

What do the extant reports/evaluations say about the Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST)?

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1. Introduction and overview

In 2017, the Victorian Government funded 18 local youth crime prevention projects as part of its response to youth offending, with a particular focus at this time on recidivist youth who were at risk of, or were offending. The Multi-Agency Support Team (MAST), in the Ballarat LGA, was one of eight directly funded Youth Crime Prevention Projects in Victoria. These eight directly funded projects have had multiple cycles of further funding extensions and the MAST project has received \$2.1 million in state government funding in total since 2017. At the time of writing this paper, MAST funding is due to cease in June 2023.

MAST is an early intervention service that provides wraparound support for young people and their families/caregivers. It comprises of a team that includes a range of professionals, including family and youth services, education and health, and is coordinated by the MAST coordinator. The primary target group of the MAST are young people aged between 10 and 17 years who are at risk of offending or recidivism. The secondary target group are families/caregivers of the young people. MAST objectives are:

- Reduce known crime related risk factors and increase protective factors
- Improve engagement of children and young people in education
- Reduce offending rates
- Enhance community connections
- Strengthen service integration (The Orange Door, 2022, p. 2).

Importantly, MAST maintains principles of flexibility and willingness to use evidence to test and trial new ways of working to respond to local and emergent needs or goals for the young person and/or their families. By way of example, this flexible and responsive approach enabled the establishment of a support group for mothers of young people involved in MAST (called MASTerful Mothers), after the MAST coordinator had noticed that many of the mothers of MAST participants were sole parents and experiencing social isolation as a result of their child's offending (Greenslade et al., 2018). The MASTerful Mothers program has received two evaluations that will be discussed later in this paper.

Since MAST's inception in 2017, there has been focus on taking an evidence-based approach to its development and there have been a number of evaluations, project reports, as well as commissioned research reports that have been completed. In sum, evidence from these reports and evaluations indicate that MAST improves trajectories of young people who are at risk of offending or recidivism and reduces offending behaviours. The purpose of this paper is to summarise key

findings from the extant reports/evaluations with a particular focus on highlighting findings that have evidenced the impact that MAST has made in the Ballarat region toward reducing youth offending and in supporting young people and their families.

2. Existing reports and program evaluations

MAST commenced in 2017 and continues to operate at the time of writing this report. During this period, there have been at least 11 reports/evaluations¹ which have recorded key information surrounding MAST's performance against objectives, including funding objectives, as well as reported key learnings and knowledge that has been observed since MAST's inception. These extant reports/evaluations have involved a number of MAST participants, their families, as well as a number of professionals, and have used a variety of methods to collate data and report on findings. These are summarised in Appendix A.

A summary of key information reported in the extant reports/evaluations is provided next. The information below is not exhaustive of all of the information/findings/recommendations reported across the 11 reports/evaluations that were reviewed, as the purpose of this paper to provide a concise summary to the reader. Instead, the following should be considered a snapshot of key themes that have been highlighted and may be useful for considering next steps for the MAST in terms of strategic direction in 2023 and beyond.

2.1 Snapshot: Key demographics reported in extant reports/evaluations

Prior to reporting on the profile of young people who have participated in MAST, it is emphasised that given that MAST has been operating since 2017, consideration needs to be given to the fact that many participants have entered and exited from the program over this period of time. That is, the young people and families that have participated in MAST over the past years has not been fixed. Likewise, the profile of MAST participants is also not fixed, but changes dependent on the current cohort of participants. With the above in mind, for this paper the profiles of MAST participants as reported in the 11 extant reports/evaluations were collated, and a summary of key details are provided below. Given that summaries over a 5-year time span are provided, these should be considered a vignette of the typical MAST cohort of participants since the program's inception.

Key details

- Approximately 2/3 of MAST participants were male.
- Approximately 15% of MAST participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.
- Approximately 3/4 of MAST participants were disengaged from education at time of referral.

¹ See Appendix A for a full list of the reports/evaluations that were reviewed for this paper. This does not include progress reports to the funding body.

Risk

At the time of referral to MAST, the most common risk factors identified for MAST participants were:

- High prevalence of educational disengagement and/or low levels of academic achievement (87%).
- High prevalence of mental or physical illness (72%).
- Exposure to family conflict or violence (69%).
- Many had a tendency toward experiencing anxiety or stress (69%).

Police contact and offending

- Most MAST participants first contact with police (as an offender) was between the age of 11 to 15.
- However, most MAST participants first had contact with police at the age of 10 or younger, most commonly due to being either the victim or a witness to family violence, assault, or sexual assault.
- At the time of MAST referral, for participants who had a history of criminal offending, the three most serious types of offences that participants had most commonly participated in were:
 - Criminal damage
 - Arson / criminal damage
 - Intentional or recklessly causing injury

Education²

- 1 in 4 MAST participants had 4 or more primary school enrolments, suggesting that their primary school experience was likely marked by instability and disruption.
- 37.5% of MAST participants were eligible for Students with Disabilities funding.
- 30% of MAST participants had documented speech, language or communication concerns.

In sum, the profile of young people who participated in MAST across 5 years of reports and evaluations reveal that this is a group of young people with a range of identified needs, from a diversity of backgrounds and histories, but who most commonly are likely to have experienced social disadvantage in the forms of exposure to abuse or neglect, low SES, and/or educational exclusion.

² These education details were all reported in Pearl Goodwin-Burns' (2019) *Education Scan of MAST Participants* report.

2.2 Snapshot: Key findings reported in extant reports/evaluations

A timeline of summarised key findings from the extant reports and evaluations is provided next.

2018 – 2019

In 2018 to 2019, 3 progress reports, 3 evaluation reports (including 1 state-wide evaluation), and 1 exploratory report were completed and reviewed for this paper (8 reports/evaluations total).

During this period of time, reports tended to place more focus on ascertaining a greater understanding of the MAST participant cohort – who they were, what their histories were (such as historical contact with police; educational histories), as well as their level of individual risk across bio/psycho/socio domains.

Several of these reports/evaluations also aimed to provide early indicators of the impact that the MAST program was making on MAST participants. Key reported findings included:

- It was identified at an early stage that younger participants (10-14 years) were more likely to engage and be susceptible to supports.
- One progress report reported that some clients who successfully transitioned from MAST decreased contact with police and re-engaged in education. However, a limitation of this finding was that no further information (such as quantification) was included, making this finding anecdotal in nature.
- A state-wide evaluation found that from 2017-2018, there was a 4% decrease in the number of high-frequency offenders in Ballarat aged 10-24 years. However, it must be stressed that this evaluation cannot directly attribute this decrease to young people's participation in the MAST program, as opposed to other variables in young people's lives (such as any other interventions through school or the young person's care team, changes in the family dynamic, etc).

Two evaluation reports focused on the MASTerful Mothers program specifically. The MASTerful Mothers program is a facilitated peer-support program for mothers of young people in the MAST program, which was identified as a need by the MAST coordinator who noticed that sole parents of MAST participants were experiencing social isolation as a result of their child's offending. Of note, these evaluations reported that MASTerful Mothers successfully:

- Increased mothers' understandings of their child's behaviours;
- Built parenting skills and strategies;
- Decreased mothers' experiences of shame in coming into contact with the police;
- Reduced mothers' feelings of isolation, self-blame and shame;
- Increased mothers' self-perception of confidence and capacity as a parent and capacity to use self-care strategies.

2020 – 2021

In 2020 to 2021, two evaluation reports were completed. The first of the evaluation reports was a state-wide evaluation of the Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program, which included evaluation of the MAST program through measuring changes in offending patterns in the Ballarat LGA and focusing on progress toward outcomes outlined in the funding agreement. The second evaluation examined the lived experience of MAST participants and their families.

The *Mid-term Evaluation Report Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program* (Victoria State Government, 2020) found that:

- Over 30% of MAST participants in Ballarat improved engagement at school.

The key focus of the mid-term evaluation report was to examine progress against objectives state-wide, including all LGAs with projects funded under the Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program, and of note overall positive emergent outcomes were reported state-wide. This included high rates of young people who participated in a program reporting that they had observed positive changes to their levels of risk/protective changes (73% state-wide) and rates of offending pre-program compared to post program decreasing (79% pre-program compared to 53% post program state-wide average).

It was also noted that on a state-wide scale short term funding cycles were identified as problematic and disruptive for many of the projects. Here, short-term funding cycles were reported to contribute to staff-turnover. Further, due to the nature of short-term funding cycles leading to uncertainty about the program's future, it was reported that this impacted some of the projects' abilities to take on new referrals. This limitation to the funding cycle likely directly impacted young people in the programs, as service providers looked to refer participants out to other programs around 3 months prior to a funding cycle ending.

The lived experiences of the MAST program (Camilleri, 2021) evaluation used qualitative interviews to speak with young people, their family members, as well as a small number of professionals with involvement in MAST. This evaluation reported that:

- For 4 of the 6 families that were interviewed, MAST appeared to have made a significant positive difference in their lives.
 - This included in supporting the young person to cease offending (5 out of 6 families) and supporting school completion (4 out of 6 families).
- Service users reported feeling supported by the MAST, that MAST 'has their back' and that MAST was 'on top of things' in supporting them. They also felt included in decision making about their child.
- Brokerage was an important aspect of MAST. The flexibility, broad focus, and responsiveness of having flexible funds coordinated by MAST built trust between parents/carers, young people and workers, and resulted in deeper engagement by families with the MAST program. Flexible funds supported the wellbeing and interests of young people, took pressure off parent/carers and offered increased opportunities to strengthen families.

- Communication was identified as pivotal to engaging and maintaining engagement with families, with all participants reporting that MAST communicated with them very well, particularly initially. Some participants felt that later in the MAST intervention communication could have been more regular in some instances.

2022

In 2022, the state-wide *Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program Evaluation Final Report* (Victoria State Government, 2022) was completed. As part of this evaluation, pre and post program offending was measured by calculating the number of days between exiting the program and 30 June 2021, then applying the same number of days prior to entering the program to calculate the pre-program period. Using this measure, it was reported that:

- 86% of MAST participants offended in the pre-program period, while this decreased to 41% in the post-program period. Of note, this was the lowest post-program offending rate in the state compared to all other LGAs with a YCPGP project.
 - That is, these findings suggest that *MAST reduces offending rates of young people who participate in the program.*

These findings indicate that MAST successfully delivered a service which improved outcomes for young people and their families who have contact or were at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. However, it must be emphasised that evaluations such as this one cannot determine if the MAST intervention solely led to the above outcome, or if other interventions (i.e. changes at school, the care team, other counselling/therapy, etc) also contributed to or shaped the outcomes observed. Despite this limitation, by reading these findings alongside other reports and evaluations completed, this adds to the body of evidence demonstrating the positive impact made by the MAST program since its inception.

A separate research report, titled *Gateways to Social Inclusion: Enablers and barriers for young people in accessing meaningful recreational activities* (Camilleri, 2022), was also completed. While this report did not evaluate MAST or report on progress against objectives, it usefully identified areas for future direction to continue to support young people and their families to engage and connect with the community (a protective factor for offending). Of note, areas for additional support to alleviate barriers to inclusion in community-based recreational activities included providing families with financial support to cover all costs of participation (including transport) as well as supporting/managing mental health barriers (such as anxiety related to participation) for young people by providing opportunities for young people to gain access to a range of activities ‘tasters’ within a supportive environment.

2.3 Snapshot: Key recommendations provided in extant reports/evaluations

A total of 58 recommendations were made across the 11 reports/evaluations that were reviewed for this paper. A number of recurring themes were identified:

- *Reducing barriers to access services for young people and their families.* Several evaluations identified that some young people and/or families experienced logistical and financial barriers to attend services either directly related to MAST or that MAST had referred them to. Several reports/evaluations recommended identifying avenues to reduce these barriers, such as providing more flexible meeting times to suit family schedules and providing additional financial support for young people and families to engage in community activities.
- *Communication with young people and families.* Communication was identified as vital for young people and their families in multiple reports. Areas where recommendations were made for improvement
- *Longer funding cycles.* Multiple evaluations identified that the short funding cycle created uncertainty surrounding MAST, which may have negatively impacted referrals to the program, and other issues over the five years such as staff turnover. Additional sustainability planning was commonly recommended.
- *Systemic issues surrounding communication and administration.* Administration (such as information sharing) was identified as challenging at times and additional planning to overcome barriers to communication between agencies and/or between agencies and government departments was recommended.

These themes are not exhaustive of all recommendations made, but were identified as a snapshot of most relevant recommendations for the purposes of this paper. Recommendations made in the early years of MAST (such as between 2018-2019) were largely not included in the above snapshot. This is due to many of the recommendations made during this period focusing on gathering more information about the profile of young people who had been referred to MAST, and are understood to have been largely completed and not as relevant for the purposes of this paper in comparison to those highlighted above.

2. What do the findings from extant reports/evaluations tell us about MAST?

Reduction in offending

Since the inception of MAST, there has been a reduction in reported youth offending in Ballarat. Further, evaluation of MAST has reported a large reduction in the percentage of young people who offended prior to participating in the program, compared to after participating in the program. That is, there is evidence that suggests that MAST is successful in its objective to reduce youth offending in the Ballarat region.

The reported reduced rate of offending by young people from 86% pre-MAST involvement to 41% post-MAST involvement (a 47.67% decrease in offending) is a standout indicator of success. Of note, this was the lowest rate of post-program offending in the state when compared to other LGAs with a Youth Crime Prevention Grant Program – with Geelong reporting the next lowest rate of offending post-program at a rate of 46%. Given that each LGA developed their own place-based model to

address youth offending and recidivism, the fact that the Ballarat LGA reported the lowest rate of offending post-program further contribute to the body of evidence that MAST is designed in a manner that positively impacts many of the young people that participate.

While there continues to be a trend of decreased numbers of young people aged 10 to 17 in detention in Victoria, decreasing from 627 in 2019-20 to 513 in 2020-21 (Sentencing Advisory Council, 2022), the cost of keeping any young person in detention continues to be substantial - recently reported to have risen to as much as “just over \$5000 per day” on average (Deery, 2023). This equates to an estimated annual cost of over 1.8 million dollars for each young person in detention in Victoria. This is without considering additional costs to the young person’s families, or the financial cost associated with the offending behaviours. Given that the profiles of young people referred to the MAST were generally understood to trend toward increased offending that commonly resulted in youth justice intervention, supervision, or incarceration (Crime Statistics Agency, 2018), it can be argued that the 47.67% reduction rate in offending by young people post their participation in MAST may shift some young people’s trajectory toward potential periods of time in youth detention, and subsequently result in substantial financial saving for the community.

Short funding cycles were disruptive for young people and their families, as well as professionals

An interesting observation made across the state-wide evaluations was that the short funding cycles negatively impacted many of the projects across the different LGAs. This was not just an issue for MAST in Ballarat. Vitally, the uncertainty surrounding program funding did not only impact professionals (i.e. job insecurity), but likely had a real impact on young people and their families as well. For example, it was reported that in the three months leading up to a funding cycle ending (1) new referrals for eligible young people would often slow down due to uncertainty about the program’s future, and (2) young people who were currently participating in programs were commonly referred on to other services even when they may not have been as appropriate/suitable for some of those young people. In short, the uncertainty of the short funding cycles was disruptive and created instability for all involved.

Limitations of the findings reported in the evaluations

Finally, it is important to re-emphasise that the findings presented in each of the evaluations of MAST have limitations that need to be considered. Most importantly, while the measures used in the evaluations were designed to capture data on MAST outcomes in areas such as frequency in offending and school engagement (for example), due to limiting factors such as data from other programs that young people were involved in while participating in MAST were not included, it is difficult to definitively determine if changes in a young person’s behaviour were due to their participation in MAST, or due to other factors.

However, as previously discussed, while there are limitations to the evaluations that need to be considered alongside their findings, limitations such as these are common in social services evaluations and each report/evaluation that has been completed has contributed to the body of knowledge about MAST over the past 5 years. Given that there have been at least 11 reports/evaluations completed for MAST over this 5-year period that used a variety of different methodologies to gather data, the body of knowledge built over this time places MAST in a good

stead toward building an evidence base of ‘what works’ to support young people and their families in Ballarat who are have entered or are at risk of entering the criminal justice system.

3. Summary

In sum, since 2017 MAST has been subject to ongoing evaluation and research efforts, of which 11 extant reports/evaluations were reviewed for this paper. Evidence gathered through the extant reports/evaluations indicate that there has been a reduction in youth offending in Ballarat since the inception of MAST and that MAST participants are less likely to offend following MAST intervention. Given the ballooning financial cost that occurs when a young person’s offending results in youth detention (Deery, 2023), the reduction in offending observed amongst young people who have participated in MAST is likely to come with a substantial financial benefit to the community. This is particularly the case given that ongoing recent efforts to enhance the sustainability of the MAST model, by using learnings from the past 5 years to embed key functions of MAST within general/existing practice across multiple agencies in the Ballarat LGA, have reduced the projected annual cost of continuing MAST from \$350,000 to \$170,000 per annum. This equates to an average cost of \$8,500 per young person per year. To inform future advocacy for the sustainability of the MAST, a cost-benefit analysis using the data from the extant reports/evaluations may be useful to understand and demonstrate the cost effectiveness of MAST relative to the cost of detention.

In addition to reducing offending, MAST has been found to provide wraparound services and coordination to young people and their families/caregivers that has enabled engagement in the community where this otherwise would have been difficult, as well as making many families *feel* supported where they otherwise were not feeling this way. While there were areas that reports/evaluations identified room for improvement, such as strengthening communication with families and maximising efforts to overcome financial/logistical barriers for families to engage in particular services, key amongst issues identified were those that arose from short term funding cycles – which were understood to not only impact professionals (i.e. contributing to turnover), but also impacted young people and their families (i.e. acting as a barrier for eligible young people being referred to MAST in the months leading up to a funding cycle ending). Increased certainty surrounding the MAST through sustainable funding would likely go a long way toward ensuring that young people in Ballarat who are at risk of offending and recidivism can continue to receive the early intervention provided by the MAST in a timely manner - diverting them away from the criminal justice system and ultimately reducing the criminalisation of children and young people in the region.

References

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- The Orange Door (2022). *TOD MAST Process*. Victoria State Government.

Appendix A. List of reports/evaluations reviewed

Name of report	Year	Methods used	Participants	Report type	Focus of report	No. of recs
<i>Ballarat Youth Crime Prevention project – 100 day report.</i> Dr Deb Greenslade.	2018	File and data sets review	21 MAST participants	Progress report	Exploratory report – understanding profile of MAST participants.	0
<i>MASTerful mothers evaluation.</i> Dr Deb Greenslade, Amber Byvoet, and Emily Nester.	2018	Focus group Interviews	5 mothers of MAST participants	Evaluation	Process and impact evaluation of MASTerful Mothers program.	3
<i>Interim Evaluation Report Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program.</i> Victoria State Government.	2018	Interviews; Focus groups; Surveys; Data sets (including police data)	175 young people who had participated in a YCPGP in Vic (survey) 66 program staff (interviews)	Evaluation report (state-wide)	Focuses on measuring progress toward program objectives.	14
<i>Ballarat Youth Crime Prevention project – 500 day report.</i> Dr Deb Greenslade.	2019	File review	40 MAST participants	Progress report	Exploratory report – understanding profile of MAST participants.	0
<i>Ballarat Youth Crime Prevention project – 500 day</i>	2019	Data set review	40 MAST participants	Progress report	Exploratory report – understanding touch points	2

<i>report. Police data.</i>					with police and police data.	
<i>MASTerful mums semester one 2019 report.</i> SalvoConnect Western. Kelly Jane Pickford.	2019	Self-report survey Focus group	5 mothers of MAST participants	Evaluation	Process and impact evaluation of MASTerful Mothers program.	6
<i>Education scan of MAST participants.</i> Highlands LLEN. Pearl Goodwin-Burns.	2019	File reviews	38 MAST participants	Exploratory report	Identifying barriers MAST participants face to education. Thinking about education as a protective factor.	4 (considerations)
<i>Mid-term Evaluation Report Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program.</i> Victoria State Government.	2020	Interviews; Focus groups; Surveys; Data sets (including police data)	568 young people who had exited funded grant programs across Victoria (variety of methods)	Evaluation report (state-wide)	Focuses on measuring progress toward program objectives.	8
<i>The lived experiences of the MAST program.</i> Federation University. Dr Marg Camilleri.	2021	Qualitative interviews	6 lead workers 7 MAST panel members 6 parents/ guardians of MAST participants 4 young people	Evaluation	Lived experiences of MAST participants and their families.	8

			(MAST participants)			
<i>Gateways to social inclusion: Enablers and barriers for young people in accessing meaningful recreational activities.</i> Federation University. Dr Marg Camilleri.	2022	Focus groups	9 Young people with similar profile as MAST participants 4 parents/ guardians of MAST participants	Research report	What recreational activities young people might like to engage in and what are the barriers to engagement.	5
<i>Youth Crime Prevention Grants Program Evaluation Final Report.</i> Victoria State Government.	2022	Interviews; Focus groups; Surveys; Document analysis; Data sets (including police data)	526 young people who had exited funded grant programs across Victoria (variety of methods) 92 program staff (interviews and focus groups)	Evaluation report (state-wide)	Focuses on measuring progress toward program objectives.	8