

Randomized Controlled Trial of Second Chance Act Programs To Facilitate the Re-entry of Adult Prisoners into the Community

D'Amico, R. and Kim, H. (2018). *Evaluation of seven Second Chance Act adult demonstration programs: impact findings at 30 months*. Social Policy Research Associates

D'Amico, R., Geckeler, C. and Kim, H. (2017). *An evaluation of seven Second Chance Act adult demonstration programs: impact findings at 18 months*. Social Policy Research Associates

Overview:

This was a well-conducted randomized controlled trial (RCT) that measured the effects of services funded by the federal Second Chance Act (SCA) Adult Demonstration Program to facilitate the re-entry of prisoners into the community. The study randomly assigned 966 adults being released from prisons and jails in seven program sites (out of 15 funded in 2009) to either a treatment group that was offered SCA-funded re-entry services or to a control group that was not (but still could access other available services in the community). The SCA services varied across the sites and included case management, employment assistance, substance abuse treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy, housing assistance, and other supportive services.

The study found that SCA services had no significant effect on the pre-specified primary outcome of reincarceration over the 30 months following random assignment. Specifically, 60 percent of the SCA group were reincarcerated versus 59 percent of the control group, a difference that was not statistically significant. The study found significant effects—some adverse, some positive—on a few exploratory outcomes (*e.g.*, an increase in the number of re-arrests over the 30 months, and an increase in workforce earnings in the eighth quarter after random assignment). However, such findings are only suggestive in nature as they could have appeared by chance due to the study's measurement of numerous exploratory outcomes.

Description of the intervention:

The federal SCA Adult Demonstration Program provides grants to state and local government agencies and nonprofit organizations aimed at reducing recidivism of adults being released from prisons and jails. The study described below evaluated SCA services as delivered by seven of the 15 state and local agencies that received funding in 2009—the first year of the SCA program.¹ These seven sites were selected because DOJ believed they were best able to participate in a rigorous evaluation. Grants to the seven agencies ranged from approximately \$1.5 to \$3.2 million, and required a 100 percent match in the form of grantee in-kind contributions and/or state, local, or private funds. The grants essentially served as supplemental funds to expand or fill gaps in jurisdictions' existing re-entry services. The SCA services varied widely across sites and included case management, employment assistance, cognitive behavioral therapy, substance abuse treatment, mental health services, housing assistance, education, and other supportive services. The average cost of SCA services was approximately \$2,800 per person in the SCA group above and beyond the cost of services received by the control group.

Study design:

A total of 966 adults being released from prison or jail who were eligible for SCA services at one of the study sites were randomly assigned to either a treatment group that was offered SCA services (n=606)

¹ The agencies participating in the study were spread across six states: Kentucky, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and California. Two of the agencies were in California.

or to a control group that was not but could still access other available services in the community (n=360). SCA funding had been in place at the participating sites for approximately two years prior to the start of the study, allowing time for the sites to address any implementation challenges before the evaluation got underway. Because the study sites were purposively selected by DOJ, the study was designed to estimate the impact of SCA services at these sites rather than across all SCA grantees.

The study measured arrests, convictions, and incarcerations through 30 months after random assignment using administrative data from state and local criminal justice agencies. The study measured employment and earnings at several time points over the follow-up period using administrative data from the National Directory of New Hires. The study also measured various outcomes via a survey administered approximately 18 months after random assignment.

Key findings:

The study found that members of the SCA group received significantly more reentry-related services than the control group, including case management assistance, employment assistance, cognitive behavioral therapy, housing assistance, and outpatient substance abuse treatment. Differences between the two groups in the proportion of individuals receiving these services ranged from 11 to 20 percentage points, and were statistically significant.

However, the study found that these added services did not produce the hoped-for effects on the primary, pre-specified outcome—reincarceration at any time over the 30-month follow-up period. Specifically, 60 percent of the SCA group were reincarcerated versus 59 percent of the control group, a difference that was not statistically significant. The study found significant effects—some adverse, some positive—on a few exploratory outcomes. For example, it found a significant increase in the average number of re-arrests over the 30 months (2.2 re-arrests for the SCA group versus 1.8 for the control group, $p < 0.05$), and a significant increase in workforce earnings in the eighth quarter after random assignment (\$2,268 for the SCA group versus \$1,242 for the control group, $p < 0.05$). However, such findings are only suggestive in nature as they could have appeared by chance due to the study's measurement of numerous exploratory outcomes.²

Summary of study quality:

This was a well-conducted RCT. The study appropriately measured outcomes for all member of the SCA group, regardless of whether or how long they actually received SCA services (*i.e.*, the study used an “intention-to-treat” analysis). The study measured the key outcomes using administrative data sources, resulting in almost no sample attrition (recidivism data were obtained for 100 percent of the sample and employment and earnings data were obtained for 98 percent of the sample). The SCA and control groups were highly similar in their pre-program demographic characteristics and criminal involvement. The study used appropriate statistical methods (“inverse probability weighting”) to adjust for the fact that the percent of individuals assigned to the SCA versus control group varied across the study sites.

A study limitation is that it only measured the *average* effect of a heterogeneous group of SCA services, but not the effect of particular service types (*e.g.*, job search assistance, substance abuse treatment). Thus, the study results leave open the possibility that some SCA-funded service types were effective even as the average effect across all services was not significant.

² For each outcome that a study examines, there is roughly a one in 20 chance that the test for statistical significance will produce a false-positive result when the program's true effect is zero. Thus, a study that measures numerous exploratory outcomes is likely to produce some false-positive findings.