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Mindful Meditation and Misconduct: A Proposal

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MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

Abstract

Rehabilitation and treatment methods used in incarceration have evolved, causing punishment philosophies in the U. S. to swing from rehabilitation to “zero tolerance” and back again. As this transition occurs, it is essential to evaluate current correctional programs as there has been a trend towards evidence-based corrections. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the SAVR (stress, anger, violence reduction) program implemented by a county jail in Massachusetts. This research will examine the extent to which participating in SAVR reduces inmate misconduct. The participants will be selected through a non-probability, convenience sample of program participants. Misconduct files will be retrieved from those who participated in at least 60 days of the program. The number of misconduct before entering the program will be counted and compared to the misconduct that occurs 60 days after completing the program, and 90 days after the program if applicable. Policy implications and directions for future research will be considered.

Keywords: Corrections, Mindful Meditation, SAVR Program, Misconduct, Rehabilitative Programming, Evaluation

Introduction

A Correctional Pendulum Shift

Throughout American history, the purpose of incarceration has varied. For the first seven decades of the 20th century, rehabilitation was the main focus in the area of corrections (Cullen & Gendreau, 2012). The first quarter of the 1900s, known as the Progressive Era, was mainly focused on an “age of reform” where the term “penitentiary” began to gain attention and alluded to the idea that a prison or jail should reform rather than punish (Cullen, 2013). The “corrections era” occurred in the next 50-year period where rehabilitative efforts held their place, and the correctional system further improved due to an increase in empirical evidence suggesting that offender rehabilitation improved public safety (Cullen & Gendreau, 2012). Over time there was a public opinion shift, and by the mid-1970s, rehabilitation was dead. According to the people, the state could not be trusted, which led to the rejection of offender treatment despite an increase in empirical evidence (Cullen, 2013).

Robert Martinson solidified the end of rehabilitation in corrections through his publication of the “nothing works doctrine” in 1974 (Cullen & Gendreau, 2012). Martinson reported his findings displayed that rehabilitative efforts have had no real effect on recidivism, the primary purpose of rehabilitation. This publication fueled the implementation of the “justice model,” introduced during the Nixon era (Cullen, 2013). The “justice model’s” defining purpose of sentencing was that of just desserts (Cullen & Gendreau, 2012). Therefore, the prison experience no longer focused on improving people but rather warehousing them, and many programs were cut or deemed unnecessary as a reflection of the Martinson report (Cullen, 2013). Years later, Martinson published an analysis of 555 studies and concluded that some treatment

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

programs might affect recidivism. The release of this document transformed the debate between rehabilitation and the “justice model” to how can the correctional system be effective as a whole (Cullen, 2013)? Therefore, it is essential to evaluate research that focuses on inmate misconduct and programs that reduce recidivism.

Researchers have found that institutional misconduct likely occurs because the inmate is more prone to stress, anger, and violence because of internal and external factors such as family instability, mental illness, or childhood (Williams-McGahee, 2015). Researchers believe that if these institutions were to work towards implementing methods to reduce these tendencies (stress, anger, and violence) within the inmates, institutional misconduct and recidivism will decrease (Cullen, 2013). As a result, the need to explore other, more practical, alternative interventions to reduce inmate stress and anxiety has come about. One such alternative is mindful meditation (Cullen & Gendreau, 2012).

This study seeks to evaluate a mindful-meditation program, Stress, Anger, and Violence Reduction (SAVR), implemented at an MA county jail. The goal of the evaluation is to be able to determine whether the program impacts institutional misconduct for the participants. I predict that inmate participation in the SAVR program reduces institutional misconduct. Official jail records of inmate misconduct will be analyzed quantitatively to test the hypothesis. Previous studies have yet to examine whether or not mindful meditation affects institutional misconduct, and this research intends to fill that gap.

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

Literature Review

Mindful Meditation

Current correctional research acknowledges the value of rehabilitative programming and seeks to implement programs that consistently and efficiently improve the prison experience for inmates. While incarcerated, the environment of prison or jail can be extremely stressful, which may make the inmate more prone to anger and violence. As practitioners were trying different methods of rehabilitation, an interest in a combination of mindfulness and meditation in a correctional facility has come about. It was in the 1970s that volunteer-led meditation classes sprung up in prisons across the United States (Cullen, 2013). While empirical research was scarce on the topic of mindful meditation in a correctional facility at that time, researchers have taken the initiative to explore if this method could reduce stress anger and violence in inmates, as well as reduce institutional misconduct and recidivism rates (Williams-McGahee, 2015).

India is where the practice of meditation originates, connecting the philosophical and spiritual traditions known as Buddhism. The symbolic Buddha represents each individual's ability to find enlightenment and transcend human suffering, negative thoughts, and emotion (Wanda & Park, 2009). Meditation can be defined explicitly as a purposive process of self-regulation of one's attention. The regulation of one's attention may be achieved by sitting and focusing on the breath, walking, cleaning, or petting an animal. Mindfulness occurs when one's awareness purposefully pays nonjudgmental attention to the present moment and sensations (Himmelstein, 2011). While mindfulness allows an individual to focus and control their thoughts, a reduction in reactivity comes about (Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn, & Bratt, 2007). Similar

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

to meditation, mindfulness is a Buddhist belief that acknowledges that the untrained mind is what contributes to human suffering (Williams-McGahee, 2015).

It is when meditation and mindfulness are practiced simultaneously, that an opportunity for stress and anxiety reduction to develop within one's self. It was in the year 1979 that John Kabat-Zinn developed the concept of Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) at UMass Amherst (Himmelstein, 2011). His original goal was to provide a coping source for patients dealing with intense chronic conditions and emotional situations. MBSR typically operates as an 8-week mindfulness-based program. The program focuses on three specific techniques: being aware of the breath while sitting in meditation, a body scan, and Hatha yoga postures (Samuelson et al., 2007). After completion of the 8-week program, the techniques learned can be molded to fit the individual practitioner.

Corrections have utilized Kabat-Zinn's program. In a correctional environment, the program typically operates in a classroom-like setting with yoga mats. Here the participants sit silently and are prompted to the practice of meditation and mindfulness for about an hour by a licensed practitioner (Williams-McGahee, 2015). Studies have shown that implementing MBSR programs into correctional facilities may assist incarcerated populations in developing healthier psychological functioning, for example, through an improvement in decision making or motivation (Williams-McGahee, 2015). Due to more criminologists publishing empirical data on this topic, there is a rising interest in meditation-based interventions in this unique setting (Samuelson et al., 2007) to implement mindfulness practices to aid the inmates manage stress and improve emotion regulation (Barrett, 2016).

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

Thoughtful Incarceration

Although mindful meditation is still in its infancy, over the last two decades, there has been an increase in empirical evidence regarding Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in correctional facilities (Williams-McGahee, 2015). For example, Samuelson and colleagues (2007) implemented an MBSR program in six different Massachusetts prisons. Before beginning the 8-week program, the researchers distributed a pretest to the participants. After completion of the program, researchers administered the post-test. The data collected demonstrated statistically significant reductions in hostility, increases in self-esteem, and improvements in mood among the participants (Samuelson et al., 2007). This study aided in the growth of attention and curiosity towards mindful meditation in a correctional facility.

Additionally, MBSR was studied after implemented into an Alternative to Incarceration program (Barrett, 2017). Through participant observation and open-ended interviews, this research found that mindfulness-based interventions can engender stress reduction and emotion regulation (Barrett, 2017). Evidence continues to show that mindful meditation may assist incarcerated populations in developing healthier psychological functioning, which could contribute to lower recidivism rates (Williams-McGahee, 2015).

Women also benefit from MBSR. Experimental evidence suggests that MBSR reduced sleeping difficulties and increased emotion regulation in female inmates (Sumter, Monk-Turner, Turner, 2009). Instead of using a pre and post-test survey for data collection like previous studies discussed, the authors of this work utilized a medical symptom checklist before and after the program completion to measure their variables. An interesting variable that this study investigated on a Likert-type scale (from 0 “never” to 4 indicating a strong desire), was feeling

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

hopeless about the future (Sumter et al., 2009). According to the data, the experimental group felt less hopeless about the future after completing the 7-week mindful meditation program. In contrast, the control group demonstrated a higher level of feeling hopeless about the future. Based on the results of this study, one can conclude that mindful-meditation programs in an incarceration setting can do more than reduce stress and increase self-esteem. There are other possible medical and psychological benefits that can only further prepare the inmates for reintegration into society.

Mindful Meditation and Misconduct

The increase in documented empirical evidence suggests that mindful meditation in a correctional setting can improve psychological and emotional functioning, which could lead to better decision making and a reduction in institutional misconduct (Cullen, 2013). Research has also suggested criminal thinking is maladaptive, and significant predictors of institutional misconduct are age and mental illness (Steiner, Butler & Ellison, 2014). Given these results, mindfulness-based interventions targeted at those likely to engage in institutional misconduct would not only aid in their emotion regulation and stress levels but also contribute to a safer correctional environment, a primary goal of rehabilitation (Cullen, 2013). Given the documented benefits of mindful meditation and a lack of research on how this affects institutional misconduct, the SAVR Program, as implemented by a county jail in Massachusetts, is worthy of further investigation.

Current Study

The current study seeks to evaluate a program that utilizes MBSR in a correctional setting: the Stress, Anger, and Violence Reduction (SAVR) program at a Massachusetts county

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

jail. It is important to evaluate this program because, over the last two decades, empirical evidence regarding the implementation of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques in a correctional setting has increased (Williams-McGahee, 2015). Today, no other previous studies have explicitly looked at how these programs affect institutional misconduct within its participants. While studies have shown that implementing MBSR programs into correctional facilities may assist incarcerated populations in developing a healthier level of psychological functioning, an evaluation of the SAVR program is warranted to determine whether or not this program elicits a decrease in institutional misconduct within the participants (Williams-McGahee, 2015). It is also of interest if there are other unintended effects of the program where MBSR benefits may spill over into other aspects of the participants' lives for those to continue to 90 days.

Methodology

The primary purpose of this study will be to evaluate the SAVR program at an MA county jail concerning inmate misconduct. When Samuelson and colleagues (2007) implemented an MBSR program into eight different Massachusetts prisons, the results demonstrated that the inmates experienced increases in self-esteem and mood and a decrease in hostility. Both of these emotional and psychological changes could facilitate good behavior among inmates. Still, prior work does not investigate whether or not these interventions can accurately assist in reducing inmate misconduct. Based on the literature discussed above, I predict that inmate participation in the SAVR program reduces institutional misconduct. Official records of inmate misconduct will be analyzed quantitatively to test this hypothesis.

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

Measures.

When seeking to answer the question of whether or not the SAVR program reduces institutional misconduct, it is essential to define the independent and dependent variables. In this case, the dependent variable is institutional misconduct, and the primary independent variable is SAVR programming. The measurement plan is detailed below.

Inmate Misconduct

Institutional misconduct can be defined as any act that violates the facility's rules. Misconduct may be criminal behavior, like assaulting others, property damage, or theft, or can be minor infractions that are only wrongful in an incarceration context (e.g., untidy cell, refusal to lock in, being in the wrong place). The jail holds these misconduct records in the form of official documents. Correctional officers use their discretion to file a formal report or impose a citation to the inmate. Therefore, it is important to note that only data on instances that were reported by the correctional officers were able to be evaluated in the present work. I am interested in the number of times each participant engaged in misconduct before beginning the SAVR program, after 60 days of the program, and after 90 days of the program. The number of infractions that occurred within those time frames will be measured by a ratio scale 0 through the number of misconduct instances. A restriction will be placed on the pre-program period, where misconduct only is reviewed 60 days before the inmate began the SAVR program to match the evaluation of misconduct. The restriction prevents certain inmates from having more time to accrue misconduct due to a more extended stay before the start of the program. By collecting a complete misconduct history of each participant and comparing their number of infractions as they

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

continue to participate in SAVR, we allow for a possible change in misconduct frequency to be measured.

The SAVR Program

The Stress, Anger, and Violence (SAVR) Program is a newer initiative by a county jail in Massachusetts. Instead of utilizing an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction intervention as implemented into correctional facilities in previous studies (Samuelson, 2007), the SAVR program uses a twice a week for 60 days intervention. If the inmate completes all 60 days of meditation, they earn a certificate of completion and five days of good-time. From there, they can continue participating or stop. Every day the men arrive at the multi-purpose room at 7 am sharp to be scanned in by a program facilitator. Next, they choose one mat arranged around the perimeter of the space while calming music plays. For the next hour, all participants sit mindfully in silence and meditate. The facilitator paces the room slowly and occasionally prompts the men. The facilitator may say, "focus on the breath," or "go to a calming place and forget everything else." Once the hour is over, the men are required to clean and return their mats to the designated closet. To become enrolled in the SAVR program, the inmate must demonstrate want for "self-help." An inmate can exemplify this through completing other programs within the jail, such as anger management or participate in HightSet or college classes, as there is a long waiting list to join the SAVR program. Inmates were allowed to participate as long as there was no gang affiliation interference. Enrollment into the SAVR Program relies on who's already enrolled in the program. If no inmates from a rivalry gang are participating and there's a spot open, they were allowed to participate.

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

The independent variable in this study will be participation in the SAVR program. Participation is defined as showing up to the program at least twice a week for 60 days, which results in program completion. If the inmate completed the program and stopped practicing MBSR, a binary indicator of 0 will be applied. If the inmate completed the program and continued meditating and practicing mindfulness for 90 days, then they will be measured as a 1. When an inmate completes the SAVR program, they are awarded five days of good-time and a certificate of completion. By measuring the program in multiple ways, the data can distinguish between the "completers" who only do 60 days versus the added benefits of those who continued to practice for at least 90 days. Another added value of the 90 versus 60-day comparison is that it allows the researcher to differentiate between inmates who behave well during the program to get good-time, from inmates who changed for the better and have embodied the principles of MBSR. The data will then be able to tell whether it is the program MBSR mechanisms that drive behavior change or just simply being in the program.

Analytic Plan

To evaluate the research question at hand, I researchers plan to analyze the data in two different ways. First, I am interested in whether or not there is a reduction in institutional misconduct from before the inmate began the SAVR program relative to after completion. If there is a reduction in institutional misconduct within the person, the program likely aided in this decrease, therefore affecting misconduct.

Second, I am interested in whether or not there was an additional decrease in misconduct for the inmates who participated in the SAVR program for more than 60 days. The between-person comparison involves calculating the average change in misconduct before and

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

after the SAVR program and determining if there are differences across the groups for levels of participation. In making this comparison, I can discern the degree of change in misconduct for the people who participated in the program longer, underscoring the extent to which extended participation in SAVR improves behavior. In contrast to the factors that indicate whether or not an inmate is more likely to engage in institutional misconduct, (e.g., age, mental illness (Steiner et al., 2014), we are also interested in describing the populations of inmates who participate in SAVR for more than 60 days. Measuring the inmates who participate in the program past the 60-day mark will allow the researchers to determine if there is something systematically different about the people who stay past the completion mark (e.g., older age, no mental illness).

Conclusions

The present study considers multiple aspects of the SAVR program's effectiveness. One way to determine program effectiveness is to determine if an inmate misconduct records displayed a decrease upon finishing the program as compared to 60 days before. Program effectiveness can also be inferred if inmates who continue mindful meditation after graduation ("continuers") exhibit less misconduct than those who only completed 60 days ("completers"). By considering the "completers" and the "continuers," it is possible to disentangle the mechanisms behind program success. If those who continue MBSR upon completion of SAVR exhibit significant less misconduct than those who only graduated, this suggests that the meditation is driving the change in behavior. However, if the majority of misconduct reduction occurs within-person before and after program completion, this indicates that it is not the meditation that reduces misconduct but simply participating in a program. This research will not only expand upon academic knowledge of mindful meditation and inmate wellbeing but may

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

also add value to the agency. The MA County House of Corrections, which implemented the SAVR program, may use this analysis to expand what they already know. After viewing the data, they may decide to cut or increase funding, implement similar programs into other correction centers in the area, or across Massachusetts.

MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

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MINDFUL MEDITATION AND MISCONDUCT

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