

Faith-based Interventions

EVIDENCE BRIEF

There is some evidence that faith-based interventions can improve the behaviour of prisoners, but a beneficial effect on reoffending is yet to be established.

OVERVIEW

- Faith-based interventions (F-BIs) encompass a broad range of programmes, which can range from essentially secular interventions sponsored by religious institutions to 'faith saturated' programmes that explicitly draw on religious concepts to shape their rehabilitative goals and practice.
- The evidence for the effect of F-BIs on reoffending is inconclusive. The voluntary nature of F-BIs creates a significant selection bias. When studies control for selection and other biases, they report insignificant or very small reductions in reoffending.
- There is evidence that F-BIs can reduce behavioural problems in prisons.
- F-BIs have been implemented extensively overseas, particularly in the United States, and intermittently in New Zealand.
- They are primarily prison-based and operate on the basis of Christian beliefs. While they can be delivered to community-based offenders and within other belief frameworks, the studies considered here are overwhelmingly of prison-based Christian programmes, with some also providing reintegrative support following a prisoner's release.

- The largest New Zealand F-BI was the Rimutaka Prison Faith-based Unit, which operated from 2003 to 2011. The unit was closed after an evaluation reported that it had no impact upon recidivism.
- F-BIs do not include "business as usual" work with faith connotations, such as prison chaplains; these are legislated requirements and cannot be treated as optional investments.

EVIDENCE BRIEF SUMMARY

Evidence rating:	Inconclusive
Unit cost:	Variable, generally low
Effect size (number needed to treat):	Unknown
Current spend:	There are currently no structured faith-based interventions delivered in New Zealand.
Unmet demand:	Unknown

DO FAITH-BASED INTERVENTIONS REDUCE CRIME?

What are faith-based interventions?

In the context of international research, F-BIs refer to a broad range of rehabilitative and reintegrative programmes. These range from “programmes or services [delivered] by an organization with some type of religious affiliation”ⁱ to “faith-based prison units ‘that seek to immerse prisoners in a ... total experience of religiously based living.’”ⁱⁱ

Christian beliefs make up the faith-component for the vast majority of F-BIs within this brief. However, constitutional issues in the United States (where most programmes and studies take place) mean that the delivery and analysis of F-BIs often de-emphasises links to specific beliefs.

While a strict definition of F-BIs has not been established,ⁱⁱⁱ the key, common characteristics of faith-based interventions are that they are designed, operated and/or delivered on the basis of religious principles.

Interventions considered by studies used in this brief include:

- Immersion-style faith-based programmes, where sections of prisons (and the activities of participating prisoners) are explicitly operated on faith- principles. Examples include the Faith-based Unit at Rimutaka Prison, and several programmes in the United States.^{iv}
- Secular-style programmes that are delivered by a religious organisation or in a religious context. Examples include Alcoholics Anonymous and mentoring programmes for young offenders.^v
- Religious programmes that are delivered as distinct activities within an otherwise secular prison environment. Examples include Bible studies and in-prison religious seminars.^{vi}

International evidence

As F-BIs are almost always voluntary, participants typically have below average chances of reoffending even before the programmes take place. Choosing to participate in an F-BI may indicate that a prisoner is religious or has already decided to try and change their behaviour, both of which are documented indicators for lower risks of offending or reoffending.^{vii} This type of selection bias is the primary issue raised by authors critical of the existing literature.

When controls are in place to address the selection bias, F-BIs are shown to have either insignificant impact on reoffending or to produce a slight reduction.

A 2011 literature review considered several studies of immersion-style F-BIs, where units or entire prisons were operated on a faith basis. The review noted significant self-selection biases in these studies; prisoners who chose to enter F-BIs were already less likely to reoffend and controls generally failed to address this issue; of the 25 studies considered by the review, only nine were labelled as “potentially valid”. The review found five high-quality studies, three of these found a small positive effect of faith-based interventions on recidivism and the other two found no effect; the findings were not quantified within the review. The review was therefore inconclusive, stating that “those few empirical studies that approach methodological validity either fail to show that faith-based prisons reduce recidivism or provide weak evidence in their favor.”^{viii}

A 2016 meta-analysis was similarly inconclusive. It noted a scarcity of “high-quality studies on the effects of faith-based interventions on official

recidivism,” so instead considered “the impact of religious prison programming on inmate attitudes and disciplinary infractions.” This meta-analysis considered 15 studies and found 57 effect sizes. Its conclusion was that F-BIs produce “a modest but significant alteration to offender values and behaviours,” with a weighted mean effect size of -0.45 for attitudinal adjustment and -0.15 for institutional misconduct.^{ix}

The New Zealand context

In the New Zealand context, F-BIs are interventions delivered to offenders which seek to rehabilitate the individual and reduce rates of future offending by promoting the offender’s adoption of religious beliefs and commitments, and by encouraging long-term involvement in a faith community.

In 2014, about one in five New Zealand prisoners reported a religious affiliation. Among these, well over two thirds specified some form of Christianity (including Ratana (10%) and Mormonism (7%)). The largest non-Christian religions were Islam (4%), Buddhism (2%) and Hinduism (1%).

Certain religious inputs are legally required for prisons in New Zealand. The manifestation of religion and belief is a human right under the *New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990*, and making reasonable provision for prisoners’ religious or spiritual needs is required under the *Corrections Act 2004*. Prison chaplaincies, accommodation of religious practices and personal religiosity are part of business as usual in respect of these legislative requirements, and cannot be treated as optional investments.

New Zealand evidence

A Faith-based Unit operated at Rimutaka Prison between 2003 and 2011. This was a joint venture between the Department of Corrections and Prison Fellowship New Zealand (PFNZ).

Prisoners could be referred to the Faith-based Unit if they had expressed a desire to change their behaviour, were willing to explore spirituality and faith through a Christian-based programme, and agreed to abide by the rules and expectations of the unit.

The Rimutaka Faith-based Unit was an immersion-style intervention. A unit of the prison was explicitly operated on Christian principles in partnership with PFNZ. Christian principles, as applied by PFNZ, were to influence every aspect of life for participants in the unit.

According to the evaluation, undertaken by the Department of Corrections in 2010, “the main mechanism of change [was] assumed to be immersion in an environment that exposes offenders to Christian values and a new moral code, with a resulting change in attitudes, motivations and behaviour.” The evaluation noted that in the theoretical model, developed by PFNZ, the therapeutic community was identified as the mechanism of change but the specific principles of the community were not directly considered.^x The faith and therapeutic aspects of the intervention are therefore difficult to separate.

The above view was, however, in contrast to PFNZ which insisted that the Rimutaka Faith-based Unit was successful in facilitating faith-based offender transformation and mentioned close links between the Unit’s approach and the restorative justice programmes^{xi}.

Small-scale evaluations were carried out prior to 2010, examining issues such as changes in participants’ attitudes and behaviour, adaptations and responses to the unit and impacts on subsequent reoffending. These evaluations were hampered by small sample sizes, and the results were inconclusive.

An outcomes evaluation took place in 2010, although it too was impacted by low volumes. This evaluation found that the unit had no

significant impact upon recidivism, an outcome that was noted to be consistent with international studies of similar programmes.^{xii} The Faith-based Unit was closed in 2011.

An informal faith-based programme was recently delivered at Manawatu Prison, but has since been closed.

CURRENT INVESTMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

There are currently no structured faith-based interventions delivered in New Zealand.

WHAT OTHER BENEFITS DO FAITH-BASED INTERVENTIONS HAVE?

Values and behaviours

A 2016 meta-analysis found a “modest but significant alteration to offender values and behaviours” as a result of faith-based interventions,^{xiii} which was reflected by improvements in the conduct of prisoners within prisons.

Other outcomes such as employment, earnings and benefit receipt

The impact of faith-based interventions on outcomes such as employment, earnings and benefit receipt has not been subject to high-quality evaluation, although one paper comments that religious conversion is a factor in prisoners gaining and retaining employment following release.^{xiv}

EVIDENCE RATING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Each Evidence Brief provides an evidence rating between Harmful and Strong.

Harmful	Robust evidence that intervention increases crime
Poor	Robust evidence that intervention tends to have no effect
Inconclusive	Conflicting evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Fair	Some evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Promising	Robust international <i>or</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime
Strong	Robust international <i>and</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime

According to the standard criteria for all Evidence Briefs¹, the appropriate evidence rating for faith-based interventions is Inconclusive.

As per the standard definitions of evidence strength outlined in our methodology, the interpretation of this evidence rating is that:

- There is conflicting evidence that interventions can reduce crime
- It is highly uncertain whether investment would generate return even if implemented well

ⁱ Dodson, Cabage and Klenowski, 2011. P. 368

ⁱⁱ Volokh, 2011. P 49

ⁱⁱⁱ Mears, Roman, Wolff and Buck, 2006. P. 352

^{iv} Volokh, 2011. P. 44 – 45

^v Mears, Roman, Wolff and Buck, 2006. P. 354

^{vi} Dodson, Cabage and Klenowski, 2011. P. 375

^{vii} Johnson, 2004. P. 331. McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler and Maruna, 2012. P. 6

- Faith-based interventions would be best suited to trial approaches with a strong research and development focus.

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FIND OUT MORE

Go to the website

www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

Email

whatworks@justice.govt.nz

Recommended reading

A. Volokh, *Do Faith-Based Prisons Work?*, *Alabama Law Review*, Vol. 63(1) 43-95, 2011.

L. Schaefer, T. Sams, and J. Lux, *Saved, Salvaged, or Sunk: A Meta-Analysis of the effects of Faith-Based Interventions on Inmate Adjustment*, *The Prison Journal*, Vol. 96(4) 600-622, 2016.

D. P. Mears, C. G. Roman, A. Wolff and J. Buck, *Faith-based effort to improve prisoner reentry: Assessing the logic and evidence*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol. 34 351-367, 2006.

Citations

^{viii} Volokh, 2011. P. 89

^{ix} Schaefer, Sams and Lux, 2016. P. 600

^x Strategic Analysis & Research, 2010. P. 3 – 5

^{xi} Workman, 2018.

^{xii} Strategic Analysis & Research, 2010.

^{xiii} Schaefer, Sams and Lux, 2016. P. 600-613

^{xiv} Johnson, 2004. P. 352

¹ Available at www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/

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- K. Workman, *Journey Towards Justice*. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2018.

SUMMARY OF EFFECT SIZES FROM META-ANALYSES

Meta-analysis	Treatment type/population	Outcome measure	Reported average effect size	Number of estimates meta-analysis based on	Percentage point improvement in attitude and reduction in misconduct (assuming 50% untreated negative attitude and misconduct)	Number needed to treat (assuming 50% untreated negative attitude and misconduct)
Schaefer, Sams and Lux, 2016.	Inmate adjustment (United States)	Attitudinal adjustment	d= -0.45*	57	0.19	5
Schaefer, Sams and Lux, 2016.	Inmate adjustment (United States)	Institutional misconduct	d = -0.15*	57	0.07	15

* The negative effect means a reduction criminal attitudes and misconduct

OR=Odds ratio

d=Cohen's d or variant (standardised mean difference)