

Managing Increasing Aging Inmate Populations
Oklahoma Department of Corrections—November 2008

Faith-Based Correctional Programming in the U.S. and Oklahoma
Oklahoma Department of Corrections—November 2008
A DOC “White Paper”

Abstract

While faith-based social programs have been increasing nationally, including in corrections, evaluations of those programs have been problematic due to inadequate research design and operational definitions. Additionally, those programs have been frequently challenged on constitutional ground for inadequate separation of the religious aspects from government endorsement. The faith- and character-based programs operated by the Oklahoma Department of Corrections have been purposely structured to permit inmates the options of either religious-based or secular-based programming. This alleviates the constitutional challenge and also allows more adequate research designs for study of non-participating control groups and groups receiving either set of programming over a given period of time. This research can also focus on institutional variables beyond the usual emphasis on recidivism, such as institutional and individual misconducts and serious incidents. As the program evolves, this attention to evaluation capacity should help the Oklahoma Faith and Character Community Program to improve outcomes for all inmates and institutions.

Faith-Based Correctional Programming in the United States

Faith-based programming (FBP) in government services has grown in the last decade (Fischer, 2003; Von Furstenburg, 2005; Wuthrich, 2005; Ferguson et al., 2007), particularly in corrections (Johnson et al., 1997; Hodge and Pittman, 2003; Hercik et al., 2004; Johnson, 2004; Lindquist and Brumbaugh, 2005; Pettway, 2007). Some correctional FBP and evaluation have come from external organizations such as the InnerChange Freedom Initiative (Johnson and Larson, 2002; Trusty and Eisenberg, 2003) and Public/Private Ventures (Ericson, 2001). States themselves have developed other programming. For example, Florida has instituted FBP in a male and a female facility in that state (LaVigne et al., 2007). In addition, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) has operated the Life Corrections Program in federal facilities (Camp et al., 2006).

What has not grown proportionately is independent evaluation of correctional FBP effectiveness compared to traditional, secular programming. This seems to be a problem for FBP generally and has been mentioned in research reviews (Fischer, 2003; Pettway, 2007). Early evaluations received criticism for not including program noncompleters in comparisons of later data on arrests and reincarcerations (Kleiman, 2003; Berkowitz, 2006). Other evaluations included such data, which showed noncompleters more problematical than completers or controls (Johnson and Larson, 2002; Trusty and Eisenberg, 2003). However, that has not eliminated methodological critiques of correctional FBP.

One review of twelve (not all correctional) FBP articles found that:

- *Studies rarely use random sampling and rely on quasi-experimental designs, which are often non-representative samples, without adequate controls;*
- *Many studies employ limited statistical analyses and rarely examine causality, relying instead on bi-variate analysis;*
- *Many studies use a limited number of control variables with many religious and spiritual factors not controlled for; and*

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- *Operational definitions of religion vary greatly among studies with many failing to capture the multiple dimensions of religion or tap into the many aspects of religiousness beyond participation (O’Conner, 2005).*

In their review of FBP to improve prisoner reentry, Mears et al. (2006) concluded that studies generally had not avoided methodological problems sufficiently to determine whether FBP was effective at reducing recidivism or not. Among the still unaddressed questions were:

(1) What is a “faith-based” program? (2) How does or could such a program reduce recidivism and improve other behavioral outcomes among released offenders? (3) What is the evidence concerning the impacts of faith-based reentry programs? (4) What are critical implementation issues that may affect the operations and impacts of such programs?

The Mears study inadvertently pointed to another limitation in existing research on correctional FBP impact: the almost exclusive emphasis on recidivism or its inverse, successful reentry, as the dependent variable (Johnson, 2004; LaVigne et al., 2007). Thus far, demonstrated impact of programming has been minimal and arguable. However, little attention has been paid to other outcomes that might interest policymakers and correctional administrators. These include subsequent misconducts and serious incidents during and after participation, which impact correctional personnel needs, security, and retention and can extend prison stays, thus affecting resources and available bedspace. Kerley et al. (2005) did find that “religiosity” might “operate as a force both for reducing antisocial behaviors and for increasing prosocial behaviors,” but that research related to “religiosity” generally, not programmatic outcomes. Arguably, given the more restricted environment of incarceration, these internal behavioral variables might demonstrate more program impact than post-release outcomes which might be more subject to influence from less restricted extraneous factors.

One of the biggest questions facing correctional FBP is not research-oriented but the programming’s constitutionality. In December 2007, a federal appeals court ruled that Iowa, running an InnerChange Freedom Initiative program in one of its state prisons, had violated the First Amendment separation of church and state (Petroski, 2006; Banerjee, 2007; Curtis, 2007). The court held that use of state funds to partially fund the program had crossed the constitutional line. At this writing, it was not clear if the state, now relying solely on private funding rather than state revenue, had overcome the constitutional objections. Nevertheless, the case made clear that current and future correctional FBP will have to walk that legal border carefully.

Overview of Oklahoma Correctional FBP

As a result of those constitutional concerns, when Oklahoma’s Department of Corrections designed its pilot FBP at a male facility and a female facility, it created for each a strictly voluntary program that also offered a secular alternative. While similar to Florida’s

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program in offering both character- and faith-based curricula (LaVigne et al., 2007), Oklahoma's program explicitly gave offenders a non-faith-based alternative equivalent in all ways but the faith-based component. The Faith and Character Community Program (FCCP) was thus the department's response to community and political demands to address rehabilitation from a faith-based perspective while avoiding the legal difficulties presented elsewhere.

The Oklahoma FCCP began for female offenders at the Mabel Bassett Correctional Center on April 1, 2007, and for male offenders at the Oklahoma State Reformatory (OSR) on July 1, 2007. A 12-month program, the FCCP housed 100 offenders in both the faith-based and the secular units at Mabel Bassett and 60 offenders in each unit at OSR, providing an initial cohort of 320 offenders. Programming was offered on a quarterly basis and was mainly non-sequential, allowing spots of noncompleters to be immediately filled when they became empty and for their coursework to start with the beginning of each new quarter. After the initial groups complete in March and June, 2008, 10% of the completers were retained to facilitate the next cohort, reducing the number of new participants slightly. Regular follow-up sessions with all completers while still in custody were planned. On July 1, 2008, the department started a second FCCP for males at Dick Conner Correctional Center with 80 inmates, 40 in the faith-based unit and 40 in the secular unit. As planned, FCCP completers were used in this second facility as facilitators, giving a different foundation to that program compared to the initial work at OSR.

The purpose of the FCCP, according to the program's proposal document, was "to reduce the incidence of violence, lower the incidence of inmate behavioral problems and create a safer and more harmonious living environment to enhance the quality of life in facilities operated by the OK Department of Corrections for both staff and inmates" (Oklahoma Department of Corrections, 2007). Its stated goals were:

- *Better quality of life while completing term of incarceration and upon release.*
- *Better skills to build and sustain quality relationships with family and friends.*
- *Better skilled employee [sic] and greater opportunity for employment upon release.*
- *To be a productive citizen while incarcerated and in society upon release.*
- *Better equipped to cope with life challenges and resolve conflict in a pro-social and healthy manner.*
- *Lessening the risk of recidivism.*

In pursuit of those goals, the FCCP's stated objectives were:

- *To promote pro-social behavior change through character education coupled with integration of spirituality for those in the faith-based portion of the program.*
- *To replace criminal thinking, attitudes, orientations, and values through the utilization of cognitive behavioral and relational skills training.*
- *To ensure a continuum of care is established for offenders that [sic] complete this program.*

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From that FCCP's proposal document came the description of its operation below:

Program Outline

The program is a housing unit program that incorporates some elements of the therapeutic communities. Each facility where the program is offered has two separate housing units or pods dedicated to the program. The program has two separate tracks, each housed on one of the pods. One is a faith-based program and the other is a secular, character-based program. They address the same criminogenic needs but from different perspectives, according to the track of the program they are on. The primary curriculums [sic] are:

- ❖ Character First developed in a partnership with the Character Training Institute
- ❖ Changing Offender Behavior and Life Connections developed by the Change Company

No state funds are used to purchase or provide programming from a particular faith perspective. The only faith-based material purchased with state funds is applicable to all faiths and is presented as such. **Comparable, secular programming will be presented on the character-based side of the program.** [Emphasis added.]

Target Population & Criteria for Participation

The program targets long-term inmates housed at medium security facilities. It focuses on behavior modification while incarcerated and preparation for eventual reentry. The criteria for the program are as follows:

- An inmate must be level 2,3 or 4 to enter the program
- An inmate must be housed at the medium security facility where the F&CC program is offered. Maximum or minimum security level inmates that are housed at the program facility may apply for the program.

Preference will be given to inmates with:

- Longer sentences
- Identified criminogenic needs addressed by this program

Participation in the program is voluntary. Offenders who wish to participate in the program submit an application and indicate which track of the program (faith-based or character-based) they desire.

In order to maintain a positive peer influence within the program, space will also be allocated based on inmate level. The goal is to have roughly the following breakdown of offender level in the program:

- 60% Level 4
- 20% Level 3
- 20% Level 2 or Level 1

Program Length & Rewards

The program is one year in length. We are currently evaluating the program to determine whether achievement credits will be offered for successful completion. Certificates will be given to those completing the program. Other aspects of the program may be seen as benefits or rewards, but are necessary components with programmatic goals, such as

- Family Days – additional visiting days with family members to work on marriage and family relationship skill building.
- Reduced Work Hours – due to the demands of the program, offenders participating in the program will work only a few hours a day. They will spend approximately 6 hours a day in program related activities.
- No special housing accommodations are made for the program.

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Program Staffing

The program is staffed by three DOC staff and numerous volunteers. The DOC staff, which will be made up of a Program Coordinator and two Program Providers, will oversee the program and facilitate the majority of the program content.

All programming from a particular faith perspective is presented by volunteers and offered only to those on the faith-based pod of that particular faith. [Emphasis added.] Offenders of other faiths who request to attend those programs are approved through the program staff.

Conclusions

While faith-based social programs have been increasing nationally, including in corrections, evaluations of those programs have been problematic due to inadequate research design and operational definitions. Additionally, those programs have been frequently challenged on constitutional ground for inadequate separation of the religious aspects from government endorsement. The faith- and character-based programs operated by the Oklahoma Department of Corrections have been purposely structured to permit inmates the options of either religious-based or secular-based programming. This alleviates the constitutional challenge and also allows more adequate research designs for study of non-participating control groups and groups receiving either set of programming over a given period of time. This research can also focus on institutional variables beyond the usual emphasis on recidivism, such as institutional and individual misconducts and serious incidents. As the program evolves, this attention to evaluation capacity should help the Oklahoma Faith and Character Community Program to improve outcomes for all inmates and institutions.

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