Kentucky Department of Corrections: **Supporting Others in Active Recovery (SOAR)**

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Project Acknowledgments

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SOAR Overview

The Kentucky Department of Corrections (KY DOC) manages Substance Abuse Programs (SAP) for individuals with substance use disorders in prisons, jails, and community custody programs (see cdar.uky.edu/cjktos). To provide additional support for individuals who have successfully completed SAP but are not released to the community, KY DOC implemented a transitional treatment program, Supporting Others in Active Recovery (SOAR). This program allows individuals to continue their treatment for substance use disorder while maintaining a prosocial environment. SOAR participants have a primary evidence-based curriculum called My Ongoing Recovery Experience (MORE) developed by Hazelden Betty Ford, as well as several other evidence-based reentry programs.

Notably, the concept for the SOAR program was developed from conversations with SAP clients who identified a need for continued recovery supports, specifically in cases where clients were not released directly to the community after SAP completion. Although SAP graduates have the opportunity to apply to continue as SAP mentors, mentorship positions are limited. Rather than transitioning back to the general jail or prison population, many SAP graduates expressed a desire to continue living in a supportive environment while actively working on their recovery – an opportunity now available through SOAR.

SOAR was initially piloted in 2019 with 88 beds at Northpoint Training Center prison. Because of the program's initial successes, in FY2021, SOAR was expanded to 166 treatment beds at three additional jail sites (Fulton County, Grant County, and Marion County Detention Centers) and in December 2022, to Blackburn Correctional Complex, creating an additional 32 treatment beds (now increased to 40). SOAR programs also offer a six-month SOAR mentorship opportunity and SOAR II dorms for individuals who wish to remain engaged with the program, with the goal of making SOAR continuously available for as long as necessary prior to clients' release to the community. In total, as of this report's publication, 294 SOAR beds are available across all jail and prison programs. As a new continuity of care model, the SOAR program has received national attention, including being presented at the Women's Working in Corrections and Juvenile Justice National Conference.

As part of a pilot initiative under the larger Criminal Justice Kentucky Treatment Outcome Study (CJKTOS), participants of SOAR were identified and invited to complete phone-based follow-up interviews at 12 months post-release with University of Kentucky research staff. This report describes baseline characteristics and 12-month outcomes for participants of SOAR who completed follow-up interviews during FY2022-2023.

"SOAR helped me stay off the yard and stay sober. Being able to have another option to follow up my SAP experience really helped me maintain my sobriety and I am thankful for that. I would like to see them add more treatment programs to follow up on SAP because that is what really saved me this time and maybe it can help someone else too."

Evaluation Methodology

SOAR participants completed the CJKTOS data collection interview at intake into SAP. Between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2022, N=314 SOAR participants were released to the community. Of these, the majority (93.9%, N=295) agreed to participate in the phone-based follow-up interview with University of Kentucky research staff 12 months after release. To maintain consistency with the larger CJKTOS evaluation study, participants were excluded from follow-up if they withdrew or were terminated from the SOAR program, or if they only received 30 days or less of SOAR programming prior to a release or institutional transfer (n=77 excluded).

Table 1. SOAR program completion status of consenting participants released between July 1, 2020 and June 30, 2022 (N=295)

Eligible for follow-up (n=218)		
Graduated	117	39.7%
Released/transferred >30 days	101	34.2%
Excluded from follow-up (n=77)		
Terminated	38	12.9%
Voluntary withdrawal	22	7.5%
Released/transferred ≤30 days	17	5.8%

Of the 218 eligible and consenting participants, an additional 12 clients were later found to be ineligible (8 out of state, 3 deceased, 1 other), 58 were unable to be located, 22 clients refused to participate in the interview, and two had data lost due to technical issues. Thus, the following report presents data collected at baseline (SAP entry) and follow-up (12-months post-release) from the final FY2022-23 sample of N=124 SOAR participants (60.2% of the N=206 eligible clients).

Baseline Characteristics of **SOAR** Participants

As shown in Table 2, at SAP entry, these participants were on average 35.4 years old, 86.3% white, and 100% male (as of this report's publication, there are no SOAR programs for women[1]). Most participants (79.0%) had obtained a high school diploma or GED and 48.4% were single, never married prior to their current incarceration.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Follow-up SOAR Participants (N=124)

	M (SD) or %
Age (range 20-59)	35.4 (7.9)
Gender (% male)	100%
Race (% white)	86.3%
HS diploma/GED or higher	79.0%
Single, never married	48.4%

[1] A female SOAR program was contracted in 2020 but was unable to begin operation due to COVID-related factors that resulted in most female SAP clients being released soon after graduation, without enough time to complete SOAR. However, the DOC still supports creation of a female SOAR program and continues to reevaluate potential need.

Compared to the follow-up sample of clients who completed SAP but did not engage in SOAR programming (see CJKTOS FY2023 annual report), while sample differences did not permit statistical comparisons, several descriptive differences should be noted in terms of prior criminal justice involvement (see Table 3).

Table 3. Criminal Justice Involvement of SOAR Participants Compared to FY2023 SAP Follow-up Sample

	SOAR Participants (n=124)	SAP FY2023 Follow-up Sample (N=295)
Lifetime convictions	11.6 (14.0)	9.6 (10.1)
Nights incarcerated in the 12 months prior to incarceration	53.5 (91.7)	50.4 (95.4)
Length of current incarceration, months	29.4 (40.1)	35.6 (60.7)
Criminal charges at SAP intake:		
Drug charges	54.8%	62.4%
Burglary	23.4%	16.3%
Theft by unlawful taking	16.9%	13.9%
Wanton endangerment	12.9%	12.5%
Parole or probation violation	6.5%	12.2%
Parole board (PB) recommendations for SAP		
No PB recommendation made	65.3%	31.9%
Participant started SAP on their own, PB recommended they complete	18.5%	26.4%
Participant recommended by PB to start and finish SAP	16.1%	41.7%

SOAR participants reported more lifetime convictions and fewer incarcerations for drug charges or parole/probation violations, but more SOAR participants were incarcerated for burglary or theft. Furthermore, about two-thirds of SOAR participants entered SAP without a parole board recommendation (65.3%), compared to 16.1% of SAP graduates who did not participate in SOAR.

Follow-up Outcomes of **SOAR** Participants

Recidivism

A central objective of SOAR programming is to reduce recidivism and reincarceration after release to the community. In total, 74.2% of SOAR participants were not re-incarcerated within the 12 months' post release from prison or jail. Although comparisons to SAP participants who did not receive SOAR must be made with caution, it should be noted that this rate is similar to that observed across SAP participants in the larger FY2023 CJKTOS evaluation study (74.9%).

74.2% of SOAR participants were *not* re-incarcerated within 12 months post-release.

Substance Use

Another key aim of SOAR is to sustain recovery after completion of SAP programming, especially during the post-release period. As shown in Table 4, less than half of follow-up

SOAR participants reported illicit drug use during the 12-month post-release period. The largest reductions in substance use from pre-incarceration levels were observed for meth or other amphetamines (-44.3 percentage points), alcohol (-27.5 percentage points), and non-prescription opiates (-27.4 percentage points).

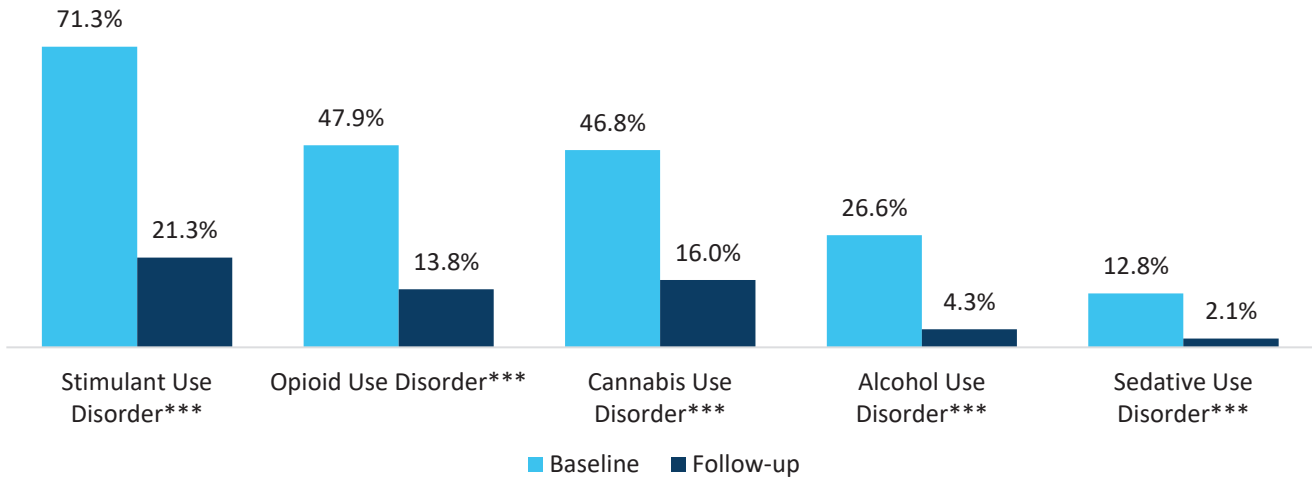
Table 4. Substance Use at Baseline (Pre-incarceration) and 12-month Follow-up (N=124)

	Baseline	12-M Follow-up
Meth or other amphetamines	66.9%	22.6%
Marijuana	55.6%	29.8%
Alcohol	44.4%	16.9%
Non-prescription opiates	33.9%	6.5%
Heroin	26.6%	8.1%
Sedatives or tranquilizers	17.7%	2.4%
Non-prescription Suboxone	16.1%	4.0%
Cocaine/crack	12.1%	8.1%
Synthetic drugs	12.1%	3.2%
Hallucinogens	5.6%	3.2%
Any illicit drug use	**93.5%**	**41.1%**

Also, although illicit drug use was reported by 41.1% of participants during the 12-month post-release period, it should be noted that ***any use*** does not necessarily indicate a return to problematic behaviors. Indeed, the process of recovery from substance use disorder (SUD) is lifelong, and many recovery advocates recognize the distinction between a "relapse" (indicating that an individual has returned to repeated, problematic use) versus a "slip" or "lapse" (in which the individual may use a few times, but stops before use progresses to a more severe state; PTEA, 2023). This distinction is evident in Figure 1, which shows significant reductions in percentages of participants who met DSM-5 criteria for each type of SUD during the 12 months before their incarceration, compared to the 12 months post-release.

58.9% of SOAR participants remained completely abstinent during the 12 months post-release.

Figure 1. Past-Year Substance Use Disorder from Pre-incarceration to One-year Post-release (N=94)+



Note: Significance established using McNemar's test for correlated proportions, ***p<.001.
+Data missing for n=30 participants, who entered SAP prior to when substance-specific SUDs began to be assessed.

Additional Indicators of Post-release Success

Although abstinence from substance use and desistance from criminal behavior are two important indicators of post-release success, SOAR participants demonstrated positive outcomes along many other dimensions of well-being. These other dimensions have been recognized as central components of recovery by national leaders in the field of substance use disorder, including the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Specifically, there was a statistically significant increase from pre-incarceration to 12 months post-release in SOAR participants reporting employment (69.9% to 85.5%), recent contact with family or friends who supported their recovery (72.6% to 91.1%), and recent attendance at self-help recovery support meetings (e.g., 12-step; 19.4% to 35.5%). Although rates of stable housing and some mental health symptoms differed between pre-incarceration and follow-up, these differences were not statistically significant.

Table 5. Additional Indicators at Baseline (Pre-incarceration) and 12-month Follow-up (N=124)

	Baseline	12-M Follow-up
Employment and housing		
Employed full- or part-time***	69.9%	85.5%
Housed in apartment, room, house or residential treatment facility	90.2%	88.6%
Social supports		
Past 30 days, contact with family or friends who support your recovery***	72.6%	91.1%
Past 30 days, attended any self-help group meetings**	19.4%	35.5%
Mental health		
Experienced serious anxiety	38.7%	43.5%
Experienced serious depression	25.0%	33.1%
Experienced symptoms consistent with PTSD	14.9%	14.9%
Experienced serious thoughts of suicide	4.8%	4.8%

Note: Significance established using McNemar's test for correlated proportions, **p≤.01, ***p≤.001.

Limitations

Findings in this brief report are subject to limitations. First, pre-incarceration data are self-reported at SAP intake and follow-up data are self-reported approximately 12-months post-release; due to these long timeframes, participants' recall of behaviors may not be entirely accurate. Second, participants are asked about sensitive behaviors (i.e., substance use) and social desirability may influence reporting. However, research has shown this type of self-report data to be valid (Del Boca & Noll, 2000; Rutherford et al., 2000). Lastly, comparisons to outcomes of other populations of SAP graduates should be made cautiously given that SOAR participants may differ systematically on key factors (e.g., length of prior incarceration, opportunities to participate in other programming while in custody, likelihood of release to supervision), in addition to the supplementary programming received by SOAR participants.

Conclusions

This report describes baseline characteristics and 12-month outcomes for participants of SOAR who completed CJKTOS follow-up interviews during FY2022-2023. The SOAR program was established as an opportunity for SAP graduates who were not getting released to the community after program completion, but who wanted to remain in a supportive environment to continue to work on their recovery. While this program has created a valuable opportunity for eligible individuals, the positive outcomes reported in the present study should not be interpreted to mean that longer terms of incarceration are beneficial. In fact, evidence does not suggest that longer incarceration periods have a significant impact on desistance post-release (Weswasi et al., 2022). However, rehabilitative programming during incarceration has generally been found to reduce recidivism (Loeffler & Nagin, 2022). Thus, in cases where an individual does remain in custody after completion of SAP, availability of SOAR is likely to have a positive impact on outcomes in the community. Indeed, findings reported in this preliminary report are promising in suggesting reductions in substance use, low rates of recidivism, and improvements in employment, social supports, and recovery meeting attendance following release from incarceration.

Implications

The SOAR program has continued to expand since its inception, providing valuable opportunities for SAP graduates to remain engaged in treatment programming, living alongside other SAP graduates and actively working on their recovery. This program has been nationally recognized and could serve as a model of transitional recovery support as individuals prepare for release from custody. Although there are important background differences between SAP participants who participate in SOAR and those who do not (e.g., factors impacting eligibility for parole on completion of SAP), outcomes of SOAR participants presented in this brief report are positive. These results suggest that, among individuals who are not yet eligible for release following SAP completion, participation in SOAR can be beneficial.

References

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