

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

Inmate Engagement in Structured Intervention Units

Highlight: Multiple factors influence inmate engagement in Structured Intervention Units, including social climate factors, environmental/setting considerations, inmate perspectives of interventions, and service delivery approaches.

Background

Structured Intervention Units (SIUs) were implemented into the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) on November 30th, 2019. SIUs are intended to provide an appropriate living environment to inmates whose accommodation within a mainstream unit could threaten the security of the institution or others, the safety of the inmate, or the integrity of an investigation. As per the [Corrections and Conditional Release Act \(CCRA\)](#), all inmates in an SIU are to be provided with the daily opportunity for a minimum of *four hours* of out of cell time, including *two hours* of interaction with others (“4/2” standards). SIUs are equipped with a team of diverse intervention staff, including program, cultural, spiritual, educational, case management, and behavioural coaching staff.

Since the inception of SIUs, a key priority has been fostering inmate engagement. While CSC has had a high rate of compliance in meeting the “4/2” standards in opportunities *offered* to inmates, an ongoing challenge has been the frequency with which inmates *avail* daily activity opportunities. For SIU stays in fiscal year 2023 to 2024, inmates accepted the minimum allotment of time, on average, 34% of days for outside cell time, and 47% of days for interaction time¹.

The current analysis presents perspectives from staff and inmates on the factors influencing inmate engagement within SIUs. As part of a larger study examining the operational realities of SIUs, data was collected at four SIU sites: Millhaven Institution, Atlantic Institution, Kent Institution, and Stony Mountain Institution. A mixed methods research approach was used, including over 200 hours of observation, 90 inmate interviews and 90 staff interviews.

Barriers to inmate engagement

Inmates and staff discussed several factors impeding inmate engagement within SIUs. One central factor related to the institutional social climate. Contextualized in relation to the pressures of inmate subculture, a pronounced “solo mentality” is an engrained disposition among some inmates, marked by a generalized desire to “keep to oneself” (away from both staff and inmates). Factors underpinning this mentality include distrust or disinterest in engaging with staff, a desire to avoid problems, and/or safety concerns. In some cases, there are coercive pressures prompting social retreat, as evidenced by inmate controls over SIU space and resources, which result in asymmetrical access.

Another salient factor impeding inmate engagement was negative perceptions of activities offered in the SIU. In regards to recreation/leisure activities, lack of appeal was explained in terms of the nature of the activity and/or the setting (e.g., yard and recreational spaces lacking amenities), or the circumstances of the offer (e.g., early in the morning). Staff-led interventions were more positively viewed, though some inmates relayed negative perspectives, most often expressing that SIU interventions do not “hold weight” to advance case milestones or are not applicable to one’s case. Overall, inmates conveyed that in-cell activity options are sometimes more appealing than the opportunities presented by staff.

Factors supporting inmate engagement

Despite the above-noted barriers, several factors were deemed supportive of inmate engagement. Regarding utilization of physical space, it was observed that environmental factors and design principles can facilitate settings conducive to engagement, e.g., design vibrancy, amenities, equipment, and “normalizing features” (referring to qualities that allow for

¹ Based on year-end data drawn from CSC’s SIU database for fiscal year 2023 to 2024.

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

practices or experiences that resemble those in “outside” society; van de Rijt et al., 2023). Intervention staff in particular noted the importance of establishing physical settings that support the relational underpinnings and behavioural change focus of SIUs. However, the principles of engaging and normalizing design can be difficult to implement, given competing operational paradigms (i.e., security factors), practical concerns (e.g., theft and vandalism) and equity considerations (i.e., creating disparities between SIUs and mainstream units). Different approaches to reconciling these considerations were evident across the four sites.

Regarding the nature of activities, inmates expressed appreciation for and engagement with opportunities that had a concrete or tangible outcome. This included educational programs that allow inmates to progress towards their educational, career, and life goals, as well as meaningful roles or jobs within the SIU, which allow inmates to engage in productive tasks, draw on/build skills, and contribute communally.

In addition, inmates typically held positive views of staff-led SIU interventions, such as correctional and social programming, behavioural coaching, education, and cultural/spiritual services. Integral to positive experiences was the relational aspects of interventions (i.e., relations with staff marked by trust, rapport, partnership, as per the “working alliance” approach; Haas & Smith, 2019). Inmates emphasized the value of receiving guidance, mentorship and support for positive change in the context of their interactions with staff. Intervention staff too emphasized the pivotal role of relational dynamics in facilitating participation, noting a human-centered approach as a key feature of building positive working relationships to support an inmate’s meaningful engagement with correctional goals. Staff also emphasized the importance of responsivity, i.e., the delivery of interventions in a manner tailored to be best suited to and most effective for the inmate (Andrews et al., 1990). This includes crafting service delivery tailored to an individual’s backgrounds, needs, and interests to deliver content in an accessible and meaningful way. An example provided by staff was the use of art-based strategies as a means to explore program concepts and ideas, which can be more palatable and accessible, and can serve as a springboard for further engagement. At the core of these strategies are attempts to break down some of the barriers that often exist between inmates and the correctional system, including negative perceptions of interventions and mistrust of staff.

What it means

Inmates’ openness to engage in opportunities within SIUs is shaped by dispositions in the prison environment, the social climate of the prison, as well as the nature, circumstances, and setting of offers. Notwithstanding variation across SIUs, staff continue to explore strategies to enhance inmate engagement via targeted interventions, setting/design factors, and population management models. At the core of successful engagement strategies are relational-based service delivery models. The emphasis intervention staff place on relations marked by trust, rapport, and partnership, as well as responsive service delivery, are aligned with evidenced-based practices in the field of correctional interventions.

For more information

Please email the [Research Branch](#). You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

Prepared by: Laura McKendy, Stephanie M. Biro, Dirk Boon, Molly Stewart, Andrew Woodard and Jessica Lundy

References

- Andrews, D. A., Bonta, J., & Hoge, R. D. (1990). Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 17(1), 19-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093854890017001004>
- Haas, S. M., & Smith, J. (2019). Core correctional practice: The role of the working alliance in offender rehabilitation. In *The Routledge Companion to Rehabilitative Work in Criminal Justice* (pp. 339-351). London: Routledge.
- van de Rijt, J., van Ginneken, E. F. J. C., & Boone, M. M. (2023). Normalisation by default and normalisation by design: A systematic review of empirical studies on the normalisation of prison life. *Incarceration*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26326663231196671>

