



Research Summary



EFFECTIVE PRISON MANAGEMENT

Question: What steps can be taken to more effectively manage prisons?

Background: Over the past two decades prison populations have risen dramatically in the United States and recently Canada is also seeing an increase. Such increases present significant challenges for managing prisons. These challenges include ensuring the personal security of both inmates and staff, the health of everyone (e.g., disease can spread more quickly in a contained environment) and facilitating the timely release of inmates back into the community.

In Canada, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is responsible for offenders with sentences of two years and more (provinces and territories are responsible for sentences under two years). Most offenders are released on some form of community supervision. Except under certain conditions, offenders must be released at two-thirds of their sentence (called Statutory Release) but can be released earlier on Full Parole. The granting of Full Parole is made by the Parole Board of Canada after considering the offender's risk and his/her actions towards a more prosocial lifestyle. Thus, there is the expectation that CSC has taken the appropriate steps to help offenders develop prosocial skills and decrease their risk to society. With a growing prison population and the ensuing pressures, are there additional steps that can be taken to improve the management of prisons?

Answer: Prison administrators have available a range of rewards and punishments to manage the behaviour of inmates. For example, solitary confinement may be used to punish undesirable behaviour. However, there is also a long history of using rewards to encourage desirable behaviour. As early as 1840, good behaviour was being rewarded with early release from prison.

In the 1960s and 1970s behaviour modification programs were heralded as a promising approach to managing prisons. Although, punishment was part of many of these programs, the systematic application of rewards for good behaviour was at the forefront. One advantage of rewards over punishment is that rewards can teach new prosocial behaviours whereas punishment can only suppress behaviour.

One type of program that emphasized rewards was token economies. Token economies provide immediate tangible rewards for good behaviour and emphasize personal responsibility for acquiring rewards. For example, daily attendance at an educational program could be rewarded with a small amount of money, toothpaste, extra TV time or some other benefit not freely available in the prison.

Evaluations of these programs demonstrated that, on average, they could significantly improve desirable behaviours among the inmate population. Unfortunately, these

programs essentially disappeared from the correctional landscape by the early 1990s for two reasons. First, the punishment component of some of the programs led to court challenges and abuses by the staff. Second, the most effective programs were complex to manage requiring extensive staff training and monitoring. Nevertheless, these behaviour modification programs may provide valuable lessons for today.

Policy Implications:

1. As prison populations increase, it will become more difficult to manage prisons effectively. In addition to trying new and innovative management practices, the research on behaviour modification programs should be consulted to learn from the past.
2. Although punishment is needed in certain circumstances, the emphasis should be placed on rewarding the good behaviour of inmates.

3. In order to deliver effective programs that reward good behaviour and make offenders responsible for their behaviour, prison administrators must recognize that this requires a considerable investment of resources.

Source: Gendreau, P., Listwan, S. J., & Kuhns, J. B. (2011). *Managing Prisons Effectively: The Potential of Contingency Management Programs* (Corrections User Report 2011-04). Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

For further information:

James Bonta, Ph.D.
Corrections Research
Public Safety Canada
340 Laurier Avenue West
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8
Phone: 613-991-2831 Fax: 613-990-8295
E-mail: Jim.Bonta@ps.gc.ca

Also available on Public Safety Canada's website at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca