

The Alternatives to Violence Project in Delaware: A Three-Year Cumulative Recidivism Study

Excerpts and paraphrasing by Doug Couch, Editor, *The Transformer* (AVP-USA newsletter), from report citing the following studies...

Current (Miller) Study:

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Referenced (Sloane) Study:

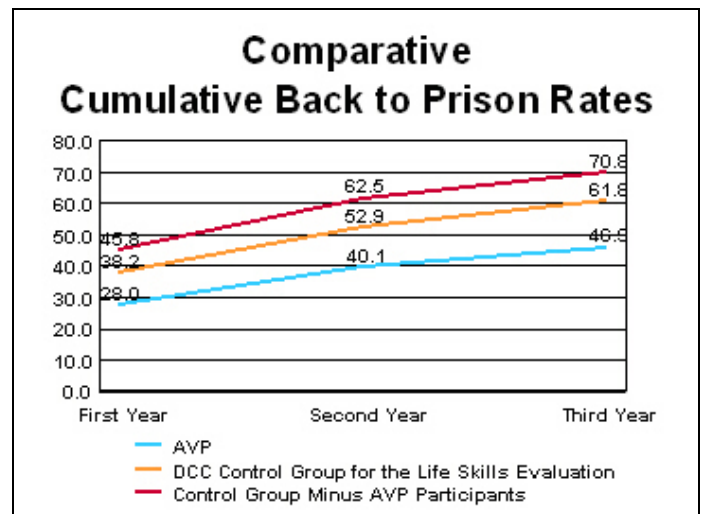
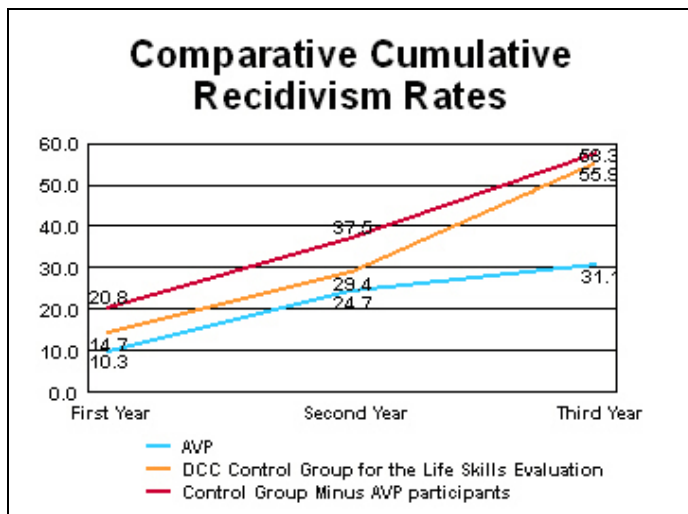
Sloane, Stanton (2002). *A Study of the Effectiveness of the Alternatives to Violence Project Workshops in a Prison System*, Ph.D. Dissertation Case Western University.



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Recidivism statistics were developed for a random sample of Alternatives to Violence Program (AVP) participants from 1993 to 2001 at the Delaware Correctional Center, the state's largest correctional institution, which houses male inmates with the most serious offenses. The AVP sample consistently performed better each year for three years both in recidivism and in the rate of return to prison for any reason. These striking results suggest that AVP is effective in reducing the likelihood of recidivism... The goal is to be able to examine the resumption of criminal careers apart from the consequence of rules violations that involve discretion and may be treated differently over time.



Inmate Comment (excerpt): "During my first basic as a trainer, there were a number of inmates there whom I had been very violent to before. I knew if I was to be a role model, to live AVP, I had to apologize to them for what I had done. It was odd to apologize to someone I had defeated and who had pleaded for his life to me."

Inmate Comment: "I always thought there were two kinds of people, strong and weak. When I learned the difference between passive, assertive and aggressive, it totally changed my perception. That was the turning point for me. Strength is now something that comes from within."

Prison Official Comment: "I saw AVP facilitate a dramatic reduction in the number of assaults between inmates . . . and the overall climate improved to a point where the inmates were actually seeking out ways to positively effect their living environment." [Stan Taylor, Commissioner, Department of Correction, Delaware]

Prison Official Comment: "Your program has been a mainstay contributing to the lowering of violence in the Facility. Time and time again, we have witnessed the effectiveness of the Alternatives to Violence Project through changed behavior of inmates, who might otherwise have committed violent acts which would have lengthened their period of incarceration. It is my sincere hope you are able to continue providing the Alternatives to Violence Project here at Eastern. We have no substitute program; we must rely on you and your staff for this vital support." [Philip Coombe, Jr., Superintendent, Eastern Correctional Facility, New York.]

"AVP starts by establishing a sense of dignity or self-worth in participants. This serves to instill a willingness and ability to communicate. Participants first have to see themselves as worthy of being communicated with, in order for them to initiate the process. As they begin communicating, they develop affective trust [cognitive trust is believing that others are competent to carry out a particular task, whereas affective trust is believing others will support and help you as part of your friendship]. As trust builds, they begin to share feelings and learn that others are more like them than they are different. This leads to the recognition that others are 'OK.'" [page 19, Sloane 2002]

As affective trust increases, participants begin to see others as having value, which is the foundation for empathy. The result is that pro-social behaviors begin to develop rather quickly. As their self-confidence and self-esteem develop, they are less affected by the negative influences in their housing units and in the institution in general. This is reinforced by the high level of visibility of this positive "community" in the institution and the fact that other graduates tend to reinforce what they have learned from AVP. It also creates curiosity in new inmates who are apprehensive about prison life and are drawn to the AVP community.

Of long term significance is the relationship of these changes on maturation. Two very important skills or abilities of adult maturity are being able to develop meaningful relationships and make healthy decisions. Prison, by its design, arrests the development of these two skills. AVP effectively re-engages this maturation process by:

- Fostering the development of empathy. AVP increases participants' self-awareness and self-knowledge. When they look into themselves, they discover their "innate health," which we all have. This increases their self-acceptance, which allows them to be more accepting and risk taking with others. This is the basis of empathy, which is necessary for meaningful relationships with significant others.
- Empowering participants through interpersonal and intrapersonal skills development and attitude change. Inmates typically feel themselves to be victims, powerless and alienated. AVP helps them realize they are co-creators of their lives, which with positive attitude change, leads to responsible and healthy decision-making.

The low recidivism rate of AVP participants should make this program attractive to Departments of Correction. In addition, an earlier study (Sloan 2002) showed that AVP has a positive effect on prison discipline.

It seems likely that the impact could be even greater if AVP were combined with a full service re-entry program after inmates are released, one that would help them avoid problems that lead to rule violations that result in returns to prison. AVP Delaware is currently exploring the possibility of developing a re-entry program that would provide a positive support community and assist with participants' many logistical and survival needs. Another possibility might be to combine AVP with other existing inside inmate programs as well as programs that provide transition services.