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The Arts and Prisoners: Experiences of Creative Rehabilitation

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Abstract: The following article presents findings from an ongoing evaluation of arts programmes from Artlink Central taking place in Cornton Vale, which is Scotland's main prison for women. Through a discussion of the findings, and a look to international research on this area, the arts can clearly generate significant rehabilitative benefits for offenders. However, such work has both real and perceived limitations. Ultimately the arts, like other rehabilitative efforts, can be regarded as an 'add on' and, therefore, do not receive the credit or place they deserve in policy and consequently in practice.

Keywords: arts; prison; rehabilitation

This article presents findings from an evaluation of Artlink Central's work over the past two years within HMP & YOI Cornton Vale, which is Scotland's main prison for women. Artlink Central is a registered charity founded in 1988 in the belief that involvement in the arts is life-enhancing and should be available to all. It enables a wide range of marginalised and special needs groups to work with experienced professional artists on high-quality art projects in the Stirling, Falkirk and Clackmannanshire areas of Central Scotland.¹ They have delivered art workshops in prisons in Scotland for the past 14 years and, therefore, have extensive experience in working within the prison environment. The evaluation highlighted the rehabilitative effects that the arts can have within a prison setting as well as the barriers (both real and perceived) to the use of arts with prisoners. At present the arts are not part of the core programme for prisoners.

Female Offenders in Scotland

Prisoner numbers continue to increase in Scotland. On 1 April 2007 the prison population stood at 7,238, but by May 2010 had increased to over 8,000.² The number of women going to prison, in particular, has risen at an alarming rate. Over the ten-year period from 1998/99 to 2007/08, the average daily prison population (men and women) increased by 22%. In the same ten-year period, the female prison population increased by 87% – over four times the growth experienced in the male prison population