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Therapeutic Incentive Program (TIP)

Providing programming in a restrictive housing unit

Agency: Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (PADOC) SCI-Dallas

Project Duration:
12/16/18–03/15/19

Pracademics*:
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Context
Restrictive-housing units may offer little or no programming or educational opportunities, which may create or exacerbate psychological and behavioral problems. Introducing programming into such units may help to alleviate problems and may even increase positive behaviors.

Key Finding
The number of misconducts dropped somewhat during TIP, but a larger drop was documented in the period after TIP was completed.

*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy “Pracademics” who can lead trials.

Background

In the recent past, prison policies limited the nature and quantity of programming, education, and mental health services delivered to those in restrictive-housing units (RHU), despite evidence of adverse effects. RHU placement has been shown to produce new mental and physical problems and exacerbate existing problems. Meaningful activities for RHU residents may prevent these problems from escalating.

The American Correctional Association provides ethical and professional standards for correctional departments. “Restrictive Housing Performance Based Standards” addresses the provision of RHU programming and urges facilities to offer access to educational, commissary, library, social, behavioral health, and treatment services; religious guidance; and recreational programs.

Guided by a desire to improve outcomes for RHU residents, the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections tested a new “Therapeutic Incentive Program” (TIP). The objective of TIP is to offer productive, therapeutic activities during RHU confinement to keep residents occupied and focused on therapeutic activities that have the potential to increase positive behavior. TIP includes both in-cell and out-of-cell therapeutic treatment, education, and activities. Participation in TIP was voluntary but encouraged.

Design

Although it was initially planned as a randomized controlled trial, three of the participating facilities withdrew from the project, leaving SCI-Dallas as the only participating site. The project was amended so that behavior in the RHU during the program period was compared to behavior in like periods before (09/16–12/15/18) and after (03/16–06/15/19) the program. Both participation logs and misconducts were collected for analysis.

Lessons Learned

There were 75 RHU residents who participated in TIP, and their behavior was tracked before and after the

program regardless of their housing situation. Participants did not all complete the same program components. For example, a participant may have completed the anger-management component but not one on antisocial thinking (see table below). Several components were provided to all participants and others were optional. In each period, no participant had more than one misconduct. In the pre-TIP period, 48 participants had one misconduct, and 45 had one misconduct during the program. The number of participants with a misconduct dropped to 17 after the program.

Next Steps

There are some limitations to this analysis. For example, there was no control group so we cannot know whether the reduction in the number of misconducts is due to TIP or other confounding factors. Also, each participant completed different TIP components, so it is difficult to determine whether the program as a whole was responsible for reducing misconducts. It may be that one or more specific components are especially effective as compared to the other components. Because random selection of participants was not conducted, it is impossible to generalize these trends to the entire RHU population.

Number of participants who completed each TIP component

Anger Management	52
Antisocial Thinking	29
Coping Skills	41
Core Life Skills	36
Emotional Regulation	27
Responsible Thinking	45
Self Control	45
Social Values	42
Substance Abuse	17

Why BetaGov Spark?

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn't possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What's more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.