The Vexing Dilemma of Character-Based Units (CBUs) in Prison

Hayden Smith
University of South Carolina, Columbia

THERE IS AN ADAGE in corrections that not all prisons are created equal. Indeed, units within a single prison can be quite diverse in terms of environmental elements, the availability and quality of programs, staffing levels, and the characteristics of the incarcerated populations that they house. To date, prison units that display increased institutional pathologies such as violence, ill-health, or antisocial cultures disproportionately consume the attention of administrators and academics. This includes, though it is not limited to, units for people with mental illness or experiencing a mental health crisis (Dyer et al., 2021), restrictive housing and solitary confinement (Beck, 2015), protective custody (Casey, Day, & Reynolds, 2016), and geriatric or hospice units (Williams & Abraldes, 2007). In contrast to these settings, far less work has been devoted to understanding the role that more prosocial living conditions within prison may offer. One prime example is character-based units (CBUs), which can be defined as prison units, dorms, or in some cases entire facilities that provide enhanced programming in a more residential environment. CBUs are reinforced by behavioral contracts, peer-to-peer accountability, and higher expectations of inmate engagement and responsibilities.

CBUs display commonality in their origins, dating back to the early 2000s when President Bush proposed a four-year $300 million initiative to fund the work of faith-based community organizations. CBUs emerged as a derivative or partnering form of these original faith-based activities. In a resource-poor prison milieu, faith-based groups are dependable sources of support, as they offer incarcerated people the opportunity to interact with external organizations that are consistent and enthusiastic. For prison administrators, faith-based groups are attractive because they are often free or require minimal financial investment, and for some staff they offer a moralistic or religious ethos that dates to earlier correctional philosophies that complement their own personal beliefs. While it is certainly true that some faith-based groups working in prison grow to become large corporation enterprises, in many prisons these approaches are inevitably restrained by scalability. These limitations are often linked to struggles in providing adequate training to faith-based volunteers, a lack of evidence-based programming, and real-world complexities, which increase the need to extend the parameters of participation beyond the theme of faith. For example, within Southern prisons in the United States, these faith-based groups are often predominately white and Christian, which creates a challenge when incarcerated African Americans who are Muslim seek to join the community.

To address this concern, faith-based activities or groups may alter their mission to invoke the term "character" in lieu of a strict religious or faith-based approach. In some settings, the term "Character-Based Units" becomes an entirely new title and direction, with the introduction of more evidence-based programming and other external support mechanisms. In other settings, there remains a hybrid model with the terms "Faith- and Character-Based Units" being favored. Faith-based groups remain a core component of both these models of CBUs, though when compared to purely faith-based units, these CBUs require greater involvement from correctional staff and other external organizations and the use of more secular resources. A final development of a character unit occurs when faith-based activities are minimized or completely separated and evidence-based programs are maximized, leading to the establishment of "Prison-Based Therapeutic Communities" (Adbel-Salam et al., 2023). It is important to note that in all these settings, that is, faith-, character-, or therapy-based units, the units operate as both programs and living communities.

The Principles of Character-Based Units (CBUs)

The creation of CBUs represents a politically appealing movement in corrections, and they are often codified at the state level. For example, in 2005 state legislators in Indiana enacted House Bill 1429 Transitional Dormitories to develop faith- and character-based units, which by 2007 housed 1,263 incarcerated people (Hall, 2008). Currently, Indiana has 15 prison facilities with "Faith and Character Based Initiatives," though there is no reliable data on the number of participants. Titled the "Purposeful Living Units Serve (PLUS) program," their goal is "strengthening

spiritual, moral, and character development as well as life-skills" (Indiana Department of Corrections, 2023). Similarly, the Alabama Department of Corrections has 12 prison institutions that each have a "faith and character" dorm (author correspondence with the agency). Florida has 34 Faith and Character Programs "that provide for the spiritual needs of inmates and offenders" and operate under the Bureau of Chaplaincy Services within the state prison agency (Florida Department of Corrections, 2023). The only state with purely character-based units is South Carolina, which has 12 prison institutions with 29 CBU units (i.e., two units can constitute one prison dorm) that house a total of 2,537 incarcerated participants (author correspondence with the South Carolina Department of Corrections).

Incarcerated populations self-select access to these CBUs through an extensive screening and admission process. Hall (2008) found that eligibility for Indiana CBUs required at least an eighth-grade reading level, a conduct history free of rule infractions for the previous year, not in segregation for disciplinary reasons, a willingness to participate in self-help faith- and character-based programs, and the signing of a covenant agreeing to abide by the rules. Likewise, the South Carolina application requires a minimum of one year with no minor disciplinary charges, six months with no major disciplinary charges, agreement to pursue a GED, and consent to sign a Social Contract. CBUs also require that the screening process coordinate the viewpoints of classifications, prison staff and administrators, the prison chaplain, and the incarcerated people within the CBU dorm itself.

Within a CBU dorm, two factors can be distinguished: an abundance of programs and zero tolerance for infractions. While there is little information on the quality, duration, or logic of the programs, there certainly is evidence that substantial resources, volunteers, and services are placed in CBUs. At Allendale prison in South Carolina, the site of the only example of an entire character-based prison, there are over 60 classes listed. Examples include authentic manhood, self-worth, soul-detox, animal grooming, the art of public speaking, crocheting, bible study, video workout, world culture, and bee keeping. In Florida, Schneider (2019) reports that "to graduate from the program that covers 50 religions, inmates complete 1,220 credit hours in seven areas: Attitude domain, community functioning, marital/family, healthy choices, mentoring, reentry and faith formation";

Schneider profiled one incarcerated participant who completed 2,307 CBU hours.

Residence in a CBU also includes zero tolerance for behavioral infractions, which can even include self-reporting or reporting by other incarcerated people. Instant removal from a CBU program can occur due to violent, threatening, and disrespectful behavior, contraband (alcohol, drugs, tobacco, cell phones, etc.), public masturbation charges, stealing, and tattooing or having tattoo paraphernalia. Behavioral infractions can also extend to countless violations of community rules such as the appropriate use of the microwave, loitering, avoidance of contraband, gambling, being in a cell during count, and grooming compliance (i.e., "clean shaven, ID visible on left collar of outermost garment, pants pulled up and shirts tucked in, walking single file inside the white line") (South Carolina Department of Corrections, 2015). General rules also advise where to sit in the dorm, avoidance of littering, showering procedures, and certain grievances being internally addressed by CBU inmate coordinators rather than staff. Depending on the location of the CBU, there is an additional review of participant behaviors through annual reviews, quizzes on the social contract or covenant, committee meetings, personal statements, and peer-to-peer accountability protocols.

It is hardly surprising that correctional agencies cite CBUs as successes to the media. For example, at the Hernando Correctional Institution in Florida, a media story highlights the "life changing results" that the CBU brings, with the warden of the facility expressing a desire to expand the program (ABC News, 2021). With such optimism, CBUs are portrayed as an avenue towards meeting the gold standard of correctional programming, that is, a reduction in recidivism. Indiana CBUs boast that participants will become "more productive members of society upon-reentry." The Alabama CBU operating manual highlights the following two main goals: "managing inmates with greater control to help minimize the potential for prison violence, prison escape, and institutional misconduct; and to reduce recidivism." South Carolina (2015) CBUs provide "programming that will assist inmates to become more successful members of society and help to reduce the recidivism rates of these inmates." These are weighty claims for the effectiveness of CBUs, and they require empirical assessment to validate outcomes.

The Promise of Character-Based Units: No Evidence of Results

Examining the legislative and administrative efforts made towards CBUs and the concomitant claims of its proponents discloses a current dearth of evidence. In 2007, La Vigne, Brazzell, and Small reported on six- and twelve-month recidivism rates of participants in two Florida "faith- and character-based institutions" (FCBI)—one male (Lawtey) and one female (Hillsborough). La Vigne and colleagues matched participants with a control group by sex, age, race, offense, prior incarcerations, time of current incarceration, time to expected release, and disciplinary history. There were no statistically significant differences in recidivism for either male or female participants when compared to the control group. A follow-up study by Brazzell and La Vigne (2008) using new data also found no statistically significant differences for a 26-month period of release from prison.

A 2009 report by the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) provides insight into 11 Florida prisons. At the institutional level, the OPPAGA (2009) compared 1,293 inmates released from a faith- and character-based institution with 2,283 inmates who had requested transfer to such an institution but weren't placed there before their release; finding the risk of CBU reoffending ranged from 0.85 to 0.95 relative to the comparison group. At the dorm level, OPPAGA (2009) compared 1,311 inmates released from a faith- and character-based dorm with 9,988 inmates who had requested transfer to such a dorm but weren't placed there before their release; finding a relative risk of reoffending for inmates released from CBU dorms was 1.03 relative to the comparison group (OPPAGA, 2009). These three studies represent the totality of published research on CBUs and recidivism. Despite being outdated, studying only Florida CBUs, and having other serious methodological issues, this research indicates that CBUs have zero to minimal impact on recidivism rates.

Conclusion

Character-based units (CBUs) in prison represent a common issue in modern-day programming. They are popular, generate considerable praise and investment from legislators, administrators, and volunteers, and contain mission statements suggestive of highly desirable outcomes in recidivism; yet they remain largely untested, and in those

cases where empirical evidence exists, there is a failure to document any impact on stated goals. A contributory factor to this limitation is that the operating definition of CBUs and similar programs may be faulty. While there is no standard definition of faith-based programs (Mears et al., 2006), there is even less clarity when assessing CBUs. Faith- and character-based units are based on the assertion (devoid of evidence) that criminal behavior is the result of a lack of spiritual, moral, and character development within the individual; therefore, personal transformation can only be achieved through "faith (whatever one's faith is) or character education" (Hall, 2008, p. 2). This is problematic for several related reasons; first, it identifies faith (or religiosity) as being a central theme of crime, while also arguing that the choice or expression of faith in promoting prosocial behavior is largely irrelevant. If faith serves as an intervention, then it must vary by the exposure to a particular religion, creed, or text. Faith is either a central concept or it is not.

This observation becomes more salient when moving towards character-based units, where morality and religiosity become less pronounced. As character-based units broaden to maximize secular resources, the continued role of prison chaplains, religiously affiliated volunteers, and church doctrines may also be questioned. For example, the Allendale Correctional Facility, South Carolina, CBU mission statement is devoid of any religious, faith-based, or spiritual language. It reads:

> This institution, partnered with community volunteers, will provide the programs, instruction, and training necessary to allow the willing inmate participant to improve his character, advance his education and gain vocational skills which will give the participant a real and viable alternative to reoffending.

This raises the matter of CBU programs requiring the endorsement of a particular faith; as any incarcerated people who are non-believers are subsequently excluded from a theoretical pathway towards success, and they may be blocked from the benefits that residence in a resource-enhanced prison unit or dorm may bring. Prison policies dictate that incarcerated people cannot be excluded from a character-based unit based on their having a different religious belief system, while taking for granted that a religious belief

system of some kind must automatically exist, reinforcing the inherent definitional problem of CBUs. This definition quandary can be linked to a challenge in measurement, as, in contrast to terms in faith-based units that record behaviors like regular attendance of services, character-based units employ more vague terms such as "faith," higher power, and spirituality.

The problems of operational definitions for CBUs impact programming efforts. Here, a reliance on the role of character and morality as a criminogenic risk and need is also highly problematic, mainly because it ignores a wealth of research that points toward sociological, economic, and environmental causes of crime. The major risks and needs that drive the modern-day Risk-Need-Responsivity (RNR) model include antisocial personality patterns, procriminal attitudes, social supports for crime, substance abuse, family/marital relationships, school/work, and prosocial recreational activities (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Andrews & Dowden, 2006). Such models do not include terms like character or morality, as they are vague, speculative, and difficult to link to evidence-based interventions. Morality frameworks also assume that incarceration automatically denotes a lack of character, which can be easily negated by historical examples as recent as the civil rights movement where social unrest, protests, conscientious objection, civil disobedience, and sit-ins resulted in periods of incarceration that were in fact based on moral reasoning.

Without a clear operational definition of CBUs, particularly with little linkage to the documented risks and needs of incarcerated populations, there is a tendency for prison administrators to disproportionately house "good inmates" in these units and provide a plethora of programs, services, and resources. Not only can measurement of so many disparate programs all occurring at the same time be unfeasible, but the evaluation of CBUs can be stymied by a severe form of self-selection bias. This bias is reinforced through the entire CBU model, from applicants with few to no behavioral infractions volunteering for access to a highly supervised and structured milieu, an intense and comprehensive screening process, a rigorous orientation period, continued total supervision and monitoring, and rigorous behavioral and academic performance reviews by peers, staff, and volunteers. Self-selection occurs at every level of the CBU process, including the removal of any participants for a host of behavioral infractions,

which jeopardizes any attempt at creating a control group. The OPPAGA (2009) study attempted to remedy some aspects of this bias by using a control group of people who applied for admittance to a CBU but who were not accepted, though it found no effects in terms of outcomes. This self-selection may also create practical problems, as the clustering of "good inmates" into good dorms may inadvertently move more disruptive inmates into concentrated groups where few programs, services, or opportunities are available.

Measurability may require a reconsideration of outcomes beyond recidivism. This is where community corrections and other systems become relevant. Currently, there are no documented instances in the academic or practitioner literature suggesting that graduation from CBU provides participants with official transcripts or reports that can be shared with court and/or parole services. Incarcerated people in these programs may enjoy an improved living environment, though over time they can become cynical and frustrated when a printed "Certificate of Completion" by the state is not even reviewed by the parole board or similar authority. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, not all prison dorms are the same, and it is important that probation or parole officers understand their clients' lived experiences in a prison unit. While community corrections officers may inquire about the increased risks and needs that come with residence in a mental health unit or restrictive housing, it is also valuable to understand the experiences of being housed in a more stable, prosocial environment like a character-based unit. Although validation of a reduction in recidivism has yet to occur, there is evidence that incarcerated populations in CBUs experience more access to programs, staffing, volunteers, and other resources that could serve as an entry point to building up existing strength and assets.

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