



Preliminary Evaluation of VADOC Faith-Based Programs

Introduction

Prisons today are operated as places of transformation. Institutional programming educates and trains offenders so that they might live productive lives once they re-enter society. In addition to educational, vocational, cognitive, and substance abuse programs, prisons provide faith-based programs to their offenders.

Prison Fellowship (PF) is a national Christian non-profit organization that leads many faith-based programs in prisons today. These

programs are designed to modify an offender's behavior by teaching Biblical concepts. In 2010, 1,329 prisons from all fifty states had an active PF presence (Prison Fellowship 2012). Although faith-based programs are widespread across the United States, few states have empirically evaluated their programs to see if they actually are reducing recidivism. This brief aims to explore the faith-based programming that is present today in the facilities of the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) and provide a preliminary evaluation on its effectiveness.

Programs in Virginia

For the past five years, PF has been partnering with the VADOC to provide faith-based programming to confined offenders in Virginia. This programming is offered free of cost to the VADOC. In 2008, James River Correctional Center (JRCC) became the first facility in Virginia to offer faith-based programming. This residential program, part of PF's Inner-Change Freedom Initiative (IFI), covers areas related to substance abuse education, victim-impact awareness, life-skills development, cognitive skill development, educational attainment, community reentry, religious instruction, and moral development.

The IFI program is divided into two parts. The first, the pre-release program, accepts applications from offenders who are 18-24 months from being released. This is a prerequisite for the second part of the IFI, the post-release program, which takes place during

the twelve months immediately following the offender's release.

Participation in the program is voluntary, but neither those with multiple disciplinary reports nor those incarcerated for murder or rape/sexual assault are eligible to apply. Because only twenty offenders at each facility may participate in the program at a time, not all eligible offenders are selected. Those eligible are interviewed, and the applicants deemed most committed to a moral lifestyle are chosen. Participants of the IFI program are required to attend at least 90% of the program's scheduled meetings. They also must not accrue multiple disciplinary reports.

The IFI program in Virginia expanded in 2010 to female offenders at Central Virginia Correctional Unit 13 (CVCU 13). In 2011 James River Correctional Center closed, and its IFI program moved to Deep Meadow Correctional Center (DMCC). These two facilities continue to administer the program today.

What Are Other States Doing?

In a 2005 survey, the National Institute of Corrections Information Center (NICIC) found that 20 states had residential faith-based programming in at least one of their institutions (NICIC 2006). (Virginia was not included among these 20 states because its first faith-based program did not start until three years after the survey was conducted—in 2008.) Not all states, though, take the same approach.



Florida

Over the past several years, the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) has been operating a volunteer-staffed faith- and character-based initiative in 11 of its prisons. Inmates of all faiths are eligible to voluntarily participate, though the FDOC admits that offering programming to a religiously diverse population is a challenge. The program operates prison-wide in four of its 11 facilities. In a 2009 assessment of this initiative, researchers found that the programming was having a positive effect of institutional adjustment and security. They, however, did not see the programming having an effect on recidivism. (Source: Florida Office of Program Policy Analysis & Government Accountability)



Louisiana

Louisiana offers faith-based programming to its confined offenders in several different ways. First, each Louisiana institution has a chaplain working with volunteers to provide religious programming on a daily basis. Additionally, all twelve correctional facilities offer the Second Chance televised program sponsored by the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). Three facilities in the state house faith and character-based dormitory (FCBD) programs. These residential programs are aimed at strengthening personal faith and beliefs through mentoring. The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's "Angola Campus" at Louisiana State Penitentiary is, perhaps, unlike any other faith-based program in the nation. The seminary offers two college level degree programs: a two-year associate's degree in pastoral ministries and a four-year bachelor's degree in theology. About ninety offenders are enrolled at the Angola Campus at any given time. Some graduates of these programs are transferred to other institutions where they work under the chaplain to strengthen that facility's religious programming. (Source: Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections).



Minnesota

The Minnesota Department of Corrections (MnDOC) started offering PF's IFI in the summer of 2002. The program is open to 40 male offenders who are within 18 to 24 months of their release date. All participants, therefore, must have a sentence of at least 18 months. As it is in Texas, the IFI is divided into three phases—the first two while the participant is in prison and the third beginning at release. The MnDOC conducted a recidivism study examining 732 offenders released from Minnesota prisons between 2003 and 2009. Results indicated that IFI significantly reduced re-offending (re-arrest, re-conviction, and re-incarceration) but did not impact re-incarceration for a technical violation revocation. The study concluded that faith-based programs can be beneficial in reducing recidivism, but only if they utilize evidence-based practices that target each participant's criminogenic needs. (Source: Minnesota Department of Corrections)



Texas

In April 1997, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) became the first state correctional agency to implement the PF-sponsored IFI when it began the program in one of its units near Houston. PF funded the program with private dollars. The program accepted offenders

who were 16 to 24 months from parole, and continued to offer 6 to 12 months of aftercare while the offender was on parole. The IFI works in three phases. The first phase provides a spiritual and moral foundation for the program. Phase two tests the inmate's values in real-life setting to prepare him for life back in the community. The final phase occurs during the first 6 to 12 months of the offender's parole. This phase involves helping to assimilate an offender back into the community by developing relationships with family, co-workers, and local churches. Recent analysis suggests that IFI graduates in Texas are "significantly less likely to be arrested or incarcerated" in the two-year period following release from prison. The research, though, fails to explain why this cohort recidivates at a lower rate. (Sources: Texas Criminal Justice Policy Council and Byron R. Johnson)

Literature Review

Churches and other religious institutions have long recognized the need for ministries in prisons. According to one researcher, the first faith-based prison program began in 1488 and was sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. In America, the Quakers greatly influenced prison reform, as did the Black Muslim movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Zimmer 2005).

Though religion has long been assumed to be beneficial to a prisoner's re-entry, this hypothesis has only recently been empirically tested. Some studies suggest that religiosity deters people from social ills (such as drug abuse or violence) regardless of whether that individual is in prison (Kerley, Matthews, and Blanchard 2005) or in the community (Jang 2008). The tendency for religion (regardless of the sect) to instill positive values and alter deviant behavior makes faith-based programming a viable option for today's prisons (Zimmer 2005).

Many studies of faith-based programs have recently been conducted with varied objectives, samples, analyses, and conclusions. One report examined the degree to which faith and spirituality are present in faith-based programming, and concluded that programs greatly differ in the extent to which they incorporate faith (Willison 2011). The study also found significant differences in the characteristics among programs that teach principles from the same faith (i.e. Christianity). Another study discovered that the religious involvement of prisoners (measured by frequency of attending religious service or a faith-based program) in one South Carolina maximum security facility was extremely varied (O'Connor 2002). Multiple studies found that there was a negative relationship between an offender's religious involvement and the number of disciplinary infractions he had while in prison (O'Connor 2002, Clear 2002).

Most research regarding faith-based programs evaluate the success of these programs by looking at recidivism. Some studies found that faith-based program participants were less likely to recidivate (Johnson 2012, Trusty and Eisenberg 2003). Other studies found the positive effects to be minimal or modest (Kerley, Matthews, and Schulz 2005; Johnson 1994; Johnson 2004). Though one study noted that faith-based programs have financial costs and require significant community involvement (Trusty and Eisenberg 2003), no study found faith-based programming to have more costs than benefits.

Some literature suggests that program participants are not a representative sample of a prison's population. Several scholars argue that program participants are less likely to recidivate not because of the program's influence, but because they volunteered for the program, thereby showing their motivation and will to reform themselves (Camp 2006). Another study refutes this claim, though, citing that IFI graduates are much less likely to recidivate than IFI participants who do not complete the program (Johnson 2012).

Methodology

To evaluate the effectiveness of the VADOC’s faith-based programming, the Statistical Analysis and Forecast (SAF) Unit selected all of the offenders who participated in the pre-release phase of a faith-based program and subsequently were released prior to March 1, 2012. This date was chosen because it allowed for a six-month follow-up of all of the released participants.

This experimental group comprised 65 individuals. They included 41 pre-release phase graduates and 24 participants who did not graduate, either because they transferred to another program, moved to a new facility, or were dismissed from the program for violating that program’s requirements.

These 65 participants were matched to a control group of 65 non-participating offenders. Each offender in the control group had the same gender and race as a matching offender in the experimental group. The matched pairs also shared the same crime type and release type. Everyone in the control group had less than two disciplinary reports. The difference in their ages at release was no more than four years. Their sentences were within 18 months of each other. Their total number of SR incarcerations was within one incarceration.

In order to discover which offenders were re-arrested within six months, the SAF Unit collected the criminal histories of offenders in both the experimental and control groups from the Virginia State Police in September 2012.

Offender Characteristics

Offenders in the control group had similar characteristics to offenders in the experimental (or participant) group. Because a female institution is currently one of two facilities in Virginia that houses faith-based programming, the gender ratio in faith-based programming is not representative of the of the prison population as a whole. About one-third of the program participants studied were female.

Though similar in age with the experimental group, the control group was slightly older. There were 53 black offenders and 12 white offenders in each group. Offenders serving sentences for violent crimes represented 43% of all offenders studied. The crime type for 38% of each group was non-violent and the remaining 18% were sentenced for drug crimes. Most (85%) of the offenders in each group were released on direct discharge. The remaining 15% were released on mandatory parole. The experimental group, overall, had slightly longer sentences (with an average of 89 months) than the control group (with an average of 86 months). More of the offenders in the control group had multiple incarcerations than those in the experimental group.

		Experimental		Control	
		#	%	#	%
Gender	Male	43	66%	43	66%
	Female	22	34%	22	34%
Age Groups	Under 25	10	15%	10	15%
	25-40	36	55%	32	49%
	41 and Older	19	29%	23	35%
Race	White	12	18%	12	18%
	Black	53	82%	53	82%
Crime Type ¹	Violent	28	43%	28	43%
	Non-Violent	25	38%	25	38%
	Drug	12	18%	12	18%
Release Type	Direct Discharge	55	85%	55	85%
	Mandatory Parole	10	15%	10	15%
Total Sentence	Under 4 Years	22	34%	26	40%
	4-9 Years	31	48%	27	42%
	10-14 Years	0	0%	0	0%
	15 Years or More	12	18%	12	18%
Number of SR Incarcerations	One	36	55%	30	46%
	More Than One	29	45%	35	54%

¹Crime type of an offender’s current most serious offense.

Preliminary Outcomes

Although it is premature to draw long-term conclusions, preliminary data reveals that 8% of program participants, compared to 16% of the non-participants in the control group, were re-arrested within six months of release. Of the 41 pre-release program graduates, 3 (7%) were re-arrested within six months. One was re-arrested for grand larceny, one for the assault and battery of a family member, and one for a probation violation on a misdemeanor offense. All three of these arrests led to convictions. Of the 24 participants who did not graduate from the pre-release program, 2 (8%) were re-arrested within six months. The SAF Unit conducted tests for statistical significance and found no statistically significant differences. This is most likely due to the small number of cases and short follow-up time used in the study.

Preliminary Recommendations

The SAF Unit recommends that the VADOC collect data on all offenders who have ever applied to a faith-based program in Virginia. By doing this, the Unit could test the impact of self-selection. Secondly, these groups should continue to be studied so the outcome measures may be expanded to include a longer follow-up period as well as re-conviction and re-incarceration, which require more time for the data to mature. Then, if the programs are found to be effective, the SAF Unit recommends that the VADOC consider expanding them to populations such as geriatric offenders, violent offenders, or others with special reentry challenges.

Where Are They Now?

Of the 41 faith-based graduates in the experimental group, none are currently incarcerated. Twenty-one graduates (51%) are currently being supervised in the community. Twenty graduates (49%) are at liberty.

	Graduate	Non-Graduate	Control
Incarcerated	0	3	9
Community Supervision	21	17	25
At Liberty	20	4	28
Fugitive	0	0	3
Total	41	24	65

Of the 24 faith-based participants in the experimental group who did not graduate, 3 (13%) are currently incarcerated. Seventeen non-graduates (71%) are being supervised in the community. The remaining four non-graduates (17%) are currently at liberty.

Of the 65 offenders in the control group, 9 (14%) are currently incarcerated. Twenty-five offenders in the control group (38%) are under community supervision. Twenty-eight offenders in the control group (43%) are at liberty. The remaining three offenders in the control group (5%) are fugitives.

Future Study

VADOC plans to continue to study faith-based programming over the coming years. First, the agency will continue to follow those offenders represented in this study to determine their outcomes. In addition, newer program participants will be studied in a similar way. VADOC will also collect data on all offenders who apply to the programs to help determine if the desire to participate in the program (and modify their behavior) serves as the impetus for change, or if the program itself is responsible for that change.

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