

ALTERNATIVES TO VIOLENCE PROJECT IN NEW MEXICO PRISONS WITH A DISCUSSION OF PROGRAM EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

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PURPOSE

Our purpose here today is to introduce the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) to you. We will describe how our AVP program works in New Mexico Prisons; what effects we see in inmate participants; and our next focus in working with the New Mexico Sentencing Commission (NMSC) to develop a survey/recidivism study of the AVP program.

BACKGROUND

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) began in 1975 in Greenhaven Prison in New York in response to the 1971 Attica Prison riots. AVP's aim is reduce violence by providing experiential workshops designed to help inmate participants learn to non-violently resolve conflicts.

AVP has evolved into an international non-profit organization providing prison workshops programs in 34 US states and some 24 countries. AVP is an all-volunteer, community-based program with small teams offering workshops in local area prisons.

In 2017 AVP conducted 1,090 workshops in 123 prisons in the US, training 15,687 inmate participants. These workshops were facilitated by 766 outside volunteers and by 1,783 trained inmate facilitators.

NEW MEXICO

Since 2005 AVP has offered workshops in New Mexico Prisons. The local affiliate is the Alternatives to Violence Project of Northern New Mexico (AVP-NNM). It conducts workshops for inmates at various security levels in three New Mexico facilities:

Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM). A men's prison, security level 2.

Springer Correctional Center. A women's prison. security levels 1&2.

Western NM Correctional Facility. A women's prison, security level 3.

In 2017 AVP-NNM conducted 21 workshops, training a total of 221 inmate participants across the three facilities. These workshops were facilitated by 9 outside volunteers and 23 trained inmate facilitators.

AVP WORKSHOP STRUCTURE

Each AVP workshop is an intensive (17-21 hours) workshop, which is usually held over two or three days, usually weekend days. An essential element in the workshop process is that participation is voluntary, both for workshop participants and facilitators. Matters shared in AVP workshops are confidential.

THREE WORKSHOP LEVELS

AVP offers three workshop levels. The Basic (Level I) Workshop focuses on respect for oneself and others, communication skills, co-operation and community. The Advanced (Level II) Workshop provides an opportunity to go deeper into issues of conflict by following a theme. The T4F (Training for Facilitators) Workshop provides further personal development for participants by being part of a facilitating team. A new apprentice facilitator needs to facilitate 4 workshops to be certified as an AVP facilitator.

INMATE FACILITATORS

Once AVP starts to use a mixed team of outside and inside facilitators there is a quantum change in workshop effectiveness. When an inmate facilitator relates how he or she handled a conflict situation or describes a life-style change, it carries far more weight with inmate participants in the workshop.

ELEMENTS IN THE AVP WORKSHOP

There are three main elements to the AVP workshop. These are: (1) GATHERINGS where the participants share their experiences in responding to a suggested topic, (2) EXPERIENTIAL EXERCISES to help develop skills in listening, communication and problem solving, and (3) LIGHT & LIVELIES (L&L's), which are cooperative games to help relieve tensions from the exercises and raise the energy level of the group

ROLE PLAYS ARE A KEY EXERCISE

AVP uses exercise role plays to simulate seeking alternative outcomes in potential conflict situations. Facilitators divide the workshop group into teams. Each team develops a one-act scenario of a potential conflict situation. The rules are that the scenario must be open ended where neither the dialogue nor outcome is fixed. The participants often use role plays to work on problems they will face on release and re-entry. They choose scenarios like *family conflicts* or *parole situations*. Playing out a scene takes about 5 minutes. The debriefing that follows can take 1/2 hour as the group analyzes the dialogue looking for turning points in seeking alternatives to violence.

OBSERVED WORKSHOP EFFECTS

We have three main sources of information about the AVP workshops: (1) feedback from inmate participants in written evaluations that they fill out at the end of a workshop; (2) observations from AVP facilitators in their notes and reports on workshops; and (3) studies looking at long-term outcomes, like recidivism (return) rates.

THRESHOLD EFFECTS – SELF-RESPECT AND SELF-MOTIVATION

AVP facilitators are able to observe attitude and behavioral changes in inmates as they progress through a workshop, and as they progress through the three workshop levels. The first and most noticeable effect we see is an increased sense of self-respect and self-awareness. This is an attitudinal change where the participants see their own self-worth as a human separate from their own bad choices and actions. We also see an increased motivation to change, expressed as “I can change”, and a sense of direction or a next step, expressed as “a need to grow”.

Once an inmate participant experiences these changes in self-awareness and self-motivation, then other changes can and do occur: developing communication skills and relating to people; making choices and taking responsibility for those choices; and finally seeking alternatives to violence in conflict situation.

PERSISTENCE IN AVP EFFECTS – STUDIES

The types of changes that the AVP-NNM team observes are consistent with those seen in studies of established AVP programs. The most-studied AVP program is in the Delaware prison system. The following two studies were done on an AVP program at the Delaware Correctional Center (DCC). DCC is a medium security men's prison with about 1,000 inmates.

WRITE-UPS

A 2002 study of 400 inmates before and after they took an AVP workshop showed a 60% drop in write-ups a year after completing an AVP workshop. Behavioral infractions (write-ups) are a good, robust measure of behavioral changes. Write-ups represent a broad spectrum of misbehavior ranging from relatively minor rule infractions to violent interactions with other inmates or correctional officers.

RECIDIVISM

A 2005 study of 275 inmates showed a reduction in the 3-year recidivism rate for inmates who had taken AVP. The 3-year cumulative recidivism rate for a control group was 58.3% and the rate for the AVP group was 31.1%, showing a reduction of 47%.

NEXT STEP

I mentioned that one source of information on the effects of AVP is inmate feedback in the form of written evaluations at the end of workshops. AVP-NNM has collected 12 years of these evaluations from the women's prisons. This raw data is in the form of 1,256 hand-written evaluation sheets. We have provided the New Mexico Sentencing Commission (NMSC) with our data set. The NMSC has put the data up in a computer accessible form and is currently analyzing the data.

WRITTEN EVALUATIONS

There are several questions on the evaluation sheets that are internal to the AVP workshop, but here are three key questions from the evaluation sheets that offer insight into what the participants have experienced in the workshops:

My most significant personal learning during the workshop was ...

How the workshop changed how I will deal with violence in the future ...

What I would say to someone considering taking the workshop is ...

DEVELOPING A SURVEY/RECIDIVISM STUDY

We expect the NMSC study to provide insight into the attitudinal and behavioral changes that the participants report. We hope then to use that information to produce (with NMSC) a survey/recidivism study. We want an easy to administer survey that we can give to participants before AVP, after AVP and post prison release. Our goal is to see if AVP reduces recidivism rates, and if it does – to see why.

CONCLUSION

AVP-NNM is committed to helping AVP workshop-trained inmates increase self-awareness and personal responsibility, create healthy interpersonal relations, and practice conflict resolution skills – all with an eye to reducing violence in prisons and producing successful re-entries in communities.

FURTHER READING

Harbert Rice, Margaret Willen, and J.J. Tellatin, *Alternatives to Violence in New Mexico Prisons*, Report of Alternatives to Violence Project of Northern New Mexico (AVP-NNM), September 2017. Report is available on request.

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