MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

AN OUTCOME EVALUATION OF A PRISON-BASED LIFE SKILLS PROGRAM: THE POWER OF PEOPLE

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The Power of People (PoP) is a personal leadership development course that was originally designed for a non-correctional setting and now serves as a prison-based life skills course in multiple Minnesota state correctional facilities. The Minnesota Department of Corrections (DOC) recently completed an evaluation of this program to assess whether PoP participation significantly reduces recidivism. Starting with a group of 887 PoP participants and 15,569 non-participants released from prison between 2006 and 2011, this study used propensity score matching to create a comparison group of 887 non-participants. Controlling for several relevant factors, Cox regression (event history) analyses were used to assess the effects of PoP participation on four recidivism outcomes: supervised release revocations, rearrests, reconvictions, and new offense reincarcerations.

KEY FINDINGS

- Participation in PoP did not have a significant effect on any of the four recidivism measures.

- Although the PoP program addresses two important criminogenic needs, the program currently lacks several established principles of effective correctional programming. This program could become effective in reducing recidivism outcomes by incorporating the following evidence-based practices:
    - Tailor the program to target a subset of offenders based on level of risk, and enroll offenders based on their assessed risk levels. Program administrators may have to adjust the dosage level of the program (e.g., number of hours per week, number of weeks) depending on which risk levels they want to target.
    - Match participants to the program based on their assessed criminogenic needs, and possibly expand the number of criminogenic needs the program targets.

- Adopt a cognitive-behavioral approach by adding more structure and standardization to the curriculum and employing instructors who are experienced in this type of programming. Adopting this approach would also require smaller class sizes.
- Expand the mentoring component of this program to both provide offenders with pro-social associates and to allow for a continuation of services as participants leave prison and enter the community.
- Ensure that all or most PoP participants have access to aftercare programming in the community.

Prison-based life skills programs, such as Thinking for a Change, the Lifestyle Change Program, and Reasoning and Rehab, have proven to be effective tools in reducing recidivism. Unlike these programs, PoP was not originally designed to serve a correctional population and it is not a cognitive-behavioral program. PoP was first introduced to the DOC as an African American men's group in late 2005. Within a year, PoP evolved into a racially and ethnically diverse life skills program. Since then, PoP has expanded to more adult facilities and is currently available at four sites.

The curriculum for this program is derived directly from a book by the same name that outlines principles of leadership and self-efficacy. Most of the book's materials teaches readers how to identify people who can positively influence their lives, and how to avoid people who can have negative influences on their lives. Although this book and the curriculum were not designed originally as a prison-based program, the class does address two very important criminogenic needs: (1) antisocial associates, and (2) antisocial cognition.

The class meets for one and half to two hours per week for ten weeks. Each class serves 20 to 60 participants at a time depending on facility regulations and classroom space availability. Participants who complete all ten weeks of the course are considered graduates and are able to become tutors in future PoP classes. The PoP administrators have a facility in the city of Minneapolis which can house up to five recently released PoP participants for no longer than 45 days each. This facility also hosts weekly group meetings that are open to all PoP participants who have been released into the community.

Recidivism Results

Although the raw numbers showed that a smaller proportion of PoP participants were rearrested or reconvicted compared to the matched comparison group, the multivariate analyses revealed that PoP participation did not have a statistically significant effect on any of the four measures of recidivism. The PoP hazard ratio in all four Cox regression models was non-significant and the effect sizes were modest in size compared to the effects of other variables the models.

Several other models using different measures of PoP participation were run, including measures of whether each PoP participant officially graduated from the course or became a student teacher for the course. These models also showed no significant effects for PoP participation on recidivism outcomes, regardless of whether the student graduated, dropped out, or became a student teacher. Taken together, these results indicate that PoP participation has a null effect on rearrest, reconviction, reincarceration, and technical violations.

Summary

The findings from this research suggest that PoP participants do not reoffend more or less often than non-participants. However, these findings do not suggest that PoP has no value to the DOC or any other corrections systems. PoP may have positive effects on other aspects of offender behavior that were not examined in this study. This study demonstrates only PoP's effect on the four measures of recidivism included in the analyses.

Given its expansion into an increased number of Minnesota state prisons and the program's high demand by prisoners, PoP has proven to be a very popular program both among prisoners and administrators. By adding additional components of evidence-based practices and aligning the program with the principles of effective correctional programs, PoP could become a more valuable asset the DOC as well as other correctional systems.