

The IF Project for Adults in Custody

Assessing the benefits of an introspective writing program

Agency: Alabama Department of Corrections, Limestone Correctional Facility

Trial Duration: 10/23/18–12/17/18

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Context

Research suggests that prisons may exacerbate the trauma and victimization suffered by many justice-involved people. Programs that encourage participants to work through their past may improve psychological functioning.

Key Finding

In this small pilot project, we found that residents who were randomized to participate in the IF Project writing program experienced a significant reduction in anxiety compared with residents in the control group.

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

Background

The IF Project is a prison program that focuses on introspective examination of past decisions and behaviors in an effort to help participants make better choices in the future. In discussions and in writing workshops, participants are encouraged to reflect upon their life choices and to identify optimal paths for the future. The program includes a six-hour intensive writing workshop and bi-weekly meetings to discuss writing exercises and homework assignments. The program aims to increase positive self perception and improve emotional, behavioral, and cognitive functioning. In a recent evaluation of the IF Project in two facilities in Washington State, pre- and post-program surveys found statistically significant increases in respondents' perceived ability to avoid antisocial behaviors. The current trial is the first experimental test to evaluate the benefits of the IF Project.

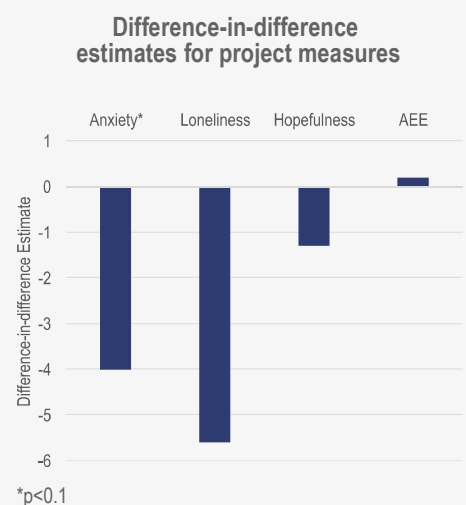
Trial Design

The program was tested using a randomized controlled trial. Volunteers at a men's prison in Alabama were randomly assigned to participate in the intervention (n=16) or to a control group (n=18). In addition to providing background information, participants completed standardized measures of hopefulness, loneliness, attitudes towards emotional expression (AEE), and anxiety before the IF Project was launched (Time 1) and again at the end of the two-month program (Time 2). Difference-in-difference estimates were computed to compare the

differences across groups, across time in the key outcome measures.

Results

The difference-in-difference estimates are shown in the graphic below. There were small differences in hopefulness and AEE, but these were not statistically significant. The results show a significant improvement on the anxiety scale (indicating less anxiety) for residents who participated in the IF Project (p=0.08). The difference-in-difference estimate shows a sizable reduction in the loneliness scale for program participants compared with control, but this was not statistically significant (a limitation of a study involving small sample sizes). This small pilot provides promising preliminary findings and a larger, better-powered study, is well justified.



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