

Using action research: an example from substance use research

Action research is a technique designed to actively bring about change in a situation while researching the change as it occurs. It is a deliberately interventionist strategy which stands in contrast to observational and experimental studies, neither of which may have any direct impact on the situation in practical application. This technique achieved tangible results in the context of crime prevention in the Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire (Kennedy, Braga & Piehl 2001). It has been widely acknowledged that such results could not have been achieved without using an action research approach.

The integration of action and research within a process of continuous planning, action, and review provides a mechanism by which participants can contribute ideas and strategies, implement such strategies and critically reflect on the results. This cyclic process alternates between meetings in which the planning and review takes place, and community action to implement the plans. A project described by Dick (2006), used action research to design a treatment which would work best in practice in respect to the subject client group. It set out to deliberately change the situation by including substance users and other parties to the research, such as health staff and youth workers, in the process. This participative approach was designed to empower substance users, which in turn provided for greater commitment on their part to decisions to which they have contributed.

By involving substance users in planning the treatment, action research is more likely to develop a treatment that will be acted on and, as such, is feasible in practice. Application of the perspectives of substance users to the research provides a practical focus on important issues about which other parties to the research may not be aware. An action research approach allows for engagement with clients which will also identify the full range of outcomes that are actually achieved rather than merely the outcomes sought by clinicians.

More generally, medication users of all types may not carry out a treatment exactly as prescribed, often as the result of a conscious decision on their part to vary or discontinue their treatment (Boston Consulting Group Study 2003). The action research technique provides a means by which treatments are developed to which substance users will want to adhere. This is due largely to the practical focus and participative approach adopted as well as the emphasis on action and results over experiments and theory. There are clear parallels for applying similar techniques to developing interventions to reduce and prevent crime involving marginalised groups such as Indigenous and young people.

References

Boston Consulting Group 2003. The hidden epidemic: finding a cure for unfilled prescriptions and missed doses. *BCG focus* December
http://www.bcg.com/publications/files/TheHiddenEpidemic_Rpt_HCDec03.pdf

Dick B 2006. Learning through action. *Of substance* 4(4): 26–27

Kennedy DM, Braga AM & Piehl AM 2001. Developing and implementing Operation Ceasefire in Reducing Gun Violence: The Boston Gun Project's Operation Ceasefire. Washington: National Institute of Justice NCJ 188741