

Abstract

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Effectiveness of Current 12-step Programs in Sweden (2003-2006) on Criminal Recidivism among Released Prisoners: A Quasi-Experimental Study

Objective: We conducted a quasi-experimental study of the effectiveness of 12-step programs administered by the Swedish Prison and Probation Administration (Kriminalvården) on reducing criminal recidivism among substance abusing prisoners upon release.

Background: The Swedish Prison and Probation Administration supply over 15 different treatment programs for clients; 6 are aimed for individuals with substance misuse. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is an international organization of recovering alcoholics that offer support through a model of abstinence and self-help groups. They can be said to be the founders of the 12-step treatment approach.

Method: The Swedish Prison and Probation Administration collect administrative data on clients; we identified 2,848 clients who began 12-step treatment during 2003 to 2006 (1,411 completed the program). They were compared with control individuals with substance misuse but no treatment during the same period (N=7,962). All clients were followed to the first new crime leading to a conviction, death, or end of follow-up (1st of September 2008). Data were analyzed in multivariate Cox' regression models, taking into account identified confounders of the association between treatment participation and criminal recidivism.

Results: Participation in 12-step programs was associated with a modest (16-17%) reduction in post-treatment re-offending after controlling for confounding. This held for the full treatment group as well as completers only.

Conclusion: Prisoners who participated in 12-step programs in Sweden during 2003-2006 had reduced criminal recidivism compared to controls. The results strengthen former international studies on 12-steps programs by showing fine results for drug users. Limitations included restricted data on individual risk (e.g. impulsivity, motivation, pro-criminal attitudes) that might vary between treatment and control groups and differentially affect recidivism.