

Harmonizing Databases? Evaluating Effectiveness of A Statewide Public Mental Health Reentry Program

Background - A Bureau of Justice Administration study reported half of all prisoners have some form of mental disorder and approximately 16% of all those incarcerated in state prisons have Serious Mental Illness (SMI).¹ Evidence also suggests that prisoners with SMI are more likely to have had previous incarcerations,² are typically under insured and have limited coping repertoires that can have “spill-over” effects in the community when they are released.³ The costs of incarceration are increasing and there has been little progress in reducing recidivism among persons with SMI.²

The Value of “Harmonizing” Data – This study will establish a combined dataset “harmonizing” existing administrative databases to evaluate the effectiveness of the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health’s Forensic Transition Team (FTT). The FTT is a case coordinator-based reentry program that serves persons with SMI transitioning from prisons. As needed, the FTT coordinators advocate for clients by attending discharge-planning meetings, providing linkages to providers, and tracking clients’ progress for three months post-release.

Study Design and Methodology – The study design is longitudinal, retrospective and uses existing secondary data with comparative analysis based on a case-control/quasi-experimental design framework. Data will be obtained from state, criminal justice, mental health, and substance abuse agencies. All FTT transition cases released from Massachusetts state prisons and two of the state’s largest county House of Correction from July 2007 through July 2009 will be studied. The FTT cases will be matched with individuals with mental disorders receiving correctional-based mental health services at the time of release who were ineligible for the FTT program. Both groups will be followed using retrospective data for two years post-release through March 2011.

Final Study Analysis Will Include:

- A comparison of post-incarceration outcomes including re-arrest, re-incarceration and detoxification admissions of FTT clients with the comparison group
- Determine factors that may affect disparities in post-incarceration outcomes (i.e. demographic factors, housing status, substance abuse and age of participants), after controlling for most recent governing offense and geographic region

Anticipated Contributions to Research & Public Policy:

- Inform development of policies and practices that address the reentry needs of individuals with mental disorders leaving correctional custody
- Provide an analysis of the costs and benefits of a case coordinator-based reentry program
- Assess the feasibility of agency collaborations and using administrative databases for program evaluation
- Provide information to determine if more resources for intensive interventions linking individuals to services are appropriate for this population

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