

Colorado Probation Research in Brief

Why Don't Offenders Complete Treatment?

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Summary/Conclusions

McMurrin and McCulloch studied the Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) program to determine why offenders did not complete the program, in an effort to identify ways of improving retention in future cognitive skills groups. They investigated the reasons offenders dropped out of ETS, as well as the offenders' circumstances. Furthermore, they identified a smaller control group of completers to provide variables that might contribute to retaining offenders in cognitive groups.

Limitations of Information

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample size was small, with a total of 24 total offenders. Secondly, the sample of non-completers (18) was three times the size of the sample of completers (6). Additionally, although the two samples differed somewhat in age and length of sentence, it is not clear from the article if the differences were significant. Lastly, interview protocol was changed during data collection, with researchers interviewing the initial participants, and prison "treatment managers" completing the rest.

Caveat: The information presented here is intended to summarize and inform readers of research and information relevant to probation work. It can provide a framework for carrying out the business of probation as well as suggestions for practical application of the material. While it may, in some instances, lead to further exploration and result in *future* decisions, it is not intended to prescribe policy and is not necessarily conclusive in its findings. Some of its limitations are described above.

Reasons for Non-Completion

Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) is a cognitive skills program that is 20 sessions long and aims "to reduce offending by addressing the dysfunctional thinking and anti-social attitudes that drive anti-social behavior." The program has been offered in the prisons of England and Wales since the early 1990's. Because previous studies have shown that "treatment non-completers were more likely to reoffend than untreated offenders," the researchers decided to explore what variables might be linked to non-completion. In order to study these variables, the researchers were provided information from the prison system on a sample of 18 non-completers and recruited a comparison sample of 6 completers. The researchers collected data by personally interviewing sample offenders, by collecting information on a 22-item checklist, and by administering a self-reported motivational scale.

Of the non-completers, most chose to withdraw from program (10), while four were removed and four did not continue due to health or prison release. During the interviews, the majority (14) of non-completers did not express positive feelings about being withdrawn or removed, with one stating, "I let myself down."

While participating, two-thirds of the non-completers felt they were learning things "they needed to know" in the program, and one-half of them agreed the program was "right" for them. Also, one-half of the non-completers were happy with the facilitators of their groups.

In contrast, all of the completers "expressed positive feelings about

completing the course," and all of the completers felt the program was "right" for them. Moreover, all of the completers felt "extremely positive" toward the facilitator of their groups and felt the program was well-delivered.

Practical Applications

- √ Identify barriers to successful completion (for example substance abuse, work schedule, transportation) prior to enrollment and develop plans to mitigate these issues.
- √ Use the results of assessments to best match offenders to interventions, keeping in mind that the higher risk client will benefit from CBT and a low risk client should not be enrolled.
- √ Assess the client's motivation for attending treatment. Increase and enhance motivation by engaging MI skills to move the client toward change.
- √ If possible for facilitators, place low-functioning and higher-functioning clients in separate groups. When separate groups are not possible, facilitators should try to provide more individualized attention to the low-functioning individual to avoid losing the interest of other group members.
- √ Facilitators of CBT should build rapport with the clients immediately, remembering that the relationship may have an effect on outcomes.
- √ When a client is enrolled in CBT, practice new skills during probation office visits and encourage change through positive reinforcement and the use of affirmations.