

Police drug diversion (PDD) – realist impact, process and economic evaluation

Key details

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| Lead institution | University of Sheffield |
| Principal researcher(s) | Professor Alex Stevens alex.stevens@sheffield.ac.uk |
| Police region | Yorkshire |
| Collaboration and partnership | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cabinet Office (funder)• College of Policing• Bradford Institute for Health Research• Department of Health and Social Care• Durham Constabulary• National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC)• Loughborough University• Open University• Thames Valley Police• University of Kent• University of Sheffield• University of York• User Voice• West Midlands Police |
| Level of research | Professional/work based |
| Project start date | September 2022 |
| Date due for completion | March 2026 |

Research context

Dame Carol Black's [Independent review of drugs \(2020\)](#) articulated the scale of the drug problem in England and Wales. There are about three million people who use illicit drugs each year with around 300,000 individuals using heroin and/or crack cocaine. The total annual cost of drug misuse is estimated to be £19.3 billion, including:

- £8.5 billion for drug-related crime
- £6.3 billion for the cost of drug-related death
- £1.4 billion in additional costs of health and social care

Drug-related deaths are also at record levels.

The Black review (2020), the [government's 10-year drugs plan \(2022\)](#), and Sir Brian Leveson's [independent review of the criminal courts](#) (2025) recommended expansion and evaluation of schemes that divert people away from the criminal justice system and into education and treatment. Previous research shows the potential for diversion to increase the proportion of offences that are brought to justice, to cut crime and reduce costs. Less is known about whether schemes have health benefits, have similar or different effects for different types of people, and are cost-effective.

Research questions

The PDD evaluation aims to fill these gaps in knowledge by answering the following research questions:

- what effects have PDD schemes had on offending?
- what effects have PDD schemes had on health outcomes?
- what other effects have PDD schemes had?
- were there inequalities in the use and effects of PDD schemes?
- what were the cost-consequences of PDD schemes for health, police and other service providers?

Funding

The PDD evaluation has received funding from the cabinet office's [Evaluation Accelerator Fund](#).

Research methodology

Work package one – development of intervention manuals and a theory of change

In workshops with stakeholders in three police force areas and nationally, the project developed detailed descriptions of the schemes that operate in these areas. A theory of change on the alternatives to criminalisation for drug possession was adapted to describe how PDD might bring about outcomes.

Work package two – process evaluation

This package focused on the implementation of PDD and how closely implementation of schemes follows the manuals for the three study forces. The process evaluation also sought to understand how contexts and mechanisms combined to effect change. The research involved semi-structured interviews (n=225) and focus groups (n=6) with police officers, service providers, people who were diverted and people who were not diverted despite being eligible, and analysis of aggregated police data.

Work package three – quantitative outcome assessment

This package assesses the impact of PDD had on offending and health outcomes. It involves complex data linkage across organisations. Analysis will compare outcomes for people who had contact with the police for drug-related offences in forces with PDD schemes, with those for similar people in forces without PDD schemes. Outcomes include reoffending and access to drug or alcohol treatment during the 24-month follow-up. Intention to treat and per protocol analysis is being carried out.

For this analysis, we received data from 44,535 people who were contacted by the police for drug possession or drug-related offences in 15 police forces between October 2021 and September 2022. People who think they may have been included in the data can see the project's [data information sheet](#).

Work package 4 – cost-consequence analysis

This package looks to establish the financial costs and benefits of PDD, and on which organisations they fall.

Work package 5 – equity assessment

This package will examine whether the use and impact of PDD varies by ethnicity, sex and location.

Work package 6 – realist synthesis

Lastly, this package will bring together all the evaluation findings to detail what works, for who, when and why.

Publications

As of October 2025, the project had produced the following publications.

Hendrie N and others. (2023). [**The Durham Police Drug Diversion Scheme. Checkpoint: Descriptive Manual.**](#) University of Kent

Hendrie N and others. (2023). [**The Thames Valley Police Drug Diversion Scheme. TVP: Descriptive Manual.**](#) University of Kent

Hendrie N and others. (2023). [**The West Midlands Police Drug Diversion Scheme. DIVERT: Descriptive Manual.**](#) University of Kent

Stevens A and others. (2025). [**Cascading constraint and subsidiary discretion: Perspectives on police discretion from police-led drug diversion and stop and search in England.**](#) British Journal of Criminology

Stevens A and others. (2023) [**Evaluating police drug diversion in England: Protocol for a realist evaluation.**](#) Health & Justice

Stevens A and others. (2023). [**Theory of change of police drug diversion: A revised programme theory.**](#) University of Kent

Sutton CE and others. (2025). [**Triggering motivations for change: Exploring engagement in adult police-led drug diversion programs.**](#) Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy