

Self-service rehabilitation? The effect of digital technology on prisoner behaviour and reoffending



McDougall, C., Pearson, D., Torgerson, D., & Garcia-Reyes, M. (2017)



HM Chief Inspector (2013)

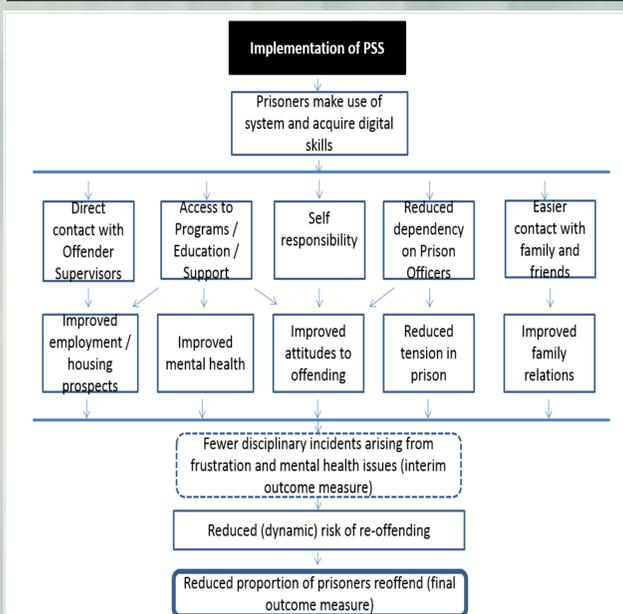
“Prisons [are] in a pre-internet dark age: inefficient, wasteful and leaving prisoners woefully prepared for the real world they will face on release. I have not met one prison professional who does not think drastic change is needed.”

Question

Might prisoner ‘self-service’ (PSS) technology support HM Prison Service priorities?

- Reduce prison disciplinary offences (Priority: ‘safe, decent, and secure prisons’)?
- Increase offender behaviour programme completions (Priority: ‘prisoner rehabilitation’)?
- Reduce reoffending (Priority: ‘prisoner rehabilitation’)?

Theory of Change



Methodology

13 prisons before and after PSS installation.

Three aspects of research design:

- Process evaluation of PSS implementation
- Measurement of impact on performance
- Rates of proven reoffending

Main Results

Process Evaluation. Focus groups before implementation:

- Staff recognised: i) frustrations due to lost / lengthy applications, errors in meal allocations, and finance management; ii) opportunities for more Personal Officer work; and for purposeful activities for prisoners.
- Prisoners were keen to i) manage own finances, ii) make own applications, iii) avoid conflict with prison officers.

Focus groups after implementation:

- Staff found fewer prisoner queries, more prisoner self-responsibility for checking their affairs, and large savings in managing the prison shop.
- Prisoners gained confidence in digital technology, and many were inspired to develop their reading skills. Tension with prison officers reduced.

Prisoner survey (via the PSS kiosks)

Q1. How Easy to Use?

A. Easy or Very Easy (93% prisoners)

Q2. How Has PSS Affected Relations with Officers?

A. Better/Much Better (32% prisoners)

Q3. Control over Own Prison Life?

A. More / Much More (55% prisoners)

Impact Evaluation. *Reduced disciplinary offences.* Ten prisons implemented PSS at various times over 7 years, for a natural experiment. We measured within-prison changes in monthly adjudications, controlling for PSS installation date.

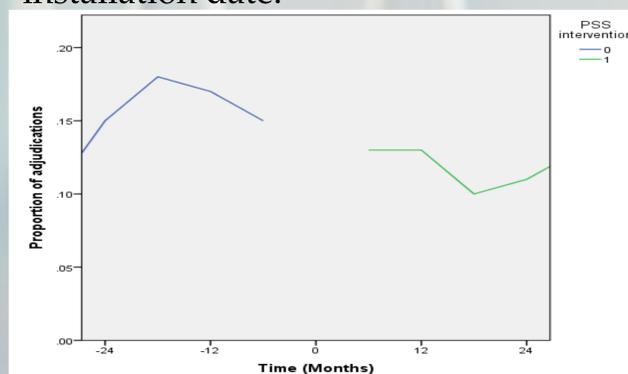


Figure 1. Significant reduction in adjudications over 2 years

Increased offender behaviour programme completions. Five prisons provided programme start & completion data.

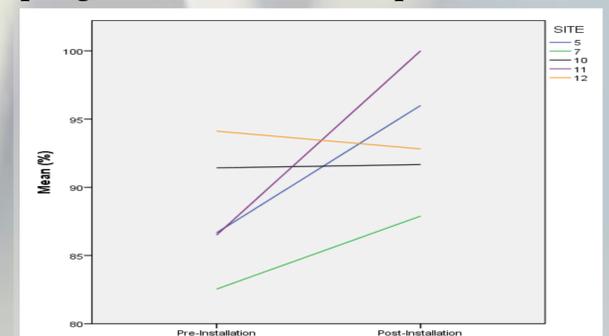


Figure 2. Completions non-significantly increased 88.5% to 93.7%

Outcome Evaluation. One year reoffending data were available for 7 prisons. After accounting for risk of released offenders, within prison reoffending was significantly reduced (across 6/7 prisons).

We also compared the prisons with non-PSS sites (their ‘family groups’) in the wider national prison estate – see Figure 3.

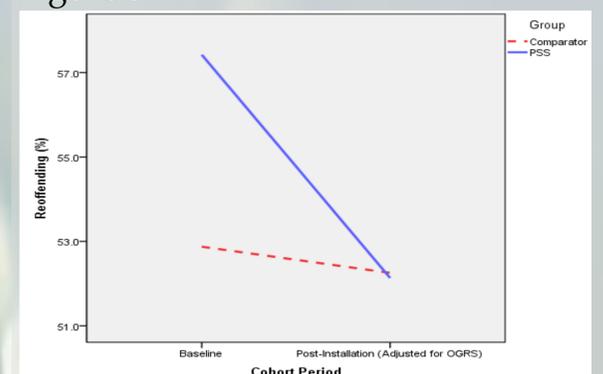


Figure 3. Change in reoffending compared to the national trend, using the MoJ method.

General Discussion Points

- Giving prisoners more responsibility for their lives in prison with PSS may have helped change the culture of the prison environment.
- PSS may remove sources of perceived unfairness attributed as a major cause of anger and frustration for prisoners in General Strain Theory (Agnew, 2006).
- As a result of PSS, prisoners are becoming familiar with modern digital technology, while improving access to their own basic needs. These skills are useful when preparing for re-entry to society.

Acknowledgements.

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