



Teen Challenge of the Dakotas

Summary of post-exit recidivism

Teen Challenge of the Dakotas seeks to help its participants build healthy lives, maintain sobriety, and keep out of the criminal justice system. Of those participants who spent at least 90 days in the program, 10 percent recidivated after exit. For those graduating from the program, post-exit recidivism was even lower (6%).

Teen Challenge of the Dakotas offers a long-term residential recovery program for adult males, primarily referred by the judicial system. The 16-month program consists of 10 months of induction and training followed by six months focused on reentry and transitioning back into the community. Teen Challenge endeavors to help its participants become mentally sound, emotionally balanced, socially adjusted, physically well, and spiritually alive.

Teen Challenge partnered with Wilder Research (a non-profit research and evaluation firm located in St. Paul, Minnesota) to design its evaluation. This summary reports findings from Wilder Research's analysis of court records from South Dakota's Unified Judicial System.

Key findings

Participants were included in Wilder Research's evaluation if they were enrolled in Teen Challenge of the Dakotas for at least 90 days. Results show a promising impact on the vast majority of program participants with low rates of incarceration or felony convictions after program exit. Of the 84 participants included in the evaluation:

- Ten percent returned to prison or were convicted of a felony *within three years* after release from prison (this finding aligns with the South Dakota State Legislature's measure of recidivism). In comparison, a recent Pew study reports that South Dakota's *statewide* recidivism rate is 45 percent (2004-2007 releases).¹
- Thirteen percent were incarcerated after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas as compared to 61 percent prior to enrollment, which is a statistically significant difference. This finding refers to all participants who were incarcerated after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, including participants who returned to prison *more than* three years after their release, as well as those who had not been incarcerated before.

An analysis of correctional outcomes data show that Teen Challenge graduates appear to have more positive outcomes related to post-exit involvement in the correctional system than non-graduates; fewer graduates recidivated than non-graduates. Key findings include:

- Just six percent of graduates returned to prison or were convicted of a felony *within three years* after release from prison (compared to 16% of non-graduates). This measure aligns with the South Dakota State Legislature's measure of recidivism.
- Ten percent of graduates were incarcerated after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas as compared to 18 percent of non-graduates. This finding refers to all participants who were incarcerated after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, including participants who returned to prison *more than* three years after their release, as well as those who had not been incarcerated before.

The program should continue to study these outcomes. While graduates appear to have better outcomes, statistical tests do not show significant differences between graduate and non-graduate groups – due in part to the relatively small number of participants in each group.

¹ The Pew Center on the States. (2011, April). *The State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America's Prisons*. Retrieved from: http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/State_Recidivism_Revolving_Door_America_Prisons%20.pdf

Program description

Teen Challenge of the Dakotas offers a long-term, faith-based residential recovery program for adult males who struggle with chemical dependency and other issues. As mentioned earlier, participants are primarily referred by the judicial system.

As well as providing residential recovery support for men struggling with alcohol and substance abuse, Teen Challenge of the Dakotas offers life skills training, which prepares its participants for successful community reentry. The director of Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, Mike Gilmartin, said the following of the program:

The real heart and soul of our program is that we focus on the man as a whole, rather than look at the dysfunction: addiction, depression, criminal activity, etc. Instead, we reach into a man's heart, which is where all the issues of life flow from. Rather than teaching a man what not to do, we lead him into a new freedom and help him discover purpose, vision, and hope for the future.

We focus on building a man's character and teaching him the value of taking responsibility and finding faith, which brings a healthy identity and self-worth.

Over the course of 16 months, participants attend programming and training that focuses on positive self-image, healthy family and personal relationships, financial literacy, job skills development, and engaging with their community.

Methods and evaluation design

Using court and incarceration records from South Dakota's Unified Judicial System, Wilder Research determined how many participants:

- Returned to prison or were convicted of a felony after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas *within three years* after release from prison. For these participants, incarceration occurred before entering Teen Challenge. South Dakota's statute defines recidivism as a return to prison within three years of prison release, *or* a conviction for a new felony while on probation supervision or within three years after discharge from probation.² For this study, the time period measured was three years since *prison release* (but we were not able to also include the additional measure related to felonies that occurred during the three year period after *probation discharge* date).

² South Dakota State Legislature. (2013, November 10). *South Dakota Codified Laws*. Retrieved from <http://legis.state.sd.us/statutes/DisplayStatute.aspx?Type=Statute&Statute=16-22-1>

- Were incarcerated or convicted of a felony after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas regardless of previous incarceration or length of time passed since release from prison.³ Wilder Research included this information to provide a comprehensive picture of the program's participant outcomes as they relate to incarcerations and felony convictions.

Limitations

There are some limitations to keep in mind when interpreting the results of this study. Wilder Research requested data only from South Dakota's Unified Judicial System. Wilder Research did not have access to other state or federal court records, and findings from this evaluation do not pertain to activity outside of South Dakota.

Recidivism is defined many different ways and sometimes includes re-arrests, re-convictions, or re-incarceration within a set period of time. In one recent publication, the US Bureau of Justice Statistics defined recidivism as a re-arrest, reconviction, or return to prison with or without a new sentence during a three-year period following a prisoner's release.⁴ The South Dakota State Legislature uses a different definition of recidivism (as defined above). Wilder Research advises caution when comparing findings from this summary report to national recidivism rates or recidivism rates of other states or regions, because it is important to ensure that all comparative sources are using the same definition of recidivism.

Another factor to consider is the length of time that has lapsed since participants exited the program. This analysis was based on participants who were enrolled at least 90 days in Teen Challenge from 2008-2011. For more recent participants in Teen Challenge (those who entered after 2011) minimal time has passed since exiting the program. An evaluation of the same participants conducted after more time has passed might yield different findings due to participants' prolonged time outside the program.

³ This finding refers to all participants who were incarcerated or were convicted of a felony after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas; it does not necessarily refer to participants who have a previous incarceration. All incarcerations included were the result of a felony conviction or probation violation.

⁴ US Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2013, November 10). *Recidivism*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=17>

Participants included in the study

The 84 participants included in this study entered Teen Challenge of the Dakotas between January 2008 and December 2011. In addition, these participants were enrolled in the program for a minimum of 90 days and an average of 411 days. Graduates were enrolled for an average of 495 days, while non-graduates were enrolled for an average of 279 days.

Of the 84 participants, 51 (61%) graduated from the program. Thirty-three participants (39%) either voluntarily quit or were dismissed by program staff for not following program requirements. For the purposes of this summary, these two groups are combined as “non-graduates.”

1. Participant characteristics

	Total participants (N=84)	Graduates (N=51)	Non-graduates (N=33)
Enrollment year			
2008	18	10	8
2009	22	14	8
2010	24	15	9
2011	20	12	8
Length of time in program			
90-180 days	9	0	9
181-270 days	11	0	11
271-360 days	7	2	5
361-540 days	48	42	6
541-720 days	8	6	2
721+ days	1	1	0

Source: Teen Challenge of the Dakotas internal records.

Findings related to judicial system involvement

Post-exit recidivism

Eight participants returned to prison or were convicted of a felony after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas (10% of total participants) *within three years* after their release from prison. Of those participants, three graduated from the program (6% of graduates) and five did not graduate (16% of non-graduates).

In comparison, a recent Pew study reports that South Dakota’s *statewide* recidivism rate is 45 percent (2004-2007 releases).⁵ The Pew recidivism rate includes returns to prison within three years, only. Whereas, this study also includes felony convictions within three years to better align with South Dakota’s statute.

2. Returned to prison or convicted of a felony *within three years* after release from prison

	Total participants (N=84)		Graduates (N=51)		Non-graduates (N=33)	
Returned to prison or convicted of a new felony <i>within three years</i> after release from prison	8	10%	3	6%	5	16%

Source: South Dakota Unified Judicial System court records.

Notes: Wilder Research did not have access to other state or federal court records; findings do not pertain to activity outside of South Dakota.

Wilder Research advises using an additional recidivism measure to evaluate longer term programs like Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, which requires its participants to be enrolled in the program for 16 months to graduate. As stated previously, graduates’ average length of stay in the program was 495 days (about 17 months). Participants who are referred to Teen Challenge of the Dakotas after release from prison may have the support of the program for about half of the three-year period after their release. For these participants, it may be important to examine their recidivism for three years after they exit Teen Challenge to more fully understand the long-term impacts of program participation and community reintegration.

Post-exit incarcerations and felony convictions

To provide a comprehensive picture of Teen Challenge of the Dakotas participant outcomes, Wilder Research included post-exit incarcerations and felony convictions regardless of any previous incarceration or how much time has passed since release from prison. The following findings include: 1) participants who were incarcerated or convicted of a felony within three years after release from prison, 2) participants who were incarcerated or convicted of a felony *more than three years* after release from prison, and 3) participants who were incarcerated or convicted of a felony who were *never previously incarcerated*. In short, the following findings refer to all participants who, after exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, were incarcerated or convicted of a felony – without regard to prior correctional history.

⁵ The Pew Center on States. (2011, April). *The State of Recidivism: The Revolving Door of America’s Prisons*. Retrieved from: http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/sentencing_and_corrections/State_Recidivism_Revolving_Door_America_Prisons%20.pdf

Eighteen participants were incarcerated⁶ or were convicted of a felony post-exit (21% of total participants) *regardless of previous incarceration or length of time since release from prison*. Of those participants, seven graduated from the program (14% of graduates) and eleven did not graduate (33% of non-graduates).

3. Incarcerated or convicted of a felony post-exit, regardless of previous incarceration or length of time since release from prison

	Total participants (N=84)		Graduates (N=51)		Non-graduates (N=33)	
Incarcerated or convicted of a felony post-exit	18	21%	7	14%	11	33%

Source: South Dakota Unified Judicial System court records.

Notes: Wilder Research did not have access to other state or federal court records; findings do not pertain to activity outside of South Dakota.

Incarceration rates

Prior to enrolling in Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, about three-fifths of participants (61%) were incarcerated for at least some length of time.⁷ Of those participants, 30 eventually graduated from the program (59% of graduates) and 21 did not graduate (64% of non-graduates).

After exiting Teen Challenge of the Dakotas, about 13 percent of participants were incarcerated for at least some length of time.⁵ Of those participants, five graduated from the program (10% of graduates) and six did not graduate (18% of non-graduates).

The decreases in incarceration rates for all participants, for graduates and non-graduates, are statistically significant. Teen Challenge of the Dakotas participants were significantly less likely to return to prison after exiting the program, regardless if they graduated or not.

4. Incarceration rates pre-enrollment and post-exit

	Total participants (N=84)		Graduates (N=51)		Non-graduates (N=33)	
Incarcerated pre-enrollment	51	61%	30	59%	21	64%
Incarcerated post-exit	11	13%***	5	10%***	6	18%***

Source: South Dakota Unified Judicial System court records.

Notes: Wilder Research did not have access to other state or federal court records; findings do not pertain to activity outside of South Dakota. Differences between pre-enrollment and post-exit incarceration rates were tested using the McNemar's test. Differences are significant at: *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, and * $p < .05$

⁶ All incarcerations included were the result of a felony conviction or probation violation.

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Next steps

Teen Challenge of the Dakotas is engaged in a process of understanding more about the short- and long-term outcomes of programming on the lives of their participants. This initial analysis of judicial data is a helpful first step and indicates that participants, particularly those who graduate, have relatively low levels of recidivism compared to statewide rates. Although recidivism is important, Teen Challenge is also interested in other outcomes such as relapse rates and treatment re-entry. Procedures have been put in place to ask permission of participants to allow researchers to follow-up to see how many participants enter treatment after exiting Teen Challenge.

As mentioned in this report, because the follow-up period study varies, depending on how long it has been since the participant exited from Teen Challenge, it is important to consider continued follow-up with study participants to best understand recidivism rates.

As mentioned earlier in this report, one limitation of the current analysis of recidivism was that some participants had a limited length of time that has lapsed since they exited the program. This analysis was based on participants enrolled from 2008-2011. For more those who entered in 2011, minimal time has passed since exiting the program. An evaluation of the same participants conducted after more time has passed is important to better understanding the full extent of possible recidivism due to participants' continued time outside the program.

Finally, Teen Challenge is planning to continue working with an outside research to conduct additional follow-up, directly with former participants, to understand other important outcomes, such as reductions in substance abuse and improvements in employment, health, mental health, relationships, and stable housing.

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For more information

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