

Good Vibrations: health and wellbeing of older prisoners

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Abstract

Purpose

The older offender population is becoming a pressing issue throughout the criminal justice system. Alongside the debates around the rising older offender population are a host of health and wellbeing issues which contribute to the needs of older offenders (Merten, Bishop & Williams, 2012; Fazel, et al., 2001). Previous reports have highlighted the need for meaningful activities to motivate older offenders and to support their wellbeing (NACRO / DH, 2009).

Design

This study used independent in-depth interviews to capture the voices of older offenders who took part in an art based prison project. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Findings

The thematic analysis of the interview data highlighted themes that were consistent with other populations who have taken part in a Good Vibrations project. However, additional themes around mobility, motivation, identity and wellbeing emerged from the interview data.

Originality/value

This study has highlighted the value, through the participant's words, of taking part in an arts project whilst in prison. Such projects provide offenders with essential tools to assist with their rehabilitation and provide a stepping-stone to encourage them to take part in other mainstream rehabilitation programs. Above all, the project gives offenders a tool to manage and support their own mental health and wellbeing whilst being incarcerated which allows them to manage their life in prison.

Introduction

Prisoners aged 50 years and above are a rapidly growing population in the England and Wales prison system, representing 8% of the overall prison population (Prison Reform Trust, 2009). Reports based on US prisons suggest that 10% of the prison population are 50 and above with more than 600 prisoners in the US above 70 years old (Age UK, 2011). Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) suggests that the rise in population is not explained using statistics for demographic changes, nor by 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 (HMIP, 2008). Older male offenders predominantly commit crimes that are sexual, and/or against the person, leading to 80% of offenders sentenced to four or more years.

Older offenders (50+) typically report high levels of chronic health conditions (Merten, Bishop & Williams, 2012; Fazel, et al., 2001) including 9% with mobility issues (Fazel, et al., 2001). Mental health issues are an increasing concern in older offending populations with figures suggesting this affects over half of prisoners aged 50 and over with most individuals experiencing depression arising as a result of imprisonment (Merten, Bishop & Williams, 2012). A Department of Health survey (1999-2000) 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. Despite mental health issues being prevalent in older offending populations, it is often overlooked by those in contact with them (Kingston, Mesurier, Yorston, Wardle & Heath, 2011). The most common illnesses reported were psychiatric, cardiovascular, musculoskeletal and respiratory (Prison Reform Trust, 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 prisoners serving long sentences who would become elderly while in prison. More specifically, the report identified 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. It also highlighted that older prisoners were commonly held long distances from their homes, which impeded resettlement work, prison visits and had a detrimental effect on their families. 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 (Hayes, Burns, Turnbull, & Shaw, 2013), some even stating that they would prefer to be segregated by age to reduce bullying and exploitation. The HMIP (2008) follow up report noted that little progress had been made in terms of developing multidisciplinary approaches to the management of older prisoners, with 'disappointing' levels of social care provision. Nonetheless, positive developments were observed in terms of healthcare provision and some individual prisons and prison staff were noted for their innovative work to meet the specific needs of older prisoners (HMIP, 2008).

NACRO / DH (2009), suggest that older prisoners have similar needs for purposeful activity whether in the form of employment or leisure activity. Some older groups enjoy 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. Age UK (2011) support that the following are beneficial to older offenders in prison: first, time spent 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. Second, through the gate services, that helps to prepare older offenders for probation and leaving prison, is considered important for the offenders overall rehabilitation and to reduce the risk of recidivism. Finally, participation in the prison regime, getting involved with exercise, catering, aspects of health and activity.

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 been recognised for their benefits (Henley, Caulfield, Wilson & Wilkinson, 2012; Caulfield, 2012; Caulfield, & Wilson, 2012; Cox & Gelsthorpe, 2008; Digard et al., 2007; Wilson et al., 2008). Prison incarcerates offenders but also aims to rehabilitate and provide purposeful activity (HM Prison Service, 2015). 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, such as improved health outcomes and demonstrable benefits, along with improvements to prisoners mental health and wellbeing (Secker, et al., 2007; DH / Arts Council England, 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

Good Vibrations gamelan is a charity that works with a variety of groups, including offenders in prison and on probation. Workshops using Gamelan has 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.

Good Vibrations projects typically run for one week. Prisoners usually express their interest in taking part, although 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

dance and shadow puppetry. The workshops build on skills with participants ready for 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. Eastbrun (2003) found that despite initial difficulties with its implementation, both staff and prisoners reported positive feedback. Digard, Graf 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 *et al.* (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.

Methodology

Research aims

This study aimed to explore the impact of taking part in a Good Vibrations project on older offenders (aged 50+). The study adopted a qualitative approach, collecting the perspective and voices of prisoners who took part in the Good Vibrations project at HMPs Dartmoor and Whatton.

HMP Dartmoor is a category C training prison, for adult male prisoners. HMP Dartmoor opened as a criminal prison in 1850 and has a capacity of 659 prisons across 7 wings. The prison has been criticised for inadequate levels accessibility around the prison for offenders with disabilities. 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 invited the Good Vibrations for a number of projects.

These two prisons were chosen to present different environments in which to evaluate the impact of Good Vibrations projects on older prisoners' lives in whilst in prison. The older prisoners (50+) who had participated in a Good Vibrations project were invited to interview.

Field research was undertaken at, firstly HMP Dartmoor three months after a Good Vibrations project had been run there. Four participants were interviewed in total from HMP Dartmoor. Interviews were then conducted at HMP Whatton with nine of the participating prisoners.

Data Collection – semi structured interviews

The interview schedule was adapted from previous research (Wilson, Caulfield, & Atherton, 2009). Participants were interviewed at length 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. 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 of emotions 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 how they felt at that time. In order to circumvent any problems with participants' literacy, the emotion scales were completed verbally with the researcher. The 13 participants who were interviewed were 'older offenders' (categorised as 55+ in this study).

Data analysis

A thematic analysis approach to the data analysis was taken, beginning with an in-depth coding process involving the entire body of interview data (Caulfield & Hill, 2014). This approach reflects the analytic process adopted in similar studies (Wilson, Caulfield & Atherton, 2009).

Research Findings

The analysis highlighted a number of themes, some consistent with previous research findings from research on Good Vibrations projects, and some specific to older offender's experiences of taking part in Good Vibrations projects.

Themes consistent with previous studies

- **Meditation**

Meditation has been a consistent theme across the reviews of Good Vibrations. Although participants are not taught about meditation, many participants make use of the recording of the final performance to meditate when they are back on their wing. Additionally, eight participants alluded to escaping prison life and remembering a moment where they felt as though they were human. In some cases, it seemed that the performance recordings were used to help manage emotions, such as anger. One participant from HMP Dartmoor commented:

"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 as, for many offenders, such skills are limited. One participant from HMP Whatton commented on his observations of his fellow group members:

“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 self-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”

- Recruitment for the project

Different prisons appear to use slightly differing means to advertise Good Vibrations projects, or at least participants report differing avenues in which they found out about the project. Where participants report that they had spoken to an inmate who had previously participated in a Good Vibrations project before they attend the workshops, they approached the project with reduced levels of anxiety and a positive attitude about what they will gain from taking part.

“I had only just moved to here, and I didn’t really know anyone, I don’t normally volunteer for stuff but I didn’t have a job and so I could do this. Him next-door told me it would be good to do, made me feel at ease I guess”

Themes specific to older offenders

- Age and mobilisation (disabled)

The older offenders that were 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 wheelchair. It was noted by those individuals with disabilities, as well as other members of the group, that the project was easily accessible. 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 habits)

It was noted by some of the participants that there were other older offenders on their wing that would have benefitted from taking part in the project. However, they tended not to sign

up to courses and activities and tended to stick to a routine, suggesting that they are ‘creatures of habit’. One prisoner at HMP Whatton commented:

“I’ve done all sorts of course 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”

- Identity – remembering, family and friends, achievements and motivation

Some offenders 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”

- Something to do with your time / hobbies & interests

A number of men commented on the importance of having something to do with your time, particularly given the repetitiveness of routine and their time inside. 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”

- A life line & discipline

Some of the men recognised the importance of self-discipline and the being able to listen and take orders from other people. They had observed men that had previously had issues with listening to and taking orders from other people and watched how 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 several years of their sentence and others had relatively little time spent. The project appeared to serve slightly different purposes for each other these groups, although some of these aspects were also shaped by the prison’s own structure and routine. For example, one prisoner at HMP Whatton had entered the prison just 6 days before the Good Vibrations project began. He had no expectations of the course given that he had not had the chance to speak to previous participants. 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 participant found the course helped him during the settling in process, which some older offenders find quite challenging. Participation in such projects, according to this offender, brings groups together quite quickly.

DISCUSSION

The interviews with older offenders presented some interesting points for consideration and discussion, some of which are consistent with previous Good Vibrations reviews and therefore contribute to the evidence surrounding the benefits of taking part in a Good Vibrations project whilst in prison. Other findings contribute to the wider discussions and debates about the management, treatment and needs of an ageing prison population.

The findings that highlight the benefits of taking part in a Good Vibrations project are, in some cases, shared by different types of offenders who have differing needs, but have demonstrated and reported beneficial qualities of taking part in the project. For example, developing social skills and working as a group in a 'non-judgemental' environment. Good Vibrations requires the development of good levels of communication across the team of participants throughout the week, including the final performance. Therefore, participation allows inmates to develop their interpersonal skills in one-to-one interactions as well as communication across a larger group. This skill is particularly important when inmates are required to accept instructions from other prisoners or members of staff, and therefore are 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 mediation is an interesting strand that appears consistently throughout the reviews of various Good Vibrations projects with different types of participants (Henley *et al.*, 2012; Caulfield & Wilson, 2012; Caulfield *et al.*, 2009). Meditation appears to be both a skill and practice that prisoners discover through reflection upon the project, and in some cases utilise the experience as a way of 'escaping' prison life or processing their own emotional reactions whilst in prison. This has particularly been noted with prisoners who report issues with anger and anger-management. For older offenders, the practice of mediation has been raised as important by the population themselves, which is in keeping with our knowledge about the rates of depression and suicide in the older population, as well as aspects relating to their wellbeing.

There were a number of themes that emerged in the participant's accounts that were specific to the needs and experiences of prison of older offenders. Physical health problems and mobilisation associated with age was discussed in depth by a number of participants from each of the prisons that were visited as part of this research. There was at least one prisoner at each of the prisons who was experiencing mobilisation issues that other participants commented upon. Good Vibrations project was considered by all participants to be accommodating and easily adapted in order for accessibility issues to be overcome and therefore allowing any inmate 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 strain on

prisoners that can accelerate the ageing process (Sterns et al, 2008). Indeed, prisoners psychological age can be up to 10 years older than their chronological age (Nacro, 2009). In addition, the older offender 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. Good Vibrations 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 priority.

Some of the offenders started to discuss the links that they had with family and friends outside of 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 of 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.

In conclusion, provisions for older offenders in the prison system are limited, and as such, support in the form of activities and courses is limited. Given the evidence that supports accelerated aging in older prisoners, activities such as the Good Vibrations' projects provide opportunities for offenders to engage with something beyond their usual regime, which encourages cognitive functioning and creativity as well as developing new ideas for interests and hobbies. Good Vibrations 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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