Institutional Faith-based Programs: Do they work?

Research Summary

Faith-based programs continue to persist throughout prisons in the United States due to financially constrained corrections departments unable to meet the programmatic needs of their offender populations. As a result, correctional administrators often partner with faith-based organizations to infuse at least some program options into their institutions. This results in a variety of faith-based activities within prisons, most notably the creation and operation of faith pods, religious honor dorms and other transformational learning programs that are sponsored by specific religious organizations. Although many of these faith-based programs have existed for years, little research has been accomplished to evaluate their impact on offender behavior change and ultimately recidivism. Additionally, the various programmatic components of each type of faith-based initiative are different, and don’t adhere to the principles of effective intervention making it hard to study them systematically and evaluate just what causal relationships may exist with behavior change.

A recent meta-analysis conducted by Schaefer, Sams and Lux (2016) sought to fill this research gap as it pertains to changes in inmates’ institutional behavior and criminal attitudes after participating in faith-based programming. A meta-analysis is a statistical technique that allows researchers to combine multiple studies conducted over time to get much more accurate and detailed information about their effectiveness and impact. Using this technique, they compiled 15 quantitative studies published between 1987 and 2010 that investigated the effectiveness of faith-based prison programs and sought to determine just what impact, if any, faith-based prison programs have on inmate behavior change as measured by changes in criminal attitudes and institutional misconduct.

The study found that faith-based prison programs have a minimal positive effect on institutional misconduct and criminal attitudes; however, the impact was greater when self-report information from the inmate regarding changes in attitudes and behavior was used as the measure of success rather than official records. This indicates that religious involvement provides a number of protective features from the harsh prison environment, but may not translate into legitimate behavioral change while incarcerated or upon release (Schaefer, Sams & Lux, 4/30/2017).
In other words, the meta-analysis was unable to find demonstrable, significant behavior change impacts from participation in faith-based programs. Ultimately, faith-based programs alone do not generate significant behavior change impacts.

Implications for Practice

There is generally no legitimate reason to disallow offenders in prison to express, practice and engage in the tenets of their faith. However, as practitioners and leaders we must be very careful as to how we frame participation in institutional faith-based programs to ensure both offenders and staff have the proper expectations regarding outcomes. Following are 4 recommendations you can adopt in policy or institution-wide communications when including faith-based programs in your prison:

1. When using faith pods, honor dorms and other faith-based activities, ensure that offenders are not receiving treatment credit for engaging in such activities, whether voluntarily or not. Rather, they should be given another type of “program” or “achievement” credit. This is because the meta-analysis found that “without an explicit intervention spirituality may not be capable of independently instigating significant change in the inmate’s actions (Schaefer, Sams & Lux, 2016, p. 613).” In other words, faith-based programs don’t equate to clinical interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or substance abuse treatment groups.

2. Include a mentorship component with your faith-based programs if the institution has the capacity, as the meta-analysis found that those programs that included mentorship saw more impact in institutional behavior than those that did not.

3. Require faith-based programs to adhere to a set structure. This includes the use of a curriculum, set schedule, program requirements and program rules. Those faith-based activities that were more structured and included pieces of evidence-based programs (e.g. skill training with directed practice) were found to be more impactful than those that did not.

4. Ensure that all personnel involved in the decision-making process to include faith-based programs as part of the prison framework have a clear understanding that institutional behavior may change, but the research indicates intrinsic value systems may not and therefore lasting behavior change that continues into the community may not result. Thus, faith-based programs must be supplemented by rigorous evidence-based treatment programs, rooted in Risk-Need-Responsivity Theory and driven by the principles of effective intervention …