



Violence Reduction Initiative

Background

The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) began implementing its Violence Reduction Initiative (VRI) in 2016. The VRI is loosely based on a community violence reduction strategy called Group Violence Intervention (GVI), and it is also modeled after Washington State DOC's Operation Place Safety initiative¹. This approach seeks to take group dynamics of prison violence into account and to provide a credible deterrent threat of sanctions in response to serious violence. Components of the VRI include responding to major violent incidents by mandatory lockdowns for up to 36 hours and immediate L-5 housing restrictions for perpetrators. The four types of major violent incidents which trigger a VRI response are:

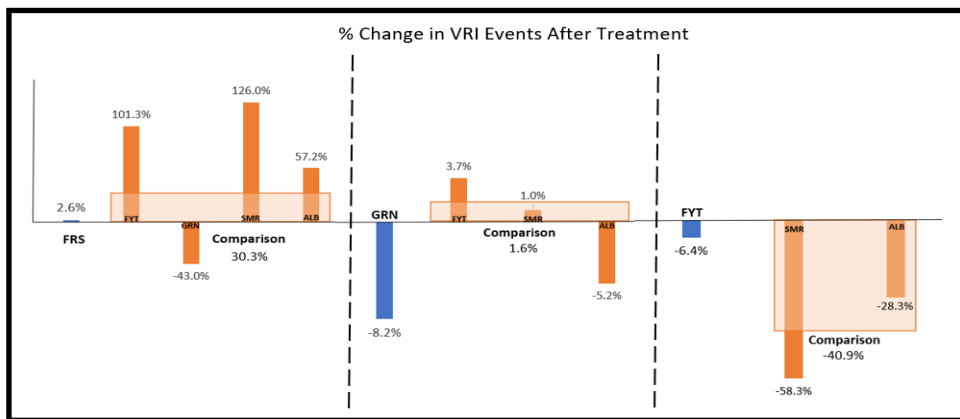
1. Major assaults on staff
2. Fights/assaults with a weapon present
3. Multi-offender assaults
4. Assaults/fights resulting in serious bodily injury

Evaluation Design

This program evaluation uses a difference-in-differences (DiD) research methodology. It considers the 12-month time periods immediately before and after implementation of VRI programs at three SCIs:

1. Forest: Start date = Jan 2016
2. Greene: Start date= April 2017
3. Fayette: Start date = October 2018

Each of these three SCIs were compared to similar SCIs who did not use VRI at the time. The SCIs were chosen because they implemented VRI in a similar way, were in the same geographic region of the state (western PA), and were similar security level facilities². The DiD evaluation method looks at the difference in the change in violence rates over time between prisons that used VRI at the time and prisons that did not use VRI at the time. Violence outcomes examined in this evaluation were: total assaults, total major assaults, major staff assaults, major inmate assaults, fights/assaults with a weapon present, multi-offender assaults, and total VRI



incidents. Outcomes were measured as rates per 1,000 inmates. During the study time-period, the number of VRI events in the SCIs that were evaluated ranged from 5 per year to 39 per year. The number of major assaults ranged from 0 per year to 11 per year.

Results

Overall, the impact of VRI varied across SCIs and outcomes, with some showing a positive impact, some showing a negative impact, and others showing no impact. Results were especially positive for SCI Forest and SCI Greene, and especially for reducing total major assaults, total VRI events, and fights/assaults with a weapon. For example, the graph here shows that the rate of VRI events at SCI Forest increased by 2.6% whereas it increased by 30.3% at the non-VRI comparison SCIs. While the VRI rate went up SCI Forest, what this shows is that it presumably would've gone up at a much higher rate without the VRI in place. At SCI Greene, the rate of VRI events dropped by 8.2% whereas it increased by 1.6% at the non-VRI comparison SCIs. Results were not favorable for SCI Fayette, showing that the rate of VRI events dropped by only 6.4% compared to 40.9% for the comparison SCIs. It should be noted that most of the comparisons did not reach a level of statistical

significance. This is probably due in part to the fact that the types of serious violence outcomes examined are relatively rare events. It should also be noted that most (but not all) of the comparisons met the "parallel trends" assumption which is important for drawing valid conclusions using the DiD methodology.

Conclusion

Results from this evaluation were mixed. The evidence suggests that the VRI program does not demonstrate consistent or predictable reductions in prison violence, but does show some evidence of effectiveness at some prisons and with some specific outcomes. SCI Forest appears to demonstrate the best implementation of the VRI program overall. The VRI program also seems most promising for reducing VRI-defined events, especially fights and assaults involving weapons. Many of the SCIs also reported positive side operational benefits from using VRI.

¹ GVI is also sometimes referred to as a "Focused Deterrence" approach, first implemented by the city of Boston as Operation Ceasefire in the mid-1990s.

² The SCIs that were used were SCI Forest, Greene, Fayette, Somerset, and Albion