

# An Incentive Model for Improving Behavior

*Rewarding good behavior with a transparent, consistent incentive program*

**Agency:** Nebraska Department of Correctional Services; Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (NCCW)

**Trial Duration:** 03/06/20–06/09/20

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### Context

The criminal justice system has struggled to develop appropriate and workable responses for discipline in custodial settings, but research indicates that rewards are often more powerful than punishment in shaping behavior.

### Key Finding

Those in the incentive group had fewer misconducts than those not offered incentives for good behavior.

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

## Background

Research on rewards and punishment indicates that rewards are often more powerful than punishment in shaping behavior, as seen in diverse areas such as drug treatment and juvenile justice programs. The criminal justice system has struggled to develop pragmatic methods of discipline in custodial settings. Most carceral facilities address misconducts on a case-by-case basis with no formal criteria for determining the punishment given for the type of violation, or the type of reward given for misconduct-free behavior.

In an effort to improve resident behavior, the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (NCCW) tested an incentive model built on a transparent, consistent incentive program.

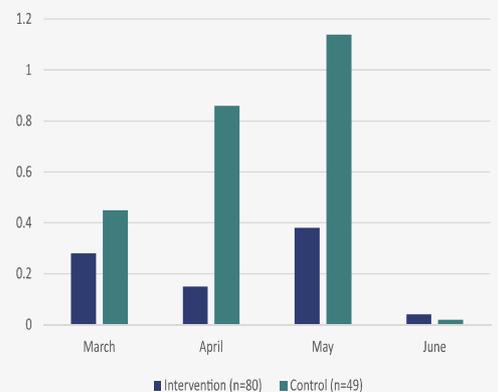
## Trial Design

Two housing units were assigned to intervention and control conditions for the three-month trial. The intervention group were told about the program, including the target misconducts and incentives offered. For example, one low-level misconduct was allowed and excused, but subsequent or higher-level misconducts required a re-start to earn an incentive. Women who met behavior criteria after each of the program months received the associated incentive. Women initially assigned to the intervention housing unit who were moved due to COVID concerns were allowed to continue in the program. Women newly entering the facility and assigned to the intervention housing unit were allowed to participate, although their time on the project was shortened to match the set end date of the trial.

## Results

Given the COVID pandemic and pragmatic concerns, women often moved in and out of the housing units. Analyses comparing the two conditions, therefore, included only participants who remained in a single housing unit throughout the trial (intervention = 80; control = 49). The table below shows misconducts by trial month and condition. The incentive group had statistically significantly fewer misconducts as compared to the control group ( $p < 0.05$ ). Addressing all intervention participants, 105 women earned a level-one incentive, 77 earned the level-two incentive, and 53 earned the level-three incentive. The number of incentives possible across all incentive group participants was 567, with a total of 235 incentives earned.

Number of misconducts per participant by month, by condition only for women who remained in their assigned condition (housing unit) the entire trial period.



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