

A Qualitative Program Evaluation of a Digital Peer Support Group for Formerly Incarcerated People

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What Is the Purpose of this Study?

- To evaluate a formal curriculum pilot of a peer-led mutual support group for formerly incarcerated people using a community-based participatory research approach.

What Is the Problem?

- At any given time, nearly 2 million people are incarcerated and 600,000 people are released from jails and prisons each year in the United States, and the role of trauma preceding, during, and caused by incarceration is well-recognized.
- Peer support programs offer a programmatic vehicle for fostering social support, and have been proposed as particularly well-suited to community-based participatory research methods.
- However, there has been limited investigation into the potential for digital platforms in implementing peer-led, peer-developed, psychosocial support groups for formerly incarcerated persons (FIP).

What Are the Findings?

- Participants did not prefer the Zoom delivery of the previously in-person modules, but appreciated its convenience and safety.
- Participants viewed the content of the curriculum as comprehensive and relevant to those undergoing reentry and readjustment to post-carceral life.
- Participants valued the FIPS group's cultivation of a space to bond over shared experience in an unguarded way, and motivate each other.
- Participants found the opportunity to both teach peers about adjusting to post-carceral life and to learn from others as therapeutic appeals of the FIPS group.
- FIPS group facilitates both social and practical support, where participants who are more established in the community can provide mentorship and information on job opportunities to those who are more newly released.
- Including loved ones in FIPS group was seen as a means of educating them on the lingering psychological and emotional changes caused by their carceral experiences, including triggers and habits.
- The inclusion of academics, clinicians, and community members was seen to destigmatize FIP and educate them on their specific psychological issues.

Who Should Care Most?

- Health care providers, researchers, activists, reentry program designers, and all those who work with communities impacted by carceral institutions and the criminal-legal system

Recommendations for Action

- Policymakers can leverage the therapeutic value of shared experiences of incarceration through investment in existing FIP peer networks, empowering psychosocial support programs that meet the needs of their contexts.
- Though there has been growing interest in peer programs developed by carceral institutions, interventions like FIPS group succeed due to community-based ownership; future interventions may benefit from similar orientations.
- Marrying material support for FIP upon release, such as Medicaid enrollment, employment programs, and housing programs, with existing peer networks of FIP could synergize efforts at post-carceral adjustment.
- Recruitment of participants for peer support group interventions should start prior to release, such that FIP have defined social support.