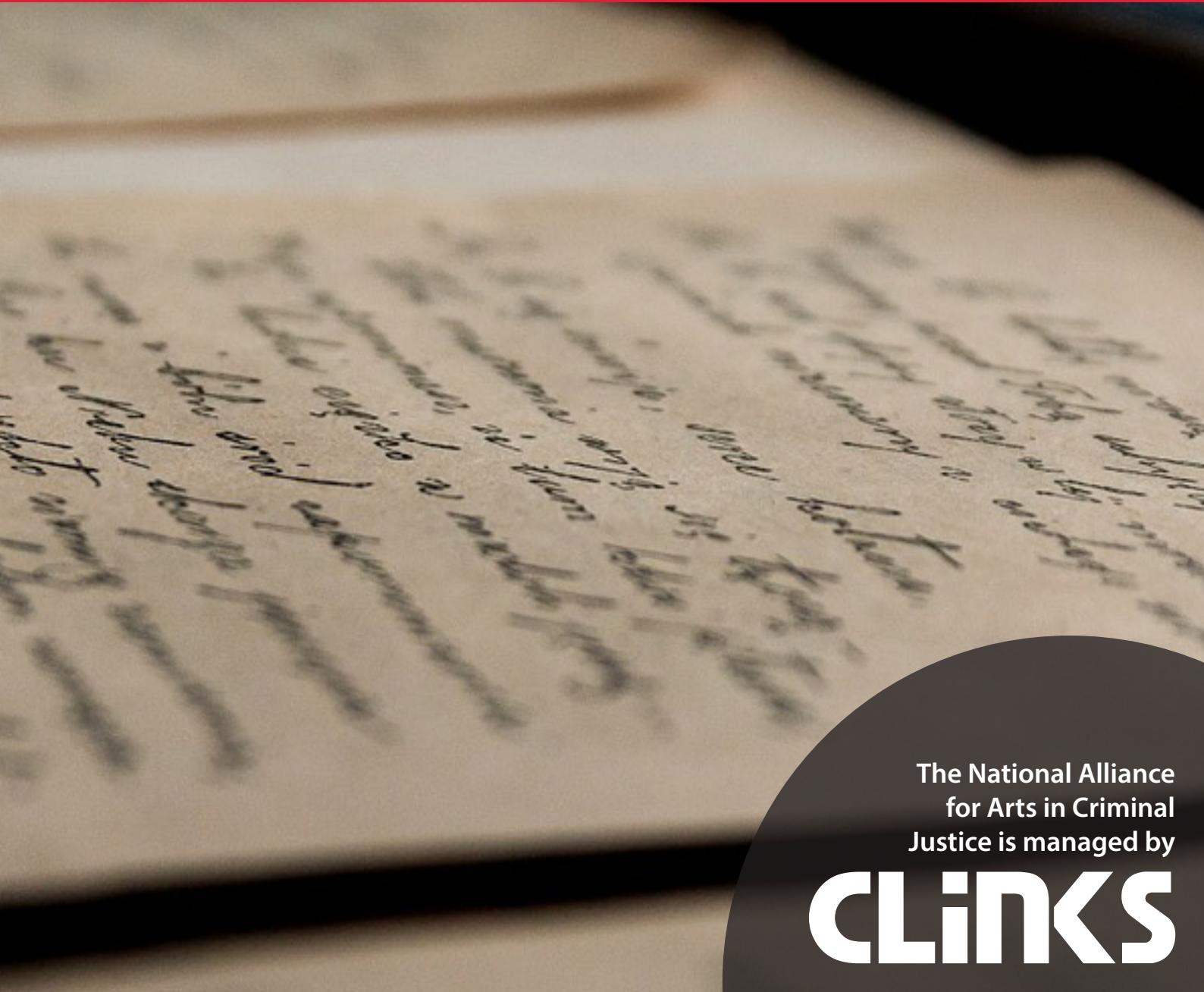


the university of sussex
using archives within the
Criminal Justice System
a case study



The National Alliance
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Justice is managed by

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About the NAACJ case study series

One of the key threads running through the work of the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice is the promotion of good practice within the arts and criminal justice sector. We want to encourage excellence amongst organisations and individuals working in this area, and ensure that our work continually encourages and celebrates good practice. To address this, we run a professional mentoring scheme, which expands opportunities for our members to develop professional skills and knowledge in the field of arts and criminal justice through a one to one mentoring relationship, and we continually update our online Evidence Library, which houses the key research and evaluation documents on the impact of arts-based projects, programmes and interventions within the Criminal Justice System.

On top of this, we want to explore and share some of the excellent work already happening in the sector on a more detailed level. We focus on interesting collaborations happening between arts organisations and criminal justice organisations, exploring how they work together and the impact this has on participants and the process of rehabilitation.



About the University of Sussex's Writing Lives project

Writing Lives: Voices of Prisoners in HMP Lewes (a category B male local prison) was inspired by a previous collaboration between Mass Observation Project Officer, Kirsty Patrick, and Creative Arts Facilitator, Evlynn Sharp, to hold creative writing workshops for inmates in HMP Lewes designed around the Mass Observation Archive's (MOA) annual 12 May Diary Day. The success of these workshops led to more creative writing workshops using the MOA and a pilot research study, which was funded by the School of Law, Politics and Sociology at University of Sussex, involving Patrick, Sharp and three researchers from the University of Sussex – Lizzie Seal, Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Bethan Stevens – as well as Abi Luthmann (Equal Access Manager) and Emma Bach (Library Manager at HMP Lewes) from East Sussex Library Service. This entailed holding four creative writing workshops led by Sharp in the library at HMP Lewes in June and July 2014.

What is the Mass Observation Archive?

The MOA specialises in material about everyday life in Britain. When it was originally founded in 1937, it recorded the thoughts, beliefs and experiences of people's lives, enabling men and women to share their opinions and feelings with both contemporary readers and audiences in the future.

It now contains papers generated by the original Mass Observation social research organisation (1937 to early 1950s), and newer material collected continuously since 1981. The Archive is a charitable trust in the care of the University of Sussex. It is housed at The Keep as part of the University's Special Collections.

www.massobs.org.uk

The Mass Observation Archive as inspiration for creative workshops

Prior to the workshops, the researchers selected materials from the MOA. Extracts from these were used in workshop exercises to elicit creative writing from prisoners alongside other prompts like relevant paintings, photos, or anecdotes from the facilitator's experience. There were two themes – 'time' and 'belonging', and two forms - letters and diaries - that provided the basis of the four workshops. The MOA is rich in personal narrative, making it especially suitable for use in a project such as this. The following extracts from the MOA focus on the theme of 'belonging' – noted by Tamsin Hinton-Smith as particularly pertinent for supporting reflective writing:

"Often I felt I did not belong; first time was coming down the stairs at say age 4/5 and hearing a row, later seeing my mother lying to her housekeeper as she said her father was a jeweler and he was only a watch mender. It was not her fault exactly as she was dying of TB, possibly brought on by my birth. Bad cess. All the relatives did their best. It was no one's fault of course, but I had to live in Lancashire twice while she was ill. I should have been grateful but I wasn't. The first time was OK and I had a dress and saw the old King and Queen Mother going past our town hall; but the second time was crap. I spoke educated and the other children spoke broad."

"When I was a very young child I had a great sense of belonging, living with my parents, sister and paternal grandmother in the house which had been built by my paternal grandparents about thirty years before. I still live here, but with my husband now. My family was very loving and protective, and my early childhood before I went to school felt very safe. I knew that I was loved, and felt secure at my home with my mother and grandmother every day. While my mother was cooking and washing, I always had my grandmother to play with. On Saturdays I used to play with the elderly woman whom my grandmother employed to clean the house, because she did not mind my following her round from room to room while she was working."

The purpose of the workshops was to focus on subjective experiences of everyday life from the participants' own perspectives. The writings that emerged from the workshops were intensely evocative and emotional, frequently expressing their authors' perspectives on significant relationships, autobiographical memories and some of the negative experiences of imprisonment. One of the results of the project was a short publication of a selection of poetry funded by East Sussex Library Service.



From May to July A participant's poem...

May 23

No window, just a vent and plastic
Divide me from the outside sky

May 29

A window at last!!
Opens either side,
Not far,
Only 2 or 3 inches
Between the edge and the wall,
Enough to see the sky
Over the buildings

June 6

The window
I despise.
A slit to remind me
Of what I miss,
The sun beams through
Hurting my eyes
As I peer through,
Eyes squinting,
It's all a blur.
I return to my rack,
And close my eyes,
And I can still see the sun
Hurting my eyes.

July 6

I don't look out of the window any more.
It hurts too much with the memories.
How will I feel in a month,
A year,
Two years?

Participation and impact

In total, twelve men participated in the workshops. The researchers conducted an evaluation focus group, which produced extremely positive feedback. Participants discussed how they found the workshops to be an emotional experience and this was perceived as beneficial. They also highlighted the role of creative writing workshops in helping to build self-confidence.

The work in this project by men in HMP Lewes shows how empowering creative writing can be when used to reflect on lives, providing the space to consider, reflect and transform the way we understand our own life stories and the world around us.

“To actually come out with the writing which people have, *it’s been inspirational.*” - participant

“If you had to ask what people got out of this, you know, I would have to say, *this was about confidence.*” - participant

“It brings out a lot of *true memories.*” - participant

“I think everybody who has written has been honest; very, very honest, and *it’s heartwarming.*” - participant

“I’ve found what has *kept me sane* being in here, has been to *put my feelings to page.*” - participant

“I think everybody who has written has been honest; very, very honest, and *it’s heartwarming.*” - participant

“You’ve got to understand the environment we are in, because you know, we’re all locked away and probably feeling the worst, and then we’ve come to this course, and look at the subjects we’ve done. We’ve done time, belonging, writing letters. Now, thinking about it, we could have all started having a gripe; time, spending time in here. I hate it, but it’s brought out things like people writing about family, people writing about loss. It’s brought everything that you wouldn’t really have thought.” - participant

Sharing work with the public



At the end of the Writing Lives project there was an event held at The Keep at the University of Sussex in September 2014. Over 40 people attended the event to hear poetry written by the project participants, inspired by MOA. The National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice views sharing arts products with the general public as an essential part of good practice in terms of challenging and ultimately changing attitudes and perceptions about offenders and ex-offenders. Below is some feedback from event attendees:

"I found the poems very honest and felt sad – they were written simply and conveyed difficult feelings very clearly."

"Very moving accounts which spoke to the heart. Clearly these writers have potential."

"I found the poems very expressive and moving. It's great the writing you are producing and good to hear your voices. Brilliant, thank you."

"A great project, a great idea – very inspiring."

This public-facing event brought together the worlds of the prisoner participants and the general public. Earlier in 2014, the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice asked UK prisoners for their thoughts on arts products (performances, exhibitions, poetry anthologies etc.) being available to the public. The majority of respondents said that these outcomes should undoubtedly be shared with the general public. The strongest reasoning for this was that it will alter public perception about offenders and prisons in the hope of breaking down barriers. Acceptance of the work and being regarded as the equal of others is affirmation that prisoners have good in them too: "The more the public see of positive things that can be achieved by prisoners, the more open-minded they will be to employing and working with ex-offenders in the future." (A prisoner who responded to our survey).

Why use archives with offenders, ex-offenders and young offenders?

Using archives with offenders, ex-offenders and young offenders is a powerful way to bring up discussions about history and community, whilst encouraging participants to reflect on their own lives. The use of archives invites participants to make links between their own lives and experiences and the lives and experiences of those represented in the archives.

Lizzie Seal, part of the Writing Lives project, noted that:

“the focus on every day, relatable topics, such as belonging, means something to everyone, and this is why the project worked so well.”

In 2009, the former Museum, Libraries and Archive Council, along with arts organisation Safe Ground, worked collaboratively on ‘Creating Community Archives’; a project exploring how a local library and archive can bring history to life for prisoners, young people at risk of offending and older adults.

The main individual outcomes for the young offenders who took part in Safe Ground’s project were: increased acting skills, music skills, writing skills, increased understanding of the importance of collecting archive materials and what can be found out from studying archive materials. Outcomes relating to the whole group included: an increase in confidence, self-esteem, positive self-imagery, empathy, raised aspirations, improvisation skills, deepened knowledge and understanding of the Second World War and an increased knowledge of how a play and exhibition are produced.

Future plans

As a result of such positive responses to the pilot workshops, Evlynn Sharp will be employed as Writer-in-Residence at HMP Lewes for a period of six months in the first instance, which is being funded as part of HMP Lewes' crime reduction initiative. There are also plans to develop a larger research project from the pilot, which will explore further the use of archival materials from the MOA to inspire creative writing by prisoners.

Resources

- You can visit The Keep's website for more information on Mass Observation Archive and the Writing Lives project: <http://www.thekeep.info/education-outreach-writing-lives-voices-prisoners-hmp-lewes/>
- For further information on archives, please visit the National Archives website: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>
- Find out more about the Creating Community Archives project here: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/archives/creating-community-archives-2010.pdf>
- Discover the key research and evaluation documents on the impact of arts-based projects, programmes and interventions within the Criminal Justice System via the Evidence Library: <http://artsevidence.org.uk/>
- Visit the National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice's website: <http://www.artsincriminaljustice.org.uk>



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National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice

With thanks to: University of Sussex and the Mass Observation Archive

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The National Alliance for Arts in Criminal Justice is managed by Clinks; the national membership body which supports the voluntary sector working with offenders in England and Wales.

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