

4 Questions about Treatment and Correctional Programs

Faye S Taxman, Ph.D.
George Mason University
ftaxman@gmu.edu

The debate about correctional and/or treatment programs usually centers on the question of effectiveness. Stated simple, can people change and, if they can, what types of program achieve behavior change. A short review of 4 key questions are designed to answer these questions

1. **Do They Work? Can People Change?**

People can change but change comes from desire, a “push”, and/or opportunities. Correctional programs, and addiction treatment programs, have been found to be effective in reducing criminal behavior. In experiments, the results show that programs can change behavior. The results are usually considered “small” (5 to 10 percent) in research terms of effect sizes because of the nature of the study, the limited time frame that offenders are studied, and the limited nature of the interventions. But, we have learned:

- a. 70 percent of offenders in prison and jail recycle through the criminal justice system, and our current efforts do not change this behavior pattern
- b. Most offenders do not have access to treatment programs, about 1 in 10 offenders on any given day
- c. Most treatment programs do not meet the criteria for effective programs because:
 - i. They are too short (under 90 days)
 - ii. They tend to focus on education, not changing how offenders think (cognitive behavior)
 - iii. The programs are geared for everyone; offenders need programs that target their risk and need level
 - iv. The staff of the treatment programs are generally not certified counselors and therefore often do not have the clinical skills to change the behavior of offenders
- d. For every dollar spent on treatment, you can save anywhere from 2 to 7 dollars in criminal justice and other costs (depends on the study).

2. **The Tale of Substance Abuse Treatment Programs: Why Substance Abuse Treatment is Important and can change behavior**

- a. Prolonged substance abuse injures the brain. This requires time to heal. A mere 100 days of abstinence can result in brain activity starting to return to normal.

- b. Few people get substance abuse treatment. In the general population, 1 in 22 young adults and 1 in 12 adults overall can get any treatment. Among offenders 1 in 10 can get treatment. But most treatment is limited in time (under 30 days), and the type of treatment provided (generally alcohol and drug education and outpatient counseling) is ineffective in changing behavior.
- c. Due the nature of public treatment (wrong types of therapy, too short of time), it often takes 27 years before half of the those using the service receive 1 or more years of abstinence (or die) (Dennis, et al 2005). And, it often takes 3 to 4 treatment admissions over 9 years before half reach abstinence.
- d. The sooner people get access to treatment, the shorter the time to get abstinence. Prolonging care, prolongs continued use.
- e. Coerced treatment is effective since it helps “motivate” people and gives them the time to participate in treatment. Drug courts, which are generally one year in duration, give people that year of abstinence that can springboard a life of abstinence.
- f. What does abstinence look like?
 - i. Year 1: More clean and sober friends and family; less criminal activity
 - ii. Year 2-3: Increased employment, virtual elimination of criminal behavior
 - iii. Year 4-7: Social support to others, better employment and quality of life

3. What do effective programs look like that work?

- a. 12 to 18 months with different phases
- b. Include a motivation to change piece (improves retention in program), intensive cognitive (thinking) and behavioral component, recovery management services
- c. Target programs based on high and moderate risk and matched to primary reason for criminal conduct—substance abuse, criminal value systems, antisocial behaviors, lifestyle
- d. Certify staff to deliver the training—qualified staff are critical
- e. Ensure that probation and parole staff and correctional staff are part of the program; they need to consider the programs their own
- f. Provide incentives to treatment and/or correctional agencies to increase the number of crime-free days or drug-free days. Performance contracts (see Delaware) have been important in changing the organization
- g. Involve the family; in fact, family therapies are critical to long term recovery.

4. When should programs be offered?

- a. At probation—any high or moderate risk offender should be participate in evidence-based treatments. This will reduce the risk for offending
- b. In jail or prison—any high or moderate risk offender should participate in evidence-based treatments

- c. Criminal justice supervision provides an opportunity to change behavior—the time involved in the justice system should be used to reduce criminogenic needs