

Group-based drumming program improves mental health of prisoners

July 30 2014, by David Stacey



An independent evaluation by The University of Western Australia of an innovative program trialled in WA prisons has found a group-based program that combines hand drumming with social and emotional learning can improve the mental health of prisoners.

A research team led by Associate Professor Lisa Wood and Assistant Professor Karen Martin, based at UWA's School of Population Health, recently completed a nine month evaluation of the Holyoake DRUMBEAT program which was run in seven WA prisons - Acacia, Bandyup, Boronia, Bunbury, Casuarina, Karnet and Wooroloo.

They found that prisoners had significantly higher average mental

wellbeing after the DRUMBEAT program and this improvement was evident for some of these prisoners for three months after the program.

In particular, the study found that DRUMBEAT had a positive impact on these prisoners' emotions and emotional regulation including anger management, capacity to talk with others, social skills and self-worth. In addition, after the program, prisoners reported they felt more included in a group, connected with a community and they said they had a better ability to build relationships. In a follow up survey of 114 prisoners who took part in DRUMBEAT sessions:

- 96.2% said it helped them work through their problems more easily;
- 93.7% said they will pass on what they learnt to other prisoners, friends and family;
- 86.6% said the program assisted improving relationships with other prisoners;
- 90.1% said they learned a better understanding of skills needed for good relationships with others; and
- 93.5% said that acquiring drumming skills helped them feel good about themselves.

Assistant Professor Karen Martin said that other DRUMBEAT benefits had emerged in interviews with some of the prison staff.

"Staff reported that DRUMBEAT had a calming effect on prisoners who took part in the program, and that they had become more tolerant of other people," she said.

DRUMBEAT (an acronym for Discovering Relationships Using Music - Beliefs, Emotions, Attitudes and Thoughts) builds on the therapeutic value of music and incorporates themes, discussions and drumming

analogies relating to, self-expression, communication, emotions and feelings, self-worth, problem solving, confidence and teamwork.

Associate Professor Wood said: "The combination of drumming activities interspersed with discussion and self-reflection on various themes works really well, and the therapy components are embedded in a way that prisoners describe as less confronting than traditional counseling.

"The drumming complements the discussion topics in a powerful way," Associate Professor Wood said. "For example, prisoners learn to play a new rhythm and then discuss what happens in life if you get out of harmony with others or if teamwork breaks down.

"In another session, they learn about the need to listen for the central beat when drumming as a group and apply it to the importance of having core values and a sense of purpose and rhythm in their own lives.

"The integration of drumming with cognitive behaviour therapy is a really innovative way to improve [mental health](#) in prison settings, and the scale of this trial and its evaluation is an international first.

"The Department of Corrective Services has been forward thinking in allowing DRUMBEAT to be trialled in WA prisons and the results show that it has been a worthwhile approach."

Assistant Professor Martin said there were significant improvements in mental wellbeing amongst the prisoners, both immediately after the program and in post program interviews and a follow up survey. Prisoners who completed the program also had increased resilience and lower levels of psychological distress.

"The underlying philosophy of DRUMBEAT helps [prisoners](#) to feel

valued, listened to and respected in a non-judgmental, non-threatening way," she said.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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