

Intensive support units for federal inmates: A descriptive review

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Substance abuse continues to rank as an important criminogenic factor in offender behaviour. Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) has been pioneering numerous innovative strategies, interventions, and research in this specific area.

During the last several years, a number of correctional jurisdictions including Her Majesty's Prison Service in Great Britain,² the South Australian Department of Correctional Services,³ the Dutch Ministry of Justice,⁴ and several federal and state correctional institutions in the United States⁵ have adopted specialized units that focus on limiting the availability of drugs. These units have been commonly referred to as "drug-free" units. While some focus solely on drug interdiction, others provide a multi-faceted approach combining drug interdiction measures with treatment services.

In February 2000, CSC embarked on a specific initiative to put into place five pilot *Intensive Support Units* (ISUs), one in each of CSC's five regions. Within these units there are specific operational and support features. When these features are combined with existing case management and program services, staff and offenders are afforded a unique opportunity to work together in an environment which is substance-free, positive, healthy, and which reinforces an offender's efforts to change his substance abuse behaviour.

The ISU initiative includes a strong research component intended to examine many behavioural and operational variables. The research will specifically report on the profile of offenders residing in the units, various offender outcomes including recidivism, whether unit operations have reduced drug availability, and the unit's impact on the rest of the institution. While research is ongoing, this article presents data collected to January 27, 2001.

Overview of Intensive Support Units

Purpose and principles⁶

The main purpose of the ISU is to provide a safe environment where offenders can live substance-free with enhanced support and intervention of staff. The units are available to both offenders with substance abuse problems and to individuals without substance abuse problems but who wish to live in an environment that is free of drugs and

interpersonal problems associated with offender drug use.

Offenders volunteer to reside on the unit and sign a contract that outlines provisions for additional drug testing and unit searches in order to minimize the availability of drugs. Offenders who violate the agreement and the unit's rules and regulations (e.g., positive drug test or possession of drug contraband) will automatically be removed from the unit. However, they will be eligible to reapply to the unit after a mandatory absence of no less than 30 days.

Staff employ numerous security measures to inhibit drug usage and availability including restricted and monitored access to the unit by non-unit inmates, increased use of drug testing, searches, increased vigilance and communication to deter visitors from introducing drugs into the institution and greater use of various electronic security devices such as ion scanners. All ISU staff receive training in the legal framework under which the units operate and support techniques (e.g., motivational interviewing). A major part of their role is to foster a positive environment and to work actively with offenders to assist them in successfully changing their substance use behaviour.

Offenders living on the units have access to CSC's core substance abuse program (OSAPP). It is expected that when the High Intensity Substance Abuse Program (HISAP) is widely implemented, it will also be an important resource for ISU offenders. While program participation occurs outside of the unit, staff support offenders as they apply learned principles and skills to their daily living. Peer support within the units may also contribute to the positive environment.

The five federal institutions chosen to participate in the pilot initiative are Westmorland, Leclerc, Joyceville, Drumheller, and Mission. Leclerc Institution officially replaced its ECHO unit (based on a therapeutic community model) with an ISU, effective April 1, 2001. The data from this site will be included in later reports.

Description of pilot sites⁷

Westmorland Institution is a minimum security institution where ten houses with six offenders each (total 60) are assigned ISU status. Joyceville Institution

is a medium security institution with one range of a regular unit designated as the ISU (total 40). This range was formerly a “drug free” area several years prior to the ISU initiative. Drumheller Institution is a medium/minimum security institution and the ISU comprises a major part of the Minimum Security Unit (MSU), which is located outside of the confines of the regular institution. Seven houses with eight offenders each are assigned ISU status (total 56). Mission Institution is a medium security institution and the ISU is a separate unit and houses approximately 50 offenders. This unit was previously designated as “drug free” and had been in operation as such for several years.

Methodology

Assessment measures

Results presented are taken from an offender and staff expectation questionnaire specifically for the study and from offender description data. The expectation questionnaires were developed to study motivation for moving to the units, anticipated benefits and expectations about potential success of the units.

Data collection and sample

Data were collected by on-site research assistants for offenders who resided in the ISUs between February 1, 2000 and January 27, 2001 and who provided consent to participate in the research project. A total of 274 offenders were used to prepare the preliminary research findings. The number of actual cases per site are presented in Table 1. In addition, 72 staff members also completed questionnaires.

Preliminary research findings

Offender profile comparison

The mean age of an offender residing in the ISUs was 36 years, the same as the mean age of the current male population in federal penitentiaries. With respect to marital status, almost half of the

sample (45%) were either married or common-law (40% nationally), 44% were single (49% nationally), and the remaining 11% were previously married (11% nationally). Over 78% of ISU offenders were Caucasian (71% nationally), 13% were Aboriginal (17% nationally), and 9% identified as having other racial origins (12% nationally). Overall offenders on the units are demographically similar to the general offender population, except that Aboriginal offenders are slightly under represented.

Table 2 presents a breakdown of the length of sentences being served by ISU cases.

Table 2

Sentence Length of ISU Cases by Number and Overall Percentage		
Sentence Length	Number of Cases	Overall Percentage
Less than 4 years	135	49%
4 years to 10 years	68	25%
10 years or greater	22	8%
Life sentence	49	18%
Total	274	100%

Over half of the sample, 56% were serving a sentence for an offence involving some form of violence such as homicide, homicide related, robbery, sexual offences, assault, etc. Sixty-four percent of the ISU offenders had no other previous federal offences.

Offender static (criminal history) and dynamic (case needs) factors levels were reviewed using data from the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA), which is completed during the intake process after the offender’s initial sentencing. The data in Table 3 presents a breakdown of both the Risk and Need levels for 253 of the 274 ISU cases. Overall, 50% were rated as having a high criminal history risk and 60% were rated as high need.

Table 1

Site Participation by Number of Cases and Overall Percentage		
Site	Number of Cases	Overall Percentage
Westmorland	78	28%
Joyceville	60	22%
Drumheller	68	25%
Mission	68	25%
Total	274	100%

Table 3

Static and Dynamic Factors Rating of ISU Cases as Identified by OIA		
Level	Static Factors	Dynamic Factors
High	50%	60%
Moderate	44%	36%
Low	6%	4%
Total	100%	100%

Table 4

Response to Offender Expectation Statement by Percentage

Offender Expectation	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
<i>I think the Intensive Support Units are a good idea.</i>	88%	
<i>I don't think the ISUs will work because it's too hard to stay clean in an institution, no matter where you are.</i>		81%
<i>I don't think offenders from the other units will give me a hard time for moving to the ISU.</i>	72%	
<i>I think the ISU will provide a more positive environment for participating in programs.</i>	71%	
<i>I think I will have more difficulty with alcohol and/or drugs on release because I live in an ISU.</i>		71%
<i>I think the ISU will cause problems in the rest of the institution.</i>		69%
<i>I moved to the ISU to stay away from the drug culture.</i>	69%	
<i>I think the ISU will help prepare me for release.</i>	66%	
<i>I don't think the ISUs will work because it's too hard to keep alcohol/drugs out of an institution, no matter where you are.</i>		65%
<i>I moved to the ISU because I will receive more privileges than I would in other areas of the institution.</i>		63%
<i>I think that the ISU will have a positive influence on the rest of the institution.</i>	60%	

The data also revealed that 77% required some form of intervention in the area of substance abuse. Other important Need domains requiring intervention included Personal and Emotional Orientation (92%), Associates and Social Interaction (62%), and Attitude (55%).

Discharges from ISU

A review of the preliminary data reveals that in first six months of operation, 42% of the offenders remained on the ISUs. As well, 24% were released on either day parole, full parole or statutory release and 17% were transferred to a lesser or similar security level, or voluntarily returned to their regular living unit, or left for other reasons.

However, 10% of the offenders were removed for using substances or having other drug contraband in their possession and 7% were removed for either rule infractions or serious security issues.

Offender expectations

A total of 46 questions comprise the Offender Expectation questionnaire. Table 4 shows responses to questions with high levels of consistency in responses.

Most offenders agreed that ISUs are a good idea. There was strong endorsement of ISUs providing a more positive environment for program participation and preparation for release with no anticipated negative impact on the institutional operation.

Table 5

Response to Staff Expectation Statement by Percentage

Staff Expectation	Agree/Strongly Agree	Disagree/Strongly Disagree
<i>I think the Intensive Support Unit will help offenders because it provides a more positive environment for participating in programs.</i>	86%	
<i>I think the idea of Intensive Support Units is a good one.</i>	85%	
<i>I think the ISU will cause more disruption in the rest of the institution.</i>		84%
<i>I think the ISU is unlikely to help offenders because they don't have enough support in an institution to get/stay clean.</i>		83%
<i>I think that the ISU is unlikely to help offenders because their problems are too severe.</i>		82%
<i>I think that increased searches will make for a safer environment.</i>	82%	
<i>I think that the ISU will help offenders because other offenders will be more supportive.</i>	80%	
<i>I think that there will be less violence among offenders in the ISUs.</i>	75%	
<i>I think that increased drug testing will decrease the presence of drugs in the ISU.</i>	74%	

Staff expectations

Staff normally assigned to the ISU were asked questions about expectations they held in relation to the unit. Table 5 presents those responses.

In general, a significant number of staff supported statements indicating that ISUs are a good idea, contribute to offender rehabilitation, and provide for a healthier, safer and more supportive environment.

Discussion

The Intensive Support Unit initiative is one of several strategies that CSC is researching to effect the reduction of substance abuse among offenders. There are currently five pilot sites nationally and the

Addictions Research Centre is evaluating the effects these units have on offender behaviour, including recidivism.

A high percentage of offenders who reside in the ISU anticipate that the unit will provide a more positive environment for participating in programs, avoiding the drug culture, and preparing them for release. The majority of staff who work in the unit believe that the ISU is a good idea and that increased interdiction activities will decrease drug usage and related problems.

Future research will evaluate these units in terms of operational impacts, particularly as to whether the unit contributes to a safer environment. ■

- 1 23 Brook Street, Montague, Prince Edward Island C0A 1R0.
- 2 Johnson, G., and Farren, E. (1996). *An Evaluation of Prisoner's Views about Substance Free Zones*. Internal document prepared for the British Psychological Society.
- 3 Incorvaia, D., and Kirby, N. A. (1997). Formative Evaluation of a Drug-Free Unit in a Correctional Services Setting. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 41(3), 231-249.
- 4 Schippers, G. M., Van Den Hurk, A. A., Breteler, M. H. M., and Meerkerk, G. J. (1998). Effectiveness of a Drug-Free Detention Treatment Program in a Dutch Prison. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 33(4), 1027-1046. See also Doornick, M., and de Jong, W. (2000). Development of HV / AIDS Policy in the Dutch Prison System. In D. Shewan, and

- J. B. Davies, (Eds.). *Drug Use and Prisons — An International Perspective*. Amsterdam, Hardwood Academic Publishers.
- 5 Peters, R. H., and Steinburg, M. L. (2000). Substance Abuse Treatment in US Prisons. In D. Shewan, and J. B. Davies, (Eds.). *Drug Use and Prisons — An International Perspective*. Amsterdam, Hardwood Academic Publishers.
- 6 Prepared by the Reintegration Programs Division, Correctional Service of Canada, NHQ, Ottawa, ON; as part of their briefing notes for ISU implementation.
- 7 Prepared by Stafford Murphy, Research Officer, Correctional Service of Canada, Addictions Research Division, NHQ, Ottawa, ON, following a national site visit in June 2000.

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