

Letters to Notify Visitors About Prison Rules

Notification of visitation rules for reducing contraband

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

Trial Duration: 10/26/16–02/28/17

Pracademic*: Mark Capozza, Superintendent

Context

Maintaining a relationship with family and friends has positive impacts for incarcerated persons; however, contraband being brought into prisons by visitors raises security concerns.

Key Finding

Residents whose visitors received a notification letter outlining prison visitation rules and consequences for breaking the rules had a lower mean number of visits compared with residents whose visitors did not receive this letter. More contraband-related misconducts, including drug-involved, were found in the same group of residents.

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

Background

Research indicates that receiving visitors in prison improves residents’ behavior while incarcerated and after release from prison. Although visitation is encouraged, some visitors conspire with residents to smuggle prohibited items, especially illicit drugs, into correctional facilities. SCI-Pittsburgh tested the effects of two different visitor-notification letters on visitation behavior.

Trial Design

A total of 225 general-population residents was randomly assigned to trial condition, with 780 eligible visitors included on their visitation logs (intervention=419, control=361). Visitors meeting trial criteria (age 18+, PA residents, visited in the past two years) received one of two notification letters. Visitors in the intervention condition received letters outlining visitation rules and consequences for breaking the rules; visitors in the control group received letters stating only that their family member/friend was housed at the facility.

Results

Trial data were collected from 11/01/16 to 02/28/17. The intervention group had a lower mean number of visitors listed on their visitation log and also a lower mean number of visits per resident. 52% of the residents in the intervention group received at least one visit compared with 57% of the control group. It may be that the intervention letter that detailed visitation rules and related consequences deterred visitation; however, the intervention group had more contraband-related misconducts and visitation suspensions. Random assignment should have equally distributed high-risk residents (and their visitors) across conditions, but no information is available to confirm this.

Visitor Notification Trial Results

	Intervention	Control
# of enrolled residents	124	101
% of visited residents	52%	57%
Mean # of visits per resident	4.2	4.6
# contraband-related misconducts (# drug-involved)	9 (6)	6 (0)
Visitation suspended	5	4

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