

Regions vary in paying prisoners to participate in research

August 17 2012

When members of the public participate in research studies, they are often given incentives – such as cash or gift cards for food – as compensation or reimbursement for their time and effort. Not so for Canada's prison population. A new analysis shows that there is inconsistency in how and when incentives are used for research participants under criminal justice supervision.

Of the provinces, territories and federal government, only two jurisdictions have written policy around the use of research incentives, according to a national study led by Dr. Flora I. Matheson, a research scientist at St. Michael's Hospital's Centre for Research on Inner City Health. Other jurisdictions have unwritten practices - some departments prohibit the use of incentives, while others allow incentives on a case-by-case basis.

The findings, published in the August issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, highlight the need to look at the issue of research incentives for [prisoners](#) openly.

"As researchers, we always offer something as a way of thanking the participants for opening up to us and for contributing their time," said Dr. Matheson, a medical sociologist.

"The prison population, including those on probation or parole, is a physically and geographically confined population, which makes recruitment for research studies relatively easy. This is one reason why

researchers often seek them out for study. But, why do we treat them differently from other research participants? Some people would consider this discriminatory. At the very least, we should be having a discussion about why there is a lack of policy for this vulnerable population."

Prison populations have particularly high rates of mental illness and substance abuse problems – factors that may influence their ability to provide consent. They are also more economically disadvantaged – in which case, monetary incentives may act as undue influence for them to participate in research and affect the voluntary nature of the consent process. Thus, the onus is on researchers and research ethics boards to develop "appropriate" use of incentives, said Dr. Matheson.

But many practical questions arise.

For example, what is the appropriate monetary value of research incentives for offenders who are living under supervision? Dr. Matheson suggests using the standard prison wage or minimum wage of the province or territory. Setting the monetary value in this way would establish a national standardized approach to equitable incentive practices.

She said policies that define appropriate incentives are vital to ensure effective and equitable engagement between researchers and the offender population. A national policy would ensure equitable treatment of offenders across all correctional jurisdictions.

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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