Introduction/Background

There are 2.2 million individuals incarcerated in prisons and jails in the U.S. Health problems including mental health issues and substance abuse are more prevalent within these institutions than the general population. The CDC reports that in 2010, prisoners were diagnosed with HIV at a rate five times greater than those who were not in prison. The closed community of a prison or jail also creates an environment where inmates face problems with privacy and confidentiality, issues that intensify the stigma of health concerns like HIV and impact health.

Jails and prisons can serve as a unique environment for health education and prevention since there is a concentrated population of individuals who are at-risk for certain health issues.

Interventions conducted during an inmate’s stay, especially just before he or she is released, may be effective in improving a prisoner’s overall health and lowering recidivism.

Peer-based programs may prove to be a beneficial intervention as they are accessible, cost-effective, and sustainable. Inmate peer educators have the advantage of sharing similar backgrounds with their educational target, having a more personal understanding of the health issue, and are more likely to be familiar with risky behavior that occurs inside and outside the correctional institution. Peer support and education could reduce risky behaviors and provide much needed psychosocial support to inmates that may help prevent recidivism.

Discussion/Conclusion

Peer-based programs in prisons positively impacted an inmate’s health through the reduction of risky behaviors, such as unprotected sex, IV drug use and shared needles. The statistically significant reduction in these risky behaviors promote health not only for the individuals but also for their sexual partners and those also using drugs. In addition, peer-based programs correlated with reduced rates of recidivism, which suggest successful rehabilitation of inmates. The successful reentry into society may lead to increased access of medical care or community resources and further prevention of disease.

Inmates who participated in peer-based programs also reported psychosocial benefits. For instance, the stigma of HIV is intensified in the prison setting yet peer education with a non-stigma talking about and viewed as an obstacle that needs transformation. Inmates who were peer caregivers, educators and supporters also experienced positive psychosocial effects from peer interventions. In the study by Loeb et al, peer mentors expressed a sense of purpose when given the opportunity to care for their fellow inmates. Taking on this role of social responsibility can potentially aid in the inmate’s reentry into society.

Future Directions

The positive impact of peer-intervention programs is promising for prisons, yet future studies should focus on the sustainability of this impact. Research analyzing the costs and benefits of peer-based program is necessary to encourage more corrections facilities to implement such programs.

Citation


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References


Boudin, L.; Medrano, M.; Surratt, H.; and Maiden, K. M. (2015). Inmates who were peer caregivers, educators and supporters also experienced positive psychosocial effects from peer interventions. In the study by Loeb et al, peer mentors expressed a sense of purpose when given the opportunity to care for their fellow inmates. Taking on this role of social responsibility can potentially aid in the inmate’s reentry into society.

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