

Intensive Support Units for federal offenders with substance abuse problems: An impact analysis¹

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Approximately 80% of offenders admitted to federal penitentiaries are identified as having a substance abuse problem that is associated with their criminal behaviour.³ To address this challenge, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) created specialized Intensive Support Units (ISUs). These units were designed to provide offenders with: 1) a supportive environment using specially trained personnel and 2) a reduced presence of drugs and alcohol through increased searching and drug testing.⁴

Offenders can volunteer to live on an ISU to more effectively address their drug and alcohol problems. ISUs were also designed for offenders who do not have a substance abuse problem but who are seeking an environment that supports them in their drug-free lifestyle. ISU residency offers no special programs or privileges, and offenders must sign a contract agreeing to remain drug-free, abide by the rules of the units and accept higher rates of searching and drug testing. Offenders living in the ISU continue to participate in regular institutional activities and either have been, or currently are, involved in substance-abuse treatment programs.⁵

This study looked at the impact of ISUs in many areas, including the presence of alcohol and drugs on the units, the institutional behaviour and release experience of ISU participants, and the perceptions of ISU staff and offenders.

The study

The study sample included 246 male offenders who were admitted to an ISU over a period of 11 months (September 2000 to July 2001) and who agreed to participate in this study. (Of 309 ISU admissions during this period, 80% agreed to participate.) The five ISU pilot sites were located in each of CSC's five regions: two in minimum-security institutions (Westmorland and Drumheller Minimum-Security Unit) and three in medium-security institutions (Leclerc, Joyceville and Mission).

Offenders completed a test battery of assessments at admission to, and discharge from, the unit to determine their perceptions about the program, their understanding of substance abuse, and the issues surrounding their drug and alcohol

problems. Changes in behaviour were measured using a monthly behaviour checklist, information on institutional misconduct charges, search and seizure data and results of drug testing. Offenders were followed after the study period for between 8 and 24 months to determine the type of release they received and the amount of time they spent in the community. Follow-up outcomes were measured using time to release, type of release, and whether they were returned to custody. Appropriate comparison groups were used to evaluate the results.

Results

Most offenders in the ISUs (80%) had a substance abuse problem linked to their criminal behaviour. ISU offenders tended to be younger, serving shorter sentences (fewer serving life sentences), less likely to be serving a sentence for a violent offence, and rated as lower risk on static factors (criminal history) than other offenders in minimum- and medium-security institutions. Aboriginal offenders accounted for 12% of ISU participants but represented 16% of the total offender population, indicating that they were under-represented in the ISU population.

One of the ISU objectives is to reduce the presence of drugs and alcohol on the units. This was accomplished via a higher level of searching (as compared to other units in the institutions). As shown in Figure 1, with the exception of month 2, the rate of individual cell and personal searching in the ISU was higher than for non-ISU participants over the 11 months of the study. On average, an offender had either his cell or person searched 1.6 times per month in the ISU compared to 1.1 in the remainder of the prison.

Even with the higher rate of individual cell and personal searches in the ISUs, the rate of seizure of substance-related contraband was lower for the ISUs during the 11 months of the study than for the non-ISUs. The rates of seizures were calculated as the number of seizures divided by the number of offenders in the unit for that month. The results suggest that there were fewer drugs and alcohol in the ISUs. In fact, in 7 of the 11 months under study, no substance-related

contraband was found during individual cell and personal searches in the ISU. Figure 2 presents the rate of substance-related contraband seizures over the 11-month period.

Further support of the efficacy of the ISUs in reducing the presence of alcohol and drugs is found in random-urinalysis data and in offender and staff reports. Each month, 5% of the inmate population is selected for random urinalysis testing to detect drug use. Many of the offenders in the ISU had been tested through the random urinalysis program so it was possible to obtain their results to determine what effect the ISU had on their drug use behaviour. Random drug-testing results indicated a decline in drug use detection from 15% before admission to an ISU to 3% after admission.

Figure 1

Rate of individual cell and personal searches by unit type

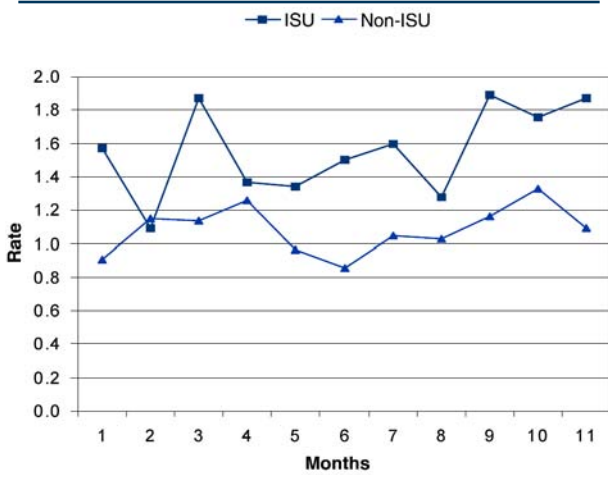
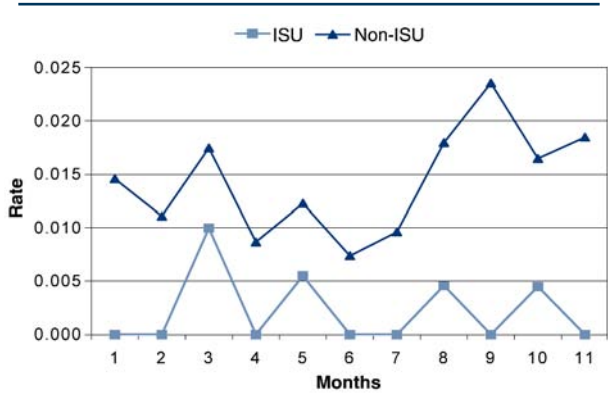


Figure 2

Rate of substance-related contraband seizures from individual cell and personal searches by unit type



Results from questionnaires given to both staff and offenders also indicated that drugs and alcohol were less available in the ISUs than in other parts of the institutions. Staff felt that both increased interdiction activities and increased offender motivation contributed to the reduced availability of drugs and alcohol on the ISUs.

In addition to less drug use being detected following admission to the ISU, results of analyses on institutional behaviour indicated a lower rate of misconducts, both minor and major, in the ISUs in relation to a comparison group.

Moreover, participation in the ISU resulted in a higher rate of discretionary release (day parole, full parole). Overall, 62% of ISU participants, compared to 46% of a matched comparison group, received a discretionary release. This represents a 34% higher rate of discretionary release for the ISU participants. ISU participants were also less likely to be returned to custody after release than offenders in the matched comparison group (25% versus 39%).

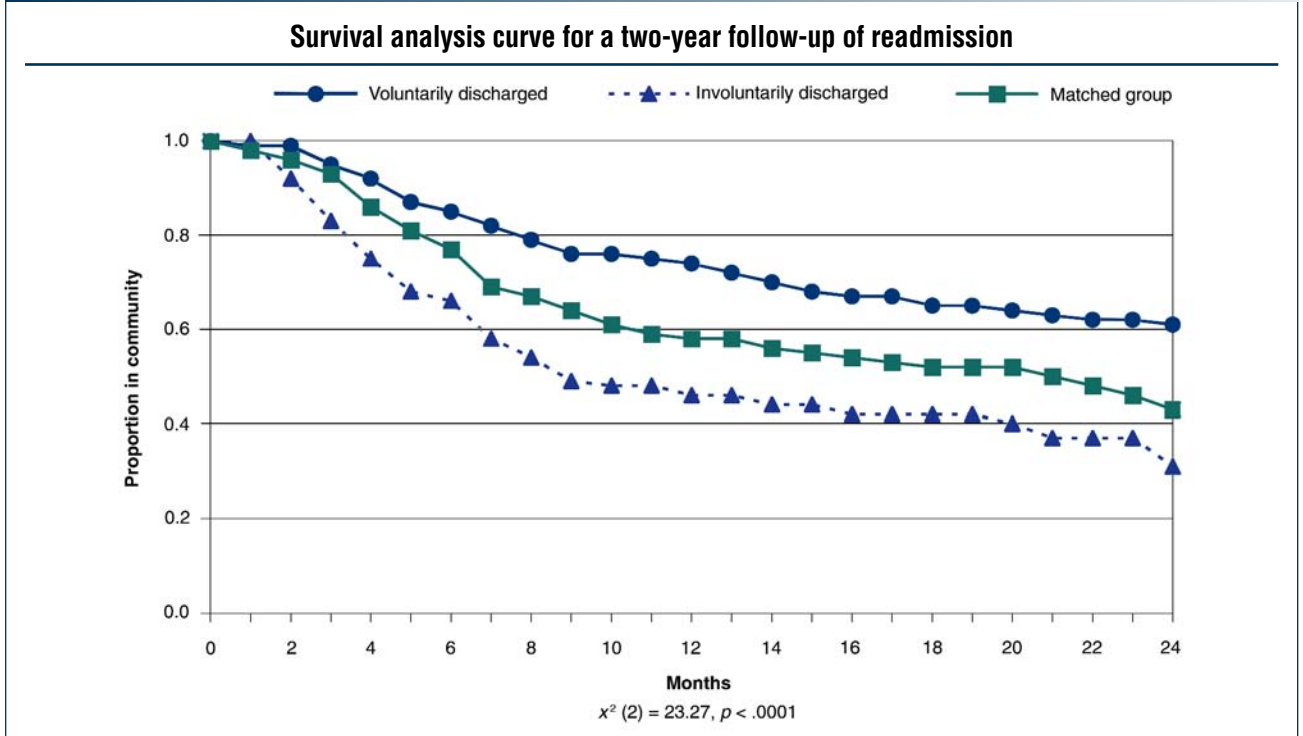
A survival analysis, presented in Figure 3, shows clear differences in the rates of return to custody across three groups: 1) those who were voluntarily discharged from the ISUs, 2) those who were involuntarily discharged, i.e., those who were removed from the unit for non-compliance with the contract, and 3) a matched comparison group. This analysis found that the ISU participants who were voluntarily discharged remained in the community the longest and at the highest rate.

For both the matched comparison group and the involuntarily discharged group, the curve is steeper in the first nine months after release, indicating a higher rate of return to custody when compared to the ISU voluntarily discharged group.

Potential cost savings of \$8000 per ISU participant were calculated based on the decreased incarceration time resulting from earlier release (via discretionary release) and the reduced likelihood of readmission.

Results from questionnaires measuring perceptions of the ISUs indicated that the supportive environment available in the ISUs helped offenders address their substance abuse problem. This environment was created by a number of factors, including the professional orientation of ISU staff (more empathetic, rehabilitation-oriented and satisfied with their work) and the use of interdiction activities that reduced the presence of drugs and alcohol.

Figure 3



Results of questionnaire data indicate that neither staff nor offenders perceived the ISUs as having a negative impact on the rest of the institution.

Discussion

Overall the study indicates that the ISUs had a positive impact on the institutional and release behaviour of offenders. Those offenders who were voluntarily discharged from the units showed the greatest benefits. The analysis of cost savings also indicates a positive economic effect for the Correctional Service of Canada. The results suggest that ISUs should be considered for use on a wider basis. In fact, early results from the study encouraged the Correctional Service of Canada to implement ISUs in all federal penitentiaries.

This research pointed to a number of themes that should be critical to the implementation of the ISU concept. While believed to be important at the outset of the ISU project, their importance is now supported by evidence. Some of these themes include:

1. Creation of a supportive environment that meets the needs of the offenders;
2. Well-trained staff who can encourage and support behavioural change;
3. Interdiction activities that ensure a drug- and alcohol-free environment; and

4. Continued access to programming and work opportunities for offenders in the ISU.

The benefits that both staff and offenders anticipated and achieved from the ISUs suggest that there is a great deal of potential in the concept. Further development of the intervention parameters, however, will contribute to consistent outcomes. Areas for development include the definition of requirements for creating and maintaining the supportive environment, the level of staff training required, the appropriate level of drug interdiction activities, and continued access to programming and work opportunities.

The pilot sites were all highly motivated to demonstrate the effectiveness of the concept, and there is a need to determine if the benefits identified in this study can be replicated following national ISU implementation. ■

¹ The full report of the study is available from the Research Branch, Correctional Service Canada: Grant, B.A., Varis, D.D., & Lefebvre, D. (2005). *Intensive Support Units (ISU) for federal offenders with substance abuse problems: An impact analysis*. Research Report R-151. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

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³ Grant, B.A., Kunic, D., MacPherson, P., McKeown, C., & Hansen, E. (2003). *The High Intensity Substance Abuse Program (HISAP): Results from the pilot programs*. Research Report R-140. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

⁴ Correctional Service Canada. (2000). *CSC Intensive Support Units - Background*. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

⁵ Ibid.