
102 ARTS PATHWAYS - YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING CUSTODY

This qualitative program of research investigated arts-based practice with high risk young adults in, or transitioning custody. The target group were 16-22 year olds in juvenile custody in Melbourne, Australia. The sentencing hierarchy ensures that young people with custodial sentences are high risk serious and/or repeat offenders. Essentially identical, multifaceted performing arts programs were researched at two gender specific sites, (one male and one female). These sites contain disproportionate numbers of Australian Indigenous, Maori/Pacific Islander, refugee and first generation migrant clients. The research focused on identifying:

- the most appropriate processes for engagement;
- the issues engaged with through the arts and the nature of that engagement;
- whether participants developed key personal, social and developmental skills;
- whether areas of criminogenic need were addressed (substance abuse, particular personality traits, mental, emotional and physical health, violence and self-abuse, offending);
- outcomes in relation to the development of key capacities (confidence, self-esteem, social and communication skills, a sense of belonging) and whether these contributed to the development of pathways for social inclusion; and
- the extent to which any of these vary with gender and diversity (culture/ethnicity).

The research is a comparative, longitudinal, qualitative study conducted over four years of doctoral research (2002–2005), based in the discipline of criminology. The study was funded by the Australian Research Council and 10 industry partners. The substantive interview and observational data offers deep descriptive understandings from multiple perspectives and time periods, of how the program was perceived, utilised and understood, the outcomes that followed participation and the challenges that were faced by the facilitators, young people and custodial institutions.

The research demonstrates that the arts program did engage with many of the key issues but this was dependent on foundational programmatic structures, facilitator qualities and processes. This presentation will briefly outline program elements that enabled engagement and outcomes in relation to health, substance use and criminogenic needs. The main focus of the paper will be to problematise these in terms of long-term change and the development of pathways to social inclusion. Most of these young people's major networks exist outside mainstream community facilities and health services; they have never been integrated with them. The arts program did begin a process of addressing a surprisingly extensive range of needs and underlying issues. However, the research identifies serious potential harms emanating from our current approach to program delivery. Without a sustainable program in a resource rich, fully integrated multi-service environment, the arts may not be 'the magic panacea' for high risk groups that so many researchers and community organisations have tried to promote. This is stark and more complex to address for Indigenous young women, than any other group in the study. The arts can neither do it all, nor do it alone. Can organisations and governments meet this challenge?