

California Prison Arts: A Quantitative Evaluation

Executive Summary

California has been a leader in prison fine arts programs in the United States. Arts-in-Corrections, the granddaddy of them all, enjoyed a highly successful 30 year run until the state budget crisis led to its closure in 2010. The need for prison arts education is greater than ever, in part because of AIC's demonstrated transformational impact on imprisoned men and women.

The William James Association Prison Arts Project, California Lawyers for the Arts, The Actor's Gang, Marin Shakespeare, and Jail Guitar Doors are California non-profit organizations with experience and a demonstrated commitment, not only to provide art instruction in prisons, but to engage in ongoing evaluation of the impact of these programs on human development. This report presents results from the most recent quantitative evaluation of prison arts education, in collaboration with these organizations, and with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, and the Andy Warhol, Gerbode and San Francisco Foundations.

There is evidence that prison fine arts programs provide authentic learning experiences that engage the minds and hearts of the incarcerated. Prison art program evaluations in the United States and elsewhere in the world have found strong correlations between arts education and improved work ethic, self-esteem, creativity, intellectual agility, motivation, self-confidence, emotional control, and an ability to work with others. Further, interdisciplinary research shows cognitive, social and personal competencies are cultivated through arts instruction and practice. The findings of this research is further evidence of the transformative power of the arts.

A brief description of this study and main findings are provided below:

- This quantitative evaluation of California prison arts programs using a pretest-posttest survey research design was conducted in four California prisons and included classes in theater(California Rehabilitation Center, Norco, San Quentin), poetry (San Quentin), writing (New Folsom), and visual arts (Soledad).
- A sample of 110 inmates participated in the study, including former Arts-in-Corrections inmates (N=49), and those new to prison arts education (N=61). Approximately half of the 61 inmates had studied or practiced art prior to their incarceration (N=30), while 31 of the participants had never studied or practiced art.

- Three surveys were administered: one to former Arts-in-Corrections inmates (33 variables); the other two were pretest (28 variables) and posttest (29 variables) questionnaires given to those who had not been involved in AIC.
- Each questionnaire included attitudinal scales adapted from the statistically validated "Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ) that measures: Time Management, Social Competence, Achievement Motivation, Intellectual Flexibility, Emotional Control, Active Initiative, and Self-Confidence.
- Those with previous arts education and practice, including former AIC participants (N=79), were statistically more likely to be intellectually flexible, self-confident, motivated, in control of their emotions, socially competent, and better managers of their time than inmates who had never studied or practiced art (N=31).
- Participants who had previously studied or practiced art were statistically more likely to pursue other educational and/or vocational programs than were those without arts education.
- A significant majority of former AIC inmates attribute to the arts program their greater confidence and self-discipline to pursue other academic and vocational opportunities. This was particularly true for those who had participated in Arts-in-Corrections for two or more years.
- Many participants self-reported a reduction in disciplinary reports while involved in the art classes, and 61% of those who were in the Arts-in-Corrections program for 5 or more years reported improved behavior.
- Most AIC inmates, regardless of years in the program, reported that they got along better with other inmates and prison staff.
- These findings are supported by a 1983 cost-benefit study of Arts-in-Corrections that showed a significant reduction in disciplinary reports for inmates active in the Arts-in-Corrections program.
- A significant majority of participants reported that the art programs helped them to relieve stress, feel happier, and gain valuable insights. Over half (58%) said their art

brought them closer to family; enriching their conversations and nurturing a new identity as artist, rather than convict.

- A comparison of the pretest-posttest survey results for the 31 inmates who had no previous arts education or practice showed a positive and statistically significant correlation between their participation in the theater, writing and visual arts classes and improved time management, achievement motivation, intellectual flexibility, active initiative, and self-confidence.
- There was a positive, although not statistically significant, change in their feelings of social competence and emotional control. The fact that former AIC inmates who had participated two or more years in the arts program showed statistically significant improvement in these areas of social behavior suggests the importance of long-term exposure to arts education and practice.