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University research shows the value of arts projects in prisoner rehabilitation

Research from academics at Northumbria University, Newcastle shows that incorporating arts activities into prisoner rehabilitation discourages re-offending.

The research, commissioned and published by the Arts Alliance, evidences the links between participation in arts activities and breaking criminal habits among offenders. Entitled Re-imagining Futures, the research was led by Charlotte Bilby and Louise Ridley – both Senior Lecturers in Criminology at Northumbria University - and Bath Spa's Head of Research and Consultancy,

Laura Caulfield.

The findings have uncovered a wide range of benefits associated with prisoners participating in arts activities, prompting warnings from the Arts Alliance that government cuts to the arts could have a detrimental impact on individuals within the Criminal Justice System.

Charlotte Bilby said: “It has been widely acknowledged that the arts may play an important role in discouraging offenders from taking part in further criminal activity, however, we wanted to find ways to evidence this. We therefore studied a number of arts projects working with offenders and the outcomes that these activities had on participants.”

The researchers engaged with five selected projects at four locations, including a visual arts class in a high security adult male prison; a music skills and deejaying project with young offenders in a community setting; a music-making project in an adult and young offenders resettlement prison; and a creative writing project and crafting course in an adult and young offender, closed female prison.

One participant said: “Taking part in music workshops was life-changing. It was the first time that I started to make positive choices for myself. It began to change the way I think in a very deep way.”

Using qualitative methods, the team found that arts activities facilitate high levels of engagement and compliance, while allowing participants to start to re-define their identity, something that can encourage offenders to stop offending. They also discovered that arts activities can complement other forms of rehabilitation and treatment – including counselling - and help participants to learn to trust others.

Tim Robertson, Chair of the Arts Alliance, said: “With average current reoffending rates just over 25% and proven re-offending rates for juvenile offenders released from custody as high as 70%, innovative projects that can engage offenders need to be protected.

“Arts Alliance members work with over 40,000 offenders a year in the community and in prisons and their work often goes unrecognised.”

Charlotte Bilby added: “The findings from this research clearly indicate that arts projects can contribute to an individual’s journey to rehabilitation. It’s encouraging to see real evidence of the impact of these activities and the difference they can make to the lives of offenders and the communities in which they live.”

The Arts Alliance is now looking to commission the biggest ever study of arts with offenders, across different criminal justice settings. This project will showcase the resulting creative outcomes such as exhibitions, films, theatre and music performances to the public, high profile artists and arts organisations, whilst simultaneously collecting qualitative and quantitative data about its impact on offenders.

The report was officially launched on 7th November at Southbank Centre, London. The event featured a range of speakers including Gerard Lemos and crime writer Caspar Walsh.

For more details, visit: <http://www.artsalliance.org.uk/arts-alliance-research-launch>.

For more information about Criminology at Northumbria University, visit www.northumbria.ac.uk/criminology.

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