

# The Art of Rehabilitation

## Attitudes to offenders' involvement in the arts

This paper considers the extent to which the success of arts activity involving offenders is influencing attitudes to rehabilitation. It suggests that while the impact of arts activity on individual participants and upon the institutions in which they are held can be considerable, levels of awareness and understanding of the role of the arts in rehabilitation remain low, both among those working in the criminal justice system and the wider public. The paper includes recommendations designed to change this situation.

### Key lessons

- Offenders should have opportunities to engage in artistic activities as part of the regime in prisons.
- Participation in arts activity can have direct and indirect benefits. An increase in writing or drawing skills would be a direct benefit. Learning how to work as a team, or increasing self-confidence, as the result of taking part in an arts production would be an indirect benefit.
- Public awareness of the purpose and range of arts activity in prisons is very low and both arts providers and prisons are wary of seeking to raise it, for fear of a negative response.
- There need to be more opportunities for enabling local residents, including the judiciary and journalists to observe and learn more about the role of arts in the criminal justice system.
- Evidence of the positive impact of arts activity on offenders is not systematically collected and more studies are needed.
- The different parties involved in the arts in the criminal justice system – artists, prison staff (including teachers and counsellors), funders, policy makers, evaluators – need to work more closely together to increase the range, quantity and quality of activity.

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# “Involvement in the arts is a “humanising” experience that arguably forms part of the decency agenda that seeks to ensure prisoners are properly treated.”

## 1. The scope of the study

This paper draws on a small-scale piece of research commissioned by Rethinking Crime & Punishment in 2002. The word arts as used here includes theatre, music, opera, dance, the visual arts, creative writing and combinations of these activities. Film, television, radio and new media are not included. The research focused on arts activity with recreational and/or educational aims. This could include studying an arts subject as part of an educational curriculum, watching a performance by a visiting arts company or taking part in a project led by professional artists (e.g. singers, painters, writers, dancers, actors) lasting anything from a few hours to several months and in rare cases more than a year.

## 2. The impact of the arts on offenders

Involvement in the arts is a “humanising” experience that arguably forms part of the decency agenda that seeks to ensure prisoners are properly treated. However, there has been increasing interest in assessing the impact of different regime components within prison and decisions about how best to spend limited resources needed to take account of the relative impact of various activities.

The most commonly cited benefits of participation in the arts fall into two categories. One relates to the creative activity itself (e.g. participation in a drama workshop resulting in an improvement in acting skills). The other is by-product of the activity (e.g. an increase in self-confidence or communication skills). The Unit for the Arts and Offenders defines the first of these as intrinsic benefits and the second as extrinsic benefits.<sup>1</sup> The criteria used to evaluate the impact of the arts in the criminal justice system vary, but commonly used dimensions include:

1. educational achievement (learning about and through an arts subject - basic and key skills, art history, music appreciation, critical, analytical and technical skills)
2. improved attitudes and behaviour
3. a reduced rate of re-offending
4. better ways of relating to other people
5. artistic, personal and social development (self-expression, communication, problem-solving skills, leadership, team work, etc.)

Many factors influence the short and long-term impact of arts activity in criminal justice settings. The quality of evaluation is variable but the volume of evidence of the positive impacts of the arts is increasing.

The following sections draw on various published sources to provide a small number of illustrations of each of these impacts. References are listed at the end of the paper.

### Educational achievement

An estimated 60% of prisoners lack sufficient literacy skills and 75% lack the numeracy skills to apply for 96% of available jobs. 50% of male and 75% of female adult prisoners have no qualifications at all; a third of prisoners were regular truants while at school, and half of the males in prison were excluded from school.

In his foreword to *Including the Arts. The creative arts - the route to basic & key skills in prisons*<sup>2</sup> the then-Director General of the Prison Service Martin Narey wrote:

"Providers of arts activities and education in prisons are now sensitive to the potential for channelling the enthusiasm for the arts, which many prisoners share, into structured programmes leading to nationally recognised accreditation. Some providers have gone even further and are developing mechanisms whereby participation in arts courses can act as a vehicle for the acquisition of competencies in basic and key skills as well as the aesthetic skills which form the basis of the courses in question. Through such developments... involvement in the arts can make a powerful contribution to reducing offending."

Julie Mills, Prison Contract Manager at Milton Keynes College, has worked with the theatre group London Shakespeare Workout at HMP Woodhill and HMP The Mount.

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"Much of what goes on in our classrooms is about building confidence, developing self esteem and motivating a group of men for whom education is not an automatic choice. Participation in a Shakespeare Workout can directly address these issues. In a single afternoon, a group of disaffected, cynical and self-conscious men are transformed into individuals with confidence and commitment, who have demonstrated an ability to concentrate on and work with texts and language that may have been considered inaccessible prior to the Workout."<sup>3</sup>

## **Improved attitudes, behaviour and problem-solving skills**

In an essay in *Including the Arts*<sup>2</sup> filmmaker Roger Graef explains how the arts can help violent prisoners to change their behaviour:

"Violence is a form of expression. We may not like the forms it takes – domestic violence, assaults on strangers, child abuse, rape and murder. Yet looking deeper into the psychology of such offenders we find pent up passions - anger, frustration, an intense longing to make an impact, a need to be noticed, a demand for attention. The motivations that drive artists to express themselves are often similar...Violence is itself a form of communication. Art can encompass those feelings in a way that does not harm other people, but transforms the experience of both the giver and the receiver and enhances their lives instead of damaging them. With offenders it can break the cycle of violence and fear. The case for art in prisons is not theoretical. It is practical and pragmatic...Through art...learning passes not only through the brain but through the heart."

In a paper published by Theatres In Prison and Probation <sup>4</sup> Simon Ruding and Kate McCoy report that "research undertaken by Geese Theatre Company has demonstrated that participants' violent and hostile feelings reduced significantly in the six months following a series of [theatre] workshops."

## **Rates of re-offending**

Prisons and YOIs regularly report that rates of offending within the institution by people involved in arts projects do decrease. The Irene Taylor Trust runs music projects in prisons and YOIs. In 1999 it ran a project at HMP Bullingdon involving 50 prisoners, working with professional actors, musicians and technicians. The evaluation of the project found that in the months following the final performance, there had been a reduction of 58% in the number of offences by the participants, compared with the six months before the project began.

Grady Hillman is an American writer who has been working in prisons in the USA since 1981. In an interview with *High Performance* magazine he says:

"California, Oklahoma and Massachusetts have come up with documentation that shows that when you bring an arts program into an adult correctional setting it reduces the incident rate – everything from stealing steaks to stabbing other inmates – by 60% to 90%. California quantified that on a cost basis and found that arts programs in prisons not only paid for themselves but provided significant savings for the institutions at the same time. There was one study of four arts programs in the state that were funded to the tune of \$125,000. Some independent professors from UC Santa Barbara were able to quantify the incident rate reduction and found that the institution actually saved \$225,000 through the effects of the programs."<sup>5</sup>

## **Better ways of relating to other people**

Ruding and McCoy write about the contribution that the arts can make to the creation of "healthy prisons". This is a concept promoted by the Prison Service, which:

- recognises prisoners' humanity and promotes self respect and a sense of responsibility
- promotes good health
- addresses factors associated with offending behaviour

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- fosters family and community ties
- enhances prisoners' ability to lead autonomous, fulfilling and law-abiding lives in the community
- minimises the likelihood that the loss of liberty, which is the essence of imprisonment, will lead to a reduction in a prisoner's mental or social capacity to cope with freedom on release.<sup>4</sup>

“With this prison model,” argue Ruding and McCoy, “it is easy to make a case for how art-based approaches can contribute to the health of prison. For example, BLAGG! TIPP's Offending Behaviour Programme, which creates a fictional but realistic offender and looks at the causes and consequences of his or her offending behaviour; provides participants with an opportunity to work as part of a team, share experiences (which in many cases will encourage mutual respect), recognise their humanity and address many of the other points listed above. These benefits will come from their participation in an art-based project whatever the subject matter is. So within this vision of healthy prisons, it is also easy to make a case for purely creative arts-based projects.”

Clive Hopwood, director of the Writers in Prisons Network, cites the example of a group of young offenders at HMYOI Onley who had the opportunity to work with a writer on a series of short plays which were then produced for radio, using professional actors. The series won a prestigious Koestler Award. In another case, a writer worked with prisoners at HMP Wayland to create stories and record them on to cassettes which were then sent home to their families. “However macho prisoners seem,” Hopwood told a BBC journalist, “they all suffer low esteem, having been told they're failures all their lives. To tell a story is a real plus, an achievement. They can say: ‘I did that’.”

### **Artistic, personal and social development**

A five-week dance residency at HMP Holloway<sup>1</sup>, involved prisoners in creating a dance piece to perform to an audience of three hundred. The project was designed by Dance United to provide the participants with a high quality experience of dance

performance. The evaluator identified a number of artistic, personal and social changes that took place as a direct result of the project. On the artistic front, the participants had learned dance and co-ordination skills, improved their timing and rhythm, learned to write and memorise lyrics, to make costumes and to rehearse and perform to a large audience. Personal and social benefits cited by the participants included increased motivation and commitment, a release of tension and depression, a calming effect and easier sleep, more confidence in speaking out, the ability to start and finish an activity, and a greater ability to work together and to trust each other. A prison officer commented:

"If [projects like this] can help women to get a sense of purpose, to feel they're worth something, it will have a great effect on stopping the reoffending, because if all of these women go out with no purpose and no respect for themselves, they reoffend."

### **3. The low level of awareness of the impact of the arts on offenders and some reasons why**

The fact that offenders are participating in arts activity, and the impact of that activity on their rehabilitation, is virtually unknown to the wider public. There are several reasons for this.

Prisons and other criminal justice settings are not public places. Issues of security and confidentiality preclude an open-door policy that would enable the public to learn more about the activities in which prisoners are participating.

There is a lack of first-hand experience of such activity on the part of those who award sentences and those who manage and work in prisons, YOIs and probation teams.

Those who have witnessed offenders working with artists comment on:

- the opportunity to see participants as individuals

# “...the number of offenders presented with an opportunity to participate in the arts is still relatively small.”

- the way in which projects bring out individual and group skills
- the quality of the interaction between participants and the artists
- the frequent humour of the situation and the humanising effects of that humour
- the quality of the end result publications, CDs, videos, plays, concerts and works of visual art.

Most arts activity is short-term and sporadic and of the prison population as a whole, the number of offenders presented with an opportunity to participate (in the arts) is still relatively small. This small-scale study suggests that the projects that make the greatest and most sustainable impact are those that last months rather than days. There is also evidence of the cumulative effect on individuals who have repeated opportunities to participate.

The shortage of hard evidence of the impact of participation in the arts remains a challenge for arts companies and a criminal justice system unable to afford regular, independent evaluations of their work. That said, more activity is being evaluated and the evidence is accumulating. If the results can be disseminated more widely, this will contribute considerably to increasing levels of awareness within the criminal justice system and beyond.

Finally, a major reason for the lack of public awareness is the cautious attitude to media coverage of the criminal justice agencies and arts companies which, in their experience, is more likely to focus on the sensational ('serial offender given time out to write poetry') than the constructive. The degree of media management required to increase the likelihood of positive coverage is beyond the means of most of the arts companies involved in this kind of work. There is also the practical point that some participants may not be photographed, filmed or interviewed and their exclusion from media coverage makes for a weaker story. However, where arts programmes give back to the community in some way, through link ups with local schools or hospitals, the perception that they are benefiting only prisoners will be reduced.

## 4. Recommendations

In order to maximise the role that can be played by the arts in prisons and to ensure that artistic activity makes a positive impact on public attitudes, the following recommendations are made.

- The new National Offender Management Service accepts the case for arts in prison and encourages and resources governors to include arts activities in regimes.
- Arts activity should be included in educational programmes in prisons.
- Staff at all levels in prisons should be involved in artistic projects.
- More rigorous evaluation of the impact of different kinds of arts activity should be undertaken, including longitudinal and random allocation studies.
- Magistrates and judges should be invited to observe performances, exhibitions or publications, along with members of the public.
- Arts organisations working with offenders should be encouraged to develop media management plans and disseminate the lessons of their work widely.

## References

<sup>1</sup> The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (2001) *An analysis of the impact of creative arts opportunities for people caught in the cycle of offending and a review of the framework for supporting this work in London*, London: London Arts.

<sup>2</sup> The Standing Committee for Arts in Prisons (2001) *Including the Arts*. The creative arts - the route to basic & key skills in prisons. Out of print but available on line.

<sup>3</sup> [www.londonshakespeare.org.uk](http://www.londonshakespeare.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> McCoy, K & Ruding, S (2002) *Arts with offenders – a discussion paper*, Manchester: TIPP. Available on [www.artsednews.co.uk/Resources/prisons.doc](http://www.artsednews.co.uk/Resources/prisons.doc).

<sup>5</sup> Durland, S (1996) 'Maintaining Humanity: an interview with Grady Hillman about Arts in Corrections' in *High Performance*, Spring 1996

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