

Social Programs That Work Review

Evidence Summary for Amity Prison Therapeutic Community

HIGHLIGHTS:

- **PROGRAM:** An in-prison therapeutic community that provides counseling/decision-making skills to inmates with drug problems, to prepare them for re-entry into the community.
- **EVALUATION METHODS:** A single randomized controlled trial (RCT) with a sample of 715 male inmates.
- **KEY FINDINGS:** Randomized controlled trial shows a reduction in reincarceration rate and an increase in average time to reincarceration over the five years after inmates' release from prison.

I. Evidence rating: **SUGGESTIVE TIER**

The standard for Suggestive Tier is:

Programs that have been evaluated in one or more well-conducted RCTs (or studies that closely approximate random assignment) and found to produce sizable positive effects, but whose evidence is limited by only short-term follow-up, effects that fall short of statistical significance, or other factors. Such evidence suggests the program may be an especially strong candidate for further research, but does not yet provide confidence that the program would produce important effects if implemented in new settings.

II. Description of the Program:

Located at the R.J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego, the Amity Prison Therapeutic Community is a separate in-prison housing unit for male inmates with drug problems who are 9 to 12 months from being released, and who volunteer to participate in the program. The Community houses approximately 200 inmates, and provides them with counseling and instruction to help them stay off of drugs and succeed outside of prison (e.g., teaching decision-making skills, self-discipline, and respect for authority). These services are provided four hours per day during weekdays.

The Community is staffed by highly-committed persons who are recovering substance abusers with criminal histories, and serve as role models for the inmates. They are specially trained and supervised,

and are available to counsel the inmates 24 hours a day. Prior to the inmates' release, the staff work with them to develop a plan for life outside of prison.

For up to one year after the inmates' release, they have the option to participate in a community-based therapeutic community called Vista, which provides similar services to the in-prison community and houses up to 40 residents at a time. All Amity graduates are encouraged to participate in support groups (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous) and use other community services as needed.

The program costs approximately \$7,582 (in 2017 dollars) per inmate (averaging those who complete all treatment and those who do not).

[Click here for Amity's website.](#)

III. Evidence of Effectiveness:

This program was evaluated in one randomized controlled trial of 715 male inmates who volunteered to live in the Amity Prison Therapeutic Community. Inmates were randomly assigned to the Community or to a control group. Most of these study participants had a history of violence, with 75% reporting that they had committed assault, kidnapping, rape, or murder. The average participant had been arrested 27 times and spent six years in prison.

Of those randomly assigned to the Community, 77% completed the Community treatment, and 23% completed both the Community treatment and Vista (i.e., post-release) treatment.

Effects of the Amity program 5 years after inmates' release from prison (versus the control group):

These results apply to all inmates who were assigned to the Community, both those who completed treatment and those who did not.

- 9% lower reincarceration rate (75.7% of the Community group had been reincarcerated at least once, versus 83.4% of the controls).
- 28% increase in average time to reincarceration (809 days versus 634 days).
- No effect on the likelihood of being employed in the past year.
- No effect on self-reported substance use.
- Suggestive evidence that whether an inmate participated in *both* the Community treatment and the Vista (post-release) treatment was a key factor in whether he recidivated.

Discussion of Study Quality:

- The study had low attrition and a long-term follow-up: At the five-year follow-up, 81% of the original sample were interviewed, and official arrest and incarceration records were obtained for 100% of the sample.
- The study measured outcomes using an intention-to-treat analysis.
- The study used official arrest and incarceration records to supplement self-reported data on criminal behavior.
- The study evaluated the Amity Prison Therapeutic Community as it is typically operated, providing evidence of its effectiveness in real-world conditions. (We note, however, that study participants were inmates who volunteered for the Community; the effects of a mandatory program are unknown.)
- Prior to the program, there were no significant differences between the program and control groups in the preponderance of characteristics.

IV. References:

Prendergast, Michael L., Elizabeth A. Hall, Harry K. Wexler, Gerald Melnick, and Yan Cao. "Amity Prison-Based Therapeutic Community: 5-Year Outcomes." *The Prison Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 1, March 2004, pp. 36-60.

UCLA Integrated Substance Abuse Programs. "Amity Prison-Based Therapeutic Community: 5-Year Outcomes." A presentation to the California Association of Criminal Justice Research, March 17, 2005.