

Incentivizing Good Behavior with Virtual Reality

Providing an incentive for improving behaviors in a women's prison

Agency: Pennsylvania Department of Corrections State Correctional Institution (SCI) Muncy

Trial Duration:
01/30/17–04/24/17

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Context

Methods for increasing positive behaviors in incarcerated persons may benefit from the use of technology. The use of practical and desirable incentives such as virtual reality to deliver real-time experiences may encourage and sustain positive behaviors.

Key Finding

No difference was found between intervention and control groups in this pilot, however the small sample size limits these results.

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

Background

Positive reinforcement (reward) can be more effective in shaping behavior than punishment, which has been found to be especially true in some prison populations. Finding the most effective incentive may require tailoring the incentive to each individual. One method that could allow a practical application of this is via use of technology such as virtual reality (VR). VR can simulate real world experiences; riding a roller coaster, visiting new places, or learning new skills. This method of "escape" may serve to be a powerful incentive for incarcerated individuals who have no other opportunities for such experiences. In a small pilot to examine the feasibility of this technology, SCI-Muncy tested the effectiveness of VR as an incentive to reduce misbehaviors in a specialized mental health housing unit.

Trial Design

This was a randomized controlled trial to compare the effectiveness of providing VR exposure to incarcerated females as an incentive for good behavior and compliance with rules. Residents in a single housing unit were randomly assigned to either the intervention group (N=7) or the control group (N=8) which received no

opportunities for VR. Women in the intervention group who had no misconducts for one week received the opportunity to select a 10-minute VR session; the control group was not offered this incentive.

Results

The average number of misconducts was 0.75 per incentive group participant and 0.25 per control group participant ($p=0.29$). This was not a statistically significant difference, however the small number of participants limits these findings. Additional trials will expand the use of VR in other prison populations to allow testing whether specific populations and specific types of VR content are most effective in improving behaviors. In this trial, VR topics of space, Christmas, the beach and scuba diving were among the most popular.

Misconducts

	Control (n=8)	Intervention (n=7)
Total	2	5
Mean # per participant (SD)	0.25 (0.88)	0.71 (0.66)

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