

UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVENESS OF ARTS-IN-CORRECTIONS

A proposed model of the theory and mechanisms behind the benefits of arts programming in prisons

A Collaboration Among the William James Association; University of San Francisco; University of California, San Diego; and University of California, Irvine

BACKGROUND

In our current correctional environment, institutional and community programs are increasingly called upon to demonstrate their effectiveness and measurable outcomes that benefit both the participant and society. Programs and principles that are “evidence-based” – those that adhere to sound theoretical foundations, are faithfully implemented and rigorously evaluated – are replacing programs based simply on tradition, belief or anecdote.

A collaboration among researchers and practitioners at the William James Association; University of San Francisco; University of California, San Diego; and University of California, Irvine is utilizing an evidence-based approach to understanding the implementation and effectiveness of Arts in Corrections (AIC). This effort is timely as AIC funding has recently been restored in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, after a hiatus of a number of years. Policy makers and observers will be asking whether AIC is an effective investment in CDCR’s toolkit of rehabilitation programming.

This document provides a brief discussion of the extant literature on arts-in-corrections, including its gaps and limitations; our team’s proposed theoretical approaches to understand the mechanisms of arts-in-corrections; and initial studies the team will be conducting.

MOTIVATION FOR OUR WORK

Prior research and writing on AIC suggests a number of positive impacts that include:

- Reduction in recidivism/institutional misconduct
- Increased human and social capital
- Increased cohesion among inmates
- Improved relationships between inmates and correctional staff
- Improved connection to family
- Increased participation in other rehabilitative programs

Unfortunately, much of the support for these positive impacts is weak. Weaknesses include:

- Lack of theoretical framework or causal mechanism to explain impact of AIC
- Poorly described analytical methods
- Lack of strong control or comparison groups
- Overreliance on anecdotal evidence
- Small sample sizes

SCOPE OF AIC IMPACT

Our framework views AIC as influencing a number of domains, ranging from changes to the individual inmate and the prison environment, to changes that occur with the inmate and family and community. Thus, we envision multiple spheres of influence as shown in the figure below.



POSSIBLE THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

In order to explain changes that AIC brings in the spheres above, we look to theory to guide us. A comprehensive explanation of how AIC impacts the spheres above does not lend itself to a one-to-one correspondence with any single theory. Therefore, in addition to examining theoretical approaches from *traditional rehabilitative programming*, our team has brought in theoretical perspectives from *arts-specific* settings both *within* and *outside the correctional environment*. This has allowed us to create a working synthesis from a set of compelling theories and corresponding mechanisms that do justice to the complexity through which AIC brings about positive change. These theories include:

Cognitive Behavioral: learning thinking skills (cognitive); self-awareness, self-expression, self-control (emotional); prosocial methods of goal pursuit and fulfillment (behavioral)

Social Learning: learning to play social roles; understanding and fulfilling performance expectations; developing personal style and identity

Resilience: cognitive competence; social competence; civic competence; goal orientation; physical health improvement

Social Capital: social skills; facilitation of cooperation; networks/relationship building; teamwork; social trust

Performance: alternatives for effective transformation; internal work and change; emphasis on liminal/transitional spaces (prominent among drama programs)

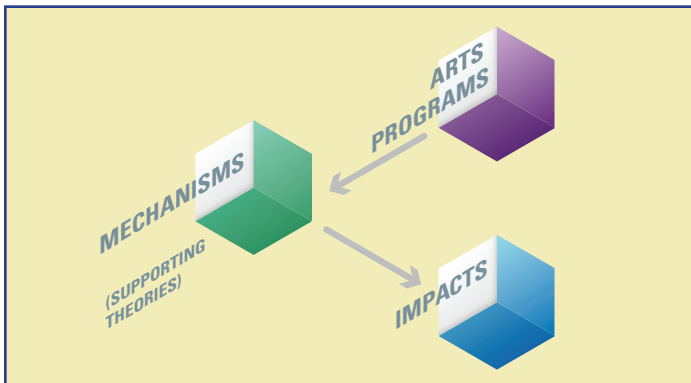
Desistance: capitalizes on attributes individuals already possess; highlights accomplishments; rejects stigma associated with labeling people for past offenses

RANGE OF OUTCOMES

Our work will include a broader scope of outcomes than those traditionally measured in the evaluation of rehabilitative programs, such as recidivism rate. Such outcomes include:

- Constructive expression of otherwise destructive emotions
- Expressed sense of community trust and cooperation
- Breakdown of racial barriers; Increase cultural awareness
- Development of new/alternative identity other than criminal
- Facilitation of cohesion among inmates
- Improved public perception

OUR PROPOSED MODEL



Our overall proposed model of AIC program effectiveness requires that we identify mechanisms of change, as supported by our selected theories, and to tie these mechanisms of change

to the effects observed in the multiple spheres of influence. This is depicted in the figure below. We will be measuring the mechanisms of change as well as their impacts on different spheres of influence as part of our evidence-based approach.

NEXT STEPS

The project team expects to begin fieldwork activities in the Fall of 2015. Our first activities will include focus groups to better understand the mechanisms through which AIC brings positive change. Focus groups will be held with individuals involved in different forms of art programs including, but not limited to: Art, sculpture, drama, and theater. Participants will be separated by “art” type in an effort to extract the most pertinent information for each group and evaluate accordingly.

Our research agenda includes:

FOCUS GROUPS

- Focus groups with formerly incarcerated AIC participants
- Focus groups with incarcerated AIC participants
- Focus groups with AIC program staff

PROGRAM EVALUATION

As funders consider selections of programs for rehabilitative efforts in subsequent years, an evaluation of AIC program models using the Correctional Program Checklist or similar tool will take place to advance such efforts.

EVALUATION OF AIC AND TRADITIONAL PROGRAMS

Drawing on the literature and focus groups, in the future, the project team also plans to investigate the ways in which AIC programming and traditional rehabilitative programming differ in their approach and impacts, from the individual inmate through the community level. To investigate the relative effectiveness for rehabilitation we plan to:

- Compare the theoretical models that underscore AIC and traditional programs
- Measure the outcomes associated with AIC, compared to traditional programs

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