

Halfway house programmes

Providing a community-based living environment, primarily to support offenders leaving prison.

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Effect scale	Quality of evidence				
	Effect Impact on crime	Mechanism How it works	Moderator Where it works	Implementation How to do it	Economic cost What it costs
 Overall reduction	 Very strong	 Low	 Strong	 Low	No information

Focus of the intervention

Halfway houses are community-based offender programmes that provide support to offenders as part of a primary sentence or licence conditions. Most halfway houses are used to support offenders to reintegrate into the community after they leave prisons (known as halfway-out houses) but they can also be used as an alternative to imprisonment (halfway-in houses).

Provision typically includes temporary housing that is provided in a community-based residential facility with around the clock supervision. They offer services such as

- access to employment
- education
- life skills training

For those being released from prison, they may provide support intended to ease the transition to living back in the community such as substance misuse treatment and counselling. There is no

single definition of a halfway house as provision varies in terms of the services offered and the populations served.

This narrative is based on one meta-analytic review covering nine studies that examined the effect of halfway houses on reducing reoffending.

A number of measures were used to identify the overall effect of halfway house programmes on reoffending

- arrest (five studies)
- conviction (four studies)
- imprisonment rates (five studies)

Eight of the nine primary studies included in the meta-analysis were based on evidence from the USA and one was carried out in Iceland. Follow-up periods selected for the analyses averaged two to three years. Only one of the nine studies focused on halfway in programmes with eight studies examining halfway out houses.

How strong is the evidence?

The review was sufficiently systematic that most forms of bias that could influence the study conclusions can be ruled out.

The review used a high-quality design. It had a transparent and well-designed search strategy, featured a valid statistical analysis, and sufficiently assessed the risks associated with publication bias.

The authors also conducted analysis to assess heterogeneity between and within primary studies, in which they found characteristics of the studies (publication year, publication type, research design, outcome measure, sample size, and sample ethnicity) were important factors in predicting the size of the halfway house treatment effect on reoffending.

Effect – how effective is it?

Overall, the evidence suggests that halfway house programmes reduce crime.

The meta-analysis found that halfway house programmes led to a statistically significant reduction in reoffending in comparison to participants who received traditional probation supervision upon release from prison.

Six of the nine individual studies included in the meta-analysis reported a statistically significant reduction in reoffending. Two of the studies were not statistically significant (one of these was the halfway in study) and one reported a statistically significant increase in reoffending.

Analyses of each of the three individual outcome measures used across the different studies found a significant impact for reductions in arrest and imprisonment. A non-significant effect was reported for conviction.

The review authors also reported the importance of research design in predicting the size of halfway house treatment effect on reoffending. Weaker study designs reported stronger, statistically significant reductions in offending behaviours.

Mechanism – how does it work?

The review suggested a number of mechanisms by which halfway house programmes might have an effect on crime. These include supporting people by addressing risk factors such as:

- unemployment
- homelessness
- substance and illegal drug use

However, these mechanisms were not empirically tested.

Moderators – in which contexts does it work best?

The review had a theoretical description of how the effectiveness of halfway house programmes might vary by context. Specifically, the meta-analysis showed that while halfway house programmes may be effective at reducing reoffending for white offenders, programmes that served predominantly ethnic minority offenders may have the opposite effect.

The review authors suggested other contextual individual factors (age and gender) and programme level characteristics (such as the selection of lower-risk or motivated offenders to participate in the

programme) could impact on the reported effectiveness of halfway houses, although these were not tested in the review.

Implementation – what can be said about implementing this initiative?

The review noted multiple elements that should be considered when implementing a halfway house programme.

These include:

- being able to provide programme participants with temporary housing
- the need for a community-based residential facility
- the requirement for constant supervision and daily contact between staff and participants (although residents are typically permitted to leave throughout the day), and a requirement for participants to abide by rules such as a curfew and drug testing
- the ability to offer services which may assist with the difficult transition from imprisonment to the community – this includes providing assistance in navigating family relationships upon release
- their potential for reducing prison overcrowding

The review authors further noted how certain services are provided (frequency, duration, intensity) may vary substantially between halfway house programmes. However, these features were not described in detail or empirically tested.

Economic considerations – how much might it cost?

The review did not discuss the costs or economic benefits of halfway house programmes, and no formal economic analysis was provided.

General considerations

- The majority of the evidence was based in the USA so caution should be taken when applying the information to other geographical contexts.

Summary

There is evidence that halfway out programmes reduce reoffending among offenders who have recently been released from prison. The implementation of halfway house programmes varies from site to site, but usually involves constant supervision and the provision of temporary housing and support services including employment, education and life skills training.

The review included a theoretical description of how the effectiveness of halfway house programmes might vary by context and illustrates the importance of understanding individual-level and programme characteristics.

Reviews

Review one

Reference

Wong, J. S., Bouchard, J., Gushue, K., & Lee, C. (2019) 'Halfway out: an examination of the effects of halfway houses on criminal recidivism', International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology, 63(7), 1018-1037.

Summary prepared by

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