

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Reducing Recidivism:
The Need for Evidenced-Based Corrections**

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ABSTRACT

Everyone in the criminal justice field is affected by offenders who constantly enter the revolving door of incarceration. The number one goal of administrators in the field of corrections is to reduce the number of subjects from reoffending. The United States prison population was at an estimated 1.8 million in 1998 and is continuing to grow (Mackenzie, 2001). For far too long, prison leaders and policy makers have failed to continually evaluate correctional programs that are aimed at reducing recidivism. The lack of results from these programs, which have been primarily based on anecdotal evidence, is now in the spotlight, and change is needed. Evidenced-based corrections are the future of correctional programs. These programs are aimed at reducing recidivism and are supported by empirical evidence. Once correctional agencies implement these programs, recidivism will be reduced, and the effects will be felt throughout the criminal justice system.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction	1
Position	3
Counter Position	7
Recommendation	9
References	11

INTRODUCTION

Police officers are known as the gatekeepers to the criminal justice system. They are the ones who decide whether or not to make an arrest. Once the decision is made to arrest, the suspect must now become part of the criminal justice system. The suspect will usually bond out of jail and, at some point in time, will have to answer to the charges through the district attorney's office. Depending on the severity of the crime and the suspect's prior criminal history, the suspect may end up having to be incarcerated for some period of time. All too often, the suspect finds himself repeating this cycle over and over again throughout their lifetime. The effects are taking a toll on the prison system. The United States makes up 25% of the world's prison population. The prison population had hit an astounding 1.5 million at the end of the 20th century and is showing no signs of slowing down (Spivak & Sharp, 2008). Recidivism is one of the main issues administrators in corrections face and one that must be tackled in order to reduce overcrowded jails and cut prison expenditures.

Since the 1900s, many programs have been utilized by correctional administrators in hopes of keeping the prison population down. From 1900 to 1975, the focus of correctional programs was on rehabilitation (Mackenzie, 2001). A shift away from rehabilitation occurred in 1974 after Robert Martinson's article known as "Nothing Works" surfaced (Mease, n.d.). He conducted a meta-analysis on all rehabilitative programs from 1945 to 1967 in corrections (Mease, n.d.). His findings showed that nothing works in regards to rehabilitation (Mease, n.d.). He found no evidence that any of the rehabilitative programs being used had any correlated impact on recidivism. His article became widely known throughout the world of corrections. The impact of his

article would be tremendously felt even though his evaluations of the programs were poorly constructed and not accurate.

The theme of rehabilitation quickly gave way to an emphasis on punishment and sentencing (Mackenzie, 2001). A philosophical shift occurred in corrections over the next 30 years (Mackenzie, 2001). This shift would lead to a dramatic increase in the prison population (Mackenzie, 2001). For example, in an 18 year span between 1980 and 1998, the prison population exploded. The total correctional population was at 1.8 million in 1980. An increase of 325% over the next 18 years resulted in the population being at 5.9 million of offenders in correctional institutions (Mackenzie, 2001). However, it took some time and significant growth in the prison systems to see that the notion of punishment and sentencing was not effective. Finally, through empirical evidence, it is now apparent how unsuccessful many of these correctional programs are in accomplishing their purpose. Administrators must recognize that no two prisoners are alike, and different programs must be used on different types of prisoners in order to have any real benefit.

One problem with current and past correctional programs is that administrators are failing to properly evaluate these programs' effects on the prison population. Instead, administrators fall victim to their continued use because they are comfortable with the programs. More and more prison officials are finally beginning to recognize the need for constant evaluations of correctional programs to determine whether the programs should continue or be terminated. These evaluations are leading administrators towards a new trend known as evidenced-based corrections.

Unlike traditional programs, evidenced-based programs are scientifically validated to ensure programs work as intended (Mackenzie, 2001). The U.S. Department of Justice (2009) stated that “Evidence-based practice (ESB) is the objective, balanced and responsible use of current research and the best available data to guide policy and practice decisions, such that outcomes for consumers are improved” (p. ix). In the context of this paper, consumers include prisoners, victims, and other key stakeholders in the criminal justice system. The medical field was one of the first origins of evidenced-based practice and rightfully so. Patients were given treatment (medication) that had been rigorously tested and backed by scientific evidence. No one wants medical treatment based on anecdotal evidence. The same logic should be applied in the criminal justice system. There is now enough empirical research across the country and even across the world on offender programs that offer the needed information in order to successfully choose and implement working correctional programs. The days of using anecdotal and commonly known correctional programs are coming to an end. Evidenced-based correctional programs should be used by correctional administrators to reduce recidivism in the prison population.

POSITION

Everyone in the criminal justice system is affected by recidivism. Police officers, judges, taxpayers, lawyers, probation officers, parole officers, and correctional officers are all affected in some way. Past correctional programs have attempted to change criminals' behavior in a way that prevents them from committing further criminal acts. One very popular and widely used correctional program is the traditional boot camps, also known as shock or intensive incarceration. These types of treatments are utilized

at the juvenile and adult level (Mackenzie, Wilson, & Kider, 2001). Most people are under the assumption that boot camps are successful programs, which is why they are still constantly used across the country. Correctional boot camps can still be found at the local, state, and federal level today (Mackenzie et al., 2001, p. 127).

Traditional boot camps offer an excellent example of why evidenced-based corrections should be utilized. Boot camps focus on many different areas; however, the main goal of boot camps and similar programs is the reduction of recidivism. Boot camps have been in existence long enough that there is enough empirical data for researchers to conduct evaluative research into these programs to identify if there is a correlation between boot camps and the reduction of recidivism. Mackenzie, Wilson, & Kider (2001) conducted research to draw conclusions about the boot camps. The results of their research are astounding. Contrary to popular belief, the scientifically measured research concluded that there is not a relationship between boot camp participants and recidivism (Mackenzie et al. 2001). A systematic review was conducted to reach this conclusion (Mackenzie et al., 2001). A program that had been utilized for decades was scientifically proven to be a waste of time (Mackenzie et al., 2001). The research on this topic hit hard on the correctional community.

Evidenced-based corrections begins with evaluating past programs to determine their scientific effects. In other words, it identifies what does not work. If correctional administrators begin to utilize these evidenced based corrections they will quickly learn about what programs are indeed effective and which ones are not. Many departments which utilize boot camps will now be able to see that they are wasting precious money and resources on a fad of the past and can use these resources elsewhere. In 2005 the

Federal Bureau of Prisons came to the that realization and determined it would save over one million dollars a year by eliminating the unsuccessful boot camps (Willing, 2005).

Just as evidenced based corrections can identify what current programs are ineffective, they can also do the opposite. Evidence-based corrections will identify what programs are effective in reducing recidivism. As mentioned, the programs are scientifically validated. Therefore, correctional administrators will be able to show policymakers the empirical data behind the program and gain support for the programs. The needed support is usually the first step to get the programs implemented. The anecdotal evidence once used will be forgotten in the past. An example of a meta-analysis that identified a type of treatment that indeed had effects on recidivism was conducted in 2006. In this systematic review using meta-analysis, nine studies on the effects of sexual offender treatment on juveniles were analyzed. The findings showed a significant impact on reducing recidivism. Those juveniles who received the treatment were only 7.37% likely to reoffend. Those who did not were almost 19% more likely to reoffend (Reitzel & Carbonell, 2006). These types of systematic reviews of past studies will point administrators in the right direction in implementing an effective evidenced-based correctional program.

Once evidenced-based corrections are implemented, a domino effect will slowly occur. Recidivism will reduce, prison population will decrease, and prison expenditures will also decrease. Other criminal justice professionals will also be allowed to focus their attention on others besides the repeat offenders. Police officers are impacted in that they do not deal with the same repeat offender who benefited from a scientifically

validated program. Overall safety in the communities will also increase. Prisoners who are rehabilitated do not commit more crimes therefore, overall public safety will increase.

Another reason for policy makers in corrections to recognize the importance of evidence-based corrections is the bottom line. The 1998 reauthorization of the Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act required that programs that are federally funded be researched base (Mackenzie, 2001). This is an example of why evidenced-based programs are emphasized. The federal government wants to know their funds are going to be used wisely. Federal grant money is indeed available; however, more and more grants have stipulations tied to them (Mease, n.d.). With the emergence of evidenced-based practices and evidenced-based corrections, grants are given to those departments that have solid empirical data to support the program they are seeking funding for. Therefore, administrators are forced to seek out evidenced-based corrections to obtain this extra funding. If administrators do not act on this, they will lose the potential to obtain valuable funding for valuable programs.

The implementation of evidenced-based corrections will also lead to a shift in the way the organization operates. More importantly, the agency is forced to implement some sort of strategic planning in order to be successful in the new mission of implementing programs that work and reducing recidivism. Bryson (2004) stated, "Strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it" (p. 6). Correctional agencies will benefit from working together on the strategic planning, which will have positive outcomes. One of the most important benefits of strategic planning is

the promotion of strategic thinking, acting, and learning, especially through communication among key stakeholders (Bryson, 2004). Correctional departments will be efficient and have a plan in place for future programs as constant program evaluation occur.

COUNTER POSITION

Though the evidence for evidenced-based corrections seems overwhelming, there are some skeptics. There is a major concern for evidenced-based practices in all fields. This concern is in the practice of the reviewing method of previous studies. The appropriate and relevant studies must be chosen carefully. If this does not occur, a proper systematic review would not be satisfied. For example, there could be a previous study that was conducted on the effectiveness of sexual offender treatment in relation to recidivism. The study could lack the necessary elements that make the study scientifically valid. Therefore, if this study is included on a systematic review, the results could definitely be invalid.

Often, studies can be located to support a certain conclusion. With evidenced-based corrections foundation being in past research, an administrator could bring his or her bias to the table. If an individual wanted to find studies that supported boot camps and their success with rehabilitating offenders, he or she could probably find such studies and omit the studies that went against their biases. One could easily see how a program could be altered to appear to be successful based on previous studies.

There is a solution to the counter arguments, and they involve detailed, systematic reviews and incorporating third parties to conduct them. The whole concept behind evidence-based corrections is the documentation of empirical data. Certain

guidelines are in place to ensure valuable and relevant research is studied. One method utilized is the systematic review. As the name states, this is one of the most comprehensive reviews of past research (Sherman, 2003). If Martinson (as cited in Mease, n.d.) had been more thorough in his research and utilized systematic reviews before publishing his article about how nothing works in the prison system, there is a strong possibility there would not have been a spike in the prison population (as cited in MacKenzie, 2001).

A systematic review begins with seeking out relevant studies (Sherman, 2003). These studies must then be critically evaluated in order to determine what works (Sherman, 2003). During this process, all activity should be made available to anyone who requests it (Sherman, 2003). A thorough, documented process must also be made available (Sherman, 2003). If another person wanted to confirm or disconfirm the findings, then they should be able to (Sherman, 2003). The needed documentation includes questions that guided the reviews, the criteria for the studies, and the methods to search and screen the evaluation reports (Petrosino, Borouch, Soydan, Duggan, & Sanchez-Meca, 2001). The review must also include how conclusions were reached (Petrosino et al., 2001). When properly utilized, they are a valid defense to selective reporting (Sherman, 2003).

A systematic review can even be taken a step further by using meta-analysis. In meta-analysis, details about the variation in studies and the average impact can be determined (Petrosino et al., 2001). A meta-analysis will also give information on why one program was effective while another one failed. In addition, a meta-analysis gives

the additional confirmation that a result did not occur because of chance alone (Petrosino et al., 2001).

To avoid any biases, a third party can be utilized to conduct the research on which the evidenced-based corrections will be based on. This method will put those who feel program coordinators may favor certain research to support their bias at ease. A sense of transparency will quickly dispel any beliefs of favoritism to any one program.

RECOMMENDATION

Correctional institutions have been through many changes over the last century. Focuses have shifted from a rehabilitative model to a model that focuses on punishment. One factor that cannot be disputed is that punishment alone will not rehabilitate offenders. Offenders must be offered appropriate programs that will enable them to return to society and abide by the laws. Policymakers, correctional administrators, and the government must all recognize there is a tool available to determine which programs work and determine what conditions are most ideal for a particular program.

Evidenced-based corrections are the future of corrections and offer many benefits. Evidence-based rehabilitative programs can be incorporated into certain agencies based on the needs of a particular population. When properly used, they clearly identify which programs are effective and which ones are not. In time, a reduction in recidivism will be apparent. Once this occurs, time and resources will open up in almost every single aspect of the criminal justice system. Courts will not be clogged. Police officers will not be dealing with the same individuals over and over

again. The prison population will reduce. Reducing recidivism is the first step to all of this, and it is why it has always a main focus in corrections.

In today's society, it is no surprise that resources are becoming a main issue for prisons. As funding shrinks at all levels, administrators are going to have to show empirical evidence that proves why their program will work in order to receive any types of funds. Evidence-based corrections will provide the needed support to receive necessary funds.

The issues with selective evaluation research and researcher biases should not persuade policymakers or administrators to not go through with these programs. The evidence shows that when a systematic approach is followed, there is little room for error. Just as evidence-based programs have been used in the medical field and social science field, they can now be confidently used for the offender population. It is time to get the proven, necessary help to the offenders in order to restore order in the criminal justice system.

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