



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



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Abstract

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. Three hundred men were randomly chosen for the sample; 175 had been released at least one year prior to data collection, 162 had been released two years prior, and 148 three years prior. One, two, and three year cumulative statistics are provided for them. At the end of three years following release, only 11.5 percent of the AVP participants had new felony convictions and only half of these were for violent offenses.

The AVP sample was compared to a group of 34 men randomly selected to be the control group for an evaluation of the Life Skills Program at DCC. 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 Alternatives to Violence Project and Recidivism

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Background

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) is a nonprofit volunteer conflict resolution program with established programs in 45 states and 25 countries on six continents. Volunteers conduct more than 1,000 intensive twenty-one hour workshops each year in the US. Seventy percent of which are provided to inmates in local, state and federal prisons. There are three levels of workshops -- Basic, Advanced and Training for Facilitators. At the Advanced level, there are specialty workshops in Bias Awareness, Manly Awareness, and Anger and Forgiveness.

AVP is a multi-cultural, all-volunteer program that began in 1975 at Greenhaven Prison in New York State in response to the violence at Attica Prison. A group of inmates requested help from Quakers to develop a workshop to help turn around the youth entering the prison. The initial workshop was successful, and it subsequently spread by word of mouth to other prisons throughout the US. There are active programs in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ghana, Uganda, India, Russia, and other Eastern and Western European countries.

AVP promotes no religious doctrine. It operates on the fundamental belief that there is a power for peace and good in everyone, and this power has the ability to transform violence. AVP emphasizes the need to respect and care for self and others, and with this focus, participants develop positive self-images. AVP teaches effective conflict resolution skills -- listening, problem solving, cooperation, assertiveness skills. It also focuses on positive, healthy attitudes. When a person's attitude toward self, others and conflict changes, their world is transformed. They see the world and others differently and this change stays with them, often for the rest of their lives. Comments like the following are common:

"All my life, negativity has been around me. I am negativity. It has created me. My thoughts were negative. When I dealt with other people, it was in the negative realm . . . Like most of us here, we came from a war zone, America is a war zone. You have to look at life as a soldier, every day. AVP took out the negative and put in positive. It gave me new avenues to view, new alternatives, other ways to see things. Now I sit back and look at the world in a different way, with a different perspective."

"What I like about AVP is that I look at others differently and I look at myself differently. I look in the mirror and I actually like what I see. I like what I've become and what I've become inside. I never before thought of how I related to other people, the defensiveness and intimidation. It just never occurred to me to think about it, that there was another alternative, not until AVP."

Before AVP, I only thought about violence, there was no second option. The violence in my life got worse and worse. I spent most of my 11 years in prison in the hole. I am not a sensitive, caring, understanding individual, but this program has really had an impact on me. AVP saved

* John Shuford was primarily responsible for the background section of this report. The research was conducted independently by Marsha Miller who is responsible for the methods, results, and discussion section.

my life, it gave me another option. 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. Some friends got out of maximum for having beat up some correctional officers and came to me anxious to get some action. I explained to them that that type of activity was not me anymore. You could see the hurt in their eyes and it hurts me because I know I cannot do it and I cannot allow them to do it. It is a whole different world, it's different for me. When I was a warrior, I fought with all the tools I could fight with. I learned to be the best that I could be. Now to be a warrior for nonviolence, I had to learn the tools of AVP."

"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."

"I had been in every group in the institution. They gave me the same information. There were very few solutions offered. When you are given the information without the solution, you are still lost. AVP gave me some concrete solutions."

"We have to re-evaluate what it is to be a man. My grandfather used to tell me that you know you are a man when you don't have to prove anything to anybody else. Now I understand. I could not before AVP."

AVP is also well respected within corrections. Prison officials report improvements in inmate behavior, like the following:

"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]

"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.]

Yet despite the positive views of AVP in correctional systems, little empirical outcome data has been available and no recidivism statistics had been developed until research was conducted in Delaware. In 2001, Delaware correctional officials approved two studies designed to answer questions about the impact of AVP on inmate behavior in prison and recidivism following release. The Delaware Correctional Center (DCC) was chosen as the focus of the research because the program was first established in that institution in 1991 and has been in continuous operation since.

Sloane Study

The first study (Sloane 2002) looked at inmate behavioral write-ups before and after participation in AVP and used an experimental group and control group. The latter was taken from the waiting list of more than 400. The sample size was 31 for the experimental group and 37 for the control group. Most subjects had long sentences of over 15 years and about 50% were

lifers. All were sentenced for violent crimes and most had multiple offenses. Half of the experimental group had only the Basic workshop and the other half had advanced levels.

The results of the study were that the experimental group experienced a 60% drop in write-ups compared with the control group. AVP showed a greater impact on young inmates and those with a GED or high school education. An explanation for why AVP appeared to be more effective with those under age forty is that those over forty tend to have far fewer write-ups. Those over forty in both the control and experimental groups had low write-ups and thus, showed only a small improvement from AVP.

AVP was equally effective with all ethnic groups studied.

There were also interviews with a sample of the experimental group. Analysis of their comments suggests: [page 16, Sloane 2002]

- AVP develops respect for self and others [empathy].
- AVP develops critical social skills [communication, interpersonal trust]
- AVP helps participants develop alternative approaches to conflict resolution by providing examples, practice and positive reinforcement.
- Participants desire a better “community” within the institution [safer, more social environment with more meaningful interaction with fellow inmates and a desire to participate in socially oriented activities.]
- AVP establishes a reinforcing social system within the institution.

All of the interviewed men indicated they had grown up in environments where they were physically and/or sexually abused. Most said they did not understand any other way to react to conflict or confrontation except violently, because they never had an alternative model or example. That is, they started from a position of significant deficiency in social skills as compared to the general public. It is the first time most of them have been taught how to communicate and relate to others. For many, it is the first time they have talked to someone else about their thoughts or feelings on any intimate level.

“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.

Methods

The current study focuses on recidivism. Three hundred men were randomly chosen from a list of the first ten years of AVP participants at DCC and followed through Delaware's Criminal Justice Information System (CJIS) for three years following their release from the institution. Of the three hundred men, one hundred-twelve (37.3 percent) were still in prison at the time of data collection in the spring of 2005. Nine died in prison and another shortly after release for a total of 3.3 percent. Of the remaining 178 men, three had not been in the community for a full year at the time of data collection and are excluded from the analysis, leaving 175 men for whom statistics can be provided.

Recidivism is defined as it is in other studies that the researcher has done for the Delaware Department of Correction. It includes pending misdemeanor or felony charges or convictions, although in this study, there were very few pending charges; virtually all had been resolved one way or another at the time of data collection. Criminal violations such as third degree criminal trespass or violations of local ordinances such as having an unlicensed dog are not included. Charges which have been dismissed or withdrawn or which have resulted in a verdict of 'not guilty' are excluded. Arrests for violations of probation are excluded as are charges of escaping from a work release center. These problems with compliance show up in the return to prison statistics. 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.

Results

Figure One shows the cumulative recidivism rate over a three-year period following release. The statistics include only those men who had been released one, two, or three full years prior to data collection. There are 175 men in the first year's statistics, 162 in the second, and 148 in the third year's statistic.

Figure Two shows the cumulative return to prison rate over a three year period. The reasons for return include technical violations at work release centers, violations of probation, detentions on new charges, and sentences for new convictions.

Figure One:

Alternatives to Violence Program Cumulative Recidivism Rates

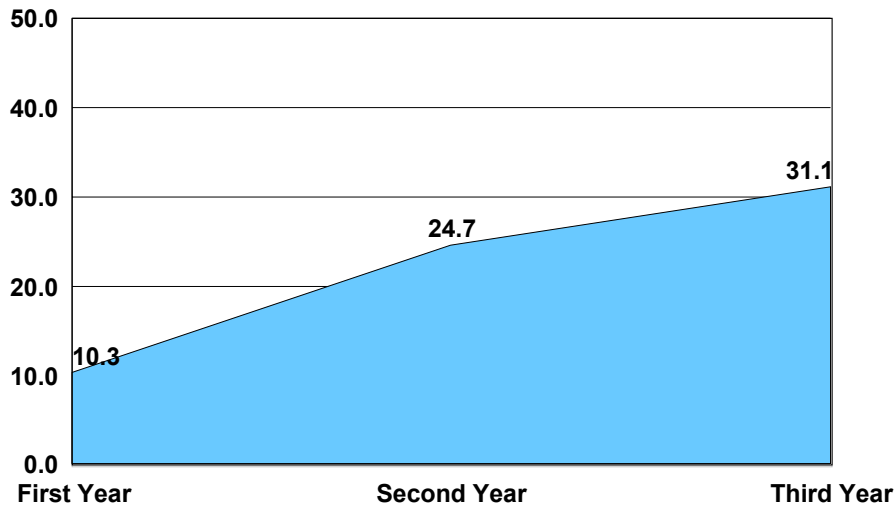
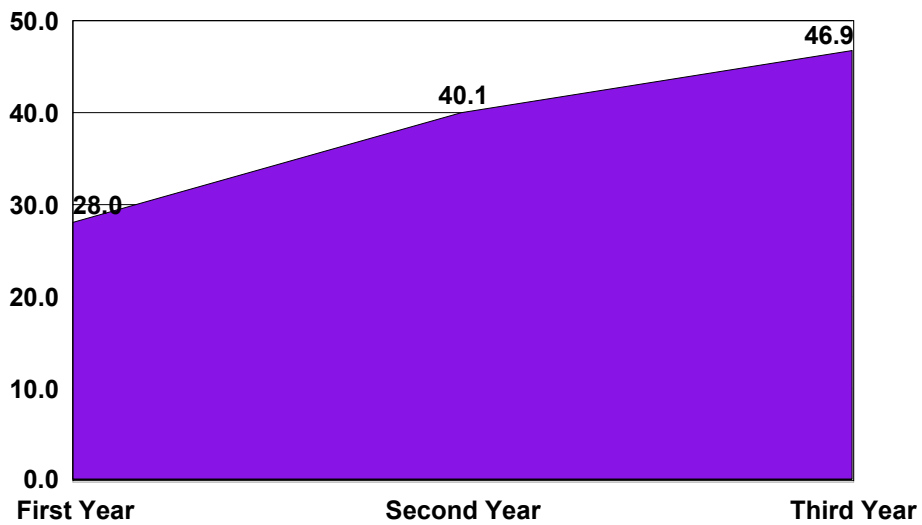


Figure Two:

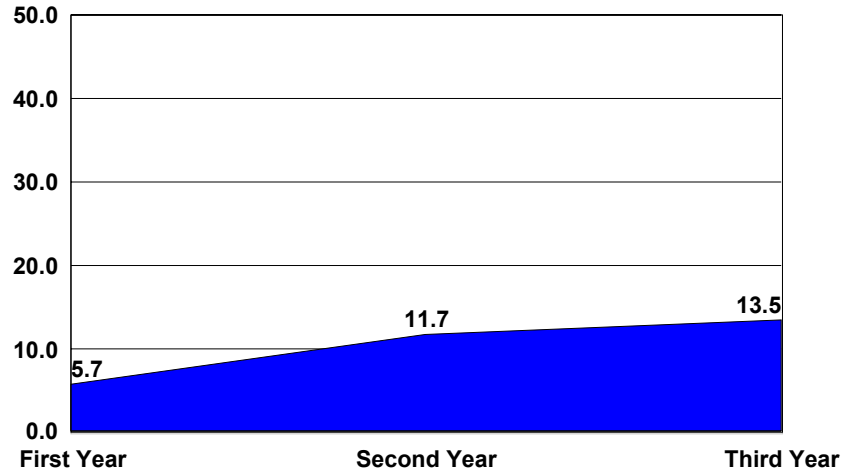
Alternatives to Violence Program Cumulative Back to Prison Rates



Most of the recidivism involved misdemeanors. New felonies are shown in Figure Three.

Figure Three:

Alternatives to Violence Program Cumulative Rates for New Felonies



The Alternatives to Violence Program focuses on building conflict resolution skills and if successful, should produce a low rate of violent recidivism. In Delaware, most drug felonies are considered violent crimes. For the purpose of this study, they are not included in the definition of violent crimes. The usual offenses are represented in Figure Four along with weapons charge and misdemeanors such as terroristic threatening, menacing, and offensive touching. Figure Five shows only violent felonies.

Figure Four:

Alternatives to Violence Program Cumulative Rates of Violent Recidivism

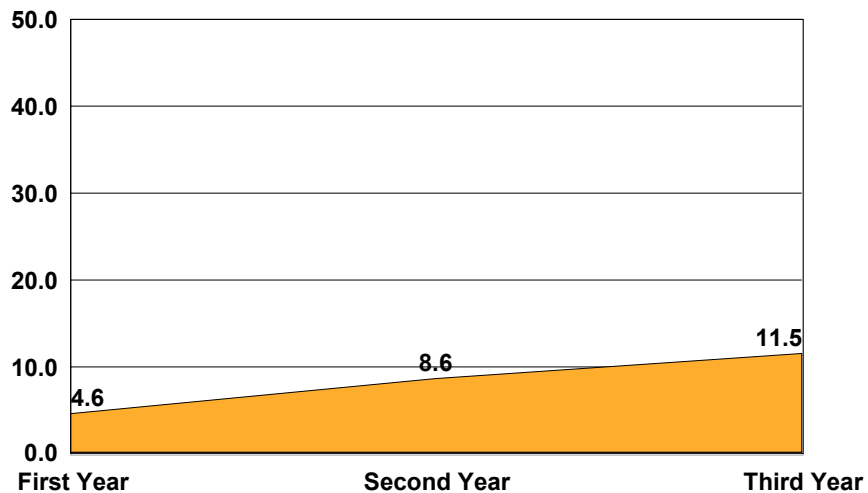
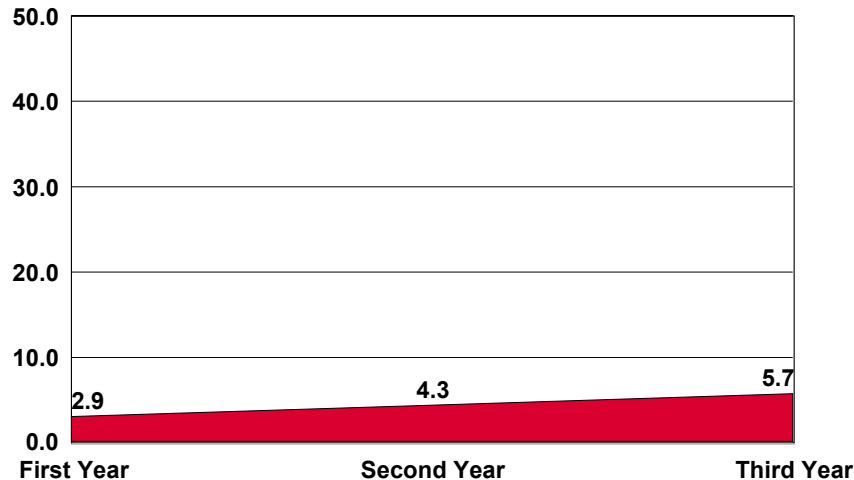


Figure Five:

Alternatives to Violence Program Cumulative Rates of Violent Felony Recidivism



Discussion:

A limitation of this study is that the evaluation was not set up as an experiment, with inmates randomly assigned to AVP or a control group. Instead, inmates voluntarily signed up for AVP and all who were approved for program participation by the classification board were accepted for participation. How then can we interpret the data? By all definitions of recidivism, the rates certainly appear low, but a comparison group would help in drawing conclusions. There is no baseline study of the recidivism of DCC inmates and if there were, it would include both those who volunteer for programs and those who do not; the AVP program group would be biased towards those with a commitment to rehabilitation who might be less likely to reoffend independent of program participation.

The original research plan proposed to use the control group for the Life Skills Program, which was established in 1995. Life Skills provides academic and moral education, practical living skills, and anger management. Life Skills began as a pilot program with federal funding and included an evaluation component. Program participants were randomly selected from volunteers who had been approved by the classification board. The DCC control group consisted of 34 men who volunteered for Life Skills in 1996 but who were not selected and were free to sign up for other programs as they became available. The DCC Life Skills control group thus offers the advantages of being chosen in the middle of the period being considered and of including people who had volunteered for a multi-month program involving substantial work.

However, when the names of the 34 men in the DCC Life Skills control group were compared to a list of all DCC AVP participants, ten men were found to be on both lists. By chance, two of those ten happened to be selected for the current AVP recidivism study. Despite the overlap, I will show comparative recidivism and return to prison rates for both groups in Figures Six and Seven, respectively. Both charts will show the results for DCC Life Skills control group in its entirety and also with the AVP participants removed.

Figure Six:

Comparative Cumulative Recidivism Rates

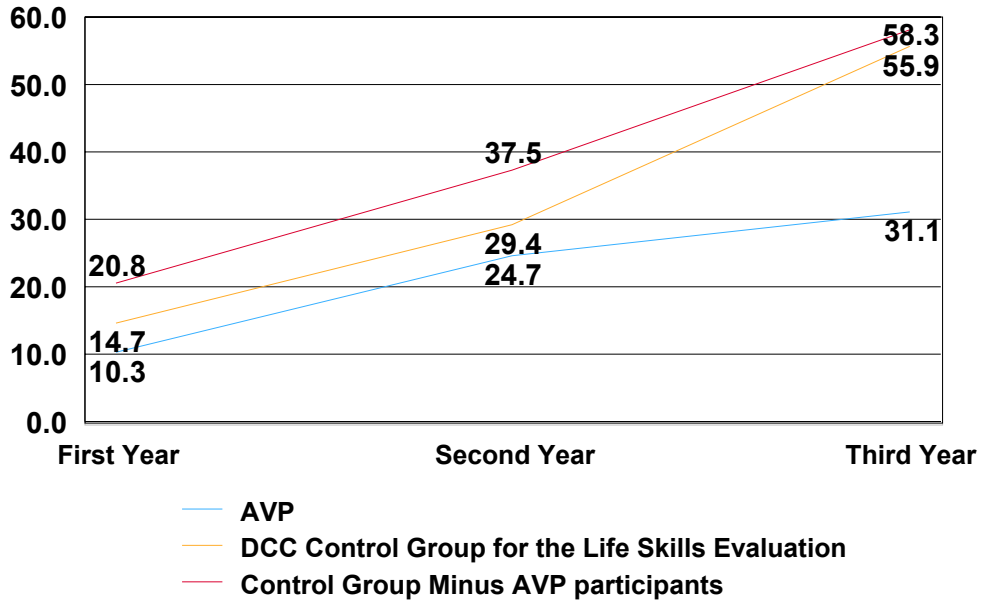
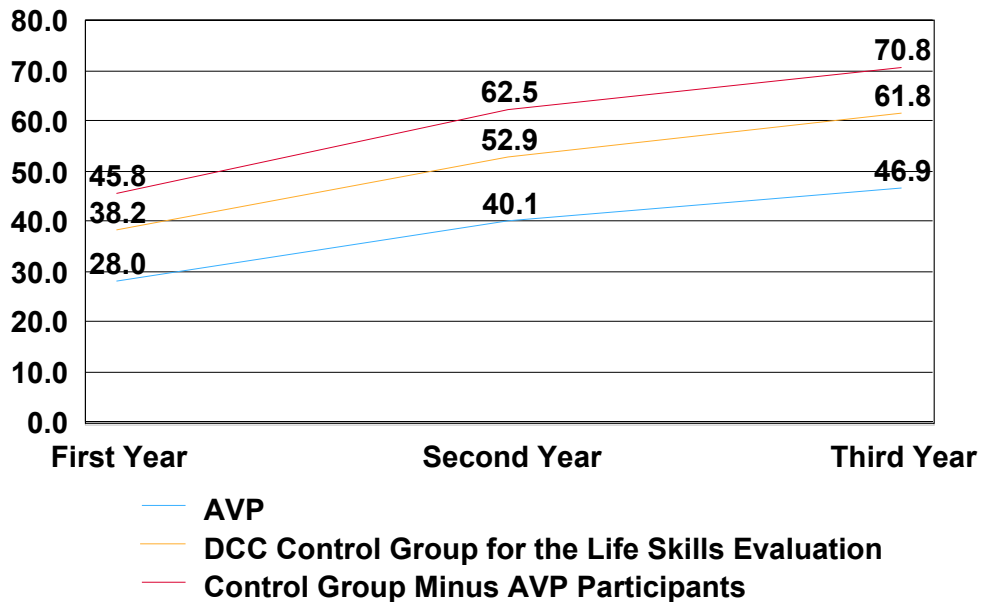


Figure Seven:

Comparative Cumulative Back to Prison Rates



If the AVP Participants are removed from the DCC Life Skills control group, the cumulative return to prison rates are 45.8 percent for the first year, 62.5 percent through the second year, and 70.8 percent through the third year.

The differences between the AVP group and the Life Skills control group on both cumulative recidivism and cumulative returns to prison for any reason are striking. Inmates in the Life Skills control group are more likely to reoffend and more likely to return to prison than our AVP sample; these rates are even higher when those who participated in AVP are removed from the control group. The control group is small, but the AVP sample consistently outperforms them on the outcome measures over a three-year period. This suggests that AVP is effective in reducing recidivism.

Recommendations

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 should be noted that not all inmates will return to the community. In Delaware, AVP is also offered to inmates serving life sentences or such long sentences that they may not be released. Indeed, one participant in the sample in the present study had been executed and eight more had died of natural causes in prison at the time of data collection. AVP's positive effect on discipline will be especially important with the lifers and long-termers, not just because of the length of time these individuals will spend in the institutions, but also because of their influence on prison culture.

We can only speculate about how AVP achieves its success with inmates but a strong possibility is that AVP addresses the important psychological need for connection with others. This is accomplished by teaching attitude skills, such as self awareness, empathy, and community building. Most, if not all, inmates have not experienced meaningful or healthy connection with others, either in their pre-prison life and certainly not while in prison. When they experience this sense of connection and community, they are changed. According to feedback, they view themselves, others and the world differently and that transforms their lives. This is not a temporary change. It is, to a significant degree, a permanent change. Not only is their behavior in prison improved, their behavior once released is also affected. It is notable that these results are achieved without any other program support.

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

Reference

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.