

A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Healing Walls: an Inmate's Journey, a mural by Cesar Viveros-Herrera and Parris Stancell in a partnership with inmate-artists at the State Correctional Institute at Graterford through the Mural Arts Project in Philadelphia.
Photo: Jack Ramsdale.

Arts in Corrections

By Grady Hillman

Largely led by community artists and arts organizations with long-standing commitments to applied arts practice with diverse marginalized populations, arts in corrections assume varied forms and intentions. Arts programs provide expressive and reflective opportunities that enable the incarcerated to examine the trajectory of their lives. Arts and restorative justice programs are taking root in many states and communities, particularly with juvenile justice, providing offenders an opportunity to make restitution to those they have injured while learning the positive values and history of the places they reside, and then being accepted back into the community. There are promising practices that employ arts programming with adjudicated youth, some based in a philosophy of Positive Youth Development, others in a continuum of care philosophy including an array of prevention, intervention and after-care programs. Many juvenile justice programs operate in correctional education venues. Hillman points to a growing trend within universities in which partnerships between community arts training and schools of social work, sociology, and criminal justice are preparing artists and others for arts in corrections work while directly offering programs in prisons.

The paper provides historical background regarding organized arts programming in prisons and charts changes in the prison system that have resulted in diminished arts programs for adult males, sustained programs for women inmates, and expanded programs for juvenile offenders. He also notes documented impact of arts in corrections programs in reducing recidivism, the incidence rate of misbehavior within correctional institutions, anti-social behaviors in youth, enhancing educational achievement, and producing many other positive economic, social, and personally transformative outcomes.

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It is an honor to be asked to write this Snapshot Paper around the theme of arts for change in the U.S. criminal justice system. After working as an artist-in-residence with the Texas Department of Corrections from 1981-84, I condensed my experience then into the following summary: “When I’d completed my first year of prison workshops, I knew all the answers. After two years, I no longer knew the questions. When I’d completed my third and final year of residency, I had gleanings of understanding about the relationship between the arts and the corrections system but wasn’t sure I had the vocabulary to articulate to others what I’d learned.” Since 1984, I’ve had the privilege of working in adult and juvenile justice settings in more than half the United States and a few foreign countries, but the picture is still far from clear. My aspiration here is to achieve a measure of coherency which will hopefully inspire the reader to further investigation and dialogue fulfilling the goal of animating democracy.

A key concept in understanding arts in corrections programming is to accept that artmaking is indigenous to prison culture. When Charles Dickens toured early American penitentiaries in the mid-1800s, he visited solitary cells where prisoners worked on looms but had no human contact. When their monastic cell doors were opened for him, he described murals created from colored fabric, musical instruments manufactured from broken wire and frame, and individuals who preserved their sanity through song. William Sidney Porter became O. Henry behind the walls of the Federal Penitentiary in Ohio in 1898 creating character studies that impacted the construction of the American identity. Leadbelly transformed prison field songs into music that informed both the development of the Blues and its mainstream popularization.

It is also true that when O. Henry wasn’t writing, he had the opportunity to perform in the prison orchestra and the prison choir; that Leadbelly’s career was ignited by the foundation-supported Lomax father and son folklore team. One of the conundrums in describing the history of organized arts programming in prisons is that after Americans began constructing prisons, we never created a national criminal justice policy or even a universally accepted philosophy of what prisons were supposed to be and do. Rehabilitate? Punish? Provide vocational training? Deter crime? Educate? Provide treatment or therapy? The federal government oversees only a small minority of prisons inhabited by people who violate some very specific federal laws. State governments, counties, and cities create and enforce the laws which impact us most, and these laws can vary widely from one side of a border to another, one county line to another, or whether you are inside the city limits or not. Likewise, the facilities these governing bodies construct have had and still have widely differing missions and fulfill those mission goals in very different ways. Most of us on the outside have little knowledge of how our own state or county operates its adult and juvenile justice systems. Sometimes the two are a continuum in the same governmental agency; sometimes they are totally separate. Our perceptions of the criminal justice system are generally a medley of stereotypes formed by bad TV, sensationalistic news reporting, and political fear mongering. Yet, we

incarcerate a larger percentage of our population than just about any country in the world.

When I began work in the Texas Department of Corrections in 1981, I came in as a poet-in-the-schools for the prison school district through grants from the Texas Commission on the Arts. Texas was then and still is a notoriously hard system. Conditions were brutal on many units. However, the system also hosted a recording studio which supported three bands that performed annually at the prison rodeo. There was a gospel choir, bonafide art teachers, and “piddlin’ shops” on almost every unit that allowed inmates with good behavior to engage in artmaking from painting to leatherwork. Their work was sold at the annual prison-wide inmate art festival that coincided with the rodeo. Inmates also received academic instruction from community colleges that operated within the walls. Their attendance was supported by Pell grants. During the ‘80s, I was invited to work in prison programs in other states including Colorado, California, and Oklahoma where I saw programs that outshined Texas by far. With notable exceptions, over the past 30 years, almost all of that has disappeared in prisons for adult males, though programs for women inmates seem to have been sustained (some notable artists here are Pat Graney, Rhodessa Jones, Wally Lamb, Leslie Neal, Jean Trounstine, Kyes Stevens, Meade Palidofsky, Jodi Jinks, Amanda Gardner, Susan Hill, Bette Buschow, and Agnes Wilcox to name just a few), and art programs for juvenile offenders have expanded dramatically.

The causes for these changes are easily identified. Pell grants for inmates were eliminated during the Reagan Administration, virtually eliminating the reformatory degree-granting presence of community colleges and universities in the prison system. Course offerings almost always included the visual arts with music, creative writing, theater, and even dance classes provided if enrollment was sufficient to bring in an instructor. The most overwhelming deterrent to prison arts programs has been mandatory sentencing and the concomitant elimination of “good time,” a practice which eliminated days from a sentence for days of good behavior. Without prospects for parole or reduced sentences, prisons expanded dramatically in number and population, and, without incentives for cooperation, they became much more unmanageable. Currently, Texas has seven times the prison population it had when I began my work there in 1981. Governmental entities on the state, local, and federal levels began privatizing the corrections system, transforming it into an “industry,” with the political declaration that corporations would do a better job for less money. Both assertions have been proven wrong and services have suffered. The likelihood that an inmate will receive treatment, vocational, educational, or rehabilitative programs is far less now than an inmate entering the system 20 or 30 years ago. The correctional system has largely surrendered its reformatory responsibility to warehousing prisoners until they are released, now constructing “supermax” prisons which keep “high risk” inmates secured in their cells for 23 hours a day.

The American arts community has not surrendered its long-standing commitment to serve the most marginalized of U.S. citizens in prison and their families, certain that having access to the arts provides expressive and reflective practices which enable the incarcerated to examine the trajectory of their lives—where they've been and where they're going, whom they've hurt and what good they can still do. A premier example is Appalshop, the Appalachian media center now enjoying its 40th anniversary. This arts and culture organization saw the damage being done to the environment and community culture by the promotion and construction of “supermax” prisons as economic boons to depressed coal communities and created two programs to counter this trend. *Holler to the Hood* is an on-going multi-media project exploring the economic and social issues in low-income rural and urban communities related to the criminal justice system, allowing those affected by the prison system to tell their story in their own voice. *Thousand Kites* is a community-based performance, web, and radio project centered on the United States prison system and created with inmates, employees, and their families. Utilizing new technologies like the web and old technologies like radio and film, these programs have become a significant outlet for prison art both within and without the walls. Other arts organizations like Prison Arts Program in Connecticut and Prison Creative Arts Project in Michigan have long histories of prison programming and annually host major art exhibits of prisoner work from their own state prisons. The Office of Accessibility at the NEA and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have continued a prison arts partnership for 30 years now with the assistance of the William James Association.

The current economic crisis has provided a double edged sword. It has mortally injured programs like the venerable California Arts in Corrections program which has served as a national best practice model for over 30 years, documenting reduced recidivism rates and cost effectiveness. But it has also forced prison budget cuts. This legislative sacred cow is no longer sacrosanct as school budgets and higher education are slashed, and social services in general reduced. There is no more expensive criminal justice policy than incarceration. Prison populations have to be reduced, requiring re-entry programs and community-based corrections solutions like *Changing Lives through Literature*. This highly successful alternative sentencing program pioneered by University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth requires attendance in rigorous literary criticism projects, examining how characters resolve conflict successfully and unsuccessfully, as an alternative to incarceration. *Rehabilitation through the Arts* in New York and *ArtSpring* in Florida are active programs that have focused on re-entry, working with inmates beyond the prison walls with great success.

Restorative justice—the practice of mediating between offenders and their victims (individuals and communities) toward restoring both the damage done and the offender as a contributing citizen—is also receiving increased attention as criminal justice practice. The Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP) has pioneered the *Healing Walls* project which has inmates and victims' rights organizations creating murals together inside Graterford Prison. The murals are then installed in crime inflicted communities. MAP's

Greenfield Restorative Justice Project operates in a similar way with juvenile offenders in probation/parole settings working with community leaders on community arts projects that benefit their home communities. Projects such as these are designed to provide offenders an opportunity to make restitution to those they've injured while learning the positive values and history of the places they reside, and then being accepted back into the community. Arts and restorative justice programs are taking root in many states and communities, particularly with juvenile justice. Gemini Ink hosts an innovative restorative justice program for youth in the San Antonio detention center, having them write and publish children's books to be used by teen parents in the community with their own children.

Here it should be stated that the juvenile justice system has expanded dramatically over the past 20 years in parallel fashion to the adult system. However, punitive philosophy has not overwhelmed correctional programming for youth. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) have collaborated on three initiatives over the past decade. YouthARTS, Arts Programs for Juvenile Offenders in Detention and Corrections, and an institute on arts and conflict resolution have all contributed public policy documentation on promising practices that employ arts programming with adjudicated youth. State and regional programs have taken up the mantle with two notable trends evolving besides restorative justice.

The Prodigy Cultural Arts Program in Florida, developed by the School of Social Work at the University of South Florida (USF), operates about 30 programs for youth on probation in Tampa and Orlando. The program operates with a philosophy of Positive Youth Development (PYD), a new trend in social work nationwide, which uses the arts to reveal talents in high risk youth, give opportunities to experience success in an on-going regimen of practice, and develop confidence which translates into resiliency. USF has thoroughly evaluated the success of the program in a recent issue of *Best Practices in Mental Health* largely devoted to their studies.

Core Arts in Mississippi, an 11-year project developed by the Mississippi Arts Commission (MAC) and Communities in Schools Greenwood Leflore, operates in over 20 communities throughout the state with a veteran cadre of artists focusing on a continuum of care philosophy. Providing challenging and rigorous arts programming to youthful offenders has often been difficult due to the fragmented nature of the juvenile justice system and the transient nature of youth within the system. Core Arts has developed an array of prevention, intervention and after-care programs that allow youth to continue their arts practice as they move through the system-alternative schools, after-school adolescent offender programs, detention centers, the state training school, and community. The program is skills-based with entrepreneurial opportunities. Student work is published in books or sold in culminating events and at a permanent gallery devoted to student work.

Many state arts commissions support initiatives that serve court-involved youth similar to Mississippi. The Texas Commission on the Arts recently initiated a grants program called Arts and Public Safety, specifically designed as a crime prevention initiative serving both youth and adults in the criminal justice system. Zero tolerance policies in public schools have resulted in the rapid development throughout the U.S. of alternative schools that are hybrid public education/ juvenile justice facilities. Some are directed by the school systems, others by the courts, but all should legally abide by state frameworks mandating art instruction, and this has provided entrée for arts organizations and state arts commissions to step in with old-style Artist in Education residencies. Some significant juvenile justice programs operating in correctional education venues are Project YouthArtreach In Maryland, Voices Unbroken in New York, Arts in Prison Inc. in Kansas and Missouri, Unlocking the Light in Massachusetts, New Directions in Nevada, Writing Our Stories in Alabama, ArtSafe in Ohio and the William James Association programs in California just to name a few.

Over the past 40 years, community arts have cohered into a well documented field rather than a kaleidoscope of grassroots practice. Fueled by Artist in Education programs born in the '60s and the community programs spawned in the '70s by the CETA program, the U.S. has a deep infrastructure of community artists and arts organizations skilled in applied arts practice with diverse marginalized populations including adult and juvenile offenders. Universities in the U.S. have begun to attend to this as an academic program need. Art education designed for public schools has been hit by No Child Left Behind, and arts educators in need of work as well as fine arts graduates have increasingly turned to community arts residencies as employment opportunities. Universities have gradually taken note of this, designing programs that serve specific constituencies like adult and juvenile offenders. Examples are the previously mentioned Prison Creative Arts Project out of the University of Michigan and Changing Lives Through Literature/UMass Dartmouth. Other higher education correctional art and literature projects that come quickly to mind are directed from the University of Arizona, Auburn University, Brown University, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, and University of Iowa.

With an increasing national interest in arts and social justice, the “town and gown” university/community connection is probably the strongest developing trend in arts in correction programming that I see. It is in the economic interest of university art departments to expand beyond the art education/fine arts paradigm and combine interests with schools of social work, sociology, and criminal justice among others.

Given that the impact of arts in corrections programs has been well documented in reducing recidivism, reducing the incidence rate of misbehavior within correctional institutions, reducing anti-social behaviors in youth, enhancing educational achievement, and producing many other positive economic, social, and personally transformative outcomes, the question has to be begged—why isn't there a greater public policy investment in these programs? Unfortunately, the only answer I can give is that for the

past 20 to 30 years, American corrections policy has commodified incarceration. Policy reflects a view of the criminal justice system as a growth industry with higher incarceration rates resulting in economic opportunity. Reducing incarceration reduces prison construction and the profits to be made from farming out inmate care. However, there is growing recognition that this model can no longer be sustained financially as the burden on tax dollars and bonded indebtedness grows exponentially. While the burgeoning criminal justice system has been fairly described as a “prison industrial complex,” the humanizing efforts of artists and arts organizations have remained a persistent presence. These programs will grow in number, strength, and efficacy as the realization dawns that we can no longer financially support the current system and must find solutions that provide healing and actually develop community and individual resiliency.¹

Grady Hillman is a well-published poet, literary translator, folklorist, and essayist. His degrees include an M.A. in Linguistic Anthropology from the University of Texas. Hillman has worked extensively for the past 32 years as a resident writer, program administrator, and arts consultant for local, state, federal, and foreign agencies in the development of arts programs for community settings with specialization in correctional programs. From 1999 to 2002, Hillman was technical assistance provider for Arts Programs for Young Offenders in Detention and Corrections, a collaboration between the National Endowment for the Arts and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. He has published extensively in the area of arts-in-corrections and community arts including the following monographs: “Artists in the Community: Training Artists to Work in Alternative Settings” (1996), “The Arts and Humanities as Agents for Social Change: Summary Report of the 4th International Congress of Educating Cities” (1998), and “Arts Programs for Juvenile Offenders in Detention and Corrections: A Guide to Promising Practices” (2002). Hillman currently directs the Center for Community Arts at Texas State University-San Marcos.

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End Notes

¹ For those not satisfied with this “snapshot” of arts-in-corrections in the United States, I refer you to the Corrections Reading Room at the Community Arts Network archive (communityarts.net) for in-depth articles, evaluation studies, and research on the projects mentioned here and many more worthy of note. An excellent survey piece by Krista Brune, “Creating Behind the Razor Wire,” can be found there. *Teaching the Arts Behind Bars*, edited by Rachel-Crane Williams, is also an excellent book with chapters provided by a dozen veteran arts-in-corrections practitioners. The *YouthArts Toolkit* is a good guide to developing programs for first-time youth offenders, and I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention *Arts Programs for Juvenile Offenders in Detention and Corrections: A Guide to Promising Practices* which I wrote for the NEA and OJJDP with assistance from another great practitioner Susan Warner.