

Improving Evaluations of Programs Offered by the Department of Corrections

Although experimental research is ideal for testing causal relationships between variables, its use in correctional settings is rare for both practical and ethical reasons. This report explores opportunities for improving the quality of WSIPP's outcome evaluations of prison programs offered by the Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC).

Background

Outcome evaluations are conducted to quantify program impacts, allowing policymakers to know whether public investments are producing meaningful results. However, researchers are often unable to draw cause-and-effect conclusions due to limitations regarding program design and data quality.

Findings

We collaborated with DOC to assess the feasibility of evaluating different DOC programs. A majority of programs maintain consistent data on program participation and completion, which facilitates evaluation research. We identified six programs that show promise regarding the use of natural experiments. Researchers could leverage these opportunities to conduct causal analysis even in the absence of experimental methods.

Researchers evaluating DOC programs face challenges regarding incomplete data collection, the lack of quality assurance systems, and the use of subjective criteria for determining program eligibility. It is important to note that these factors do not imply that programs are ineffective, but that they are more challenging to evaluate.

Limitations

This report focuses on adult prison programs. Reentry programs, juvenile justice programs, and non-program conditions like solitary confinement are outside the scope of this report.

Administrative practices that could improve research quality

Practices that would be less burdensome to implement:

- Digitizing data on program facilitators
- Tracking data on program waitlists
- Tracking data used in eligibility screenings

Practices that would require additional resources:

- Data tracking for larger programs and programs run in collaboration with other organizations

Practices that would raise legal or ethical issues:

- Conducting randomized controlled trials to test program effectiveness
- Implementing quality assurance systems for programs run in collaboration with other organizations
- Tracking medical data used to determine eligibility for mental health treatment programs

Assignment Details

WSIPP used legislative funding for adult criminal justice research to support this work

[Full report available on WSIPP's website](#)

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