

Examining the Effectiveness of Opioid Agonist Programs for Prisoners at One Month Following Release from Incarceration

Background: Despite its effectiveness, methadone maintenance is rarely provided in American correctional facilities. This study is the first randomized clinical trial in the US to examine the effectiveness of methadone maintenance treatment provided to prisoners with pre-incarceration heroin addiction. *Methods:* A three-group randomized controlled trial was conducted between September 2003 and June 2005. Two hundred-eleven Baltimore pre-release inmates who were heroin dependent during the year prior to incarceration were enrolled in this study. Participants were randomly assigned to the following: Counseling Only: counseling in prison, with passive referral to treatment upon release ($n = 70$); Counseling + Transfer: counseling in prison with transfer to methadone maintenance treatment upon release ($n = 70$); and Counseling + Methadone: methadone maintenance and counseling in prison, continued in a community-based methadone maintenance program upon release ($n = 71$). *Results:* Two hundred participants were located for follow-up interviews and included in the current analysis. The percentages of participants in each condition that entered community-based treatment were, respectively, *Counseling Only* 7.8%, *Counseling + Transfer* 50.0%, and *Counseling + Methadone* 68.6%, $p < .05$. All pair wise comparisons were statistically significant, (all $ps < .05$). The percentage of participants in each condition that tested positive for opioids at one month post-release were, respectively, *Counseling Only* 62.9%, *Counseling + Transfer* 41.0%, and *Counseling + Methadone* 27.6%, $p < .05$, with the Counseling Only group significantly more likely to test positive than the Counseling + Methadone group. *Conclusions:* Methadone maintenance initiated prior to or immediately after release from prison appears to have beneficial short-term impact on community treatment entry and heroin use. This intervention may be able to fill an urgent treatment need for prisoners with heroin addiction histories.