

## Inspiring Desistance? Arts projects and 'what works?'

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### Abstract

This paper draws principally on a literature review that explored the question of whether Arts projects in prisons can inspire desistance from crime. The review, which aimed to connect the literatures on Arts projects in prisons, on learning in prisons and on desistance from crime, was undertaken to support the evaluation of a major Arts initiative in Scottish Prisons -- Inspiring Change -- which took place during 2010. A brief summary of the findings of the evaluation is also provided. The paper concludes that while it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect Arts projects in and of themselves to 'produce' desistance, there is evidence that they can play a vital role in enabling prisoners to imagine and to embark on the desistance process.

### Introduction

This paper draws on the final evaluation report of an initiative called Inspiring Change which was a co-ordinated programme of arts interventions that ran in 5 Scottish prisons (Barlinnie, Greenock, Polmont, Shotts and the Open Estate) throughout 2010. The programme involved a wide-ranging partnership between its principal sponsors Creative Scotland<sup>1</sup>, its coordinators Motherwell College and Learning Centre staff located in prison establishments, the Scottish Prison Service, and participating arts organizations: National Galleries of Scotland, Citizens' Theatre, Traverse Theatre, Scottish Opera, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Scottish Ensemble, National Youth Choir of Scotland.

Inspiring Change aimed to involve about 200 prisoners in a wide range of projects in order to stimulate offenders' engagement with learning, improve literacy skills and demonstrate the potential of the arts to support the process of rehabilitation. Our intention in this short paper is neither to describe the arts projects in detail, nor to report the findings from the evaluation (Anderson, et al., 2011). Rather, given the lead author's longstanding interest in 'what works?' and his experience as an accreditation panel member dealing with more traditional offender programmes, we focus on the third aim of the initiative (supporting rehabilitation through the arts) and examine the question: Can arts projects in prisons inspire desistance from crime? To that end, we draw principally on parts of an extensive literature review undertaken as part of the evaluation, and report briefly some of the data collected.

### Arts and Learning in Prisons

Although involvement in the arts is sometimes presented within the criminal justice context simply as a way for prisoners to pass the time, the reality is that the artistic

<sup>1</sup> Creative Scotland is the national leader for Scotland's arts, screen and creative industries. See: <http://www.creativescotland.com/>