Evaluating a Prison-Based Intervention Program: Approaches and Challenges

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Abstract: The Quebec government considers program evaluations to be a necessity if public organizations are to monitor and improve their performances (Lalande, 2010). However, relatively few evaluations are conducted in prisons, despite the important need for programs in such an environment (Cortoni & Lafortune, 2009). The numerous challenges that face researchers who attempt such evaluations may partially explain the reluctance to undertake them. This article traces and explains the process used by a team of researchers in evaluating an addiction program in a provincial prison. The article describes the challenges and problems faced by the team and the strategies that were implemented to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: attrition, challenges, comparison group, free and informed consent, prison context, prisoners’ code, program evaluation, program theory, total institution

Résumé: Pour le gouvernement du Québec, l’évaluation de programme est incon- tournable pour que les organisations rendent compte de leurs performances et les améliorent (Lalande, 2010). Pourtant, peu de démarches évaluatives sont réalisées en contexte carcéral, malgré les besoins importants (Cortoni & Lafortune, 2009), les nombreux défis qui y guettent les chercheurs pouvant expliquer la réticence de plusieurs chercheurs. L’expérience d’une équipe de recherche à travers l’évaluation d’un programme spécialisé en toxicomanie offert dans un établissement de détention québécois est présentée afin d’illustrer les différents défis auxquels elle fut confrontée, mais surtout, de quelles façons ces défis ont été surmontés.

Mots clés : attrition, défis, groupe témoin, consentement libre et éclairé, milieu carcéral, code des détenus, evaluation de programme, théorie du programme, institution totalitaire

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INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that 40,000 individuals are incarcerated annually in Québec detention facilities that deal with individuals with sentences of up to two years minus a day (Service correctionnel du Québec [SCQ], 2010). To encourage offenders to adopt a socially acceptable lifestyle, Corrections Services of Quebec (SCQ) offers programs adapted to their particular needs (Lalande, 2010). However, evidence-based intervention programs are rare (Cullen & Gendreau, 2001), in part because few Quebec programs and treatment initiative efforts are ever evaluated (Goyette, 2009).

Conducting any sort of research project in a prison context is rarely simple (Patenaude, 2001). The pitfalls researchers encounter are similar to those that are often found in the context of intercultural research (Patenaude, 2004), such as the need to work with numerous and complex organizational efforts, delays created by a complex administrative system, complications in ethical approaches, and difficulties in recruiting participants (Appelbaum, 2008; Patenaude, 2004; Wakai, Shelton, Trestman, & Kesten, 2009). However, while there are issues and challenges involved in working in such an environment, they are not insurmountable (Wakai et al., 2009). In this article we discuss four types of challenges encountered in undertaking program evaluation in the prison context: those related to the environment, the population, the program that is being evaluated, and the methods used. Our focus is not on the results obtained but on the challenges faced during the evaluation process.

The Purpose of the Research Process

Although dependence on psychoactive substances is recognized as an important factor in recidivism or parole revocation (Strang et al., 2012; Pernanen, Cousineau, Brochu, & Sun, 2002), there is no Quebec-wide program offered in prisons to deal with this problem. In Quebec, the governing agreement between the Ministry of Public Safety (Ministère de la sécurité publique, MSP) and the Ministry of Health and Social Services (Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux, MSSS) specifies that the public rehabilitation centres (Centres publics de réadaptation en dépendance, CRD) of each region are responsible for addiction treatment of inmates. However, apart from the activities that Alcoholics Anonymous provides in most establishments, most incarcerated addicts have no access to treatment programs (Brochu & Plourde, 2012). There is one exception to this situation: since 2009, the Quebec CRD (CRDQ) has offered an addiction treatment program in the Quebec Detention Centre (Établissement de détention de Québec, EDQ) as part of an educational program of social and professional reintegration.

Players in the Program and Its Work

This program is the result of a cross-sectorial agreement between the Ministry of Education, Recreation, and Sports (Ministère de l’Éducation, des Loisirs et des Sports, MELS), the MSSS, and the MSP. Through the services offered in
connection with this social and professional integration program by MELS, the CRDQ (under MSSS) provides addiction services to the EDQ prison population (under MSP) (Ferland, Blanchette-Martin, Arseneault, Desbiens, & Émond, 2013). Given the unique character of this initiative, its functioning and its results are being closely watched.

**Evaluative Research Design**

This article is based on a research project (funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, CIHR) aimed at obtaining a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the impact of an innovative strategy for the social reintegration of offenders in provincial prisons. The design was based on a quasi-experimental mixed protocol (Creswell, 2003; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002) that combined quantitative data—repeated-measurements collected from volunteer participants in both an experimental group and a control group—with qualitative data. The evaluation process took into account the realities of the prison context and the marginalized population it serves (Alain, 2009; Berk & Rossi, 1990, 1999; Donaldson, Christie, & Mark, 2009; Fink, 1992; Grembowski, 2001).

**CHALLENGES OF EVALUATIVE RESEARCH IN A PRISON CONTEXT**

Four kinds of challenges were considered: those related to the prison environment, the population it serves, the program offered, and the research design.

**Challenges Related to the Prison Environment**

Correctional services that provide mentoring and support for inmates must deal with two competing prison philosophies: security and social reintegration (Lalande, 2010). Despite their attempts to reconcile these objectives, the security aspect prevails, and care/treatment and research come second and third, respectively, in the priorities of these institutions (Trestman, 2005; Wakai et al., 2009). Staff statistics provided by Correctional Service Canada clearly demonstrate the importance placed on security in its facilities: 40% of staff is assigned to surveillance, 12.4% to administration, 4.6% to providing clinical expertise, and 4.9% to program development and application (Bensimon, 2009).

Even if a research project to evaluate a prison intervention program is clearly related to the social reintegration aspect of prisons, researchers must deal both theoretically and practically with security issues. Participatory research, which unites partners from different backgrounds and different organizational cultures, is based on close partnerships (Portelance & Giroux, 2009) and the sharing of different expertises (Leclercq & Varga, 2012). Thus, building relationships with institution staff—particularly with correctional officers, who are the ones primarily concerned with the security mandate—becomes a significant issue (Apa et al., 2012). The researcher must be aware of the legitimate concerns of correctional officers with respect to their arrival in the environment: Does it have an impact on safety or affect the behaviour of inmates? Does escorting the researcher or his
assistant increase the officers’ workload? Maintaining a courteous and respectful relationship with security officers is essential: they have a direct influence on the success of the project, ensure the safety of the team, and facilitate navigating the prison system, for example, by reducing delays (Apa et al., 2012).

When developing the research design (consent, recruitment, data collection), the researcher must consider the security aspects, including minimizing the movement of prisoners as well as taking into account the increased burden or workload for correctional staff (Appelbaum, 2008; Wakai et al., 2009). To do this, Rossi et al. (2004) suggest integrating stakeholders into the development of the design, taking into consideration their views on the feasibility of proposed approaches and methods, and their needs and concerns, without ignoring the reality of the prison environment (Fox, Zambrana, & Lane, 2011; Vanderhoff, Jeglic, & Donovick, 2011; Welsh & Zajac, 2004). Apa’s team (2012) pushes this idea even further, all the way to meeting with the inmate committee of the institution in which the project will take place. Reconciling the philosophies of security and social reintegration is a challenge, and any research, even if involved with social reintegration, must first comply with all security considerations.

**Accessing the Complete Institution Using a Collaborative Research Approach**

A prison is considered to be a total institution (Ben-David, 1992; Denzin, 1968; Kolstad, 1996; Megargee, 1995; Wenk & Moos, 1972) as it is a place of residence and work where a large number of individuals are placed in the same situation, are cut off from the outside world for a relatively long period, and lead a secluded life on explicitly and meticulously regulated terms (Goffman, 1961). Total institutions create their own civil and moral order (Denzin, 1968), with activities organized according to a strict schedule and an explicit set of rules (Vacheret & Lemire, 2007). Researchers who carry out field work in a prison must be very respectful of its system, be sensitive to its explicit and implicit rules, and, above all, demonstrate great flexibility and adaptability. They have to work collaboratively, in a situation where everyone takes part based on their own interests but must also be alert to the perspectives and reality of other researchers (Desgagné & Bednarz, 2005). They also have to deal with sudden changes caused by uncertainties in the environment (disorganized population, fire alarms, inmate transfer, overcrowding, inadequate staffing, postponed meetings) that influence and sometimes determine progress. Trulson, Marquart, and Mullings (2004) developed a list of 10 items that help promote the acceptance and success of a project in prison, four of which involve respect for the structure of the environment. These are punctuality and regularity; undertaking the work at a time that is convenient for the institution; following the rules, even when they appear baseless; and discretion. In our research, following these rules definitely contributed to the welcome the research team received in prison environments.

Prisons have been seen as “black boxes” because of their inaccessibility to researchers (Palermo, 2011). To create a gateway through the institution’s wall,
the researcher must establish a close connection with the prison’s liaison officer (Wakai et al., 2009) or, according to the participatory approach (O’Sullivan, 2004), with a “competent player” who had experienced events from the inside and is knowledgeable about technical and ethical considerations related to the environment (Desgagné, Bednarz, Lebuis, Poirier, & Couture 2001). This agent becomes the researcher’s public relations contact, acting as a guide through the intricacies of the environment and making it possible to avoid blunders that can sometimes mean the end of a project (Hamel, Cousineau, & Vézina, 2008; Megargee, 1995). Such a contact also helps the researcher gain the trust and cooperation of the prison staff and gives legitimacy to the project (Trulson et al., 2004). Taking the most inclusive perspective possible, Apa et al. (2012) believe that, depending on the nature of the project, the role of liaison officer could be filled by a prisoner who is respected by his peers. Trulson et al. (2004) suggest various tricks to maintain this vital relationship: organize informal activities involving the liaison officer, participate in off-campus activities with him/her, and regularly express appreciation of his/her work. As part of our research, we sponsored informal lunches to learn the liaison officers’ perceptions of the progress of the research, sent greeting cards and small gifts at Christmas time to show our appreciation, invited the EDQ liaison officer as a presenter in talks given at various conventions/conferences, and regularly mentioned the outstanding contributions of prison staff involved in our research during talks and public events.

In addition to correctional and liaison officers, the entire prison staff should be involved in the data collection process. To ensure the smooth running of their study, Apa et al. (2012) established working relationships with four different groups: administrative staff, nursing staff, security officials, and prisoners. Others, like Byrne (2005), have targeted administrators, civilians, and prisoners. Whatever the chosen groups, their needs are the same: information on the aims, method, results, and use of project data. The establishment of an advisory committee can help to meet all these needs—some of which arise because the research work is being done in a “culturally different” environment—while also giving the representatives the opportunity to become truly involved in the research process (Fletcher, 2003). The pursuit of a common goal is the foundation of such a collaborative approach (Garant & Lavoie, 1997). As part of the project under review, all the partners collaborated in the research process from the very beginning. They were questioned particularly about their own needs regarding the evaluation process and their concerns and fears, but also on the specifics of the proposed design. Thereafter, occasional visits to different parts of the prison and the CRDQ and quarterly statements outlining the progress of the work were undertaken to maintain this connection and the partners’ sense of involvement.

Inmates’ code. The way a prison, as a total institution, operates is determined entirely by the human relations between guards and detainees (Vacheret & Lemire, 2007). The organization of the prison means that two main groups live side by side: the authorities (prison staff) and the inmates (Denzin, 1968; Megargee, 1995). While the authorities’ main target is security, the prisoners’ main goal
is finding a way to diminish the difficulties related to incarceration, such as frustration and deprivation (Schwartz, 1973). These conflicting goals create a climate of “us against them,” with the prison staff on one side and the prison population on the other (Demuth, 1995).

It is recognized that prisons operate based on an “inmate code,” a code that governs prisoners’ beliefs and values (Rotter, McQuistion, Broner, & Steinbacher, 2005; Vacheret & Lemire, 2007) and makes it possible to maintain control of the prison population (Hayner & Ash, 1939). Although neither official nor written, inmates seem intuitively to adhere to this code—and if they break it are rapidly “educated” by their fellow inmates (Demuth, 1995). Although behaviours valued by this code can help inmates adapt during their time in prison and serve as survival mechanisms in a hostile environment, they often conflict with therapeutic objectives and interfere with social reintegration initiatives (Rotter et al., 2005).

The inmates’ code demands that prisoners, among others things, avoid consorting with the enemy, always be wary, and, above all, reject all that the prison represents (work, authority, and reintegration) (Sykes & Messinger, 1960). Participating in a research project to assess an intervention strategy can be interpreted as betraying the peer group for the benefit of “the enemy” and may make inmates reluctant to volunteer (Copes, 2012). Reassuring them about confidentiality, the independence of the project from the prison system, the use made of the data collected, how the results will be disseminated, and so on, have proven to be effective strategies to win the confidence of inmates and encourage their participation (Patenaude, 2004).

**Issues Connected to the Participants**

**Free and informed consent.** Obtaining free and informed consent is a major challenge for any research involving vulnerable and marginalized populations, such as inmates (Appelbaum, 2008; Hagan, 2010; Neuman, Wiegand, & Winterdyk, 2004). “Free” consent, which refers to obtaining consent in an environment free from coercion, whether the coercion is implicit or explicit, can be seriously compromised in the prison context (Edens, Epstein, Stiles, & Poythress, 2011; Wexler, 1990). Inmates may feel unintended stress (Goodwin, 2008) and believe, wrongly, that refusal to participate will negatively affect the trajectory in prison or in appearances in court (Moser et al., 2004). Others may hope that their participation will favourably affect judicial proceedings and decisions (Neuman et al., 2004). In the United States, the Federal Regulation Code allows researchers to provide a certificate attesting to the inmate’s participation in a study, although for obvious ethical reasons any such certificate should state that it cannot be used in parole review to avoid creating false hope and out of respect for anonymity (Trestman, 2005). Conversely, others may refuse to participate because of the sensitive content of information in interviews (Hagan, 2010; Kraska & Neuman, 2012). The presence of any of the above puts the voluntary nature of participation at risk (DuVal & Salmon, 2004).
Some characteristics of a large part of the population being studied, such as a high level of psychological disorders and a low level of education, may limit the ability to give informed consent (Goodwin, 2008). The portrait of the prison population compiled by Giroux (2011) shows that about 60% of inmates have not completed high school, suggesting that potential participants may have difficulty weighing the pros and cons of participating in a research project (DeMatteo, Filone, & LaDuke, 2011).

It is vital that prison researchers are aware of and respectful of these aspects of the population being studied. As part of our research, various measures were put in place to ensure the “free and informed” nature of the consent obtained: these included a lengthy and detailed consent form that used clear and understandable language to explain the project and what it involved (Bachman & Schutt, 2012; Wexler, 1990), detailed explanations of the nature of the hazards and possible benefits of participation, frequent reminders of the independence of the research team (Maxfield & Babbie, 2012), validation that participants understood what was being asked, and provision of explanatory documents (McShane & Williams, 2008). Moreover, two committees (the Ethics Committee of the Centre D’ollard-Cormier and the Ethics and Research Committee of the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières) as well as the research manager in the office of the Minister of Public Security studied and approved the project before it was implemented.

Some ethics committees go even further. For example, the Columbia University Institutional Review Board requires that the draft protocol be reviewed by the lawyers of inmate participants (Apa et al., 2012). Other committees include prisoners among their members (Wakai et al., 2009). In the past, failure to deal properly with the ethical aspects of research programs led to research that caused harm to inmates, notably through experiments involving chemical, medical, or technological products (Kalmbach & Lyons, 2003; McShane & Williams, 2008; Megargee, 1995; Wexler, 1990). It is estimated that at the beginning of the last century, 85% of clinical drug trials were conducted on inmates (Hoffman, 2000):

Prisoners make splendid laboratory animals. Healthy, relatively free of alcohol and drugs, with regulated diets, they are captives, unlikely to wander off and be lost to both treatment and control groups, and they are under sufficient pressure of adversity to “volunteer.” (Mills & Morris, 1974, p. 60)

The many abuses of the past have resulted in the prison population becoming a protected group that is very difficult to access (Byrne, 2005; Hornblum, 1997; Moser et al., 2004; Wakai et al., 2009).

Confidentiality limits. The prison population is extremely concerned with confidentiality issues, as a breach in confidentiality could have serious consequences (Bourdon & Trottier, 2012). For instance, when Appelbaum and his team (2008) brought together about 20 people with different roles in the prison to reflect on the barriers to mental health research in the prison context, one of the barriers identified was the difficulty of ensuring confidentiality because everyone in the prison quickly knows the nature of the research and which inmates

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have met with the researchers. Vanderhoff et al. (2011) believe that imprisonment always leads to a significant decrease in respect for the prisoners’ rights to privacy and to confidentiality.

The issue of confidentiality can also arise due to the nature of the confidences that are collected as part of the research (Kempf, 1990). Like clinicians, researchers in prisons may receive confidences that can cause them to wonder about the need to breach confidentiality. Zinger, Wichmann, and Gendreau (2001) believe that guaranteeing confidentiality in a context where one is likely to receive sensitive information is an attack on the dignity of the participants. It is therefore imperative that the researcher properly establish the boundaries within which confidentiality can be maintained, especially when the consent form is being signed (Kalmbach & Lyons, 2003).

Other situations, referred to as “dirty hands syndrome” (Klockars, 1979) or “guilty knowledge” (Fetterman, 1989), may also cause difficulties with confidentiality. Researchers may witness or be entrusted with information that indirectly implicates them in illegal activities or that may lead them to suspect that they could be considered accomplices if they remain silent. In our interviews, for instance, an assistant witnessed a drug deal between a visitor and an inmate, several inmates confided that they used drugs while incarcerated, and a prisoner threatened a fellow inmate. In all these cases, the research team wondered how to respond, sometimes even turning to ethics committees for help, while always recognizing that the integrity and security of the detainees, the institution, and the researcher as well as the continuation of the project must be at the forefront of its decision process. That being said, it is important to recognize that special circumstances may require more flexible limits before confidentiality is broken (Appelbaum, 2005; Cohen & Gerbasi, 2005) and that it is necessary to rely on the clinician’s or researcher’s good judgement (Pinta, 2009). For example, condoms are distributed to the inmates, even though sexual relations between them are prohibited, and bleach is available for the sterilization of injection equipment, part of an equally outlawed practice (Thomas, 2005). Such officially prohibited situations are tolerated because they do not compromise the safety of others or of the institution.

Sample attrition. While the characteristics of the study population can compromise obtaining free and informed consent, they also represent a threat to tracking and retaining participants, particularly if the period following probation is part of the project (Lobmaier, Kunoe, & Waal, 2010). Inmates participating in research projects demonstrate an exceptionally high attrition rate due to various factors (transfer, release, court appearances, isolation, vulnerability to relapse, unreachability, loss of interest in the research, precarious situation when leaving prison) (Lobmaier et al., 2010; Wakai et al., 2009). Lösel (2001) estimates that the attrition rate for projects involving a prison population are 10% at best, 50% at worst, and typically around 25%.

Relatively new information has emerged in recent years concerning tracking participants who are “difficult to reach” or part of a “hidden population,” such as offenders who are not incarcerated (Jacques & Wright, 2008) and those addicted...
to psychoactive substances (Kelly, 2010; Miller & Sønderlund, 2010; Peterson et al., 2008). In our case, “routine” strategies in longitudinal research design (Smith Fowler, Aubry, & Smith, 2004) were used, including collecting as much information as possible, particularly essential contact information. As well, participants were given a business card with the telephone number (toll-free) of a research contact as well as the team’s e-mail address (McKenzie, Peterson Tulsky, Long, Chesney, & Moss, 1999). A classic technique, highly recommended by Jacques and Wright (2008), is to make it a priority that the same person maintains contact with the participants, which promotes trust and ensures greater validity of results. This strategy should be used as much as possible, recognizing the specific contingencies of university research, in which the training of students, whose time in the team may be longer or shorter depending on the situation, is also important. The greater stability of assistants conducting interviews for the experimental group (95% saw the same assistant for each of the three stages, against only 14% for the control group) clearly affected the attrition rate, which was considerably better for the experimental group in the last stage (39% versus 19% for control group).

Associated techniques (Smith Fowler et al., 2004) were also used to keep track of study participants, such as obtaining authorization to communicate with others (MSP, Ministère de l’Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale) to obtain new contact information, to communicate with family members and/or friends, and to contact participants via social networks, and so on. The strategy that proved to be most effective in the context of this project was that of asking permission to communicate with the participants’ probation officer to obtain current contact information, as several of the participants were on probation during the third stage of the study.

Other techniques can also be used to promote participant retention and involve the characteristics of interviewers, the relationship between the interviewer and the participant, and the motivation of the participant (Smith Fowler et al., 2004). Careful interviewer selection criteria were established, which included being comfortable with a population of incarcerated offenders, having been trained in or being willing to be specifically trained in techniques for conducting research in a prison environment, being conscious and aware of participants’ cultural and social characteristics, being able to be respectful and listen, being calm, and dressing suitably (Cohen et al., 1993; McKenzie et al., 1999). As the research is based on social interactions, certain characteristics of the interviewer, including gender, are likely to affect participant behaviour (Reid, 2005). (As the pool of assistants in psychoeducation, psychology, and criminology is largely made up of women, women are usually overrepresented in such teams.) Financial compensation of $40 paid at the last stage of data collection to participants who were no longer imprisoned was one of the means used to maintain motivation to participate. In view of the precarious situation in which most find themselves when leaving prison, this compensation meets a real need in the population being studied and may, among other things, cover expenses of travelling to the meeting place and related costs. Jacques and Wright (2008) believe that financial compensation, however modest, is unavoidable when dealing with a criminal population for
whom giving something without expecting anything in return is unusual. On the other hand, some inmates said that they were satisfied simply with helping other inmates and thus making their “time” in detention profitable. Some also chose to donate their compensation to charity.

As part of the goal of minimizing sample attrition at the last stage, we found that using telephone interviews and sending (by mail, by e-mail, through intermediaries) the documents necessary to complete the interview in advance greatly facilitated participant retention. It is difficult for many participants to get around (no transportation, insecure jobs with varied schedules, etc.) and also difficult to find places for in-person interviews that both are safe and guarantee confidentiality.

Finally, other reasons also accounted for sample attrition: not being able to get in touch with the participant due to change of contact information, failure to return a call when a message was left with a friend or relative, refusal to continue, many missed appointments suggesting a lack of interest, entering therapy, and even death.

**Issues Linked to the Program Being Evaluated**

**Evaluating a program in which three ministries are involved.** A special feature of our project is that it assessed a program that arose from collaboration between three ministries—the MELS, the MSSS, and the MSP—who had aligned their respective mandates to create a unique program. The partners were all enthusiastic about the program and expressed concern about the reality and views of the others who were involved, but in practice program activities seem to take place in isolation: the MSP takes care of the security aspect, the MSSS of the drug treatment component, and the MELS of the educational component. Their approach illustrates the challenge facing participative research—to move beyond simple cooperation, which essentially consists of recognizing that there are different organizations or groups that remain relatively independent, to achieve true collaboration, which leads to the emergence of a shared worldview and language (Leclercq & Varga, 2012). The evaluation process has had the effect, through training or joint presentations at conferences, of increasingly bringing different stakeholders together.

**The theory behind the program and the efficiency criteria.** It is recognized that the theory behind a program plays a pivotal role in formulating and prioritizing research questions, developing specifications for research, and, ultimately, interpreting results (Bickman, 1987; Chen & Rossi, 1980). Too often, evaluators do not spend enough time articulating the relevant theory before developing their project, assuming that it is clearly established and unambiguous (Donaldson et al., 2009). However, it is not uncommon to find that the theory behind a program is only implied, that the stakeholders do not all have the same vision of it (Chen, 2005; Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004), or that it is not clearly detailed in official program documents. Conflict among stakeholders is often due to differing political values and ideologies that can be difficult to
reconcile, even in the most comprehensive and respectful research design (Rossi et al., 2004). In our case, a major difference in the philosophy of intervention concerning psychoactive substance use meant that two partners were in opposition to a certain extent: the EDQ advocates abstinence while the CRDQ believes in harm reduction (Brisson, 1997). These two philosophies lead to different conceptions of what makes a drug intervention program successful. If the parties at the heart of the project are not in substantial agreement about the mission, goals, and other aspects of the program, evaluation becomes more complex. Such disagreement can have a significant impact not only on the interpretation of results but also on the distribution/presentation of results to partners. If results contradict the policies and perspectives advocated by stakeholders, the whole evaluation process is likely to be strongly criticized.

Participative research involves commitment to a co-construction of the knowledge process and the joint development of an understanding of the purpose of the research (Portelance & Giroux, 2009). A difference in perspectives can thus serve to promote interaction and reflection (Garant & Lavoie, 1997). However, to achieve this we had to arrive at an articulate and explicit description of the concepts, hypotheses, and expectations that supported the rationale behind the program and ensure that all partners were in agreement about these (Rossi & Lipsey, 1999).

Criminological research questions often involve phenomena that are difficult to quantify, such as social reintegration, making it hard to identify indicators that are objectively measurable. However, we can establish a set of concepts to describe these phenomena by isolating a certain number of them and developing measures to evaluate them (Legault-Mercier & St-Pierre, 2011). As with program theory, it is important to include stakeholders in the establishment of criteria for success (Funnell & Rogers, 2011). In this case, the research team used indicators that the SCQ had developed with regard to different risk factors related to criminal behaviour and integrated them with the harm reduction approach advocated by the other partner (CRDQ). The fact of whether or not a drug was used was not sufficient to measure changes in behaviour: instead, the evaluation project focused on whether the situation of the participant had been improved, whether there had been a reduction in the negative consequences of drug use, and so on (Fallu & Brisson, 2013).

**Issues Related to Research Methods: Putting Together a Comparison Group**

In an era of evidence, experimental designs that yield objective results are often seen as “the gold standard” (Lafortune, Meilleur, & Blanchard, 2009; Rossi et al., 2004). However, using experimental designs in a program-evaluation framework is not always possible (Bachman & Schutt, 2012), particularly in judicial and criminological contexts (Heck & Roussel, 2007). In such contexts, practical, administrative, legal, and ethical issues often prevent the use of experimental design (Goodwin, 2008; Maxfield & Babbie, 2012). Larney and Martire (2010)
argue that the use of randomized designs in the context of prison program evaluation is not only unnecessary but also unethical, particularly due to incompatibility between the subjects studied in criminology and the experimental logic of random assignment of subjects to treatment or control groups (Lafortune et al., 2009). Given this, researchers in the field of criminology usually turn to a quasi-experimental design (McShane & Williams, 2008) as the best way to maximize validity (Bachman & Schutt, 2003) when an experimental design is impossible, difficult, or simply inappropriate (Funnell & Rogers, 2011; Kraska & Neuman, 2012; Neuman et al., 2004). Quasi-experimental designs, however, face a major challenge in dealing with group equivalence (Rossi et al., 2004). The more similar the groups are, especially in terms of personal characteristics related to program interventions, the more confident researchers can be about the results (Bachman & Schutt, 2012), but if the program being evaluated is effective, assuring similarity means that some individuals who would benefit are prevented from participating.

In our study, control group participants were recruited from the detention facility in Trois-Rivières (Établissement de détention de Trois-Rivières, EDTR). Using the prison population from another region as a control avoids the ethical problem that can be created in an evaluation approach focused on effects, that of removing part of the population from a potentially beneficial intervention program (Haccoun & McDuff, 2009; Newman & Brown, 1996). Having the control group and the experimental group in different establishments also prevented the contamination that might have occurred if the two groups had been from the same establishment, as Quebec prisons are not large enough to prevent contact between experimental and control group members. To ensure that participants in the control group corresponded in every respect to participants in the experimental group, pavilions where recruitment took place were strategically selected, files of prisoners who had expressed interest in the project were evaluated by the prison counsellor, and the level of substance abuse of interested prisoners was appraised by the research assistants. These measures helped to establish that those in the control group met all necessary criteria to qualify for inclusion in the treatment initiative if it had been offered in their facility.

DISCUSSION: FACTORS FAVOURING EVALUATIVE RESEARCH IN A PRISON CONTEXT

In light of our experience, we can confirm that carrying out a prison research project raises a considerable number of issues but is still feasible. Here are the elements that allowed us to ensure the project's success:

- Various techniques exist to minimize sample attrition (Smith Fowler et al., 2004). To deal with the many special characteristics of the prison population, it is necessary to combine several of these and to be creative in developing new ones.
• It is essential that the researcher engage all the stakeholders when developing the research design, putting it into action, analyzing results, or disseminating these results. Considering and respecting the reality of each of person or entity involved and taking them into account throughout the process helps to guarantee their collaboration.

• The connection established with the staff of the institution, particularly correctional officers, is paramount. By communicating openly, with understanding and respect, the researcher secures allies who will be of value throughout the project.

• The prison environment and the population it serves have very special characteristics to which the researcher should be sensitive. Being open-minded and respectful is essential.

• The researcher should remember that the success of such projects is often based on personal initiatives, on people who believe in him/her and in the project and make this belief apparent to others in the research environment. To this end, an alliance with a liaison who is recognized and respected in the environment is crucial.

• Winning participant trust by being reassuring and frank and taking the time to explain the project is the only way to ensure prisoner cooperation and thereby ensure that results are as valid as possible. In our experience, detainees, once their confidence is earned, are remarkably generous.

In sum, a high degree of adaptability and openness to change, creativity, rigour, alertness to the scope of one’s actions, a sympathetic understanding of the environment and those in it, and developing and maintaining respectful relationships are essential assets for any researcher who hopes to succeed with a prison context research project.

CONCLUSION

The overall objective of this project was to obtain viable data about the effectiveness of a prison drug intervention program through an evaluative approach that takes into account the realities of the prison context and the marginalized population it serves (Alain, 2009; Berk & Rossi, 1990, 1999; Donaldson et al., 2009; Fink, 1992; Grembowski, 2001) using a mixed quasi-experimental design (Creswell, 2003; Shadish et al., 2002). While specialized substance abuse services in detention facilities must be maintained (federally) and developed (provincially) (Kinkel et al., 2007; Lipton, Pearson, Cleland, & Yee, 2002; McMurran 2006; Pearson & Lipton, 1999; Stallwitz & Stöver, 2007), very few Quebec studies have investigated the impact of these programs (Brochu & Schneeberger, 2000). The structure of the prison system imposes social, political, and organizational restrictions that make a program evaluation approach both difficult and hazardous (Rossi et al., 2004), especially for researchers from outside the environment (Patenaude, 2004).
However, an evaluation process in the prison environment, although strewn with pitfalls, is possible if certain measures are taken, as shown in this article.

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