

# Science or Serendipity?

## Implementing a multisite RCT in English prisons

### EXPERIMENTAL REQUIREMENTS

#### RESEARCHER

- Patience to overcome structural barriers such as data access
- Perseverance to maintain communication and recruiting
- Foster in practitioners a fundamental belief in the project
- Identify and inspire key people such as administrators/managers
- Facilitate practitioner buy-in as they will (often unseen by researchers) defend the project

#### CONTEXT

- Multiple sites/prisons diversifies the investment providing the potential for sufficient samples in some, if not all, of them
- Permission at one level may not mean that permission at other levels follows automatically
- Ascertain your level of data access and develop strategies to ensure effective negotiation for access (for example, justifying variables)
- Expect risk-averse attitudes and prepare to refute them by identifying allies and assembling supporting evidence

#### GOVERNMENT

- Proposed research department; interactive, enabling the exchange of practitioner and research expertise, disseminate knowledge and skill, enable a communication-exchange capacity, perform prisoner tracking, uphold research protocols
- A single, accessible, research-savvy department would help eliminate ambiguity or misunderstanding at all levels, potentially before difficult situations arise
- Update policymakers and research bodies with the current and emerging research position and any impending policy changes that might affect their work
- Once a proposal is approved all barriers would vanish although Governors may still veto new (but not existing) research in their establishment
- Currently the default non-disclosure of data hinders research designs that require an individual's actual offending patterns to be available; establish a protocol for searching live criminal records, authorise access to PNMIS (HMPS database), approve the variables, create the search tools, conduct searches

#### SANITY !

- Prepare unambiguous protocols and eligibility criteria
- Flexibility and compromise will be necessary
- Trust, truth, and tolerance make the best tools
- Allow more time than you think because the experiment will overrun
- Remember that relationships at *all* hierarchical levels are central

### Rapid Overview

#### KEY SUCCESSES

over 60% treatment compliance, low attrition, access to and retention of data

#### KEY PEOPLE

CEO of NOMS, prison governors, prison chaplains, programme coordinators, offender managers

#### KEY BARRIERS

acceptance of methodology, prisoner mobility, staff turnover and shortage, data access (prison and criminal records/convictions)

#### KEY FACTORS

Single entity programme, practitioner goodwill, strong academic support, slightly mad researcher



"And therein lies the problem."

*Front-line practitioners' understanding the concept of random assignment allowed this RCT to contradict the wider literature as they welcomed it for offering them fair allocation of an oversubscribed programme!*

### VITAL STATISTICS

Overall compliance 92%					T group 87%					C group 98%				
Prison	Sample Size	Randomly Assigned	Months to Complete	% Target RA	Prison	Treatment complied	% T compliance	Controls complied	% C compliance	Prison	Treatment complied	% T compliance	Controls complied	% C compliance
Prison 1	121	116	22	100%	Prison 1	48	81%	57	100%	Prison 1	48	81%	57	100%
Prison 2	120	111	34	96%	Prison 2	50	95%	56	98%	Prison 2	50	95%	56	98%
Prison 3	50	44	35	38%	Prison 3	17	84%	22	100%	Prison 3	17	84%	22	100%
Prison 4	1	1	1	1%	Prison 4		0%			Prison 4		0%		
Prison 5	139	117	36	101%	Prison 5	49	86%	60	100%	Prison 5	49	86%	60	100%
Prison 6	23	22	2	19%	Prison 6	9	90%	11	92%	Prison 6	9	90%	11	92%
Prison 7	4	4	2	3%	Prison 7	2	100%	2	100%	Prison 7	2	100%	2	100%
Prison 8	52	50	15	43%	Prison 8	23	84%	22	88%	Prison 8	23	84%	22	88%

Total sample size	510 cases	Total cases R/A	465 cases	Overall recruiting timeline	38 months
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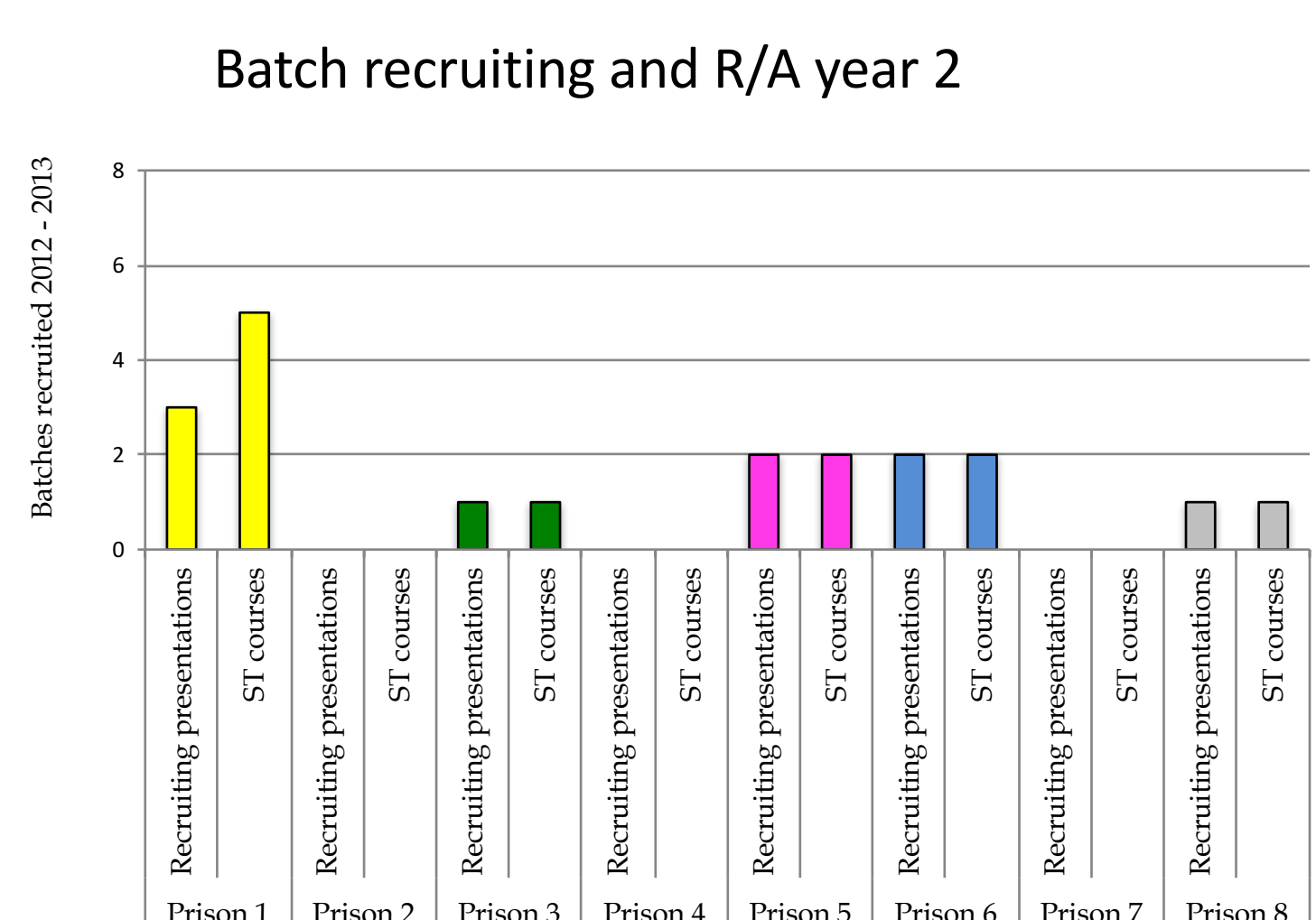
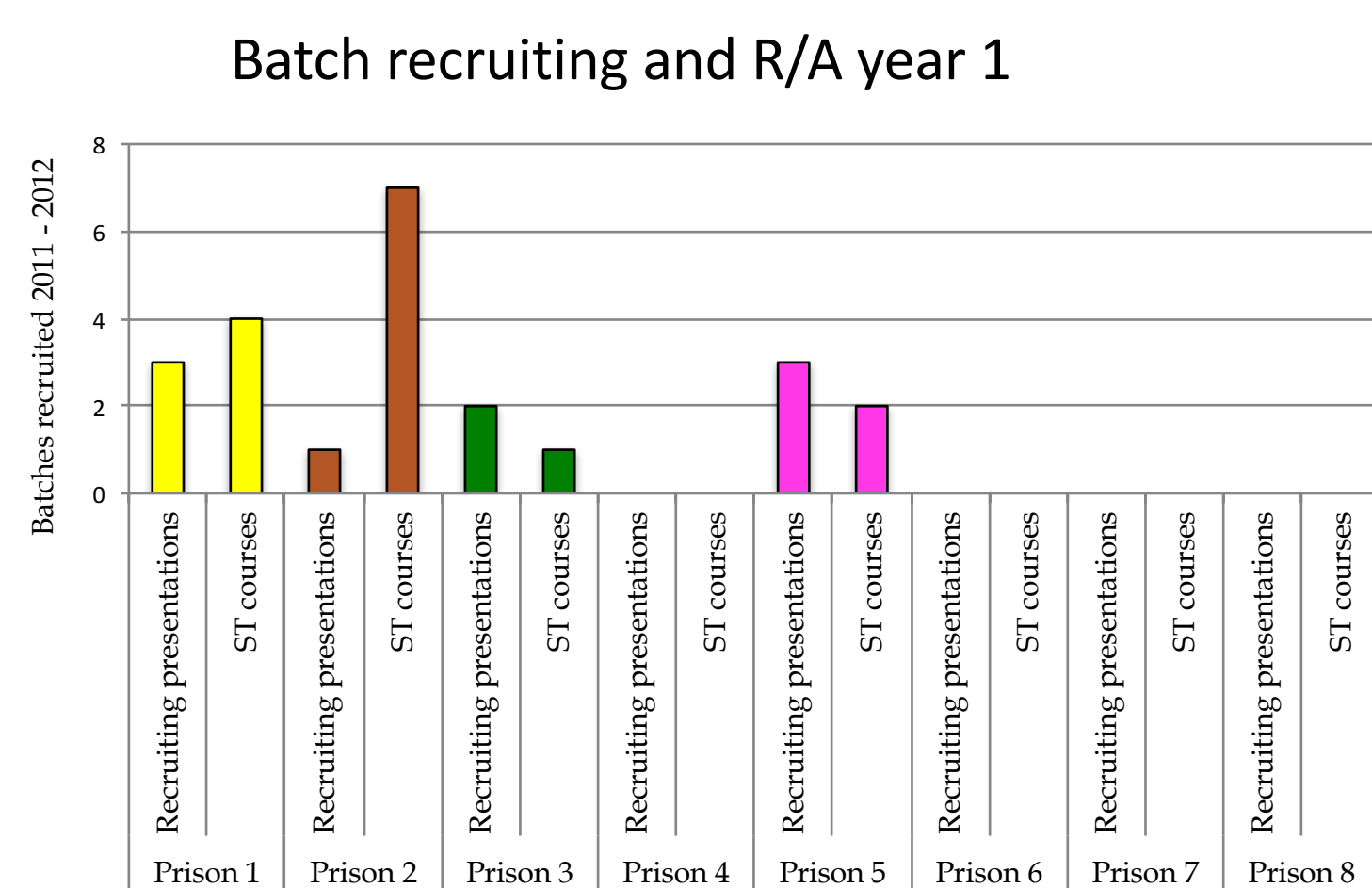
### OVERVIEW OF THIS RCT

Recruiting and randomly assigning the cases is the most vital part of an RCT followed by ensuring that the intervention(s) under test is provided and delivered as expected. Additionally, researchers must make sure as far as possible that controls do not receive the intervention being evaluated.

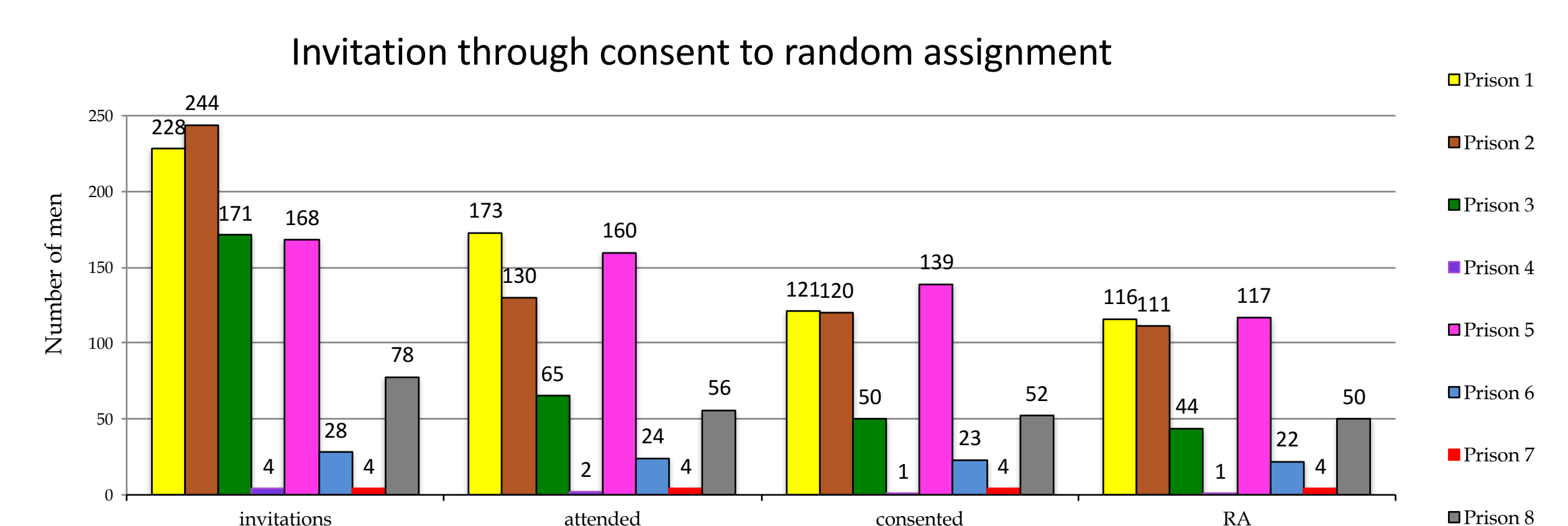
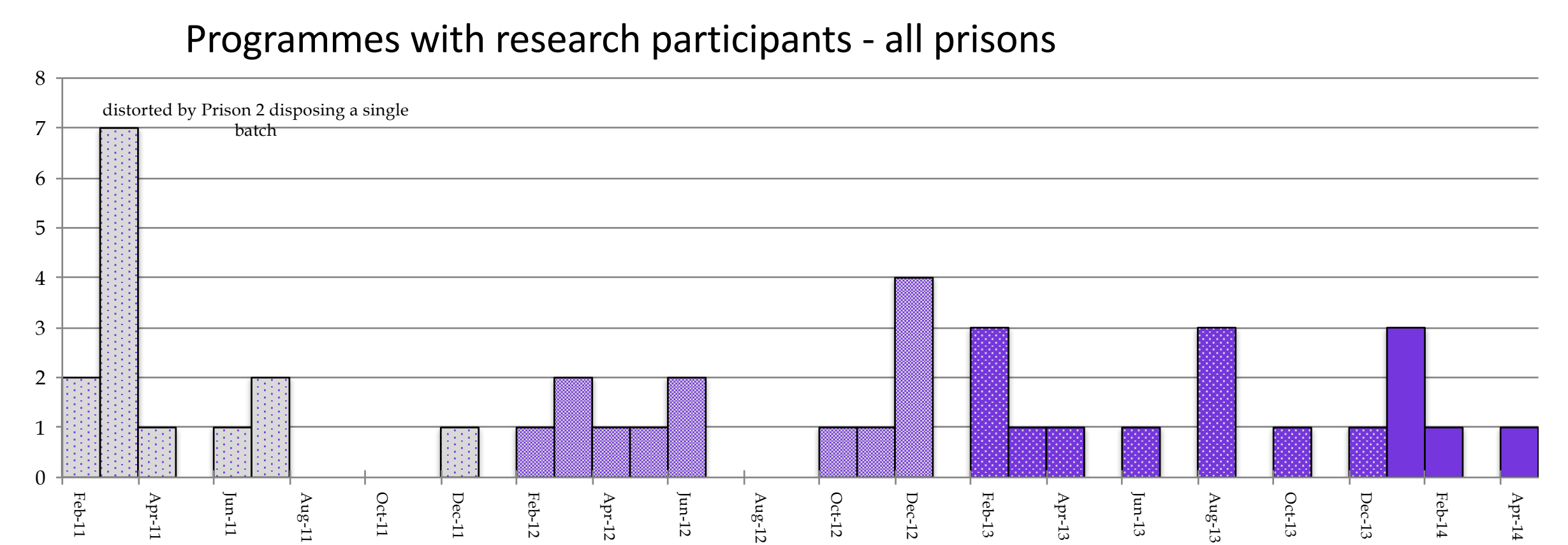
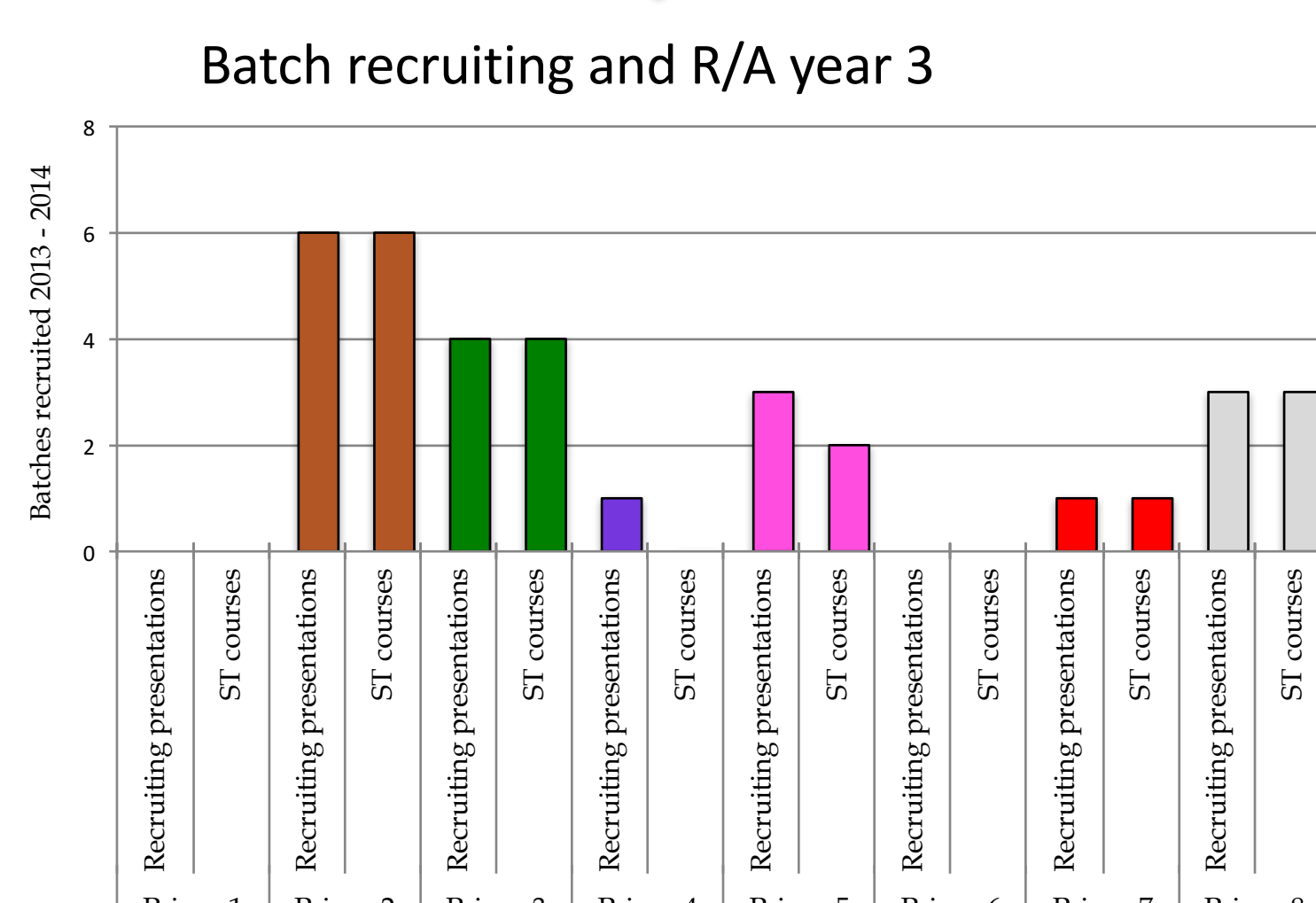
In this RCT adult male prisoners were invited to a research presentation given by prison Chaplains and programme coordinators. We recruited discrete batches of men that were then randomly assigned to the forthcoming programme. Random assignment was done in batches per institution.

Many batches were recruited over time and men 'trickled' into the experiment, therefore this is described as a 'trickle batch pipeline' where the 'pipeline' is the route from agreeing to participate, through random assignment, to completing treatment as assigned. Here are some graphic illustrations of recruiting prisoners for this RCT.

### RECRUITING THE CASES & PROVIDING THE PROGRAMME OF INTEREST



In the bottom right corner the reduction in numbers between being identified as eligible, responding to an invitation to participate, and actually being randomly assigned to an experimental group is clear.



My belief in the experiment enabled me to convince front-line practitioners and high-level officials that it was viable and desirable. Their buy-in, in turn, created the background lobbying and defence that were necessary to successfully implement the RCT. The bottom-up-top-down approach engaged those practitioners necessary to defend the pipeline for recruiting and treatment compliance and, simultaneously, the high ranking individuals required to maintain commitment and access the systems on which the experiment depended.

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