

## Research Reports

# The Perceived Benefits of an Arts Project for Health and Wellbeing of Older Offenders

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## Abstract

The increasing ageing prison population is becoming a pressing issue throughout the criminal justice system. Alongside the rising population, are a host of health and wellbeing issues that contribute to older offenders needs whilst in prison. It has been recommended that meaningful activities can have positive effects on this population and therefore this paper uniquely reviews older offenders accounts of taking part in an arts based project, Good Vibrations, whilst imprisoned. The Good Vibrations project engages individuals in Gamelan music making with an end of project performance. This study used independent in-depth interviews to capture the voices of older offenders who took part in an art based prison project. The interview data was analysed using thematic analysis, which highlighted themes that were consistent with other populations who have taken part in a Good Vibrations project, along with specific age relating issues of mobility, motivation, identity and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** ageing prison population, older offender, arts in prison, prisoner health, arts

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Prisoners aged 50 years and above are a rapidly growing population in the England and Wales prison system. Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), suggests that the rise in population is not explained using statistics for demographic changes, nor by an increased prevalence of offending by older individuals, but by harsher sentencing policies, with a larger proportion of offenders aged over 60 years receiving longer sentences (de Viggiani, Mackintosh, & Lang, 2010). Older male offenders predominantly commit crimes that are sexual, and/or against people, leading to 80% of these offenders sentenced to four or more years.

Older offenders (50+) typically report high levels of chronic health conditions (Birmingham, 2003, 2004; Fazel et al., 2001; Merten, Bishop, & Williams, 2012) including 9% with mobility issues (Fazel, Hope, O'Donnell, Piper, & Jacoby, 2001). Mental health issues are an increasing concern in older offending populations with figures suggesting that they affect over half of prisoners aged 50 plus, with most individuals experiencing depression arising as a result of imprisonment (Merten, Bishop, & Williams, 2012). A Department of Health (1999-2000) survey highlighted that 85% of prisoners aged 60 and over had one or more major illnesses reported in their medical records, while 83% reported at least one chronic illness or disability (Howse, 2003). Despite mental health issues being prevalent in older offending populations, they are often overlooked by those in contact with

them (Kingston, Le Mesurier, Yorston, Wardle, & Heath, 2011). The most common illnesses reported were psychiatric, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and respiratory (de Viggiani, 2007a, 2007b; de Viggiani, Mackintosh, & Lang, 2010; Howse, 2003).

HMIP (2004) reviewed the treatment and conditions of older offenders in England and Wales, considering the requirements of the Human Rights Act, the Disability Discrimination Act, and the National Service Framework for older people. The report highlighted issues around the entry of older people into the prison setting and how this process is managed, along with sentence length leading to prisoners becoming elderly while in prison (de Viggiani, Mackintosh, & Lang, 2010). More specifically, the lack of specialist accommodation and provision to meet individual needs, the inappropriateness of prison regimes to the needs of older prisoners, the lack of tailored activities for older prisoners, and failure within prisons to adequately assess and address mental and physical health needs of this group (de Viggiani, Mackintosh, & Lang, 2010). Also, older prisoners were commonly housed in prisons extended distances from their homes, which hindered resettlement work, prison visits, and had a detrimental effect on their families (de Viggiani, Mackintosh, & Lang, 2010). Similar findings were reported by Hayes, Burns, Turnbull, and Shaw (2013) when considering the specific needs of older offenders. Older offenders have also reported issues with mixing with the younger offender population, some even stating that they would prefer to be segregated by age to reduce bullying and exploitation (Hayes et al., 2013). In a follow up study, the HMIP (2008) noted that marginal changes had been achieved with regards to developing a multidisciplinary approach to the treatment and management of older prisoners. Social care had 'disappointing' levels of provision. However, they noted 'positive developments' with regards to levels of healthcare provision. It was noted that some individual prisons and prison staff were implementing innovative work to support the specific needs of older prisoners (HMIP, 2008).

The National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders (NACRO / Department of Health, 2009) associated with the Department of Health (DH, 2008), report that older prisoners have needs for purposeful activity whether in the form of employment or leisure activity. Some older groups enjoy - and are therefore likely to engage in purposeful activity through - reminiscence activities, which can be simple discussion based groups, films, art and genealogy, plus activities or workshops focused on arts and crafts, testing general knowledge, creative writing, reading, history and music, and outdoor activities including gardening. Fellner and Vinck (2012) support that the following are beneficial to older offenders in prison. First, time spend outside of the cell, up to 10 hours per day, allows prisoners to be a part of social groupings and to take part in meaningful activities which can be crucial for their rehabilitation, mental health and wellbeing. Older offenders generally have fewer opportunities or incentives to take up activities outside of their cell. Services that prepare older offenders for probation and release are considered important for offender's overall rehabilitation and to reduce their risk of recidivism.

## Arts Projects in Prison

Arts based projects have a long and complex history of work with offenders (Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2012). The arts, and more specifically music based projects, in prisons have recently been recognised for their benefits (Caulfield, 2012; Caulfield & Wilson, 2012; Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Digard et al., 2007; Henley, Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2012; Wilson, Caulfield, & Atherton, 2008). Prison incarcerates offenders but also aims to rehabilitate and provide purposeful activity (HMIP, 2008). Engaging with the arts in prison environments has been described by Allen, Shaw, and Hall (2004) as a "humanising experience", which enables prisoners to acquire educational achievements and also improves self-confidence, social skills, and personal development.

Increasing offenders' self-esteem, communication skills, and self-worth, have value in their own right and arts programmes have been shown to tackle these areas (Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Miles & Clarke, 2006). However, it is noted that very few studies have specifically considered the contribution that creative music programmes can bring to older prisoners. For example, improved physical and mental health, health and wellbeing (DH / Arts Council England, 2007; Secker, Hacking, Spandler, Kent, & Shenton, 2007), in particular alleviating emotional stress, building self-esteem and self-confidence, personal achievement, improving communication skills, and enhancing peer and family relationships.

### **The Good Vibrations Gamelan Project**

The Good Vibrations Gamelan music project is run by a charity that works with offenders in prison and on probation. Gamelan is a traditional ensemble of music from Java and Bali in Indonesia comprising of bronze percussion instruments. Workshops using Gamelan have been noted as a good medium for group settings due to its informal and inclusive approach. The musical instruments can be played without any prior musical experience (Eastburn, 2003). The ethos of Gamelan means that participants are compelled to work together.

The Good Vibrations projects run across the duration of one week. Prisoners usually express their interest in taking part, however, in some prisons places on the project are given to targeted groups. During the project, traditional Javanese pieces are learnt, participants learn how to improvise, compose their own pieces, learn about Javanese culture and associated art-forms such as Javanese dance and shadow puppetry. The workshops develop individual's skills so that participants are ready to present a final performance where an invited audience of peers, family members, staff and sometimes outside guests attend (Henley, Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2012).

There have been a number of reviews of the Good Vibrations project to date. Eastburn (2003) found that despite initial difficulties with its implementation, both staff and prisoners reported positive feedback. Later studies, such as Digard, von Sponeck, and Liebling (2007), found a number of significant positive influences on participants such as increased insight and reflection in individual prisoners and a stronger cohesion in groups of prisoners. Participants found the teaching in the project empowering. They were given more responsibility as the project progressed and began to share ideas on how to improve the music, resulting in an increase in confidence. The report also revealed that the process of learning a new skill in an informal group setting was empowering for prisoners. Digard, von Sponeck, and Liebling (2007) also found that participants and staff reported improved social skills and the development of self-regulation, needed in order to achieve a range of goals each day, caused by the prisoners interacting with each other.

Good Vibrations projects are intended to be accessible for all, and previous research has highlighted the positive experiences of adult women, men, and young people who have taken part in these projects in prison (Caulfield, 2015; Digard, von Sponeck, & Liebling, 2007; Henley, Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2012). However, no previous research has specifically sought to investigate the experience of older offenders taking part in such a project. Given the increased numbers of older offenders in prison, and the specific needs they may have it is important to investigate whether arts-based projects might be able to respond to the needs of older offenders and successfully engage them.

## Method

### Design

The study adopted a qualitative approach in order to collect the accounts, perspectives and voices of prisoners who took part in the Good Vibrations project. For logistical reasons, such as prisoner regimes and availability, in depth interviews were conducted with offenders at HMP Dartmoor and HMP Whatton two months after taking part in a Good Vibrations project. The Good Vibration project was run by experienced staff from the charity. Prisoners were informed about the project through a number of communication channels, such as posters on wings and recreation prison staff, and participants took part on a voluntary basis. Participants were excused from their normal routine during the week of participation.

### Participants

13 older prisoners (aged 50+) who had taken part in the Good Vibrations project were interviewed in depth. Participants' ages ranged between 50 and 65 years and they had served between five and eight years of their sentence. Two prisoners had been transferred to their current prison just weeks before taking part in the Good Vibration project. No other demographic information was collected. Interviews were conducted with four prisoners from HMP Dartmoor and nine prisoners from HMP Whatton in order to triangulate the results. Interviews were held until saturation was reached. HMP Dartmoor is a category C training prison for adult male prisoners. The prison has hosted several Good Vibrations projects. HMP Whatton is a category C prison that houses adult male sex offenders. The prison first opened as a detention centre and since May 1990 it has held sex offenders who participate in the Sex Offenders Treatment Programme. HMP Whatton has also invited the Good Vibrations for a number of projects. Participant's informed consent was gained prior to interviews taking place and participation was on a voluntary basis. The real names of the participants have not been given in this report in order to maintain anonymity. No compensation was given for the individuals' participation.

### Materials – Semi Structure Interviews

Participants were interviewed at length by the lead researcher and were asked to describe their experiences of the project, what they gained from it, and specifically to focus on their experiences and behaviour after the project. Interview lasted on average one hour. The interviews took place in a private location, with only the researcher and participant present. The interview schedule was adapted from previous research (Wilson, Caulfield, & Atherton, 2009). The structure was developed in such a way that participants were required to discuss the project in a logical time sequence – before and after - to enhance memory recall at each specific time point. For example, participants were asked to describe the first day of the project in detail to encourage accurate memories of their experience and feelings at that time. As this was a semi structure interview, certain questions were prepared beforehand as a framework; however, there was flexibility for participants to add additional information or for the interviewer to ask additional questions relating to the participant's response. Examples of questions include:

1. What were your expectations of the gamelan sessions?
  - Had you heard from others who had taken part?
  - What motivated you to take part?
2. How did you feel at the end of the week?

3. Was there anything about this project that was particularly useful or meaningful to you?

## Ethics

This research project gained ethical approval from Birmingham City University's Psychology Research Committee and therefore conformed to the ethical policies of the university. In addition, the research project followed the guidelines of the British Psychological Society's Ethical Framework for research psychologists.

## Data Analysis

The lead researcher conducted the data analysis. A thematic analysis approach was adopted (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013), beginning with an in-depth coding process involving the entire body of interview data (Caulfield & Hill, 2014) and working towards overarching themes that represent the common points across all interview data. This approach reflects the analytical process adopted in other similar studies (Wilson, Caulfield, & Atherton, 2009).

## Results

A number of key themes emerged from the interview data. Some of these themes were consistent with previous research findings of the Good Vibrations project, and some specific to older offender's experience of taking part in the Good Vibrations project.

### Themes Consistent With Previous Studies

#### Meditation and Managing Emotion

Meditation has been a consistent theme across the reviews of the Good Vibrations project. Although participants of the project are not taught about meditation specifically, it seems that many participants make use of the recording of their final performance to meditate when they are back on their wing. Additionally, eight participants alluded to being able to forget, temporarily, that they were in prison and remembering a moment where they felt as though they were human (during the project). In some cases, the performance recordings were used to help manage their emotion, such as anger.

*"it reminds me of doing the project and I feel good, like a human again"*

*"If I'm feeling down or wound up, I get wound up a lot, then I listen to it in my cell – my mate asked if he could use it too"*

#### Communication and Social Skills

Communication and social skills form the basis of many of the mainstream intervention programs within the Criminal Justice System. However, for many offenders such skills are limited. One participant from HMP Whatton commented about his observations of the group members who took part in the project:

*"I was a well respected man, in my job I was important, but some men here they have got to learn to listen, they don't like it, but this project, well they had to really – they didn't have a choice you see"*

Additionally, one participant from HMP Dartmoor reflected on his experience:

*"I like to keep myself personal, I don't mix much, but this project helped me to talk to the others, well I had to listen to them and I had to tell them"*

### **Sense of Achievement and Motivation**

Some participants commented on the CD recording of their final performance as something that they could send or give to their friends and families so that they can see what they have achieved during their time in prison. They saw the project as a way to demonstrate that they were doing something and achieving something that their family could be proud of.

*“it was a unique experience that we won’t come across again in our life”*

*“I sent my CD, you know the final performance, well we got a CD and I gave that one to my daughter, something she could see that I have done whilst in here”*

### **Themes Specific to Older Offenders**

The themes below have been considered as specific to older offenders as these themes have not emerged from other similar studies using the same methodologies, but with differing typologies of offenders (e.g. Caulfield, 2012, 2015; Caulfield, Wilkinson, & Wilson, 2016)

#### **Age and Mobilisation (Disabled)**

The older offenders interviewed at HMP Dartmoor and HMP Whatton were very aware of the accessibility of the project to individuals who might be ‘disabled’ in some way. The disabling factor seemed to vary, but in some cases participants were physically less mobile and in some cases confined to a wheel chair. It was noted by the individuals themselves, as well as other members of the group, that the project was easily accessible to these individuals. One participant from HMP Dartmoor suggested:

*“Even people who weren’t easily mobile were able to take part, I mean one guy – he’s in a chair and cant normally do stuff – they just move stuff for him... yea they moved one instrument on a table for him”*

#### **Age and the Unknown (Creatures of Habit)**

It was noted by some of the participants of the project, that there were other older offenders on their wing that would have greatly benefitted from taking part in the project however, they tend not to sign up to courses and activities and tend to stick to a routine, suggesting that they are ‘creatures of habit’. One prisoner at HMP Whatton commented:

*“I’ve done all sorts of courses whilst in prison but older ones here fear the unknown, they like to keep to their normal stuff. What they do day to day.”*

*“older offenders fear the unknown... this project helps to encourage us to do other things”*

*“many of the people on my wing, where I come from, are in the over 57 age bracket and trying to get them to do anything outside their cell is virtually impossible”*

#### **Something to Do With Your Time / Hobbies & Interests**

A number of men commented upon the importance of having something to do with their time, particularly given the repetitiveness of routine inside the prison. They expressed that having something different to do was important and some of the men had considered how they could follow up their participation in this particular project with further projects. In particular, there was gratitude that the project didn’t require a pre-existing musical skill in order to participate.

*"I mean I have a musical skill, but this was different, this let the men who aren't musical do something"*

*"I've thought about taking part in another, yes, if they came back again, I mean are they coming back again? I heard that it wasn't the first time. I think everyone needs something to focus on"*

Some of the men recognised the importance of self-discipline and being able to listen and take orders from other people. They had observed men that previously had had issues with listening to and taking orders from other people and watched how during the project they began to listen and work alongside other people.

*"the project did people a lot of good – it taught inmates to do as they were told, because they had to listen and do what they were told to do, you know, for it to work"*

*"You can't just do what you like, you have to listen, even those that don't normally listen, they listen to them and have a go"*

Some men commented on how taking part in the project had offered them a life line, something that they can focus on and think beyond prison life. They had expressed their interest in being a part of Good Vibrations or something similar once they have left prison and were part of society again.

### **Start and End of Sentence**

Some of the men had served a good number of years towards their sentence and others had relatively little time spent. The Good Vibrations project appeared to serve slightly different purposes for each other these groups, although some of these aspects or reasons are also shaped by the prisons own structure and routines. For example, one prisoner at HMP Whatton had joined the prison just six days before the Good Vibrations course began. He had no expectations of the course given that he had not had the chance to speak to previous participants of a Good Vibrations course. He suggested that:

*"not all prisoners have the same opportunities and age stops some, also, unemployment / retirement can restrict course participation, but the course help me settle in, particularly when you are older".*

This particular prisoner found the course helped him during the settling in process, which some older offenders find quite challenging (Crawley & Sparks, 2006). Participation in such groups, according to this offender, brings groups together quite quickly.

### **Critical Reflections**

There were some consistent critical reflections of the project, which included participants commenting that they would like to see the project more frequently in their prison and that they think each project should be more than one week, the recommendation was two weeks in order to maximise the benefits of taking part.

*"I think, the only thing really, more frequent visit [of the project] would be better, more of us could do it then ... and two weeks rather than one, you just get into it, you know, how it works n' stuff n' one week isn't enough"*

## Discussion

The interviews with older offenders presented some interesting points for consideration and discussion which capture the wider discussions and debates surrounding the management, treatment, and needs of an ageing prison population.

The findings presented here demonstrate that the positive findings seen in previous studies with younger participants may also apply to older offenders. For example: practice and development of skills whilst in prison, enabling individuals to communicate clearly with other prisoners and prison staff; managing their own responses in social interactions and situations; and generally practicing working as a group in a 'non judgemental' environment. The Good Vibrations project requires the development of good levels of communication across the team of participants throughout the week, including the final showcase performance. Therefore, participation allows prisoners to develop their interpersonal skills in one-to-one interactions as well as communication across a larger group. This skill is particularly important when prisoners are required to accept instructions from other prisoners or members of staff, and therefore required to be compliant in order for the project to be successful. Older offenders in particular have been found to report difficulties when socialising and mixing with younger offenders, some even stating that they would prefer to be segregated by age to reduce bullying and exploitation (Hayes, Burns, Turnbull, & Shaw, 2013).

The practice of meditation is an interesting strand that appears consistently throughout the reviews of various Good Vibrations projects with different types of participants (Caulfield & Wilson, 2012; Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2009; Henley, Caulfield, Wilson, & Wilkinson, 2012). Meditation appears to be both a skill and practice that prisoners discover through reflection upon the project. In some cases, participants use the experience of reflection as a way of 'forgetting' prison life temporarily, or processing their own emotional reactions whilst being housed in prison. This has particularly been noted in prisoners who report issues with anger and self-management of their anger, which is consistent with developing literature (Fennell, Benau, & Atchley, 2016; Hirano & Yukawa, 2013). However, for older offenders, the practice of meditation has been raised as important by the population themselves, which is in keeping with previous studies of older female prisoners' rates of depression and the use of religious meditation (Aday, Krabill, & Deaton-Owens, 2014), and older prisoners' use of meditation and relaxation to manage emotions (Aday, 2006).

There were a number of themes that emerged in the participant's accounts that were specific to older offenders, their needs, and their experience of prison. Physical health problems and age-associated mobility issues were discussed in depth by a number of participants from each of the prisons that were visited as part of this evaluation project. There was at least one prisoner at each of the prisons who was experiencing mobility issues that other participants commented upon. The Good Vibrations project was considered by all participants, those with mobility issues and those who observed individuals with mobility issues, to be accommodating and easily adapted in order for accessibility issues to be overcome and therefore allowing any prisoner to take part. As well as mobility issues, many older offenders experience chronic health conditions prior to or during prison life as results of factors such as poverty, diet, inadequate access to healthcare, alcoholism, smoking and other substance abuse (Anno et al., 2004). Prison life, including factors such as separation from family, fear of victimisation, and the possibility of a long duration behind bars place psychological strains on prisoners which can accelerate the ageing process (Sterns et al., 2008) whereby prisoners psychological can be up to 10 years older than their chronological age (NACRO / Department of Health, 2009). In addition, the older offenders



population is increasing across our prisons, and to some extent it appears that the system is unable to cater for their particular needs with regards to rehabilitation and treatment. There are also limited courses on offer, aside from mainstream rehabilitation, for the older offending population. The Good Vibrations project appears to 'fill the gap' in terms of giving older offenders the opportunity to engage in a project and potentially develop a hobby or interest in something uniquely different from their usual prison routine. It seems that for some offenders, who were approaching parole, developing an interest and links with an organisation outside of the prison was an important opportunity.

Some participants began to discuss the links they had with family and friends outside prison. They explained how the recording from the project provided them with a sense of achievement that they could show family and friends to demonstrate what they have been doing whilst inside. They further suggested that friends and family often lived too far away to travel or experienced difficulty in mobility themselves and hence found it difficult to visit. [Hayes, Burns, Turnbull, and Shaw \(2013\)](#) reported similar findings in their review of social and custodial needs for older offenders. They found that up to 40% of older offenders received no visits from friends and family, and nearly 50% were situated out of their home area. [Crawley and Sparks \(2006\)](#) describe how older offenders are at risk of losing touch with people in the community and therefore having little to look forward to upon release from prison. The CD recording of the participant's final performance provided discussion points for visits, letters and communication with the outside world in a positive way, and allowed the prisoners who were interviewed as part of this project to demonstrate a rare but positive achievement whilst inside prison.

The aim of this project was to capture the older offender participants' reflections of taking part in a Good Vibration project; therefore, there were no specific measures used to record an impact. Future research might consider pre and post measures to address this. Whilst the sample of this project included men who had committed a range of offences it would be beneficial to explore the experience of men in other prisons who have also taken part in the project.

In conclusion, provision for older offenders in the prison system is limited and, as such, support in the form of activities and courses is limited. Given the evidence that supports accelerated aging in older individuals in the prison system, activities such as the Good Vibrations project provide opportunities for offenders to engage with something beyond their cell and usual regime, which encourages cognitive functioning and creativity ([Greaves & Farbus, 2006](#)) as well as developing new ideas for interests and hobbies. The Good Vibrations project meets a number of 'needs' for the older offending population, fostering positive interactions, development of social interaction skills, motivation and interest collectively whilst working with other offenders.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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