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Views from the National Council on Crime and Delinquency

Evaluation of the Insight Prison Project

JUNE 2012

Fabiana Silva
Christopher Hartney

- The Insight Prison Project (IPP) is a nonprofit community-based organization committed to the design and implementation of rehabilitative programs tested within San Quentin State Prison ... California's oldest and best-known correctional institution.
- IPP programs are designed for incarcerated populations to develop insight and awareness about their emotions, behaviors, and motivations; practice new skills; and integrate these new skills into all aspects of their lives in order to correct entrenched negative behavioral patterns.
- This study suggests that longer participation in IPP programming is associated with the desired cognitive behavioral outcomes.

Introduction

Founded in 1997, the California-based Insight Prison Project (IPP) is a nonprofit community-based organization committed to the design and implementation of rehabilitative programs tested within San Quentin State Prison. San Quentin is California's oldest and best-known correctional institution. The prison today includes life-sentenced and detriment-sentenced adult males. As of December 2011, the population was approximately 4,400 inmates. The state's only execution chamber and death row for all condemned male inmates are located at San Quentin.

IPP programs are designed for incarcerated populations to develop insight and awareness about their emotions, behaviors, and motivations; practice new skills; and integrate these new skills into all aspects of their lives in order to correct entrenched negative behavioral patterns. IPP's programs focus on a socialization process, a process of transformational re-education, that is designed to bring about a shift in ingrained patterns of harmful and destructive behavior; enable men to make life-enhancing choices; and then integrate them into lasting, positive behavior.

In order to gather information on the impact of IPP's programs, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) performed a pilot exploration of five of the 19 classes offered by IPP at San Quentin. These classes, which at the time of NCCD's study made up the "core" of IPP programming, are the Victim Offender Education Group, Yoga, Violence Prevention, Emotional Literacy (focusing on cognitive behavioral rehabilitation), and Brothers' Keepers, a peer mentoring and crisis intervention training program.¹ NCCD's project had two modes: qualitative, semi-structured individual interviews of class participants; and a quantitative survey of participants, which included some demographic information and several scales derived from published psychological measures.

NCCD concluded that these course offerings represent promising rehabilitation tools that may lead to a reduction in recidivism. Prisoner interviewees consistently reported a high regard for the course content and course facilitators, and reported receiving a range of benefits from participation. Survey results suggested that participation in IPP may be associated with higher scores on cognitive behavioral measures, although further study is required.

The Classes

IPP classes are offered to prisoners serving the longest sentences (including life sentences), who are housed in the Main Yard, as well as those serving shorter sentences, who are housed in H-Unit. Classes are led by qualified professionals with years of experience. Class teachers and facilitators include licensed therapists, advocates, a certified yoga instructor, and a mediator.

Victim Offender Education Group

The Victim Offender Education Group (VOEG) is a 52-week class that aims to help offenders become accountable for the impact of their crimes on victims, communities, families, and themselves. The stated goal of the class is to "help offenders fully understand and take responsibility for the impact of their actions and to make the necessary changes in their lives in order to live a productive life free from prison."²

Each VOEG class meeting begins with a "check-in" conversation, when each prisoner updates the group on how he is feeling emotionally, physically, and spiritually (including current state-of-mind, current stressors, recent accomplishments, etc.). Participants also share and discuss their homework exercises, which generally cover events and causes preceding the prisoners' offenses and their negative consequences. These activities are designed to help prisoners understand the connections between their criminal behaviors and any unresolved

traumatic events in their early lives, investigate and confront negative feelings, and challenge cognitive distortions—exaggerated and/or irrational thoughts that can contribute to criminogenic behavior. The VOEG facilitators help participants process and integrate their feelings and past experiences, often by being directive and by helping to facilitate a process using the memories, sensations, and/or feelings a participant is having.

Other elements of VOEG’s curriculum include developing a crime impact statement, participating in a victim impact panel, and strengthening relapse prevention skills. As part of creating a crime impact statement, which is the first assignment in VOEG, prisoners are asked to examine the impact of their crime and use language focusing on accountability. The victim impact panel provides a forum for surrogate victims of violent crimes and prisoners to meet and share their experiences and perspectives. This process is intended to encourage the prisoners to empathize with the victims and become more conscious of the ramifications of their actions. The course ends with a segment on relapse. Relapse prevention consists of working with the prisoner to identify and develop an action plan to manage triggers, risk behaviors, and potentially volatile situations in order to prevent engagement in criminal or destructive behaviors.

Similar justice system programs that have a restorative justice focus in the juvenile justice system, such as Victim Offender Mediation and Victim Offender Reconciliation Program, have been shown to be effective at reducing recidivism rates.³

Yoga

The Yoga course, part of IPP’s Mind Body Integration program, intends to increase prisoners’ self-awareness by fostering positive connections between mind and body. In a series of weekly classes, prisoners



are taught a sequence of yoga poses accompanied by conscious breathing techniques. This technique helps prisoners relax and disengage from stress and negative impulses. Prisoners also practice mindfulness, which promotes increased attentiveness to one’s physical and emotional state. The Yoga program is designed to provide prisoners with a physical exercise regimen as well as the skills to recognize and control negative emotions in their daily lives and to respond to situations skillfully.

Research on yoga as a rehabilitative activity is not conclusive, but some studies have found correlations between prisoners’ participation in yoga and decreased levels of depression, as well as improved mental well-being.⁴ In addition, a number of studies focusing on various non-inmate populations have affirmed yoga’s benefits in areas including stress reduction, reduced depression, improved self-esteem, and enhanced conflict resolution abilities.⁵

Violence Prevention

IPP's Violence Prevention course is a 24-week sequence of cognitive behavioral classes. The purpose of the weekly class is to help class participants understand the origins of their anger and develop skills to effectively manage their anger, rather than acting out in impulsive and destructive ways. It integrates principles of somatic psychology and mindfulness training and also draws on elements of the ManAlive program model as it is implemented at San Francisco County Jail through the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP).⁶ The program is based on the philosophy that through the process and practice of correcting cognitive distortions, prisoners can move beyond criminogenic thought patterns and unlearn violent tendencies. Like VOEG, Violence Prevention stresses recognizing and properly communicating negative emotions, while avoiding the converse; that is, ignoring or denying negative emotions and acting out on negative impulses.

A major element of the Violence Prevention class is its peer education approach, in which inmates who are state domestic violence/batterers intervention facilitators, and have previously taken the course, co-facilitate classes and mentor newer students. Each session of the course integrates three principles:

- Instruction functions as a means to teach the information that is crucial to the theoretical framework of the program.
- Process refers to the various exercises employed to work with a deep layer of emotional material that must be acknowledged, expressed, and integrated in order for insight and understanding to occur.
- Practice anchors the acquired insights into a durable behavior by spending time learning how to embody what has been learned.

Class discussions focus on educating prisoners about the manifestations of violence and its causes and consequences, covering topics such as the definition of violence, personal violence histories, and how cultural and gender conditioning can justify the use of violence.

A study of the RSVP program found in-house violent incident rates for RSVP participants were reduced by 100% and recidivism rates for violent offenders were reduced by up to 82.6% in comparison to the control groups.⁷

Emotional Literacy

Emotional Literacy is a cognitive behavioral rehabilitation program. It provides a context for in-depth group processing that focuses on addressing negative conditioning and creating positive and durable behavioral changes. In-depth group processing refers to the student learning to shift from affective behavior that is dissociative and avoidant to pro-social conduct. It implies mastering the ability to relate a sensory component that is integral to every affective experience.

Emotional Literacy is an ongoing program that meets weekly. It is intended to help prisoners move beyond seeing their incarceration as a meaningless and frustrating time, and to help them develop the motivation to transform their lives. The program starts with building a supportive and safe community that engenders group bonding, reciprocal learning, and confidentiality. Based on a foundation of refuting cognitive distortions and developing emotional intelligence, the course aims to help prisoners learn to understand conditioned negative thinking patterns, adopt positive habits, and process negative emotional issues and personal histories. Group processing helps prisoners embody these skills and achieve lasting life changes.

Each class session generally begins with a check-in, followed by a mix of informal discussions and formal lesson plans regarding various life skills. Themes covered include the function of shame and denial in destructive tendencies, understanding the dynamics of medicating feelings through substance abuse, and developing self-validation.

Similar programs in other institutions have reported positive results.⁸ Many health professionals who have conducted similar groups in correctional settings also agree about the benefits of group work.⁹

Brothers' Keepers

Founded in response to the 2005 suicide of a San Quentin prisoner, Brothers' Keepers is a 90-week course that trains a select group of prisoners, referred to as "peers," in crisis resolution, mentoring, and suicide prevention techniques. Once trained, Brothers' Keepers participants are required to make their services available to all San Quentin inmates. Unlike IPP's other programs at San Quentin, Brothers' Keepers participants are selected through an application and

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interview process in order to ensure that each member is capable and sincere in his commitment to the program as well as to the prisoner community. After completing 180 hours of crisis intervention training, the peers meet every other week to discuss individual cases and continue learning new techniques.

Having a team of well-trained and supervised peer responders is necessary for the prison's general well-being because prisoners are generally reluctant to confide in prison staff. Peers can identify needs and refer prisoners to appropriate treatment before a problematic behavior evolves into a crisis situation. However, peers do not substitute for prison health professionals. While the training is intended to primarily benefit general prisoners, helping fellow prisoners has improved the psychological and emotional well-being of Brothers' Keepers peer participants also.

There is some evidence that peer programs are effective. They serve as supplementary resources to professionals and the long-term benefits outweigh the start-up costs of training.¹⁰ Research shows that peer programs benefit the peer participants, general prisoner population, and home communities in terms of providing opportunities for self-advocacy, personal development, and career training.¹¹

Qualitative Interview Findings: Prisoners' Assessment of the Benefits of IPP Participation

Individual interviews were conducted with 31 prisoners: 20 from the Main Yard (where prisoners serving long sentences including life sentences are housed) and 11 from H-Unit (where prisoners serving shorter sentences are housed). In terms of race/ethnicity, 55% of the interviewees were White and 16% were African American. Interviewees' ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s. Crimes committed varied from drug to violent offenses. Sixteen (52%) were serving life sentences. Twenty-one interviewees (68%) had participated in multiple IPP classes. Prisoners were administered a semi-structured interview about their perspectives on the benefits of the classes as well as areas for improvement.

Overall, the interview findings constitute a strong endorsement of IPP programming and of the potential of cognitive behavioral-based programming in corrections settings. Participants responded positively about the IPP facilitators and programs, especially in regards to their progress in emotional control, interpersonal relationships, and decision making.

Victim Offender Education Group (VOEG) Interview Findings

Five participants were interviewed about the VOEG program. Four of the five men reported feeling encouraged by their progress in controlling anger and expressing emotions, as well as being less aggressive when interacting with others. Three reported that the class had helped them consider their actions more rationally. Based on interview responses, VOEG shows promising results in improving participants' emotional control and interpersonal skills. All men also expressed desires to offer restitution, indicating that the victim panel had helped increase their sense of accountability of their actions. They also commented that the facilitator-prisoner relationship was trusting and respectful, and they felt more open about sharing their personal stories.



Yoga Interview Findings

The five men interviewed about the Yoga course had exceedingly positive responses about the classes. All interviewees noted that they had experienced a reduction in their stress and anxiety; three attributed their calmer temperament to the breathing exercises that they have incorporated into their daily lives. Four reported better emotional control and anger management, as well as more rational decision making. All interviewees felt comfortable in class with the facilitator, whom they described as patient, helpful, and trustworthy. A majority also noted physical benefits of yoga, e.g., reduced back pain. These interviews reveal that the Yoga program has been successful in helping participants reduce stress, increase impulse control, and improve their physical health. Some men intended to continue practicing yoga upon release, which shows their commitment to make long-term physical and mental improvements. The participants suggested increasing the number of classes offered.

Violence Prevention Interview Findings

The nine prisoners interviewed about the Violence Prevention course all described their experiences as extremely positive. All interviewees noted improved understanding of their own anger and violence and fewer negative impulses. Three believed the breathing exercises helped with controlling anger. A majority noted that the class had helped them better relate and bond with others, and make more thoughtful decisions. All of them highly praised the facilitator. These interviews suggest that the Violence Prevention course is successful in helping participants control anger, foster emotional healing, and make rational decisions. A few interviewees suggested moving more slowly into discussing participants' emotional histories and having class more often.

Emotional Literacy Interview Findings

All of the seven men interviewed reported benefitting from their participation in Emotional Literacy. The majority spoke very positively about the program. A few respondents recommended more structured classes as well as the flexibility to set goals that better suit each member's needs. However, even those who suggested changes felt they benefited from the program as a whole. Six of seven participants said that it had improved their decision-making processes and interpersonal relationships. Other benefits cited include increased self-esteem, greater honesty in and outside of class, and improved well-being. All interviewees felt comfortable sharing deep emotional and personal issues in class. With several specifically noting that confidentiality was crucial in fostering trust and honesty among participants, the interviewees largely attributed the program's success to the respectful and supportive environment fostered by the program and the class facilitators. Regard for the facilitators was also high. Most suggested increasing the number of classes so that more prisoners could participate. In short, participant responses suggested that Emotional Literacy is successful in creating positive behavioral changes in its participants.

Brothers' Keepers Interview Findings

Five men were interviewed about Brothers' Keepers. Each was a peer participant in the program. All five reported that the general prisoner population frequently sought their help and were comfortable with their service. Common issues that peers had encountered include racially based issues, cellmate conflict, and difficulties for transgender prisoners. All of the interviewees said that the program's training prepared them well and made them feel confident dealing with any crisis. Interviewees also stated they have discovered a sense of purpose and responsibility through participation. They felt more motivated to make responsible choices for themselves. All men

noted the strong bond they have built with their classmates and facilitators. These interviews reveal that Brothers' Keepers has been successful in creating a team of well-trained peer responders to help prison staff identify and assist prisoners in need.

Quantitative Study Design

To evaluate the impact of class participation on participants' emotional well-being, the original study design included an intervention vs. comparison group design, which would have compared IPP participants to other, non-IPP prisoners (the "comparison group") who were similar with regard to demographics, behavior, and system involvement, but who did not participate in IPP. These two samples of prisoners would be assessed on a range of personal characteristics and psychological scales at least two times (for the IPP participants, prior to and after class participation). This method would allow for a comparison of the change in IPP participants' responses to the change in non-IPP participants' responses and thereby facilitate a methodologically sound assessment of the impact of the courses on IPP participants.

After a 12-month-plus period in which several revisions of the proposed research plan were submitted to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), the CDCR approved a scaled-down study involving no comparison group, no pre-post testing, and very limited personal or offense history data collection, including no individually identifying variables. Also, the final sample size was small ($n = 45$), making it difficult to discern statistical differences between scores. Because of these research limitations, the quantitative research conducted and reported here was limited to the exploratory study described in detail below. Additional research is required to provide definitive evidence of the positive impacts of IPP on its participants.

Quantitative Survey: Is Emotional Well-being Associated With Participation in IPP?

The impact of IPP on its participants was measured relative to dosage; that is, the total number of months enrolled in IPP courses.¹² The sample was divided into two groups: those with higher dosage (six months or more total IPP experience) compared to those with lower dosage (less than six months total IPP experience). Program evaluation literature and IPP staff indicated that six months would be the minimum amount of time needed to bring about a measurable cognitive behavioral change in participants. NCCD hypothesized that higher dosage (more time in IPP courses) would be associated with healthier functioning.

Main Yard vs. H-Unit. For two reasons, dosage analysis focused on Main Yard rather than H-Unit participants. From the standpoint of rigorous methodology, Main Yard participants provided a stronger sample for analysis; there was more consistency regarding their age, sentence length, time served, and time in IPP. Main Yard participants were older, had longer sentences, have served more time, have had more IPP experience, and were more consistent in their attitudes toward IPP. Secondly, interviews with experienced stakeholders observed that Main Yard prisoners tend to be more mature, and more likely to quickly build trust and camaraderie in class. These are significant distinctions since trust of both the IPP staff and fellow prisoners is crucial for IPP class success. While the six-month dosage cut-off was likely to identify two distinct groups of Main Yard prisoners, it was unlikely that the same cut-off was likely to distinguish H-Unit prisoners. Personal characteristics and histories were expected to play a larger role in how well these prisoners took to IPP courses and how soon positive impacts might be observed. It was not expected that the final interview

approved by CDCR would allow for the level of analysis necessary to produce measurable differences by dosage among H-Unit participants.

A 130-item survey was created to explore statistical associations between IPP participation and the desired cognitive outcomes. The survey consisted of questions about demographics and IPP participation, followed by adapted versions of six psychological scales. Participants were asked to rate themselves in the areas of emotional well-being, aggression, and decision-making processes, and to provide their perspectives on the dynamics of classes.

Scales. Six scales were adapted to create the survey:

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale¹³ measured participants' self-esteem, which IPP considers a crucial element of cognitive behavioral rehabilitation. Scores could range from 0 (lowest degree of self-esteem) to 4 (highest).

The Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire¹⁴ measured participants' levels of anger and aggression. Scores could range from 0 (highest degree of aggression) to 4 (lowest).

Social Problem-Solving Inventory¹⁵ assessed how participants define, evaluate, and respond to perceived problems. Scores could range from 0 (most negative answer) to 20 (most positive) on the overall scale, and from 0 to 4 on the five subscales.

Multi-dimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support¹⁶ measured the level of emotional support participants felt they received from various sources. Scores could range from 0 (most negative answer) to 4 (most positive).

The Beck Hopelessness Scale¹⁷ measured participants' attitudes about the future. Scores could range from 0 (highest degree of hope) to 4 (lowest).

The Group Environment Scale (the “Real” formulation; GES-R) measured participant perspectives on group cohesion, leadership, support, and expressiveness of each class. Scores could range from 0 (least positive) to 1 (most positive). The GES was included to assess IPP participants’ attitudes toward the classes themselves, rather than the impact of the classes on their behavior.

Main Yard Survey Findings: Consistent Higher Emotional Well-being for Higher Dosage Participants

Of the 62 Main Yard participants surveyed, 45 had complete data with regard to dosage and scales. Of these 45, 33 belonged to the higher dosage group (six months or more in IPP) and 12 belonged to the lower dosage group (less than six months in IPP). The higher dosage group was 36% White and 33% African American; the lower dosage group was 58% White and 25% African American. The higher dosage and lower dosage subgroups had approximately the same average age (45.5 vs. 45.9 years), had all received life sentences with a similar parole minimum of years (17.5 vs. 19.1 years), and had served similar amounts of time (21.1 vs. 20.6 years). More of the higher dosage group had been denied parole at least once (61% vs. 42%).

Main Yard Scale Scores by Dosage
(Length of Time in IPP Courses)

| | Six Mo. or Longer | Less Than Six Mo. |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Self-esteem | 3.28 | 2.92 |
| Aggression | 3.08 | 2.87 |
| Problem Solving | 15.02 | 14.22 |
| Social Support | 3.74 | 3.44 |
| Hopelessness | 3.39 | 3.17 |
| Group Environment | 0.87 | 0.84 |

As the above table shows, the analysis found that for Main Yard participants the higher dosage group consistently reported higher emotional well-being than the lower dosage group.¹⁸ Those with higher

dosage outscored those with lower dosage on every scale and subscale, although not at statistically significant levels. Their scores suggest that they had higher self-esteem, and were more hopeful regarding the future. They were more likely to conduct positive, non-aggressive interpersonal relationships. They approached problems in more rational and effective ways, and were less likely to make impulsive and hasty decisions. The consistent trend in these findings indicates that research with more methodological rigor would likely find a higher level of participation in IPP courses to be associated with healthier cognitive behavioral functioning.

The Main Yard higher dosage group also indicated slightly more positive attitudes toward IPP courses than the lower dosage group on the group environment scale (0.87 vs. 0.84). It might be expected that those who think more highly of a class benefit more from it, although in this case the difference in GES-R by dosage is very small, with even new IPP participants assessing the courses positively.

Conclusions

Together, the qualitative and quantitative results indicate that IPP’s programs offer a number of promising strategies to improve well-being and reduce violence. Quantitative analysis showed that the Main Yard participants who had more IPP experience achieved slightly more positive results in every aspect of measurements than those with less IPP experience. Even in the absence of statistical significance, the survey findings were very consistent and corresponded with the participants’ interview responses considerably. This study suggests that longer participation in IPP programming is associated with the desired cognitive behavioral outcomes. Also, further research with wider sampling and stronger research design is merited to provide definitive evidence of the positive impact of IPP on its participants.

References

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- ¹² Dosage is the combined total number of months an inmate was enrolled in IPP courses (e.g., three months of Emotional Literacy and seven months of VOEG, taken at separate times or concurrently, would mean a combined total of 10 months of IPP dosage).
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- ¹⁸ H-Unit Findings. H-Unit analysis did not reveal a consistent difference between H-Unit participants with a six-month dosage and H-Unit participants with less than six months. Prior discussions with IPP staff anticipated these results (see Main Yard vs. H-Unit discussion above). Classes with mostly H-Unit men require more time to process IPP materials and concepts because they have not experienced life in custody to the extent Main Yard prisoners have, and it takes time to build the trust and rapport necessary when participants are asked to share very personal issues. Indeed, H-Unit participants overall showed lower scores on the GES scale. Measuring the impact of IPP on H-Unit prisoners would likely require a longer cut-off point of at least a year and, as with the study of Main Yard prisoners, a substantially larger sample size.