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Intermediate outcomes of arts projects: a rapid evidence assessment

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This report summarises the findings from a rapid evidence assessment (REA) which sought to identify 'intermediate' outcomes from arts projects.¹ The REA is the first stage in a wider project funded by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to develop a framework for outcome measurement which can be adopted by organisations that deliver arts projects to offenders.

Key points

The aim of the literature review was to generate a detailed understanding of the impacts of arts projects with adult offenders. This included identifying the kinds of changes that arts projects generate, and understanding how they are linked to reoffending and desistance. The review found the following.

- There is a lack of good-quality research evidence that explores the impact of arts projects with offenders. This is an issue that the wider project will address by providing organisations delivering arts programmes with a framework or toolkit for evidencing the impact of their work.
- Currently, there is insufficient evidence to conclude whether or not arts projects have a measurable impact on reoffending.
- The best available evidence indicates that arts projects are effective at improving in-prison behaviour (such as compliance with rules and engagement with the regime) and individual psychological factors (such as depression and a sense of purpose).
- More tentative evidence suggests that arts projects may be effective at improving educational outcomes and enhancing the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes.
- All of these 'intermediate outcomes' can be theoretically linked to reductions in reoffending behaviour. Most relate to criminogenic or protective factors identified widely in the academic and research literature, and hence are likely to contribute to the process of desistance from crime. The research team therefore recommends that these are included as potential measures in a proposed toolkit which can be used by organisations providing arts programmes to measure their activities and impacts.

¹ Full report available on request to national.research@noms.gsi.gov.uk

Context

This report summarises findings from an REA which addresses three research questions.

- What evidence is there of a direct relationship between arts programmes and reduced reoffending?
- What positive outcomes, apart from reductions in reoffending, have been claimed, hypothesised or demonstrated to have been brought about (partly or wholly) by arts programmes?
- In each case, are there established or plausible links between the ('intermediate') outcome in question and reductions in reoffending?

The purpose of the REA is to identify evidence to guide the construction of potentially valid measures of 'intermediate outcomes' achieved as a result of arts projects. In later stages of this project these intermediate outcomes could be included in user-friendly toolkits which could be used by provider organisations to measure their activities and impacts.

What are arts projects?

Offenders who engage in arts-based activities do so in a number of different ways, in different contexts and with different organisations. The type of activities include theatre projects, dance, painting, drawing, creative writing, crafts, film and music. Sometimes the arts activities are delivered as part of a rehabilitation programme, art therapy or an educational activity, or they can be a purely creative activity. Projects are delivered in the community, throughout the prison estate, in therapeutic communities and in secure mental health facilities. This review assessed the impact of all kinds of arts projects, delivered to adult offenders in a range of settings.

Why would measuring intermediate outcomes be valuable?

Intermediate outcomes are those that can be directly or indirectly associated with reductions in reoffending: for example, reducing substance misuse or improving positive relationships. They are 'intermediate' in the sense that they indicate that an offender is making positive changes towards an offence-free future, but are not yet considered to have successfully stopped offending. This may be because they have made only partial progress towards change, or they are unable to demonstrate

successful avoidance of offending behaviour because they are still in custody. Improvements in intermediate outcomes may indicate successful steps on a journey towards the desired final outcome of reduced reoffending and desistance from crime. In the context of an increased focus on intervention outcomes (Ministry of Justice, 2010) (including outcomes beyond reduced recidivism alone), the advent of payment by results and the involvement of more third sector and private providers, there is a need for a strong evidence base about the effectiveness of services for offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2012), and more robust and reliable ways of measuring their impact. Measuring intermediate outcomes might provide answers to these challenges.

Approach

A systematic search of electronic databases and specialist websites was employed to identify relevant academic and grey literature. In addition, unpublished literature was identified by contacting academics who work in the field. This combined approach ensured that the review included the best available academic research, as well as smaller evaluations conducted by service providers.

How was the quality of the research studies assessed?

A mixed methods approach to quality assessment was employed based upon the Maryland Scale (Sherman *et al*, 1997),² the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre Weight of Evidence assessment (Gough, 2007) and the Government Social Research Network assessment tool for qualitative research (Spencer *et al*, 2003). Overall, the assessment focused on the following.

- Relevance – to what extent was the study considered relevant to the topic area of arts projects and offenders, providing information that is relevant to the construction of a toolkit?

² Level 1: Correlation between a crime prevention program and a measure of crime or crime risk factors at a single point in time. Level 2: Temporal sequence between the program and the crime or risk outcome clearly observed, or the presence of a comparison group without demonstrated comparability to the treatment group. Level 3: A comparison between two or more comparable units of analysis, one with and one without the program. Level 4: Comparison between multiple units with and without the program, controlling for other factors or using comparison units that evidence only minor differences. Level 5: Random assignment and analysis of comparable units to program and comparison groups.

- Transparency – to what extent were the aims of the study and research methods used clearly stated?
- Robustness – to what extent did the study follow good practice in terms of data collection and analysis?
- Coherence – to what extent were the methods chosen suitable for the stated aims of the study? To what extent are there clear and justifiable links between the findings and the conclusions?

How were the findings consolidated?

A narrative approach was used to synthesise findings from the identified sources. The strengths and limitations of each study were discussed, along with a description of the methodology, findings and links to desistance theory. This approach:

- enabled the review to be inclusive (including methodologically limited studies which scored lower on the Maryland Scale), while also being robust (greater weight was given to those papers that were of higher methodological quality);
- made the best of the available literature while being very clear about the quality of the evidence base;
- allowed the analysis to draw on wider desistance literature and theory.

Results

The review presents the research evidence for each identified intermediate outcome (in-prison behaviour, individual psychological factors, education and offending behaviour programmes). For each intermediate outcome measure the review discusses the quality of the available evidence, the relationship between the intermediate outcome and desistance theory, and the potential mechanisms through which an arts project may produce this intermediate outcome. This process helps to identify the potential utility of each intermediate outcome as part of a framework for outcome measurement (or toolkit).

Size and nature of the research literature

This review found a lack of good-quality research evidence. From an initial pool of 2,028 papers that were identified using the electronic databases, 134 papers were selected as relevant for this study (that is, the research broadly examined the issue of the

arts and offenders). Only 16 studies were able to meet the quality criteria for this review.

Two of the 16 studies used randomised experimental design, six used comparison group experimental design, seven explored pre- and post-project scores for a treatment group only, and one was a post-project qualitative study. The largest sample size was 219, the smallest sample size was nine, and the average sample size was 66.

Therefore, the evidence base in relation to arts projects and offenders is small in size and low in quality. This is an issue that the wider project will address by developing toolkits which arts programme providers can use to evidence the impact of their work.

Findings from previous reviews

Two previous high-quality reviews of the literature were identified (Hughes, 2005; Meekums and Daniel, 2011). These papers both reported problems with identifying good-quality research in the area. Problems with the research included small sample sizes, an over-reliance on self-report measures, a lack of control groups, a lack of follow-up measures and poor analysis of qualitative data. Given the low volume and poor quality of the available research, both reviews offer only tentative conclusions. The reviews indicate that arts projects appear to have positive effects with offenders, including improved in-custody behaviour and improved mental health.

What impact do arts projects have on reoffending?

No solid evidence was found that arts projects are able to have a direct impact on reoffending. This finding reflects a lack of *demonstrable* impact and does not suggest that arts projects are ineffective.

The best available evidence: arts projects can improve in-prison behaviour

What is the evidence? Four studies provided evidence that arts projects may be able to improve in-prison behaviour (Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Dawes, 1999; Gussak, 2004; Moller, 2011). These studies found that participation in arts projects was associated with a reduction in the volume and severity of rule-breaking among offenders in custody, including an increase in compliance with staff requests. More tentative evidence suggests that relationships between staff and inmates can be improved by joint participation in arts projects.

How might arts projects bring about this change? Evidence suggests arts projects may promote improvements in in-prison behaviour by:

- providing an appropriate outlet for negative emotions;
- providing an incentive to behave well, so as not to be removed from the project;
- helping to foster a new way of seeing oneself and others;
- improving relationships between offenders and staff.

How might this link to desistance? While an improvement in in-custody behaviour is of value in its own right (for example, due to the reduced risk of attacks on staff), such improvements in behaviour could be seen as a useful early indication of long-term positive change. In addition, improved in-prison behaviour may help to enhance the environment of the prison in a way that can facilitate other rehabilitative efforts (such as education classes or rehabilitation programmes) and personal change.

The best available evidence: arts projects can improve individual psychological factors

What is the evidence? Ten studies provided evidence that arts projects may be able to improve individual psychological factors (Bensimon and Gilboa, 2010; Cohen, 2009, 2012; Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Gussak, 2004, 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Harkins *et al*, 2011; Moller, 2011). These studies found that participation in arts projects was associated with reductions in depression and an increased sense of purpose. More tentative findings indicate that arts projects may be able to produce improvements in terms of motivation, locus of control, anger, self-efficacy, anxiety and identity.

How might arts projects bring about this change? There is an extensive literature that documents the many individual psychological changes which can occur as a result of participation in arts projects. These changes can result through:

- positive interactions with others;
- being given the freedom to shape one's own work;
- having a sense of achievement and pride in the work;

- being able to engage with the material in a meaningful way.

How might this link to desistance? The importance of psychological change in the reduction of reoffending is well established. The kinds of psychological changes that rehabilitation programmes typically target are locus of control, impulsivity and attitudes to crime. This review provides tentative evidence that arts projects may be able to promote these types of changes. However, perhaps the most valuable potential contribution by arts projects will be to enhance the processes associated with secondary desistance – specifically by facilitating readiness to change and changes in self-concept by providing an engaging opportunity for offenders to begin to see themselves differently.

More tentative evidence: arts projects may improve educational outcomes

What is the evidence? One study provided evidence that arts projects may be able to improve educational outcomes (Halperin, Kessler and Braunschweiger, in press). This study indicated that participation in arts projects may lead to improved engagement in education for those participants who already had a reasonable level of educational attainment. More tentative findings suggest that arts projects can improve literacy and increase confidence in learning.

How might arts projects bring about this change? Evidence suggests arts projects may lead to improvements in education by:

- providing a more engaging learning environment;
- appealing to different learning styles in comparison to traditional educational contexts;
- providing a sense of achievement;
- increasing self-esteem;
- helping participants see that they can learn and grow.

How might this link to desistance? Improvements in education can lead to opportunities for employment, increase social capital, improve thinking skills and enhance feelings of self-worth – all of which are prominent positive factors in most major theories on desistance.

More tentative evidence: arts projects may enhance the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes

What is the context? Currently a wide range of offending behaviour programmes are delivered across the Prison and Probation Service. Programmes target different aspects of offending behaviour including violence, sexual offending and general cognitive skills. In some cases the arts are used as a 'bolt on' to a standard programme: for example, drama and role-play could be used to facilitate the practice of skills learned on the programme. In other cases the arts are used to deliver the whole content of a programme: for example, drama is used to help participants experience and work with issues such as empathy.

What is the evidence? Three studies provide evidence that arts projects may be able to enhance the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes (Bairn *et al*, 1999; Blacker, Watson and Beech, 2008; van den Broek, Keulen-de Vos and Bernstein, 2011). These studies indicate that interventions that combine the arts with other therapeutic methods (such as cognitive behavioural therapy) result in effective interventions, and that arts-based therapy can be more effective than traditional verbal forms of therapy.

How might arts projects bring about this change? Arts projects may enhance the effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes by helping programmes meet the principle of responsivity more effectively (one of three 'what works?' principles on which, traditionally, rehabilitative efforts are based). One of the ways in which arts projects are able to do this is by being participant-led, both in terms of pace and the degree of autonomy given to participants. They may appeal successfully also to a full range of different learning styles, by enabling participants to engage with the material in visual, kinaesthetic, verbal and auditory ways. Both of these factors may help to increase the range of people who are willing to engage in programmes, and consequently reduce rates of attrition from them.³

Delivering the content of an offending behaviour programme through an artistic medium may provide

a less threatening way for an offender to approach difficult and painful topics than can be achieved in a traditional group therapy format. It may provide offenders with a 'new language' or way of expressing emotions that helps them to engage with these emotions more fully, especially if they have literacy or language problems.

For rehabilitation programmes that are based on enhancing offenders' strengths (that is, programmes based on the 'Good Lives' model⁴), arts projects may be used to help offenders engage with the idea that they have hidden strengths (for example, by discovering new skills), experience 'goods' through a non-offending route (for example, by achieving praise and respect for their art) and imagine a different way of being.

How might this link to desistance? A discussion of the research literature that links the impact of offending behaviour programmes to reductions in reoffending is beyond the scope of this review⁵. However, in addition to helping efforts to produce primary desistance, it may be the case that arts projects can help programmes engage offenders in the process of secondary desistance by encouraging a deeper level of engagement with the material, helping offenders to link the material more directly to their own lives, and facilitating this continued process post-programme.

Implications

This review assesses the current impact that arts projects have with offenders, and identifies intermediate outcomes that may be linked to reoffending. The review emphasises a need for the wider research project to develop a framework for outcome measurement that can be adopted by organisations which deliver arts projects to offenders. The review has highlighted the current lack of good-quality research in the area, while illustrating ways in which arts projects may play an important part in the process of desistance. In terms of intermediate outcome measures, the review identifies that in-prison behaviour and individual psychological factors should be prioritised for inclusion in a toolkit on the basis of the evidence presented in this report, their important place in desistance theory and as an opportunity to develop

³ It is recognised that programme engagement may be seen as a process or output measure. Its inclusion reflects the fact that several studies report on client engagement as an intermediate outcome.

⁴ For more information, see <http://www.goodlivesmodel.com/glm/Home.html>

⁵ See 'Transforming Rehabilitation. A summary of evidence on reducing reoffending', Ministry of Justice, 2013

the evidence base. In addition, educational outcomes and the enhanced effectiveness of offending behaviour programmes should be included in toolkit development – at least at the outset of the development process, on the grounds that it would provide an opportunity to develop the tentative findings in these studies.

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