

Incentivizing Positive Behavior in Inmates with Mental Health Disorders

The Use of Candy to Incentivize Good Behavior in a Diversionary Treatment Unit

Agency: The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections
Trial Duration: 8/14/16 - 02/11/17
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Context

Inmates with mental illness are likely to be involved in violent infractions due to being vulnerable, victimized, and often lacking in social skills. The use of tangible, immediate rewards may increase positive behaviors.

Key Finding

Candy did not increase overall out-of-cell time among inmates with mental illness. An increase in programming participation and a reduction in reported misconducts were observed in the intervention period.

*BetaGov trains agency personnel to become research-savvy "pracademics" who lead trials.

Background

Mentally-ill inmates, housed in segregated units for temporary behavioral discipline, are offered programming and recreational activities in communal areas. However, mental health issues and fears about victimization may be barriers to participation.

Positive reinforcement using small but immediate rewards can be effective. The State Correctional Institution at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (SCI-PIT) tested the use of candy as an incentive among mentally-ill inmates housed in the facility's Diversionary Treatment Unit (DTU) in an effort to increase participation rates in out-of-cell (OOC) activities, and for reducing misbehaviors.

Trial Design

This trial included two 13-week periods: the baseline phase (8/14/16-11/12/16) and

the intervention phase (11/13/16-2/11/17). During the intervention period, a small piece of candy (Jolly Ranchers or Life Savers) was provided to inmates. A total of 59 inmates participated in the study.

Results and Implications

Trial results suggest that candy was not a sufficient incentive for encouraging OOC time, though a reduction in the numbers of misconducts was observed. However, because a randomized controlled trial was not used, strong conclusions may not be made as inmates may have been very different in each phase. It may be that staying in one's cell is associated with fewer opportunities for misbehaviors; hence, as OOC time is reduced, a corresponding reduction in misconducts is seen.

	Number of Misconducts		OCC Time Acceptance Rates		
	Assaultive	Non-Assaultive	Total OCC Time	Programming Time	Recreation Time
Baseline Phase	19	30	29%	35%	24%
Intervention Phase	7	15	24%	38%	12%
Percent Reduction	63%	50%	N/A	N/A	N/A

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