



Research Spotlight

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YOGA AND MINDFULNESS TRAINING

“Helps calm you down and relaxes you. It allows you to relax and get rid of negative thoughts.”
 A youth program participant

Walking in, it seems like any other gym; however this one is located inside a secure facility operated by the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services (DJS). The floor is covered by yoga mats, waiting for the youth and instructor. The youth enter the gym and place their shoes neatly in front of the bleachers. There is a level of excitement that buzzes in the room as they all talk before the instructor arrives. As the instructor walks in, the youth take a mat and begin to listen. It is easy to determine which youth have participated in a few classes before this one, as they know to roll their socks over their pant cuffs to allow freedom of movement. It all begins with deep breaths and relaxing muscles before moving into specific yoga poses. As they follow the instructor’s lead, it is obvious that the youth are enjoying themselves.

The instructor uses this time to not only take the youth through the poses, but also to discuss various topics with them and teach them how to regulate their breathing. Topics vary, but are centered on an idea of youth acquiring social skills, helping them realize self-worth, and ways they can work towards fulfilling their potential.

Part of the work that DJS endeavors to do is to provide the youth in its care with a safe environment that can help them change their lives for the better. In addition to the critical services and educational programs provided to the youth, the department also seeks to provide positive activities and opportunities to explore new things. According to DJS’ Director of Behavior Health, “Youth are involved in multiple therapeutic, educational and recreational activities during their stay in a residential setting. There has been increasing amount of research focusing on Mindfulness training, and its therapeutic effects for youth - especially those that may have experienced trauma and display maladaptive behaviors as a result of those experiences. Mindfulness interventions - which include meditation, yoga, self-introspection, calming/ coping strategies - are showing promising results in recent literature reviews with adult and juvenile populations.” Keeping youth engaged and active is essential to creating a more balanced environment and overall more invested youth.

To add to its therapeutic opportunities, in the spring of 2017 DJS began providing yoga classes at Baltimore City Juvenile Justice Center (BCJJC) and Thomas J.S. Waxter Children’s Center (Waxter). The intention was to provide a new program to engage the youth while also teaching them ways to relax and cope with stress both inside and outside of the facility. Due to the success at these two facilities, the program was expanded to Victor Cullen Center in May 2018 and DJS plans to expand it further into Savage Mountain Youth Center.

WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY ABOUT PROGRAMS LIKE THIS?

Studies have shown that introducing juvenile offenders to the art of yoga and meditation can have a positive impact on the way they approach future conflicts in their lives. An article from the Chicago Tribune in 2008 stated that, “Yoga for juvenile offenders is relatively rare, but yoga and similar stress-relieving practices such as meditation have been used in prisons for years.”¹

The Prison Journal published an article in 2007 that discussed a mindfulness program in use within Massachusetts correctional facilities for adults. The study determined there was improvement between pre-test and post-test results on measures of hostility, self-esteem, and mood disturbance. Results also indicated more evidence of improvement among females than males and more improvement within pre-release facilities than for those in medium-security facilities.²

In February 2016, the International Journal of Offender Therapy and

Comparative Criminology published an article examining a cohort of males ranging in age from 18 to 24 in an alternative to incarceration program. They also participated in yoga and mindfulness training. The report findings discussed the benefits acquired by the participants and specifically mentioned stress reduction and improvements in emotional control. Some participants also expressed improvements in anger control specifically among those amenable to mindfulness training.³

WHAT IS THE YOGA PROGRAM AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Yoga has countless and well documented positive results for its participants. Research has indicated its potential usefulness in a correctional environment... but how does the department actually DO the Yoga Program at its facilities? For DJS, it made sense to contract with a vendor to offer and operate the classes. Since vendors may not already have a program designed to operate within a juvenile detention facility, DJS needed a specialized program. Classes needed to accommodate the turnover of youth into and out of the detention centers

“The youth look forward to the yoga classes. After yoga they appeared to be more relaxed.”

--DJS Staff Member

so that all available slots could be consistently filled as youth are admitted and released.

The classes incorporated the principles of the Positive Youth Development model and utilized strategies to foster team building, pro-social activities, and character and competency development. Classes were specifically designed to help program youth:

- Acquire social skills and to realize self-worth and fulfill their potential;
- Learn how to identify stressors;
- Discover how to decrease stress in constructive ways to ultimately stop destructive behaviors and breathe when anxious; and
- Provide programming to youth that will enhance stress management skills and will promote more adaptive behavioral functioning.

The facilities chosen for the Yoga Program serve different populations. The program at BCJJC serves primarily Baltimore City male youth, while Waxter serves female youth from across Maryland. This was an important consideration when providing programming and staff for the facilities. Even though the program served different populations, the overall criteria were the same for both facilities:



Youth participating in a Yoga class at BCJJC

1. Minimum of 10 youth in each yoga class
2. Two yoga classes were to be held during the week
3. Each class would last 60 minutes (1 hour)

Each class is different but they all have elements in common. All begin with deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and yoga poses. The environment is casual and relaxed throughout the class and youth can interact with the instructor and one other.

Several youth mentioned that they have utilized the yoga techniques they've learned to help calm themselves down during situations that have occurred outside of the program. It was stated by one youth, "when you are confronted with a situation, you can count to ten and relax yourself to not get upset." Even if yoga techniques are not practiced all of the time, youth participants have been introduced to an alternative way of managing anger and negative emotions. Youth discussed using the relaxation techniques to help them prepare for "lights out" and to calm their minds so they can sleep. Another youth explained that he uses the techniques from yoga to make him a better basketball player. The poses they learn in the yoga class offer core (abdomen) strength training.

WHAT ARE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS?

In order to present a complete picture of the youth who participated in the program between July and December 2017, demographic and most-serious

offense data were collected on a total of 147 youth. These data include race, sex, age, region of residence, most serious offense.

Participant Demographics and Most Serious Offenses

Demographics	
Race/Ethnicity	
Black	87.8%
White	10.2%
Other	0.7%
Hispanic	1.4%
Sex	
Male	55.8%
Female	44.2%
Age	
13	2.0%
14	8.8%
15	16.3%
16	27.2%
17	34.0%
18	10.2%
19	1.4%
Region	
Baltimore City	63.9%
Central	18.4%
Eastern Shore	2.0%
Metro	4.1%
Southern	8.2%
Western	2.7%
Out of State	0.7%
Offense Category	
Crime of Violence	35.4%
Crime of Violence	52
Felony	21.8%
Property	19
Drugs	3
Unspecified	1
Misdemeanor	42.2%
Person-to-Person	36
Property	21
Drugs	2
CINS	1
Unspecified	2
Missing	1
Total	147

- Program youth were most likely to be 17-year-old black males
- 64% of youth came from Baltimore City.
- The most frequent charges: motor vehicle theft (12.9%) and Assault/Battery (Misdemeanor) (12.2%).
- Misdemeanors were the most common offense category (42.2%) for program participants and within that category, Person-to-Person offenses were most common (58.1%).

WHAT WERE THE SURVEY RESULTS?

To acquire perspectives of the Yoga Program, DJS provided a pre- and post-program survey to youth participants and also administered a staff survey to gain their thoughts on the program and its impact. Youth were administered the pre-program survey to determine whether they could identify: the things in their life that cause them stress, if they were interested in getting assistance with controlling responses to stress, and if someone has clearly explained the program to them.

- More than half (55.3%) of youth felt that their lives were often stressful,
- Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) indicated that they wanted to learn new skills to help control motions/ behaviors, and
- Over half (57.5%) indicated that purpose of the class was clearly explained.

At the end of their time in the program, the youth were asked questions to



Youth participating in a Yoga class at BCJJC

determine if the program had impacted their responses. Youth were asked if they gained skills in the class to address their life stressors, if they are better able to identify those life stressors, and if they will take the skills they've learned through the Yoga Program and practice them outside of that time each week and when they go home.

- Over two-thirds (68.2%) indicated that they gained skills to better calm themselves down.
- Approximately one-third (34.8%) indicated they could recognize things that cause them stress and tricks to deal with stress from this class.
- 60.9% felt this is a good program for youth to participate in.

“The program is working well and the youth continue to use techniques for sleeping and stretching outside of class time. They like to participate in the discussions and on Fridays, if they’ve had a good session we stop early to play basketball, applying the breathing techniques they’ve been taught.”

--Yoga Program Instructor

As mentioned, staff were given an opportunity to express their opinions on the program and determine if they felt it was making a difference for the youth. The survey was administered to security staff who observed youth before and after program participation and to the Recreation Specialists who are sometimes present during the program. The questions asked staff if they thought the youth would benefit from this class and if there was a noticeable change in behavior after participation.

- 71.4% of staff respondents believe the youth benefit from this class.
- Nearly half (42.9%) staff respondents indicated they observed youth who had participated in the yoga class were noticeably able to calm themselves in a tense situation.

CONCLUSION

Due to the preliminary successes experienced with the Yoga Program at BCJJC and Waxter, in May 2018 DJS began offering a Yoga Program at Victor Cullen Center. Staff indicated that the youth are excited to have this new program and look forward to the classes each week, even after just having a few sessions. In addition to the new program at Victor Cullen Center, DJS plans to expand the Yoga Program even

further, intending to begin a program at Savage Mountain Youth Center.

Downward Facing Dog. Plank. Warrior. All are easily recognizable as basic yoga poses - right? Well, perhaps to an average adult, yes. However, ask a young person and these might be totally new concepts they have never heard of before. Now imagine asking a youth who is in a juvenile detention center! Undoubtedly, these are not terms typically heard or experienced on a daily basis within the confines of detention. That is something that DJS is trying to change. In time, DJS hopes that these and other yoga poses will not only be recognizable to the youth in its care, but also that the mindfulness training experienced in the yoga program will be something the youth can use in their daily lives both in the facility and beyond.

ENDNOTES

¹ Kocian, L. (2008, June 05). Yoga helps teen offenders. *Chicago Tribune*. Retrieved March, 2017, from <http://www.chicagotribune.com>

² Samuelson, M., Carmody, J., Kabat-Zinn, J., & Bratt, M. A. (2007). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Massachusetts Correctional Facilities. *The Prison Journal*, 87(2), 254-268. doi:10.1177/0032885507303753

³ Barrett, C. (2016). Mindfulness and Rehabilitation: Teaching Yoga and Meditation to Young Men in an Alternative to Incarceration Program. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 61(15), 1719-1738. Retrieved March, 2017.