



Art as a Rehabilitation Tool

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## **Abstract**

The carceral experience presents many detrimental impacts on the wellbeing of people who are incarcerated. In a broken penal system in the United States, fine arts programming can be one of the more effective alternatives to punishment and can be implemented in the restructuring of this system. The primary aim of this review paper was to examine the impact creative art programming in correctional institutions had on the people who are incarcerated with a specific focus on the effectiveness of these programs on the people's mental health, likelihood of being rehabilitated, and reducing their recidivism. This paper conducted a meta-analysis of nine published studies on the implementation of creative art programs in correctional institutions to evaluate and examine the effectiveness of these programs, and it relied on the framework of labeling and general strain theory. The findings of this paper revealed that the implementation of creative arts programming in correctional institutions was linked to the (1) fostering of social cohesion and rehabilitation in prisons, (2) positive effects on the emotional regulation and personal growth of the people who are incarcerated, and (3) the ability to reduce recidivism and promote education among the people who are incarcerated. Despite the positive findings, it is important to highlight the publication bias that exists in this subject and the lack of studies that report negative outcomes of these programs. This review paper identifies that future research should focus on exploring the perspectives of people who are incarcerated and highlighting their voices and stories. Negative outcomes should be reported and not neglected to determine the true effectiveness and longevity of these programs in the future restructuring of the penal system. *Keywords:* penal system, creative art programs, recidivism reduction, rehabilitation, offenders.

## **Introduction**

Incarceration is a harrowing and dehumanizing experience for many individuals who find themselves sitting behind bars in their six-by-eight-foot prison cells. The individuals are immediately stripped of their autonomy upon their arrival into the prison and find themselves facing an inner turmoil of trying to better themselves in an environment that is not supportive of such a notion. Those who try not to succumb to the demeaning labels society ascribes to them find resilience and solace within the programming available in prisons.

Fleetwood (2020) highlighted the testimonial of Russell Craig, a person who was incarcerated, describing how helpful fine arts programming was to his personal growth when talking about a painting he made of his prison ID.

Art was like my tool, and then I found art in the prison, in the system. It says, “PA Department of Corrections” — “De-part-ment”—so it says “art” in the middle of “Department.” So I underlined “art,” because that word happened to be hidden inside “Department.” That just was, you know, interesting how that was there for me. Art was my tool, my vessel, to navigate out of this system, out of that kind of lifestyle that just was going nowhere (Fleetwood, 2020, p.24).

Implementing creative art programs in the penal system can potentially create the change needed to repair the broken system. Textor (2022) highlighted the critical role art programming can play in restructuring the prison system by providing help to individuals on a personal level and creating changes on a systemic level. Art has the power to heal people, and those people incarcerated in correctional institutions deserve opportunities to change their lives. I believe everyone deserves a second chance to turn their life around, and creative programs within correctional institutions can provide the space for individuals to change their behaviors. These programs can offer the inmates a reprieve from the brutalizing and isolating experiences incarceration holds for them.

The United States penal system is broken because it has lost sight of the mission to reform the individuals they have deemed harmful to society, among other various social factors and issues that have committed to its downfall. The only promise this system has delivered is the consistent incarceration of people at high rates and removing them from society. In 2022, the Bureau of Justice Statistics revealed that 1.2 million people are incarcerated in correctional institutions across the United States (U.S. Department of Justice et al., 2023). This high incarceration rate, coupled with a 66% recidivism rate documented in a 10-year longitudinal study by the U.S. Department of Justice, is a clear indicator that the penal system is in need of repair (Antenangeli et al., 2021). Punishing for the sake of punishment is not the goal that should be at the forefront of the criminal legal system. The criminal legal system needs to be restructured for actual change to occur in the behavior of the people incarcerated within it.

Textor (2022) emphasizes the notion that many people have experienced mental health issues during their imprisonment, and the environment of the correctional institutions only further damages their mental

health. One of the only places in correctional institutions that can improve the quality of life of the people who are incarcerated is the creative art programs. These programs help people process their emotions and elevate their self-esteem and self-confidence that the prison environment has broken upon their arrival into the system. They can also develop relationships built on trust because of the vulnerability they display when participating in these programs with other people who are incarcerated, which creates a community that provides them with the support they need.

Creative art programs have been around prisons for centuries; however, only in the past few decades have these programs been examined and evaluated to determine their impact on the people who are incarcerated. Littman & Silva (2020) touch on the history of these programs and how they were initially formed and led by the people who are incarcerated, who took it upon themselves to create a space for them to form social connections. Littman & Silva's (2020) systematic review examined 25 pre existing studies on prison art programs in the United States and other countries to analyze the outcomes of these programs on the people who are incarcerated. Their findings revealed that these prison art programs produced a variety of positive social-emotional outcomes for the people who are incarcerated and improved their community relationships. Their literature review highlighted the need for future empirical research on these programs, which would be helpful for society to better understand how influential these programs can be not just on the people who are incarcerated but on their families, communities, and correctional institutions (Littman & Silva, 2020).

Textor (2022) shared a powerful story of a male participant who participated in these art programs and how the poetry he wrote in the art program allowed him to restore the relationship with his daughter, which had been dormant for years. The creative writing program he participated in during his time in the correctional institution equipped him with the tools necessary for rebuilding the broken relationship with his daughter by allowing him to display his vulnerabilities. The man shared poems with his daughter, which led to a series of exchanges between the two, eventually allowing them to restore their relationship. Kumar (2020) presented multiple powerful stories from male participants in a writing program in prison who reported how impactful this program was in helping rebuild and restore their identity as individuals while simultaneously allowing them to unpack the elements behind their behaviors, which led them to where they currently were.

The influences of creative art programs go beyond the positive social-emotional outcomes on the mental health of the participants who are incarcerated. They even have the ability to provide the people with an opportunity for employment after their release from prison. Dahesh (2024) highlighted the importance of employment for the released inmates in keeping them from recidivating after they re-integrate into society. The creative art programs provide the possibility of teaching the participants skills that can be useful for obtaining employment after they are released. Participating in areas such as painting, drawing, graphic design, and other art fields can allow the people who are incarcerated to develop skills they could apply when released in jobs related to the art field and other fields that use similar skills (Dahesh, 2024). I believe that such programs are vital not only in fostering the creativity within these individuals but also in providing them with skills and tools that could potentially allow them to successfully reintegrate into society. Employment is especially important for the released individuals who were incarcerated because it provides them with a secure and stable routine that will alleviate any potential strain that could cause them to re-offend (Dahesh, 2024).

Rehabilitation promises to offer the people who are incarcerated the tools to change their criminogenic behavior to ensure they carry this new rehabilitated behavior back into society when released. There are many ways in which rehabilitation can take place in correctional institutions, but the method I am most interested in exploring is the approach through creative art programs. I am a firm believer that art has the power to change someone and offer them the tools to better their behavior. This paper is informed by the structure of the labeling and general strain theory.

## **Methods**

This review paper was guided by the following research questions: How influential are creative art programs on the mental health of people who are incarcerated? What role do these creative programs play in the possibility of reducing recidivism among people who are incarcerated? How effective are these programs in providing a social support and community network for people who are incarcerated? Those questions outlined above served as the foundation of my paper and research efforts to find sources aligned with my interests in creative art programs in correctional institutions. The discovery of those sources included in this paper was made possible by the keywords I used on search

engines such as Google Scholar and the database of the Lloyd Sealy Library. The keywords I used are penal system, art programs, rehabilitation, and recidivism. These terms yielded various scholarly articles that aided in my literature review of these creative art programs and the development of this paper.

The process of determining the relevance of these articles in correlation to the topic of my paper was moderately easy; however, I did run into my fair share of difficulties in finding the exact sources that fit the criteria I wanted for my paper. The initial criteria I had for determining the relevance of these articles were a publication date from the last 14 years, the inclusion of a discussion on the operation of creative programs in correctional facilities, either jails or prisons, and a discussion on the effect of the rehabilitative or recidivism programs on the population of people who are incarcerated. To remedy the problem of finding relevant articles that fit the scope of my research that I faced in the early stages of my research, I modified the search terms mentioned above and used combinations of two or three search terms to see which combination of terms would provide me with the results that matched my initial criteria. Certain searches I performed included the keywords *penal system*, *art programs*, *rehabilitation or prison*, *art programs*, *recidivism*, etc. The ability to explore the effect of these keywords on my searches ultimately led to a collection of scholarly articles that informed the contents of this paper.

The scholarly articles used in this paper are a collection of qualitative and quantitative empirical studies that focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the creative art programs operating in correctional institutions in the United States and other countries that have published studies on this matter. The nine scholarly articles that were specific to the effectiveness of the program are either meta-analyses or original studies. The articles that are meta-analyses are Dahesh (2024), Kumar (2020), Littman & Silva (2020), Oliver (2017), Pesata et al., (2022), and Textor (2022). The articles that are original studies are Halperin et al., (2012), Parker (2022), and Van Der Meulen and Instead, (2020). It was essential for me to include studies conducted in the last 14 years to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of these programs I was evaluating. This also helps highlight any limitations these publications found and allows for more thought to be given to future studies that can be done in this field.

There were two sociological and criminological theories that were integral to the framework of my research on this topic: the General Strain Theory and the Labeling Theory. Both theories are renowned in sociology and

criminology for their unique explanation of the motivations behind criminal behavior. General strain theory is a sociological theory developed by Robert Agnew (1992) who updated and altered the version of classic Strain Theories that Robert Merton had created (Agnew, 1992). This updated theory focuses on the broader concept of *strain*, more specifically, the role negative emotions and treatment by others have on the propensity of someone to commit an offense. Agnew believed that the experience of strain or stress could generate negative emotions that could create pressure for a person, and the only solution to alleviate this strain would be participation in criminal behavior. In this paper, the General strain theory is used to explain how participation in art programs that elicit positive emotions in correctional institutions can relieve the strain that people who are incarcerated might feel during their imprisonment and upon release. Alleviating this strain would deter them from participating in criminal activities and encourage them to gain access to employment with the help of the skills they acquired from these programs (Dahesh, 2024).

Labeling theory is a sociological theory that believes people's behaviors are influenced by how others have labeled them (Becker, 1963). This theory is applicable to my paper because the population being discussed in this paper are people who are incarcerated who, upon entering the doors of the penal system, are branded with the label of "criminal" or "convicted felon." This label is difficult for them to shed, and at some point, they will tire of trying to shed that label and decide to adhere to it because that is how society sees them. This theory is a self-fulfilling prophecy because the labels can be negative and pose so many obstacles for the individuals who have been prescribed that label by society that for them, the only thing left they can do is live up to that label. In this paper, this theory is used to demonstrate how other labels such as "artist", "writer", "poet", "musician", and others have the potential ability to influence people who are incarcerated in a positive way, allowing them to re identify themselves to the world through their participation in creative art programs.

## **Findings**

This review paper examined and evaluated nine published studies and articles on the operation of creative art programs in correctional institutions. The nine sources revealed interesting results about the effectiveness of these programs, the effects they provided the people who are incarcerated on their mental health, and whether or not they reduced the likelihood of recidivating for

the people who are incarcerated. I have organized the findings I have found in this paper into three key ideas that relate to: (1) the powerful role the arts programs play in the fostering of social cohesion and rehabilitation in prison; (2) how art programs serve as tools for the emotional regulation and personal growth of the people who are incarcerated; and (3) how the art programs have the ability to reduce recidivism and promote education among the offenders.

### **The Powerful Role of Creative Art Programs in Rehabilitation**

It is well-known that the incarceration experience is a deeply isolating and harrowing experience for an individual to go through (Mooney & Shanahan, 2020). The criminal justice and penal system promises to reform individuals by sentencing them to incarceration to rid them of their criminogenic behaviors. Yet, these systems fail at that goal because of the punitive environment in those institutions, which does not positively support reformatory change. Punitive and retributive measures do not encourage the reform of the individuals who go through the doors of correctional institutions. They are costly measures to maintain, and the only thing they successfully achieve is breaking the spirit of these individuals and worsening their prospects in society after incarceration.

The penal system needs to be restructured and reformed, as the United States' high incarceration rate has proven the ineffectiveness of this system (Textor, 2022). Many alternative approaches to punitive measures could be applied in restructuring this system. However, one method that is reasonably effective and valuable to both the people who are incarcerated, and society is the implementation of fine arts programming. Textor (2022) believes fine arts programming in the penal system can positively influence people who are incarcerated on a personal level while simultaneously restructuring the justice system from one that emphasizes punishment to one that emphasizes rehabilitation.

Harsh and cruel punishments have not been able to yield the positive results that the penal system wants to better the overall society. However, creative and fine arts programming has been able to remedy some of the flaws that the penal system hasn't been able to address for decades. Art has historically been responsible for a multitude of societal changes, with particular historical events such as the Enlightenment period in the 18<sup>th</sup> century changing the way punishment was enacted and leading to the evolution of the penal system (Oliver, 2017). The rehabilitative component of creative arts programs



has delivered promising results pertaining to the strengthened social cohesion bonds among people who are incarcerated and positively influenced their personal development as well as allowing them to take accountability for their actions.

There has been a recent shift and interest towards the arts in the United States society in its relationship to enhancing the wellbeing of individuals. Pesata et al. (2022) found that implementing these art programs in group settings can impact the social cohesion and functioning of individuals in their relationships with one another. Van Der Meulen and Omstead (2020) discovered a similar finding in their study conducted with women incarcerated in a Canadian corrections facility where the women reported feeling a deep connection and bond forming between them and the other artists present with them in this program. Both studies shared the sentiment that these programs helped aid the personal development of the individuals participating in the programs and strengthened their ties to the group and social community.

The strengthened social ties and community are essential to the mental health of incarcerated individuals as it can be challenging for them to allow themselves to be vulnerable with others and restore broken bonds. The incarceration experience makes it difficult for these individuals to heal this part of themselves. However, these creative art programs provide them the opportunity to slowly rebuild a part of themselves that was broken.

### **Art Fosters Offender's Emotional Regulation and Personal Growth**

The experience of life as a human being can be complex and challenging for many individuals in society. However, those who exist in our society without the proper tools or knowledge to process their emotions and challenges in their life experiences can find living incredibly difficult. Not everyone has found themselves equipped with the cognitive and emotional tools which could ease their navigation and interactions with people in their daily lives. Many people who find themselves confined within the walls of correctional institutions are there because the nature of their crimes revolves around conflict and unprocessed emotions of anger and frustration, they had with the individuals involved. The lack of tools needed to process these emotions led to this outburst and the unfortunate offense they committed because they were unable to properly self-regulate their emotions (Parker, 2022). Parker (2022) analyzed the effectiveness that art programs in prison had on the

emotional regulation of the people who are incarcerated. She found that the art programs provided the people who are incarcerated the ability to unpack their prior behaviors and develop healthier ways to self-regulate their emotions.

During the art program sessions Parker (2022) studied, the correction officers were not present, and that helped the offenders benefit even more from their time in the program because they were not under the constant supervision and surveillance of those officers who could put them down for trying to better themselves. Correction officers often hold a mindset that the people who are incarcerated are inherently bad people and nothing that they try to do will ever change that part of themselves because of the “criminal” label enforced on them. Thus, their absence in these sessions and perhaps, the lack of constant surveillance, encouraged the people who are incarcerated to participate more and increased the therapeutic outcomes on their behavior. Many offenders who participated in the art programs reported higher levels of self-confidence, self-respect, and an enhanced sense of their personal identity (Parker, 2022).

Kumar (2020) explored the impact reflective writing programs in correctional institutions had on people who are incarcerated, and the results were overwhelmingly positive. The writing programs provided solace for the inmates and encouraged them to process their emotions through a healthy outlet. It teaches them a different way to view their situation while building up their self-esteem and helping redefine who they are. One participant in Kumar’s (2020) study, Naji, delivered a powerful testimonial on how this writing program allowed him to gain a new understanding of his life and criminal actions, which landed him in prison. This new understanding of his life encouraged him to change his ways and take accountability for his actions and role in the offense he committed. It is because of this reflective writing program that provided him with a variety of writing prompts to reflect and unpack his actions which has allowed him this ability to hold himself accountable for his past behaviors to avoid repeating them in the future.

The influences of creative art programs go beyond the positive-social emotional outcomes on the mental health of people who are incarcerated. They even have the ability to provide the people who are incarcerated an opportunity for employment after their release. Dahesh (2024) highlighted the importance of employment for the people who are incarcerated in keeping them from recidivating after they re-integrate into society. The creative art programs provide the possibility of teaching the participants skills that can be useful for obtaining employment after their release. Employment is especially important

for released people who were incarcerated because it provides them with a secure and stable routine that will alleviate any potential strain in their lives that could cause them to re-offend (Daresh, 2024). The general strain theory supports the role income from a job and education can play in alleviating the strain on these individuals' lives (Brezina, 2017).

### **The Benefits of Creative Arts Programs: Promoting Education Among Offenders and Reducing Recidivism:**

Several studies found it possible for creative art programs to promote education among people who are incarcerated and reduce recidivism. They demonstrated these program's ability to not only help individuals on a personal level but also help restructure society on a larger scale (Textor, 2022). Littman & Silva's (2020) systematic review examines 25 studies on prison art programs in the United States and other countries to identify outcomes of these programs on participants who are incarcerated. Their findings revealed that these prison art programs produced a variety of positive social-emotional outcomes for inmates and improved their community relationships. Littman & Silva (2020) noted that there were a few studies they reviewed that reported reduced recidivism rates from people who are incarcerated who participated in the arts programs. However, they also noted that this evidence was limited and inconsistent across studies.

Halperin et al. (2012) explored the impact of a rehabilitation arts program in the Sing-Sing correctional facility in New York on the participants' behavior and engagement throughout the program. The program they studied, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, which was founded in 1996, was voluntary for participating people who are incarcerated and therefore were not forced to enroll in them. They emphasized that it is important that the people who are incarcerated voluntarily choose arts programs rather than feeling coerced to participate. The autonomy of the people who are incarcerated as a significant element of Rehabilitation Through the Arts. Empirical results of the program's efficacy demonstrated that this approach increased the self-confidence and self-esteem of people who are incarcerated (Halperin et al., 2012).

### **Discussion**

This review paper found useful research as well as critical ideas in relation to the implementation of creative art programs in correctional

institutions through the analysis of the preexisting published studies. A main finding I found in almost all of the studies spoke to the positive impact these programs had on the wellbeing of people who are incarcerated. Many participants of these programs in the studies published reported feeling more connected, self-confident, and having higher self-esteem which helped alleviate the mental strains of incarceration they were facing. Dahesh (2024), Halperin et al. (2012), Kumar (2020), Littman & Silva (2020), and Parker (2022) are among the studies that highlighted the positive impact the creative art programs had on people who are incarcerated.

This overwhelmingly positive impact puts forth an essential message that alternative punishment methods exist that reduce the detrimental effects of incarceration. It is evident that in the penal system people who are incarcerated are denied many basic human rights because it is believed that access to those rights is a luxury. But in actuality, there is nothing luxurious about the carceral experience. Terwiel (2018) discusses this notion when referencing the effect high temperatures in correctional institutions have on offenders. High-ranking officials of the prison possessed opinions that the absence of air conditioning in the institutions was to minimize the comfort people who are incarcerated might experience and deter them from returning. Ironically, these officials equated a fundamental right to proper living conditions and health to luxurious comfort in an institution that differs radically from normal and luxurious housing options.

Terwiel (2018) found that alongside access to basic rights such as food, water, and heated cells that prisoners had demanded to make their carceral experience better, they also requested access to art supplies. This finding surprised me at first, but after a while, I realized that it is not that unusual of a demand because, given the brutal carceral experience, it makes sense that the prisoners would gravitate towards art to make sense of their experience and express their emotions. In addition to the positive impact on the wellbeing of the people who are incarcerated, the creative art programs helped strengthen and foster social bonds and communities between the people who are incarcerated. This finding demonstrates how creative art programs can have the ability to foster the inclusion for this population in our society.

Creative art programs also offer people who are incarcerated the opportunity to be morally included through their participation in programs where they can become “artists” and “creatives” instead of “criminals.” These programs made the carceral experience less daunting for the participants of the program because it provided them a community where they were included and

not excluded as they typically were from society. This feeling of inclusion has the opportunity of limiting the strain they individuals would face from society and is necessary for their rehabilitation.

Opotow (1990) critiqued a narrow scope of justice that can be detrimental in society. This can occur when justice is applied differently to people who are morally included versus those who are morally excluded in society. People who are incarcerated are a category of morally-excluded individuals for whom society has denied access to justice because they are viewed as “bad people” because of a criminal label. Exclusionary practices harm individuals who are seen as unworthy and they can therefore receive little to no access to the necessities and resources needed to survive and thrive in our society.

These exclusionary practices can stem from legal and social restrictions that are placed on these individuals from the moment of their incarceration. Grant (2023) analyzes how this concept known as carceral citizenship has the ability to negatively impact and exclude individuals who were formerly incarcerated from society. This exclusion can be demonstrated through legislation that has been enacted to prevent these individuals from accessing the right to vote, having stable housing, employment, and health services. Carceral citizenship is a form of disenfranchisement that creates a sense of strain in the lives of the people who were formerly incarcerated. This makes it incredibly difficult for them to successfully reintegrate into society in a way that allows them to shed their former identity and develop a new one that is not defined by their criminal activities or their criminal sentence.

The issue of exclusion is applicable to the construction of historical narratives as it has the ability to silence the voices of individuals whose narratives have been overwritten or unshared, which produces a one-sided narrative. Trouillot (2015), analyzed the concept of a historical narrative to understand how detrimental exclusion can be when silencing particular voices in our history. Today, the voices of people who are viewed as *offenders* have often been overwritten and silenced in many spheres of society. But one area in which they are able to share their perspectives, creativity, and their authentic voices are in the creative art programs.

This review paper noted how art programs in carceral institutions offer people who are incarcerated the opportunity for personal growth, accountability, and the ability to share their voices through their artworks. Indeed, when artworks by people who are incarcerated are displayed in various art institutions

across the United States, they can play an instrumental role in sharing the perspectives, creativity, and voices of those behind bars (Littman & Silva, 2020).

These findings all point to the fact that the penal system in America needs dire reformation from the top to the bottom. Indeed, some of these authors believe that art programs in carceral institutions are key to the reformation of the system. Mooney & Shanahan (2020) agreed with this sentiment that the penal system needs to change through their examination of the failings of Rikers Island. Rikers Island is a penitentiary built as a solution to the failure of the Blackwell Penitentiary, an institution that became a house of horrors. Mooney & Shanahan (2020) attributed the failure of Rikers to the lack of understanding surrounding the failings of the prior penitentiary it was set to replace. As they argue, a new house that is built with the same bricks as a previous house that fell apart and placed in a different location will still fall apart. This is the problem the two penitentiaries had, as the issues that caused the first one to fail were not addressed in the construction of the second one. The disparities of the penal system in America needs to be understood before designing and constructing more failed institutions. Thus, we must address the current issues of the penal system before constructing a reformed system.

If these disparities are not addressed, we risk the chance of history repeating itself in this never-ending cycle of failed penal institutions. This is an issue currently with the rapid dilapidation of the Rikers Island correctional facility, which has caused hundreds of people who are incarcerated within the institution to be faced with circumstances that are detrimental to their physical and mental health. Brown et al. (2020) highlights the failure of this institution, which was supposed to promote a rehabilitative approach to punishment and achieve what its predecessor failed to accomplish. The New York City Council voted to have Riker's Island close its doors by 2026 and divest the funding directed towards it to four smaller jails across the boroughs in New York City.

As a jail, most of the people who are incarcerated within Riker's Island are being detained as pretrial defendants or held on bail. It is appalling that a correctional facility that is supposed to be temporarily detaining these individuals has developed a brutal and horrendous environment that has threatened the safety of these individuals' lives. In response to the decision to create four smaller jails in the boroughs of NYC to remedy the problem of the brutal and dangerous situation in Rikers Island, people have founded the No New Jails Movement in response to the city's decision (Brown et al., 2020).

I believe the city's decision further perpetuates this cycle of failed penal institutions that do more harm than good. The money used to fund the construction of these four smaller jails could have been directed towards creative programs and other essential resources in the community that could help people and prevent them from committing criminal actions. It also could be directed towards creating ways to make the reintegration of released people who were incarcerated smoother into society. Until the issues of these failed penal institutions are addressed, it will be difficult for change to take place and for the people who are incarcerated to have a better chance in society of being rehabilitated individuals.

This paper has argued penal institutions have the capacity to advance the well-being of people who are incarcerated through the implementation of creative arts programming in correctional institutions. Doing so can aid in the reformation of the penal system and the individuals who go through it. I believe that these kinds of programs are one method in which the rehabilitation of these individuals is possible, and the majority of the literature included in this paper supports and reaffirms this notion.

However, it is important to note that of the nine studies I have analyzed surrounding this topic seven of them discussed overwhelmingly positive results, and only two critiqued these programs and offered the negative outcomes. Pesata et al. (2022) identify a critical issue in examining the published literature on creative art programs and how most of these studies reported an overwhelmingly positive support for the influence these programs have on an individual. It is necessary to consider that there is a publication bias that exists in the literature about art programming in community settings and correctional institutions.

This publication bias could be due to the pressure the people who are incarcerated face when participating in the creative programs. They might feel inclined to report more positive results and impacts they experience from the program in fear of having it taken away from them by the administration of the correctional institutions if they were to voice any negative concerns. For many individuals these programs provide them the space and time to work on themselves and to escape the brutal environment of the correctional institutions which only want to put them down for making any progress in their personal growth. Therefore, they might feel worried that they would have these programs taken away from them if they reported anything other than positive results.

In my review of the literature on art programming in correctional institutions, I have found only two studies that reported negative outcomes of implementing these programs and faced difficulty finding any more that had a similar sentiment. One paper I reviewed on this subject focused on art programs from another perspective and critically critiqued them, highlighting the negative outcomes they could produce for society. Van Der Meulen and Omstead (2020) examined an art program in a women's correctional facility in Canada to determine the effectiveness of this program as a rehabilitation and recidivism reduction tool. They did not negate the positive impact this art program had on the mental health of the women who are incarcerated based on their examination of the program, but they also highlighted the bigger issues these forms of programming pose for the wellbeing of society.

These authors argue that prisons should not be conceptualized as a place that provides therapy and healing for people who are incarcerated. Framing the correctional institutions as this healing place that treats people for their harmful behavior takes away from the bigger problem of legitimizing neoliberal divestment from community programs in favor of criminalizing more people (Van Der Meulen and Omstead, 2020).

This poses an important critical observation surrounding the implementation of art programs in correctional institutions because while they can support the mental health of the people who are incarcerated, they cannot solve the multitude of societal issues that are at the root of the crime these individuals commit (Van Der Meulen and Omstead, 2020). Society should focus on providing funds to those necessary resources in the community setting to deter these individuals from committing crimes to avoid implementing them as a last resort measure in correctional facilities.

I agree with the suggestion of Van Der Meulen and Omstead (2020) solely based on the fact that so much money is dedicated to the construction of these correctional institutions and the law enforcement agencies that focus on the criminalization of people. However, this suggestion might not be entirely feasible given the complexity of criminal behavior and the factors that cause people to commit those crimes. It is a relevant critique that should be considered when communities deliberate about restructuring penal institutions.

I believe it was necessary to seek out these perspectives on art programming that were not overwhelmingly positive because it is crucial to understand the overall impact these programs would have in a positive or negative way. This is necessary when examining any societal issue because one



should not only look for one perspective but for many in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the solutions proposed for those societal issues.

Art can be healing and provide solace to individuals who are incarcerated behind bars, but their introduction to this healing tool should not be done behind prison bars and instead should be in the community before the commission of the crime. I believe that if these programs were made available to these individuals before they committed crimes it could have had an ability to impact their lives positively and give them the change and agency they desire as members in society.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this review paper was to examine the impact that creative art programming in correctional institutions had on the people who are incarcerated with a specific focus on the effectiveness of these programs on the individuals mental health, likelihood of being rehabilitated, and reducing recidivism. Overall, the incarceration experience has a detrimental impact on the rehabilitation and possibility of increasing the recidivism likelihood for the people who are incarcerated (Kumar, 2020). This is an issue for the United States society, given the high recidivism rates present in this nation's penal system (Antenangeli et al., 2021). By reviewing various studies on creative art programming, this study found a positive impact on the offenders' mental health and reduction of recidivism. My analysis, therefore, showcases the effectiveness of art programming on people who are incarcerated and the importance this alternative form of punishment can serve for the wellbeing of society.

However, based on the overwhelmingly positive results in published literature on this subject this paper proposes that future work should consider exploring different aspects of these forms of programming that offer people who are incarcerated an opportunity to describe how they experienced these art programs without fearing that they must praise these programs to avoid any retribution from the correctional institutions. The future research should focus on exploring the perspectives of people who are incarcerated and highlighting their voices and stories. I believe that creative arts programming has the ability to restructure the penal system, but more research needs to be conducted to examine the feasibility of these programs and their role in the reformation of the United State's carceral system.

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