

Incarceration-based drug treatment programs have modest effects on criminal behaviour



Incarceration-based drug treatment programs are modestly effective in reducing criminal behaviour and drug use

What is the aim of this review?

This Campbell systematic review examines the effectiveness incarceration-based drug treatment interventions in reducing post-release recidivism and drug use. The review summarise findings from 74 studies, sixty-five of which were conducted in the United States, four in Canada, three in Australia, one in Taiwan and one in the United Kingdom.

Incarcerated offenders often have substance abuse problems. They are likely to continue their criminal behaviour post-release without effective treatment. Incarceration-based drug treatment programs are modestly effective in reducing recidivism and drug use. Effects vary by program design. Therapeutic communities are most effective. Boot camps are ineffective.

What did the review study?

Many, if not most, incarcerated criminals are drug-dependent. In the absence of effective substance abuse treatment, a high proportion of these drug-dependent criminals will return to crime once released.

Incarceration-based drug treatment programs allow correctional facilities to use force to encourage abusers to engage in treatment – many of who otherwise would not do so – as well as limit the availability of drugs with sufficient time available to focus on treatment and introspection.

This review examines the effectiveness of incarceration-based drug treatment programs in reducing post-release recidivism and drug use.

What studies are included?

Included studies assess incarceration-based drug treatment interventions for incarcerated participants with substance abuse problems using experimental or two-group quasi-experimental research designs that included a treatment and comparison group.

The incarceration-based drug treatment programs fell into four distinct types: therapeutic communities (TCs), group counseling, boot camps specifically for drug offenders and narcotics maintenance programs.

A total of 74 independent evaluations were included in the review. Sixty-five of the studies



Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Charles Rivezzo

How up-to-date is this review?

The review authors searched for studies published until November 2011. This Campbell Systematic Review was published in August 2012.

What is the Campbell Collaboration?

The Campbell Collaboration is an international, voluntary, non-profit research network that publishes systematic reviews. We summarise and evaluate the quality of evidence about programmes in the social and behavioural sciences. Our aim is to help people make better choices and better policy decisions.

About this summary

This summary was prepared by Ada Chukwudozie and Howard White (Campbell Collaboration) based on the Campbell Systematic Review 2012:18 The Effectiveness of Incarceration-Based Drug Treatment on Criminal Behaviour: A systematic review Ojmarrh Mitchell, David B. Wilson and Doris L. MacKenzie (DOI 10.4073/csr.2012:18). Tanya Kristiansen redesigned and edited the summary. Financial support from the American Institutes for Research for the production of this summary is gratefully acknowledged.



were conducted in the United States, four in Canada, three in Australia, one in Taiwan and one the United Kingdom. The studies compare the methodology, samples and programme features of each program type.

What are the main results in this review?

Incarceration-based drug treatment programs are modestly effective in reducing criminal behaviour and drug use. The overall average effect of these programs is approximately a 15 to 17% reduction in recidivism and drug relapse.

Effects vary by program design. Therapeutic communities have relatively consistent but modest reductions in recidivism and drug relapse. Counselling programs reduce recidivism but not drug relapse, narcotic maintenance programs cause sizeable reductions in drug relapse but not recidivism, and boot camps have negligible effects on both recidivism and drug relapse.

What do the findings in this review mean?

The main evidence presented in this review suggests that the effectiveness of treatment programs varies by the type of treatment. These findings most strongly support the effectiveness of therapeutic communities, as these programs produced relatively consistent reductions in recidivism and drug use. Boot camps have no effect on either outcome.

These conclusions should be read with caution given the limited number of such evaluations and general methodological weakness.

Therapeutic community programs were the only programs to consistently show modest reductions in recidivism and drug relapse however, there is evidence of publication bias that could have over-estimated its effectiveness. Given all these shortcomings, further evidence regarding the effectiveness of this type of intervention is needed.