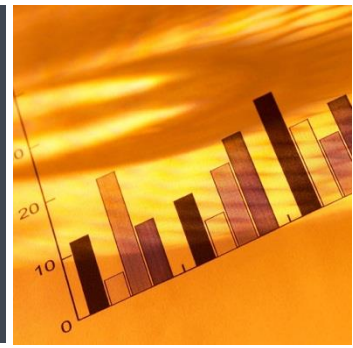


RESEARCH SUMMARY

A Meta-analysis of the Effectiveness of Culturally-relevant Treatment for Indigenous Offenders



2017-S016

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Preliminary research supports the effectiveness of culturally-relevant programming with Indigenous offenders for reducing re-offending; however, higher quality research is needed to understand how cultural-relevance is related to program effectiveness.

BACKGROUND

Indigenous peoples continue to be vastly overrepresented in criminal justice systems in Canada and internationally. It has been argued that replacing standard correctional treatment with culturally-relevant programming may be an effective step towards reducing this issue. Tailoring services to individuals' unique needs and cultural backgrounds, as opposed to a *one-size-fits-all* approach, may provide more effective rehabilitative services to diverse offender groups. Although culturally-relevant programs have emerged, little is known about their effectiveness in reducing recidivism in comparison to conventional programming.

While effective correctional strategies have been identified for offenders in general (e.g., Risk, Need, Responsivity (RNR) model of intervention), less is known about what works with Indigenous offenders. Preliminary research on the potential benefits of culturally-relevant programming has indicated that participation may lead to higher rates of program completion, reductions in risk/needs after treatment, increased program satisfaction, and an increased sense of cultural identity (Trevethan, Moore, & Naqitarvik, 2004).

A recent meta-analysis examined the effectiveness of culturally-relevant correctional programming and found that Indigenous offenders who participated in treatment were less likely to be readmitted into custody compared to those who did not participate in treatment (Usher & Stewart, 2014). However, this study did not examine the effectiveness of culturally-relevant programming compared to generic programming. The current study aimed to examine whether culturally-

relevant programs were associated with greater reductions in recidivism in comparison to generic programming among Indigenous offenders.

METHOD

A comprehensive literature review identified seven unique studies that examined the effectiveness of culturally-relevant programs for Indigenous offenders in reducing recidivism in comparison to Indigenous offenders who participated in generic correctional programming. The total sample size included 1,731 Indigenous offenders ($n = 728$ offenders in the culturally-relevant treatment group and $n = 1,003$ offenders in the comparison group) representing independent samples of Indigenous offenders from Canada ($k = 3$) and New Zealand ($k = 4$).

Information pertaining to the study's content and adherence to RNR was coded to facilitate comparison between programs included in the review. Additionally, the Collaborative Outcome Data Committee's (CODC, 2007) guidelines to assess overall study quality were considered to evaluate whether results were biased due to the study design.

FINDINGS

The average recidivism rate for Indigenous offenders who participated in culturally-relevant programming was 9% lower than the average recidivism rate of Indigenous offenders who participated in generic programming ($M = 39\%$ vs. $M = 48\%$, respectively). This indicated that the likelihood of recidivism was lower for the treatment group, relative to the comparison group.



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Upon assessing the treatment and overall quality of the studies included, only one study received a rating of *Good*, whereas the remaining six studies received a rating of *Weak*, due to several methodological limitations. These limitations included inadequate group matching on risk relevant characteristics, focusing on program graduates instead of all identified treatment participants (i.e., intent-to-treat analysis), and a lack of information on treatment structure and dosage for both groups of participants. Given the small number of studies and low statistical power, many moderators (e.g., adherence to RNR) could not be assessed. Future investigation of whether the treatment effect differs as a result of quality will shed light on the potential benefits of culturally-relevant programming.

IMPLICATIONS

The issue of Indigenous overrepresentation in the criminal justice system continues to persist. One strategy to ameliorate Indigenous overrepresentation is to ensure that services are situated to provide the best chance to avoid re-contact with the justice system. The current study sought to examine the effectiveness of culturally-relevant correctional programming compared to standard, generic programming.

Results indicated that those who participated in culturally-relevant programming demonstrated an average reduction of 9% in recidivism compared to Indigenous offenders exposed to standard programming. There are two possible explanations for the findings: 1) culturally-relevant programs are, in fact, more effective than generic programs for reducing reoffending, or, 2) the methodological issues systematically influenced obtaining a treatment effect.

First, support for a treatment effect aligns with the concept of specific responsivity (i.e., treatment environments that tailor their engagement and learning styles to individuals will be more effective). Further, these programs could be addressing unique criminogenic need factors (i.e., culturally-relevant need factors) that generic programs do not address. The current study could not thoroughly investigate these considerations due to a lack of information, underscoring the importance of including this information in future program evaluations.

In contrast, given that meta-analysis involves a combination of different studies, the research included varies in quality. The most common methodological concern was large amounts of missing information, specifically regarding the treatment received by the comparison groups. As such, it is possible that the observed treatment effect may not be attributable to the cultural-relevance, but rather the culturally-relevant programs were generally better quality than the comparison group programs. The results of this research should be interpreted with caution and seen as preliminary until more rigorous evaluations are conducted.

Given that there are over 100 Indigenous-specific treatment programs operating internationally (Camman, Ferguson, Appell, & Wormith, 2011), more, higher-quality, evaluations are needed. Additionally, since most criminal justice systems are comprised of diverse peoples, it is imperative that these agencies strive to generate evidence-based knowledge of *what works best for whom*, as opposed to relying on a *one-size-fits-all* approach. To accomplish this, programs should be co-developed with Indigenous peoples and communities and then subjected to rigorous evaluations.

SOURCE

Gutierrez, L., Chadwick, N., & Wanamaker, K. A. (2017). *Culturally-relevant programming versus the status quo: A meta-analytic review of the effectiveness of treatment for Indigenous offenders*. Research Report 2017–R016. Ottawa, Ontario: Public Safety Canada.

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