



# Resource landscapes for young people leaving residential alcohol and drug services: Research Summary 7

## Young people's incremental gains during the year after leaving intensive alcohol and drug programs

Date: August 2024

Authors: Sarah MacLean, Gabriel Caluzzi, Mark Ferry, Andrew Bruun, Jen Skattebol, Joanne Neale, Joanne Bryant

This study focuses on how young people who engage with intensive alcohol and other drug (AoD) services, navigate their lives after treatment. Participants in the study engaged with a range of services over a year, including detox, rehab, mental health programs, and other support services. They generally viewed these services as valuable resources they could rely on if needed, maintaining optimism about their ability to help.

The study found that returning to services was often triggered by a return to problematic substance use. However, participants approached these returns with different goals than before, such as focusing on a different substance, improving mental health, or learning new skills like anger management. Some were motivated by positive changes in their lives, like getting a job or managing a medical condition, which gave them new reasons to change. Others believed that new services could offer valued opportunities or teach them skills they hadn't gained from previous programs. Multiple engagements with services allowed them to make progress on different goals over time, viewing relapse as part of a long-term recovery process rather than a sign of failure.

The study highlights the interconnectedness of substance use with other life challenges, such as mental health, neurodiversity, and securing employment or housing. Addressing these issues helps young people better manage their substance use.

One significant challenge identified was that when services weren't available when they needed them, young people's progress was disrupted. The way young people leave a service also impacts their willingness to return. A small number of participants felt that staff held grudges against them, which deterred them from re-entering services. The transition from youth to adult AoD services was another area of concern. Some young people were reluctant to engage with the adult system, viewing it as a sign that their problems were becoming more serious.

The study also noted the value of ongoing care and support after leaving intensive programs. This includes structured activities, outreach, peer support, and therapy.

Across three waves of interviews conducted during the span of a year, we saw most young people develop a stronger sense of wellbeing, many moving to living independently, working and either ceasing or keeping

substance use contained in their lives. Young people's gains were not made consistently, and participants described substance use and other life crises alongside them.

## How we did the research

We followed a cohort of 38 young people in NSW, ACT and Victoria for one year, interviewing them while in residential AOD services, and then again at six and twelve months after leaving treatment. We conducted in-depth interviews at each point, asking about their background and biography (at timepoint 1 only), AOD use, experiences with family, friends and other meaningful people, experiences with services including AOD services, and important life events or turning points since last interview.

Participants were 38 young people, including 18 men, 16 women, three non-binary young people, one trans man, and one non-binary and trans young person. They ranged in age from 16 to 23 years old. Fifteen participants identified as LGBTQ+. Eight identified as Aboriginal. Most participants had previous experience with residential AOD treatment, even prior to recruitment for our study, and some returned to treatment during the course of the study.

## Recommendations:

- AoD services should focus on helping individuals build skills and resources for a better life, rather than solely aiming to eliminate substance use.
- Managing departures from services in a warm and supportive way is essential, especially when young people do not exit voluntarily.
- More research is needed on how to support young people during transition to adult services and institutions.
- Providing opportunities for young people to remain engaged with a worker after leaving intensive services make it easier to reengage them when required
- The effectiveness of treatment should be measured across the entire service system, not just by evaluating single programs.

## Acknowledgement and funding:

This research was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant DP200100492 'Aftercare for young people: A sociological study of resource opportunities', with additional funding from the UNSW Interlude grant scheme 2021. The project is a partnership between UNSW Sydney Australia, La Trobe University Melbourne Australia, Kings College London United Kingdom, YSAS Youth Support Advocacy Services, and The Ted Noffs Foundation. Joanne Neale is part-funded by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) Biomedical Research Centre for Mental Health at South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and King's College London. Joanne Bryant is funded by an ARC Future Fellowship FT220100100. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ARC, NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care. The research was supported by the excellent contributions of Ora Davidson and Mitchell Beadman. The research team is grateful for the support provided by the staff of YSAS, Windana, Ted Noffs Foundation and Lives Lived Well residential rehabilitation, residential detoxification and housing programs. We are particularly grateful to the 38 young people who shared their stories about substance use and treatment experiences for this research.



UNSW  
SYDNEY



**For the full paper:**

MacLean S, Caluzzi G, Ferry M, Bruun A, Skattebol J, Neale J, Bryant J (2024). Young people returning to alcohol and other drug services as incremental treatment. *Social Science and Medicine*, 357: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2024.117181>

**Suggested citation for this document:**

MacLean S, Caluzzi G, Ferry M, Bruun A, Skattebol J, Neale J, Bryant J (2024). Young people's incremental treatment gains during the year after leaving intensive programs. UNSW Sydney; La Trobe University Melbourne.

**For more information about this project, please visit:** <https://www.unsw.edu.au/arts-design-architecture/our-schools/social-sciences/our-research/engagement-impact/our-projects/resource-landscapes-young-people-leaving-residential-drug-alcohol-services>