number of prior charges



#### Sentencing Elements

Sentence received

- *No supervision*
- *Community supervision*
- *Intensive supervision*
- *Custody*

Finance



#### Conference Elements

Type of victim participation  
Family participation  
Type of police participation  
Co-offenders present  
Conference held of remand

### Outcomes



#### Recidivism

Likelihood within two years

- *Crimes against the person*
- *Property & deception crimes*

Rate within two years

- *Crimes against the person*
- *Property & deception crimes*

# Results

## Study 1: Comparing Recurrent Recidivism Among Youth Referred to Conferencing and Controls

We examined the likelihood of criminal charges from adolescence to young adulthood. **Individual characteristics were the strongest predictors of recurrent recidivism.** Recidivism likelihood was higher among:

-  Male participants
-  Those younger at the age of first charge
-  Those with a greater number of prior charges

- The likelihood of recurrent recidivism was lower in the group conferencing sample compared to the control sample:

Likelihood of recurrent recidivism\*



\* After accounting for age, gender and prior charges

- Young people were less likely to record recurrent recidivism after conference completion:

Likelihood of recurrent recidivism



- These results were consistent when we examined all charges, crimes against the person, and property and deception crimes.

## Study 2: Effective Elements of Conferences

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Narrowing focus to conference completers, recidivism was higher among male participants, those with a greater number of prior charges, those younger at the age of first charge, those poorly compliant with the conference process, and those who lived in Out of Home Care.



After taking these variables into account, **recidivism outcomes did not differ across conferences where victims did not attend** compared to conferences with victim attendance.



There was an **enhanced reduction in recidivism when primary and secondary victims** (someone indirectly affected by the crime such as a family member of the victim) **attended together**. This effect was also consistent when secondary victims attended in the place of a primary victim.



Attendance by the **youth's family was inconsistently related to recidivism**, sometimes related to greater risk and sometimes lower risk.

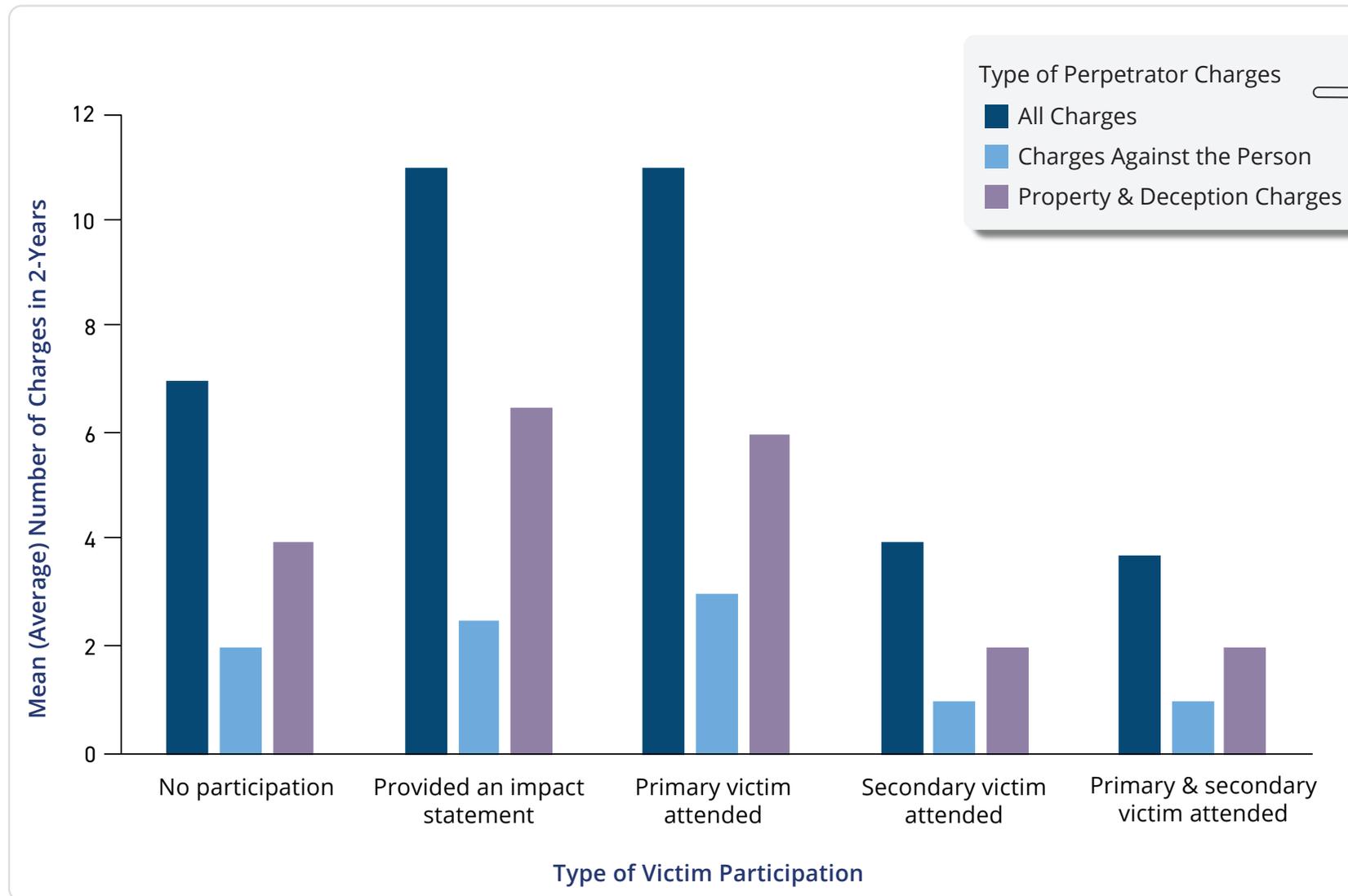


Attendance by a **police informant was related to lower recidivism** when compared to conferences attended by a youth resource officer in place of a police informant.



After taking into account all the variables above, **the sentence received after returning to court did not predict recidivism**. This indicates that youth characteristics such as criminal history determine differences in sentencing decisions.

## Mean Number of Perpetrator Charges Accrued in 2-Years by Type of Victim Participation in Group Conferencing



## Conclusions

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The first important take-away message is that **the Victorian model of conferencing reduces recidivism**. Second, this means conferencing is appropriate with higher risk youth charged with violent crimes and more serious property crimes. Third, reduced recidivism is not contingent on a face-to-face victim-offender interaction. Instead, victims can choose how they participate, if at all, without compromising the aim to reduce crime.

In some other jurisdictions, when victims decline to participate the conference is cancelled. Our research suggests this would limit opportunities for youth to desist. Fourth, conference effects are optimised when police informants and secondary victims attend the conference. This may be because youth learn about the broader effects of their criminal behaviour.



Q

Does conferencing reduce recidivism among young people?

A

In short, yes. Importantly, it reduces recidivism among higher-risk youth.

Q

What program ingredients are associated with less or more recidivism?

A

Secondary victims and police informants are associated with lower recidivism.

Q

Are the findings consistent across different types of crimes?

A

Conferences reduce both person-based and property recidivism, but conference elements appear to work differently for each.

## Impact of Group Conferencing



Group conferencing is effective in reducing the likelihood of recurrent youth recidivism.



It is appropriate for use with higher risk youths.



Effects are not contingent on the participation of a primary victim in a conference.



Various modes of victim participation are accommodated.



Effects can be enhanced by the inclusion of people with personal but indirect experience of the crime.

## Key Limitations

- Retrospective observational research design meant there were systemic reasons why some youth were selected for conferencing (e.g., they were higher risk) and which youth attended conferences (e.g., they agreed to participate). The research could only partly account for these systemic differences.
- As a field study, we were limited by the data that were available in program and official record files.
- Although conferencing completion and specific elements in the conference were related to different recidivism outcomes even after accounting for many critical variables, the study design cannot be used to conclude that conferences caused reduced likelihood of recidivism.