The impact of cognitive skills training on postrelease recidivism among Canadian federal offenders (R-41, 1995)

This report describes the results of a study of the effects of Cognitive Skills Training on postrelease outcomes of offenders under federal jurisdiction in Canada. Re-admission and reconviction rates for a sample of Cognitive Skills Training participants are compared with the rates of released offenders who were randomly assigned to a waiting list but never received the program. The report provides details on the differential impact of the program on offenders with varying characteristics including different release types, risk levels, offence types and demographic variables. The results provide grounds for considerable optimism regarding the effectiveness of Cognitive Skills Training as a method of reducing recidivism among this group of generally high risk offenders.

The Cognitive Skills Training program consists of 36 sessions delivered by staff who have completed an intensive two-week training program. It focuses on the faulty thinking patterns that typify the haphazard strategies offenders employ to make life decisions, solve minor problems and react to immediate situations. The program combines didactic methods of teaching cognitive skills by the coaches, with carefully guided group and individual exercises which provide opportunities to practise skills. Among the cognitive deficits addressed by the program are impulsive decision making, narrow thinking, absence of goal-setting behaviour and poor interpersonal skills.

This research is based on a sample of 4,072 offenders who completed Cognitive Skills Training or were referred and considered eligible for the program between 1990 and 1994. Case management officers assessed the candidates to ensure they possessed the cognitive deficits addressed by the program and were motivated to participate. Eligible candidates were randomly assigned to the program immediately or placed on a waiting list for the next program. Offenders who remained on the waiting list without receiving the program became the control group for this study. This ensured that a pool of "untreated" offenders with the same characteristics as program participants was available for postrelease outcome comparisons.

The research also addressed the assumption that programs have more effect on recidivism when conditional release occurs close to program completion. While the results do not conclude that offering programming in close proximity to probable release should be abandoned, they challenge the notion that offenders will lose program skills if they must wait longer periods before release.

Overall, the results of this study furnish encouraging evidence that careful attention to the development and implementation of state-of-the-art correctional programming can pay dividends in terms of reductions in recidivism. They also fill many gaps in our knowledge about programming with this population and, more important, demonstrate that effective correctional programming for many federal offenders is feasible.