



**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SACRO'S  
ALCOHOL EDUCATION  
PROBATION PROGRAMME IN  
REDUCING RE-CONVICTIONS**

THE RESULTS OF A TWO YEAR  
FOLLOW-UP STUDY

**Elizabeth Cutting**

## **Key Points**

- 84 people were referred to the SACRO Alcohol Education Probation Programme between May 2000 and December 2002 as a condition of probation. In the two year period prior to the programme 86% of these people had received one or more convictions
- 68 people completed a programme. The remaining 16 started a programme, but dropped out at various stages over the eight-week period
- For those who completed a programme, 71% had no further convictions after one year compared to 56% of those who failed to complete
- After two years, 64% of completers had no further convictions compared to 48% of non-completers (taking pseudo-convictions into account). Figure released by the Scottish Executive show that 41% of all those who received a probation order in 1997 had no further convictions (Criminal Justice Statistical Bulletin CRJ/2003)
- An analysis of subsequent re-convictions by type of crime, sentence received and type of court in which the conviction was made, does not appear to be associated with an increase in severity of offending
- Early referral is essential to maximise the impact of the programme and prevent further offending. The programme could be extended for use with more serious offenders as part of a range of Throughcare options and could also be adapted for use within prisons re-release.

## **Introduction**

SACRO has been providing a group work programme since 1991 for people from Edinburgh and Midlothian subject to probation, where there is a link between their offending behaviour and their use of alcohol. This programme is provided in partnership with The City of Edinburgh Council and Midlothian Council and funded with the assistance of the Scottish Executive Justice Department.

The service is located in Edinburgh city centre, alongside a range of other criminal justice services provided by SACRO. It provides a much-needed resource for the courts and social workers to use for people who are either subject to probation or are being considered for probation, pending a court disposal.

The Alcohol Education Probation Service plays a significant part in managing and reducing risks posed by participants, in line with their agreed probation supervision action plan. It also provides a means by which compliance with the requirements of probation can be monitored. The service works in collaboration with the supervising social worker and specifically aims to reduce alcohol linked re-offending.

Research evidence, both nationally and internationally, has demonstrated the clear links between offending and alcohol consumption. SACRO's experience of working with offenders led to the creation of this programme. It addresses this issue by using groupwork methods to explore and tackle alcohol linked offending behaviour.

**This paper provides clear evidence that SACRO's Alcohol Education Probation Programme has led to a reduction in further convictions, based on a follow up study of all of clients who were referred to the service between May 2000 and December 2002.**

In a unique collaboration between the Scottish Criminal Records Office and the Scottish Executive Justice Statistics Unit, SACRO was able to track 84 clients referred to the Alcohol Education Probation Programme between May 2000 and December 2002 to establish re-conviction levels. An analysis of the data obtained for these clients shows a marked reduction in subsequent re-conviction rates.

**71% of those who successfully completed the Alcohol Education Programme had no further convictions after one year compared with 56% of those who did not complete the programme.**

## Eligibility Criteria

Referral and acceptance to the Alcohol Education Programme is dependant on clients acknowledging that their offending behaviour:

- is alcohol related
- could be reduced if their alcohol use in specific situations was under more control.

Working in groups of up to eight people, clients attend eight weekly group work and paired sessions, each lasting two hours. Programmes are gender specific, given the different gender issues implicit in both alcohol use and offending behaviour.

By the end of the programme participants are expected to have:

- a greater understanding of the physical and physiological effects of alcohol
- the ability to monitor their own use of alcohol and begun to make changes
- the confidence that they can take steps to reduce the likelihood of further alcohol related offending.

## Relationship between alcohol and crime – the context in which the SACRO service works

There is evidence that clearly points to the major role that alcohol plays in offending behaviour and violence. Early identification of people whose offending behaviour is linked to their alcohol consumption is important. The SACRO study shows that **early referral to a suitable alcohol education programme offers an effective and successful solution in tackling this major problem.**

Alcohol is widely used in the UK and most people consume alcohol socially and moderately without offending. However, drinking large amounts of alcohol in short periods of time may result in criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Identifying the precise role of alcohol is difficult but research conducted by the Home Office between 1997-1999 gave an assessment of the relationship between drug and alcohol consumption on a range of suspected offenders arrested by the police in five different locations. The study estimated that **40% of violent crime, 78% of assaults and 88% of criminal damage cases are committed while the offender is under the influence of alcohol.**

Alcohol Concern's Report, published in 1995 concluded that alcohol is a factor in a large proportion of violent crimes – **70% of all stabbings and beatings and 40% of all domestic violence incidents.**

The Policing and Reducing Crime Unit of the Home Office also points to a strong link between alcohol and domestic violence where women are the victims. Half of all injuries sustained by women in the home were associated with alcohol consumption (Alcohol and Crime: Taking Stock, 1999).

An all-party group of MP's investigating alcohol and crime (July 1995) was advised by the British Medical Association that **alcohol is a factor in 60-70% of homicides, 75% of stabbings, 70% of beatings and 50% of fights and domestic assaults.**

The Police Superintendents (1999) advised **that alcohol is present in half of all crime** and the National Association of Probation Officers (1994) advised that **30% of offenders on probation and 58% of prisoners have severe alcohol problems** that play a major role in their offence or pattern of offending.

The British Crime Survey 2000 found that in **40% of all violent incidents the victim described the assailant as being under the influence of alcohol** at the time of the assault.

**Every year there are about 1.5 million victims of violent attacks committed by people under the influence of alcohol** (excluding domestic violence) and around 5,000 glassings in which a smashed beer glass is used as weapon (HMSO 1998).

A report published by The Portman Group in 2001, as part of their Alcohol and Society Series entitled Crime and Disorder, revealed that the public see alcohol-related violence, street drinking and drink driving as major problems. This research study conducted by MORI found that more than **half of those surveyed thought that alcohol related crime was increasing, both on the street (61%) and in the pub (52%).**

Of the 127 accused persons in homicide cases recorded in Scotland in 2002 whose drink/drug status at the time of the homicide was known, 60 per cent were reported as being drunk. ( 'Homicide in Scotland', 2002, Scottish Executive Criminal Justice Statistical Bulletin CrJ/2003/9 November 2002).

## **The Study of the SACRO Alcohol Education Probation Service**

An evaluation of the effectiveness of this groupwork programme was undertaken between July and October 2003 to examine re-conviction levels and the impact the programme had on individuals. Eighty-four clients, who had started on SACRO's Alcohol Education Probation Programme between May 2000 and February 2002, were tracked to determine whether or not they had been re-convicted of any further offences following their acceptance on the programme.

The 84 clients consisted of 76 males and 8 females across a range of age groups (18 - 30 and over).

Total	Type of Accused		Age at reference date				
	Male	Female	Under 21	21 - 25	26 - 30	Over 30	Other*
84	76	8	6	12	12	49	5

*\* 5 males with convictions for offences outside scope of Scottish Offenders Index - road traffic offence*

Sixty-eight people completed a programme successfully, while 16 people started but dropped out at various stages over the eight-week period. These two groups are referred to as 'completers' and 'non-completers', respectively.

The start dates of the programmes were used as a reference date. Information regarding previous convictions in the two-year period prior to the reference dates was obtained for each participant. This was then compared to re-conviction data for up to two years after the reference dates.

Data supplied by the Scottish Criminal Records Office and the Scottish Executive enabled a statistical analysis of the previous and any subsequent reconvictions over a one year and two year follow-up period, of all 84 people in the study group. The data obtained also permitted an examination of subsequent reconvictions by type of crime, sentence received and the type of court in which the

conviction was made. This allowed a proxy indication of whether subsequent re-convictions increased in severity.

### **Note**

All the figures included in this paper are based on an analysis of data from the Scottish Offenders Index (SOI) provided by the Scottish Executive Justice Statistics Unit. In considering the findings reported on below, a number of qualifications about this data need to be borne in mind.

- The SOI excludes convictions for motoring and some minor miscellaneous offences. It also excludes convictions in courts outwith Scotland.
- The SOI data is as at 14 October 2003; data on convictions in 2002 and 2003 are provisional and incomplete. Further analysis will be undertaken with the same cohort group in 2005 as a follow up study.
- The follow-up 'window' available on reconvictions for each individual in the study group will vary according to when they started the programme.
- When comparing reconviction rates for the two study sub-groups – completers and non-completers – the relatively small number of individuals involved needs to be taken into account.

## Findings

Of the 84 people who started a programme in the survey period, 93% had a history of previous convictions based on data for the period 1989 - 2000. In the two-year period prior to the reference dates, 86% of these people had received one or more convictions, which in total amounted to 212 convictions.

### Previous conviction levels in 2 years prior to reference date

Scottish Offenders Index data at 14 October 2003 + provisional (and incomplete) convictions data for 2002 and 2003

Number of Convictions	Percentage of Completers	Percentage of Non-Completers
0	15	13
1	32	13
2	18	25
3	12	19
4	7	6
5	3	6
6	7	0
7-9	6	12
10-16	0	6

### After one year

For the 68 people who completed a programme, 71% had no further convictions in the twelve-month period following the programme, compared to 56% of non-completers in the same period.

### After two years

Figures for the two-year period following a programme showed that 54% of completers had no further convictions. This compares favourably to figures published by the Scottish Executive Justice Department for 1997, which show that 41% of all those who received a probation order had no further convictions within two years (Scottish Executive Criminal Justice Statistical Bulletin CRJ/2003/1 March 2003).

## Reconviction Levels in the 2 years following reference date

Scottish Offenders Index data at 14 October 2003 + provisional (and incomplete) convictions data for 2002 and 2003

Number of Convictions	Percentage of Completers	Percentage of Non-Completers
0	54	38
1	19	13
2	16	6
3	1	13
4	4	13
5	1	6
6-9	1	6
10-14	1	6

Some participants are likely to have been convicted for offences committed **prior** to taking part in the programme, but which would have been processed at some point afterwards. These are referred to as 'pseudo convictions' and are misleading when included in re-conviction data for the purposes of evaluating an intervention. The Scottish Executive estimates that taking 'pseudo convictions' into account reduces the two year re-conviction rate by 10% for all those given community service or probation (Scottish Executive Criminal Justice Statistical Bulletin CRJ/2003/1 March 2003).

Assuming a similar adjustment for 'pseudo reconvictions' can be applied to the study group involved here, we can therefore estimate that over the two-year period, 64% of completers and 48% of non-completers were not subsequently convicted for any further offences **after** their participation in the Alcohol Education Probation Programme.

**The following table summarises the study's findings:**

<b>Conviction Levels Before and After Alcohol Education Probation programme</b>	<b>Total Participants/Clients (n = 84)</b>	<b>Completers (n = 68)</b>	<b>Non-Completers (n = 16)</b>
Number of convictions 2 years <b>prior</b> to programme	<b>212</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>54</b>
Number of convictions 2 years <b>after</b> the to programme	<b>113</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>41</b>
Number of convictions 1 year <b>prior</b> to programme	<b>137</b>	<b>106</b>	<b>31</b>
Number of convictions 1 year <b>after</b> programme	<b>58</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>% with no reconvictions after 1 year</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>71%</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>% with no reconvictions after 2 years</b>	<b>51%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>38%</b>
<b>% with no reconvictions after 2 years</b> <i>(taking 'pseudo-convictions' into account)</i>	<b>61%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>48%</b>

In the two-year period following a programme, this cohort of offenders had received 113 convictions compared with a total of 212 convictions in the two-year period prior to starting a programme. **The number of convictions was therefore reduced by 47%.**

## Further Offending and Reconviction

For those who were subsequently re-convicted over the two-year period (2000-2002), an analysis of the data reveals the following.

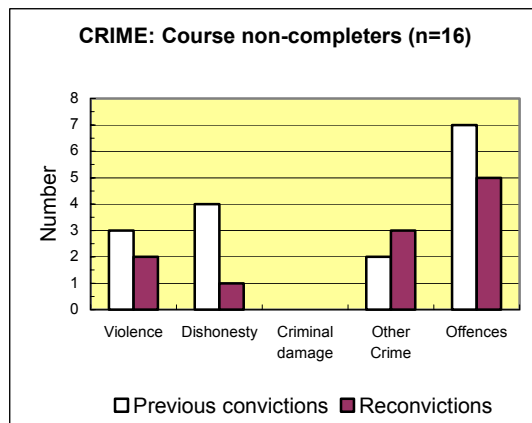
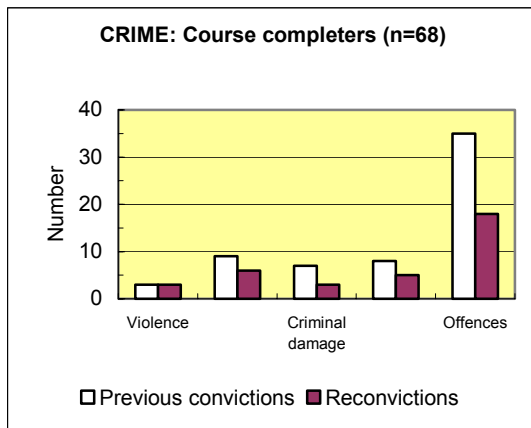
For the 68 completers, we estimate that 36% were subsequently reconvicted for crimes or offences that occurred after completing the programme. For the 16 non-completers we estimate that 52% were reconvicted for crimes or offences after their involvement on the programme. (Both these percentages take into account the adjustment for 'pseudo convictions' referred to above.)

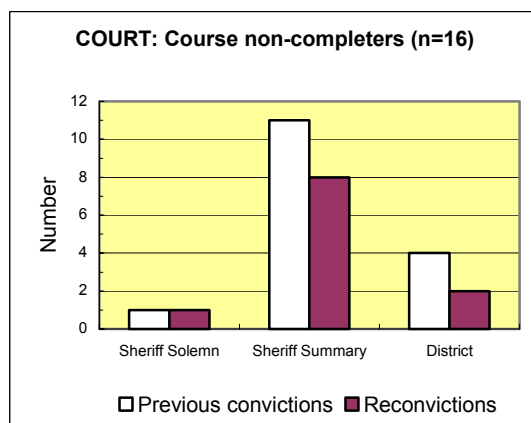
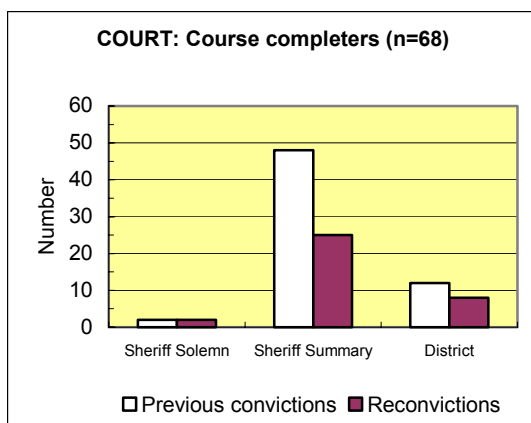
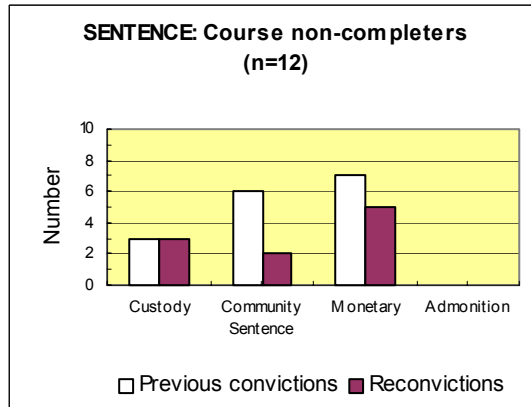
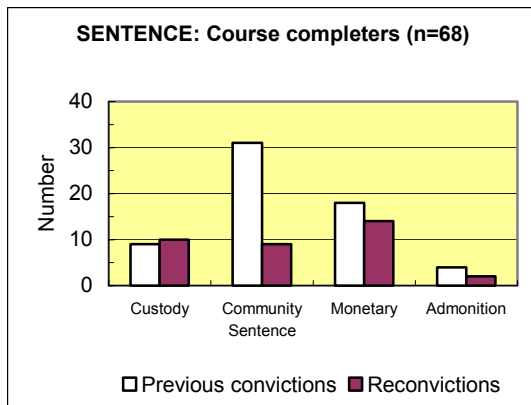
However, as the tables below show, there was a significant decrease (25%) in re-convictions for offences (mainly common assault and breach of the peace) by completers, while convictions for serious crimes of violence and indecency remained unchanged (3 convictions). For those who failed to complete the course, re-convictions decreased by 3% for offences, but increased by 2% for 'other' crimes.

Custodial re-convictions remained much the same as before for both course completers and non-completers. The most significant change was a 32% decrease in community sentences for completers who were reconvicted.

The overall decrease in re-conviction rates was reflected across most court types. Re-convictions in Sheriff Summary Courts decreased by 34% for course completers and 4% for non-completers, while the District Courts saw a decrease of 6% for course completers and 3% for non-completers.

### Reconvictions and previous convictions +/- 2 years from re-date, by type of crime, sentence and court





These figures clearly indicate that while the Alcohol Education Probation Programme did lead to an overall reduction in reconviction rates, they also indicate that subsequent reconvictions do not appear to be associated with any increase in severity of offending.

### What does this mean?

The programme did succeed in its overall aim to reduce the frequency of reconviction. The results show a clear decrease in the number of people that were convicted of further offences after completing the Alcohol Education Probation Programme.

Those who completed a programme had a higher success rate than those who did not, but nonetheless almost half (48%) of those who attended part of a programme, were not re-convicted in the two-year period following the programme.

**The number of completers who were not reconvicted after one year (71%) decreased in the second year to 64%.**

Figures released by the Scottish Executive show that 41% of all those who received a probation order in Scotland in 1997 were not reconvicted within two years (ob cit).

The positive benefits for clients on the programme, in terms of preventing further convictions, appears to decrease in the second year. This may indicate a need for ongoing support and evidence from interviews with staff and clients indicates that after one year clients do make contact with staff requesting additional support.

The results of this study indicate the need for additional 'top up' support to be available for those clients who need assistance to maintain the benefits of the programme. SACRO staff encourage clients to make contact although they are not strictly speaking funded to do so. If such an arrangement is to be formalised and additional support offered to every client after one year, this would have resource implications for the future. Some clients do require ongoing support if they are to avoid reconviction and this additional assistance could enable people to sustain positive changes in their lives for longer periods of time.

## **Interpreting Reconviction Data**

While these figures clearly show a marked drop in re-conviction rates after the programme, a note of caution is required in the interpretation of such data. Re-conviction data can only ever be used as an indicative measure of success for a number the following reasons:

- It is extremely difficult to link any particular intervention with offenders to a particular outcome as a number of other social, economic and psychological factors also play a significant part.
- Re-conviction data refers only to crimes detected and proceeded against to point of conviction. Clearly, it does not take into account offences which may not have been detected or which may have been detected but not proceeded against, for a number of reasons. Procurators Fiscal may decide to take no proceedings may employ an alternative to prosecution such as diversion, a warning letter or a fiscal fine. Therefore, re-conviction data should only be used as an indicator of success and particular interventions acknowledged as only one of a number of possible factors that may contribute to reduced re-conviction rates.

To supplement this data analysis and to illuminate the part played by other factors in reducing offending, it is important to gather qualitative data. Case studies with clients provide a greater insight into the impact and ongoing effect of programme work with offenders. These also show the importance of ensuring that support is available to service users, both during the programme and afterwards, in helping them to address their offending behaviour and sustaining positive changes in their lives. An extract from a case study of a client who has been through the Alcohol Education Probation Programme is given below.

## **Implications for the future**

SACRO's Alcohol Education Probation Programme has seen an upsurge in referrals over the last two years year and demand for the service continues to exceed capacity.

Alcohol is clearly implicated in a substantial number of crimes in Scotland from lower level offending to more serious violent crimes.

The evidence from the SACRO study shows that the greatest impact for alcohol education programmes can be achieved with those whose offending behaviour is still at the lower end of the offending spectrum.

However, positive benefits can also be achieved with more serious offenders. In this study, the number of people referred to the programme with previous convictions for serious crimes was very low. But the scope to increase the number of such referrals as part of a range of Throughcare options, could play an effective role in reducing further alcohol related offending. The programme could also be adapted for use within prisons pre-release.

If people can be referred to the programme at an early point when they are recognised to have a problem with alcohol and before their offending becomes more serious, then it will have a far greater long-term impact. This impact will not only benefit the individuals, their families and their communities, but also the extensive resources that are required to process these cases through the courts and for many, to be detained in prison on remand or on custodial sentences.

In the words of one of the men who successfully completed the programme in 2003:

*Drinking almost cost me my life and destroyed my family. If only I had received the help I needed sooner. Why did I have to wait so long? If I'd been sent on the course sooner, I wouldn't have had to go through all that. Why don't the courts refer people to courses like this when they get caught drink driving? If someone gets caught the second time, people should realise there is a problem and get the person the help they need. If people wait until someone gets caught a third or fourth time, then it's too late. They end up in prison for a few months with no help for their problems.*

*Half the men shouldn't be there. They need help not prison. In this day and age, it's ridiculous that someone has to go to prison before they can get help if they've a drink problem. They're not alcoholics; they're people with problems who can't always control their drinking. Those people need help, they don't need to be stuck in prison.*

*The Sheriffs should come and see how this course works. They need to know more about it and the best way to do that is to listen to the people who've been on it. They've firsthand experience and they all have similar stories to me. Then they might send more people to courses like this much earlier instead of sending them to prison.*

*Before I came on this course, I blamed the drink and then the drugs on my behaviour. Now I take responsibility for my actions. Everyone has choices and at the end of the day it's down to you. I have been given a second chance and I'm grateful for that. SACRO has helped me get my life back. What happened to me was horrible. I never want to go back to that situation again.*

*Billy*

## **Acknowledgement**

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