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# Does Anger Management Among Prisoners Work? — A Review of Recent Meta-Analyses

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## Abstract

Anger is a complex emotion that can motivate individuals to commit crimes. This central belief has led many researchers as well as policymakers to wonder whether anger management programs can help reduce the prevalence of recidivism or re-offending among offenders. Over the years, there have been several studies that have been designed to answer this question, which in turn has led many to carry out a meta-analysis. The present article is aimed at examining some recent meta-analyses on this topic and an attempt has been made to find a more comprehensive answer to the question- Does anger management among prisoners really work?

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## Introduction

The recent pandemic has had a significant negative impact on the health and well-being of not only the public but also the healthcare workers (Krishnan & Butola, 2022). Even the education industry had to be shifted online, leading to many losing out on quality education (Krishnan & Joseph, 2023). However, one area that did not receive much focus and attention was the correctional setting. In particular, the focus on reforming offenders by reducing their innate aggression. Anger as an emotion may not always lead to aggression (Henwood et al., 2015). In fact, it has been argued that anger could be considered positive under certain circumstances such as being able to stand up for oneself (Parrott, 2014). On the other hand, anger, when dis-regulated can be highly problematic (Novaco, 2011). Anger is a powerful factor that is

known to be associated with the perpetuation of various crimes such as intimate partner violence (Giordano et al., 2016) and traffic crimes such as risky driving (Faílde-Garrido et al., 2023), to name a few. There are several perspectives on how anger contributes to crime. One such perspective is that anger negatively impacts the cognitive processes of an individual and acts as a barrier to resolving a situation (Agnew, 2009). Another popular view that connects anger and crime is the strain theory, according to which the poor socio-economic position of an individual is the cause of a strain that results in negative emotions (such as anger and frustration), thereby motivating the person to commit a crime (Agnew, 2009). No matter what the perspective is, the end result of anger is by and large catastrophic, leading to the destruction of oneself as well as others. For example, in one recent study, it was discovered that murderers who were motivated by anger, were less likely to even conceal the body of their victims, indicating how someone who is strongly possessed by anger could act in such a thoughtless manner (Kamaluddin et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, criminals who re-offend are also higher on trait-anger (Corapçioğlu & Erdoğan, 2004), leading to the wide-spread discussion on the necessity of anger management programmes for offenders.

In the United Kingdom, anger management programmes constitute ten per cent of all the group work activities in prisons (Byrne & Howells, 2002). Such programmes are based on the assumption that aggression that leads to violence is an outcome of anger and that by helping individuals reduce or manage their anger, they can reduce the instances of aggression (Lee & DiGiuseppe, 2018). While some studies do vouch for the effectiveness of anger management among prisoners in reducing anger (Bahrami et al., 2016) and preventing re-offending (Lila et al., 2014), other studies suggest that they might not be very effective (Constantinou et al., 2015). Therefore, there is a significant debate on this matter that warrants a closer examination.

## Recent Meta-Analyses

Although there have been meta-analyses on the impact of anger management on prisoners, none of them have laid stress on the effectiveness of anger management in groups across various therapeutic interventions. For example, Henwood et al. (2015), carried out a meta-analysis on the effectiveness of cognitive behaviour therapy-based anger management in reducing general and violent recidivism rates. Although this study has been carried out elaborately, it was limited to only cognitive behaviour-based therapy. The meta-analysis revealed that such anger management interventions did lead to a reduction in re-offending and interestingly, less intensive interventions were more effective than intensive interventions (Henwood et al., 2015).

Another meta-analysis by Lee & DiGiuseppe (2018), examined the impact of anger management programmes in both non-clinical and psychiatric populations. The researchers have made a distinction between anger and aggression treatments and noted that anger treatments have been moderately effective among both non-clinical and psychiatric populations. Furthermore, the researchers have noted that the existing literature on the subject lacks studies that focus on the impact of anger management classes (Lee & DiGiuseppe, 2018). The study, however, was not specific to prisoners.

A more recent and detailed meta-analysis on the matter was carried out by Papalia et al., (2019). In their analysis that

explored whether psychological treatments for violent offenders could lead to a decrease in re-offending, the researchers included a total of 27 studies and found that these programmes did lead to a reduction in violent offending, however, they also observed that there is a paucity of research on the subject, particularly, a clear picture of which component of the treatments were effective for which type of offenders. Although the analysis did include 27 studies with 7062 offenders, it was not exclusively based on offenders in prison and it did not differentiate between individual vs group based treatment.

Gannon et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis that examined whether specialised psychological treatment for violent offenders could help reduce recidivism. The authors examined over 70 studies covering 55,604 individuals who had committed a wide variety of offences that ranged from sexual violence to domestic violence. The researchers noted that over 66.1 months, the rate of recidivism was 13.4 per cent for those who had undergone treatment and it was 19.4 per cent for those who had not received treatment. In particular, the researchers noted that certain variables appeared to help optimise the psychological program for treating specific types of offences. For example, arousal re-conditioning was helpful in optimising sexual offence programs. On the whole, the researchers felt that such treatments had a robust impact in reducing recidivism.

Giesbrecht (2023) carried out a more recent meta-analysis that examined the impact of violence intervention programs on the rate of general as well as violent recidivism. The meta-analysis comprehensively examined the interventions in both community as well as correctional settings. A total of 21 studies which included 17,223 individuals were systematically examined. The author concluded that the odds of general recidivism were 25 per cent lower than the control group while in the case of violent recidivism, it was 24 per cent lower than the control group. The results of the meta-analysis once again supported the use of correctional violence treatment programs.

## Research Gap

The existing meta-analyses on the subject appear to be either limited to the testing of cognitive behaviour therapy or towards the reduction of the rate of re-offending. There is a need to examine this issue through quantitative methods such as the RADaR technique that has been employed in recent times (Krishnan & Meena, 2023). There is also a paucity of studies that examine the impact of group-based anger management intervention (irrespective of the therapy used) on the reduction of anger scores of inmates. There is an urgent need to examine this matter because the reduction in the rate of re-offending may not necessarily be an indicator of a reduction in anger scores. Furthermore, the inmate may re-offend several years later, which might be much beyond the scope of previous meta-analyses. Some prisoners may simply be cautious enough to not be caught again after committing a similar crime. Therefore, using re-offending rates as an indicator of anger reduction is significantly flawed. Finally, there is a question of the diversity of the studies included in the meta-analyses. A vast majority of the studies that have been included in meta-analyses have been conducted in the West. There is a paucity of studies on this matter in developing countries such as India where serious crimes such as child trafficking are on the rise (Krishnan, 2023) and where there is a need for prison reforms and improved counselling services for prisoners.

## Conclusion

The review of the recent meta-analyses on the effectiveness of anger management among prisoners/offenders has revealed a lot about the nature of anger itself. While anger can be controlled and anger-induced behaviour can be modified, anger and aggression itself cannot be eliminated. Most studies indicate that anger management or intervention programs to reduce recidivism work to a certain extent, but there is still a significant gap in understanding what causes an individual to re-offend. This points to the fact that the causes of crime, just like the causes of most other forms of acts and behaviours are multivariate in nature. In other words, while anger might be one important force, inequality, lack of employment opportunities, and other environmental factors could also be playing an important role in motivating offenders to commit the same or similar crime. Therefore, instead of focusing only on anger as a cause of recidivism, there is a need to examine other factors as well.

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