

# **A Study of the Effectiveness of Alternatives to Violence Workshops in a Prison System**

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## **Background**

This project arose as a continuation of earlier research on Quaker other-regarding behavior (see Sloane, 2001). That line of inquiry led to an ethnographic study of inmates in the Delaware Correction Center who were participating in Alternatives-to-Violence Program (AVP) workshops. These workshops were originally developed by the Quakers in response to requests from inmates at Attica prison for some way to address violence at the prison. The workshops are facilitated by outside volunteers (non-prison employees) and focus on developing social skills. The intent is to help the inmates cope with potentially violent situations, by recognizing when they are likely to occur, improve interpersonal communications in order to mitigate the situation, and develop a sense of other-valuing to reduce the likelihood of resorting to violence. The workshops are managed by inmate trainers, but with the support and involvement of outside volunteer co-trainers. AVP workshops are typically two or three days in length, depending on the specific module. Both inmates, as well as outside trainers are volunteers, their qualifications being completion of all AVP modules in addition to the “train-the-trainer” workshop. Participants start with the basic workshop, progress to the advanced, and from there to the adjunct modules which include Bias Awareness and Manly Awareness. The ethnographic study, completed in May of 2001 (Sloane 2001), suggested that AVP participants’ behaviors were modified by their involvement in these workshops.

Motivation levels at the start of the workshops appeared to be high. The rapidity of behavioral change appeared high and the degree to which behavior appeared to change between the start of the workshops and their conclusion seemed high, despite the fact that the workshops were completed in only two days (basic AVP is two days, advanced is a three-day workshop, as are many of the additional modules). Speculation from that research suggests that if AVP (and similar) programs can be shown to be effective in reducing violent behavior, there should be a measurably lower number of incidences of violence involving inmates who have completed AVP programs compared to those who have not. Likewise, it would be expected that workshop alumnae would have a lower post-release incidence of violent behavior.

Some further speculation about why AVP “works” is probably in order, as well. In my original research, I suggested that the answer might lie in issues around trust. Inmates are particularly suspicious of others. Many are victims of abuse. Many come from broken homes, lack appropriate role models, have poor educations and are generally socially maladjusted. AVP offers an opportunity to develop trust. The participants learn that others can be trusted and they get opportunities to practice trusting others in a safe, non-threatening environment. When working with these men in the workshops, the transition is unmistakable as they learn to trust; that others are not necessarily a threat. The Quaker principle of seeing others as having value seems operative and other-valuing seems to follow the development of trust. This change in attitude is enabled by the development of social skills that include negotiating and communicating.

A large motivation for this line of inquiry is the societal costs associated with corrections in the United States. U.S. Department of Justice statistics indicate that there were 1.4M prisoners in federal and state prisons at the end of 2000. This was up approx. 1.3% from 1999.

State prisons were operating at between full capacity and 15% over capacity. The federal system was operating at 31% above capacity (US Dept. of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001). Actually, 2000 was a “good year” in that inmate populations grew at less than the 6% average rate of the previous ten years. However, any growth is a problem, given the lack of capacity. Prisons are extremely costly to build, staff and operate. For example, Texas, which operates the largest prison system in the nation, spent \$2B on operations in 1999. Texas’ average cost to operate a minimum-security cell was \$30 per day. For maximum security, the rate increases to \$59 per day (Correctional Education Connections, 2001). This works out to be about \$12,000 per inmate per annum (for minimum security), adjusted to current dollars. This figure just reflects operations costs and does not take into account capital spending for new facilities. While the estimates are not necessarily accurate because there are certain minimum operating costs that would be incurred even if there was only one inmate, they are illustrative of the point: namely that it is expensive to operate prisons. Clearly, if we could show that AVP is effective in reducing recidivism, we should be able to make an economic case for expanding the program. I should note here, however, the myriad issues associated with attempting to make a direct link between training and education of any type and recidivism rates. There is much debate about the appropriate objectives for correctional education (see Gehring, 2000), a lack of a standard definition of recidivism and no clear criteria for what constitutes success for correctional education programs. So while it is clear that reduced recidivism is the ultimate objective, one must be very careful about making claims about correctional education’s ability to reduce it.

There is, of course, a social argument for reducing violence that is not so easily quantified, but is compelling, nonetheless. Again according to the DoJ, “over half the increase in state prison population since 1990 is due to an increase in the number of prisoners convicted of violent offenses” (DoJ Bureau of Justice Statistics 2001). Victims suffer tremendous psychological and physical trauma as the result of violent crime. Irrespective of economic issues, any effort aimed at reducing violence is worthwhile.

### *Existing Research and Related Issues*

Research in the field of recidivism is fairly extensive, but much of what is available focuses on the effect of correctional education of a general nature such as GED training, college courses, vocational training, or basic literacy. In addition to these categories, correctional education also encompasses social skills training (further explained later) and substance abuse awareness. Research on the effectiveness of social skills training in prison (e.g., communications, negotiation, conflict resolution, trust, self-management) is much scarcer. Claimed effects of correctional education and training programs cover the spectrum from not effective to highly effective, depending on the study. For example, Flanagan, et al. (1994) found that correctional education was a critical factor in reducing recidivism, but that vocational training was less effective. He also summarizes findings from a variety of studies between 1970 and 1981 (mostly meta-analyses) that suggest correctional education is correlated with reduced recidivism about 66% of the time (Flanagan, 1994, p.43). However, Frees (1994), in a US Dept. of Education funded program to assess the effectiveness of a vocational training program, reports that no conclusion could be drawn because of variances in the settings in which data was collected.

As mentioned, many of the researchers focus on literacy or general education programs. Harer (1994) found that recidivism rates were inversely related to completion of correctional education programs in federal releasees. He also explored some of the external variables that affect recidivism (e.g., availability of post-release employment, influence of halfway houses), but statistical information is thin and the basis of his claims questionable. In a later study (Harer, 1995), he does provide some solid research that establishes a correlation between education levels and recidivism, with the most notable benefit being in the group that had the least education when they entered prison. Langenbach, et al. (1990) evaluated a Televised Instructional System (TIS) in the Texas prison system and similar to those above, found a correlation between participation and reduced recidivism post-release. In an interesting note related to the research herein, they measured infraction rates for program participants and found no correlation between number of infractions and program participation. (TIS was a general education program).

Linden and Perry, (1982) did not find a measurable effect of general education programs on recidivism, while an Ohio Dept. of Rehabilitation and Correction (1995) report found that the effect for similar programs was marginal, except in certain subgroups (e.g., women and very violent offenders). Ryan and Mauldin (1994) analyzed 97 recidivism studies and found that 85% reported correlations between correctional education programs and recidivism rates, but about half of these studies reported their findings without supporting data.

Other research has attempted to assess the effectiveness of both education and vocational training. Hull, et al. (2000), found a correlation between education and vocational training programs in Virginia prisons. Jancic (1998), and Kelso (2000) found similar correlations in their studies, as did Nichols (1998), O'Neill (1990), Pasco County School Board (1993), Saylor and Gaes (1995), Schumaker, et al. (1990), Stiles and Siegel (1994), Thorpe et al. (1984) and Wilson, (1994). Ryan and Desuta (2000) found a correlation between vocational training and reduced recidivism and projected a \$1.58-to-\$1 payback (cost savings from fewer inmates compared to cost of implementation) for the program under study (Operation Outreach).

One researcher in this sample, Hobler, (1999) researched the effectiveness of a Moral Reconciliation Therapy (MRT) program in the Delaware prison system that taught "life skills," one of the few reports on social skills training. MRT combines "life skills" training with academic instruction and violence reduction workshops. His finding was that the program showed a lower recidivism rate for those who completed the program than those who did not (19% vs. ~50% after one year following release), but his report does not discuss any research design or methodology, presents neither statistical information nor detailed description of the program nor why it was thought to be effective.

Other research on the effect of social skills training (see Finn/Dept. of Justice (1998), and MacKenzie and Hickman (1998)) is focused on drug rehabilitation or youthful offenders. The studies suggest a correlation with recidivism, but measurement of the long-term effectiveness of substance abuse education is particularly problematic and even more vulnerable to uncontrolled variable effects than other areas of focus. The Correctional Service of Canada seems to have the most interest, and the most relevant research on correctional social skills training. They have published a wide variety of research, which tends to support the conclusion that correctional education programs are effective. To my knowledge, there has been little or no research on the

many volunteer programs that operate in prisons around the US, despite their prevalence and a professed belief in their effectiveness by the volunteers.

### *Effects on Recidivism*

Of the research that addresses education and training effects on recidivism, most has attempted to link prison experiences directly to behavior that results in re-arrest and re-incarceration post-release. This was pointed out by Enocksson (1981):

“To measure the success of a program against the single variable of the absence of reconviction for a criminal act does not take into account the many other factors influencing an individual both during and after release. There appears to be general agreement in the literature that factors such as the offender’s previous life history, post-release family and other socio-economic connections, access to opportunity systems, physical and mental health, and a variety of other variables contribute substantially to his or her behavior upon release from incarceration...Persons who have experienced correctional training may be favorably affected by the treatment only to have the good effects discounted by the fact that they are returned to the same family, the same neighborhood, and the same detrimental social groupings and influences which contributed to their anti-social behavior in the first place.”

In his study, Flanagan (1994) cites the above passage from Enocksson, but he then goes on to state:

“Exposure to educational programs is a critical issue in measures of effectiveness in reducing return to prison....”

While he does not say here that education is the only measure of effectiveness, he does not address the importance of other variables anywhere else in his report other than his reference to Enocksson. Flanagan is not alone in failing to address the importance of external variables on recidivism, however.

Gehring (2000) discusses the problem with uncontrolled external variables, coming to the conclusion that one cannot measure recidivism (in fact, it is hard even to define). To illustrate the point, some researchers measure recidivism at the one-year point following release. Some measure it at longer intervals. Yet published research seldom controls for this difference. There is no standard that establishes criteria for measuring recidivism at pre-defined intervals. Prisoners who die in the interval between release and data collection are sometimes categorized as non-recidivists. This is clearly a problem, and again, seldom controlled. Someone released following completion of a long sentence for a very violent offense who is then subsequently re-arrested for a petty larceny would typically be categorized as a recidivist. Is this appropriate? Gehring makes no attempt to suggest a means to control for these variables; he just abandons the whole line of thinking. This is not helpful. While it may be useful to measure recidivism in a particular study, given an appropriate operational definition, using recidivism as a measure of general effectiveness of correctional education programs is problematic in the absence of generally agreed upon standards of measurement.

Harer (1994) found that halfway houses did not contribute to reduced recidivism directly, but inmates released through halfway houses were more successful in finding employment, which did reduce recidivism. Here again, the research starts to move toward an analysis of external variables, but it stops short, addressing only employment effects.

Hull, et al. (2000) is another example of making the great leap from correctional education directly to recidivism measurements. In the part of her paper that addresses limitations to the findings, external variables are not adequately addressed (although there is a passing reference to them in her final paragraphs) and no serious discussion of the threats to validity is provided. Jancic (1998) suffers from the same problem. Kelso (2000) talks about self-selection bias in recidivism studies, but fails to recognize external variables along with the other authors mentioned above. Langenbach, et al. (1990) does a thorough job of providing clearly defined categories of offenders, a well-designed control group carefully matched to the experimental group, and a generally well thought out research design. He simply fails to consider external variables.

Linden and Perry (1982) are critical of much of the research on recidivism, citing flaws in methodology. They draw the conclusion that the extant literature is invalid, but they make no suggestion as to how to correct the situation other than to say that post-release support systems should be provided if we want to reduce recidivism. Nichols (1988), in her dissertation on Ohio prison education programs, recognizes the possible effects of external variables, but she does not propose a research design to address them. The Ohio Department of Corrections report (1995) is likewise devoid of any recognition of external variables. It systematically sorts offenders by a variety of factors (e.g., age, race, sex, type of offense), but leaves out any analyses regarding post-release factors. O'Neill (1990), also omits consideration of post-release factors. Pasco County School Board (1993) found no correlation between correctional education programs and recidivism, but they too fail to consider post-release factors. They reach a false-negative conclusion, whereas in most of the other researchers cited herein reach a false positive, but their failure to consider external variables is just as serious an omission.

Ryan and Desuta (2000) discuss only two issues with their findings that an Operation Outward Reach (OOR) Program reduced recidivism: first, that there is a problem defining recidivism, and second, that self-selection bias is an issue. The Ryan and Mauldin (1994) survey (97 articles) on correctional education effects on recidivism concluded that there is evidence that these programs are effective, but the authors fail to critique the research designs of any of the articles or consider the effects of important external variables, such as ability to obtain employment, presence or absence of a family support structure, access to counseling and mental health services, marriage stability and a host of other factors which contribute to recidivism. The mechanisms that underlay recidivism (those that tend to produce behaviors that either foster recidivism or prevent it) are simply not addressed. Stated differently, the research discusses correlation, but not causality. Saylor and Gaes (1994 & 1995), Schumaker, et al. (1990), Stiles (1994), Thorpe, et al. (1984), and Wilson (1994) also fail to address external variables.

The above papers are representative of a broader body of research on recidivism. Why does the research apparently ignore such an obvious issue as uncontrolled external variables? It may be indicative of this field of research that better research designs are needed. Perhaps this is why there is no consensus on the effectiveness of correctional education. Its critics argue that the research is flawed. Its proponents argue effectiveness based on invalid research methodologies. Neither side seems to recognize what the problem is or what to do about it. What is needed is better methodology, with tighter controls on validity. There is also a need to standardize definitions and establish general success criteria that can be used to provide a baseline for correctional education research.

### *Social Skills*

Correctional education literature usually makes a distinction as to type of training or education. In addition to general education programs (e.g. high school and college level courses), and basic literacy education, three other categories are usually defined: vocational training, substance abuse education, and social skills training. A variety of vocational training programs are provided in various prison systems, as are social skills programs. “Social skills” usually refers to competency in communications (interpersonal), negotiation, conflict avoidance or resolution, and the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. Beyond that, social skills programs also teach inmates how to deal with stress, empathize, manage their emotions, deal with prejudice, relate to the opposite sex, control anger, and as in the case of AVP, develop skills in avoiding/managing conflict and violence.

Outside of general education and vocational training, much of the training that is offered by prisons targets substance abuse issues. There are social skills programs available in the prisons (at least in Delaware), but many of these are facilitated by outside volunteers and lack “official” standing (my comments apply only to the state correctional center with which I am familiar). This lack of standing may explain why there seems to be little in the way of research on the effectiveness of these programs. In general, it has been difficult to locate research on the effectiveness of social skills training in the prisons. While there is research available on the effectiveness of social skills training in general, it does not address the specific environment associated with prisoners or correctional education.

For example, Frey (2002) found that childhood aggression is a predictor for later high-risk behaviors and that aggressive behavior was a proxy for under-developed social skills.

“Young people at risk for behavior problems typically lack the core social and emotional competencies necessary for success in school, family relations, and the workplace.”

She describes a variety of research showing that, “social and emotional skills can be taught and, more importantly, that acquisition of core social and emotional competence reduces aggressive behavior in youth.” Weissberg, et al (1989), Meichenbaum (1977), Novaco (1975), Rosenberg, et al (1997), Lockman, et al (1994), and Grossman, et al (1997) also address social skills programs and generally support the motion that they can be effective in modifying undesirable behaviors.

Prison systems seem to be preoccupied by concerns about education, not social skills, a curious paradox, since most prisoners are incarcerated for anti-social behavior of one sort or another, not for being uneducated. This study attempts to fill some of the void in the literature by determining the effectiveness of AVP training as measured by its effect on anti-social behavior. While there is obviously a difference between the prison environment and the “outside,” it seems reasonable to assume that if an effect can be shown in prison, that there would be an effect on post-release. An appropriate first step in making the link between social skills training (in this case AVP training) and recidivism is to look at the effect of the program on behavior in the prison. It is hoped that the findings of this study will then result in greater interest in research in this area.

### *Concept and Design*



The setting for the research was a state prison in Delaware. The control and experimental groups were drawn from a prison population of approximately 2200 inmates. The control group was drawn from a population of approximately 125 inmates who had volunteered for, but not yet completed, AVP training. The experimental group was drawn from a population of approximately 600 inmates who had completed AVP training at least twelve months prior to the collection of data. Both groups were selected randomly, but independently.

The research was limited to an analysis of AVP effects on infraction rates in the prison. No attempt to correlate AVP training to recidivism was made, although it would not be illogical to assume that if AVP is effective *in situ* in the prison, it would be helpful in reducing recidivism. To validate that assumption, however, an appropriate research plan would need to be developed which incorporates a research design having high internal validity. Research along those lines would be insightful and should be encouraged.<sup>1</sup> While this study is an important step in that direction, its scope is more limited.

The research question being addressed in this project is: *Do prisoners who have completed Alternatives to Violence Programs exhibit a reduced tendency toward violent or anti-social behavior?* A secondary question is: *If so, why?* The research hypothesis is that AVP training has a positive effect on participants (positive in the sense that it produces a behavioral change). The null hypothesis is that AVP produces no change in behavior. The research design for the project is *static group comparison* with control and experimental groups (see Campbell and Stanley (1963), for a discussion of the research design). This design is graphically depicted below.

$$\frac{X \quad O_1}{O_2}$$

All members of the experimental group had completed basic AVP training at least twelve months prior to data collection. Approximately half of the group had completed advanced and/or other AVP modules. While there were some instances of experimental group members participating in an additional AVP training during the twelve-month data collection “window,” most members of the group had completed their last training more than twelve months prior. The experimental group was a group only in the sense that they were measured collectively. Group members underwent AVP training independently. Data were collected in February 2002. Infractions were measured for the preceding twelve months for both the control and experimental groups.

Participants in the control and experimental groups were selected randomly from lists provided by the Delaware Correction Center level. Because the groups differ, there are also differences in age, racial mix and education levels that necessitate further analysis of these factors to ensure unbiased results. The 37 members of the control group were drawn from the list of all inmates who had volunteered for, but not yet completed, AVP as of February 2002. The prison uses this list to schedule inmates for upcoming AVP sessions. The 31 members of the experimental group were randomly selected from the institution’s list of inmates who had

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<sup>1</sup> There are several US Dept. of Education funded studies underway along these lines.

completed AVP as of February 2002. Some members of the experimental group had also completed AVP advanced workshops and/or other levels of AVP (e.g. manly awareness, anger management, bias awareness modules) in addition to the basic training. Incidence of anti-social behavior, as measured by recorded infractions of prison rules, is the dependent variable (frequency count only, no segregation by severity or other factors). AVP graduates were compared to the control group.

Structuring the control group from inmates who have expressed a motivation to attend AVP helps control for self-selection bias, a concern in this circumstance. For example, if the control group had been structured from the entire population, it would have included inmates with low motivation to improve their situation. The likely outcome of this would be that AVP training would falsely indicate higher effectiveness in reducing anti-social behavior than is warranted. Selecting inmates who have volunteered for AVP training ensured that comparisons were being made for inmates of similar motivation levels. Information for this study was supplied by the Delaware Correction Center.

In addition to selection bias, this research design is prone to mortality issues (Campbell and Stanley 1963, p12). In this study, selection bias is well controlled as described above. The second concern, mortality, is less of a problem in a prison setting than it would be in many other situations because the inmates who comprised the control and experimental groups all were serving long sentences (in excess of 15 years). The “dropout” rate due to release was zero in this study. Also, because AVP training is “compressed” into intensive two or three day workshops, virtually all inmates who start a workshop, finish it. Maturation and history effects are also low in the groups because the prison environment is a natural “insulator” for these factors. Therefore, the study was structured under an assumption that the control and experimental groups were similar enough that any before and after measurement for one group would be valid for the other.

To further control for external variables that would potentially bias results, records were broken down into control sub-groups by age, educational background and race (similar to Langenbach’s (1990) approach). This is important because the groups are different in this research design and it is important to understand whether factors other than AVP completion are correlated to the observed effects of the program. The initial intention was to break down the groups by type of offense, but it turned out that everyone in both the control and experimental groups, with only two exceptions, had been convicted of violent crime and most had multiple offenses, so there was no point in further breakdown for this study.

Inmates who violate prison rules are “written up” and undergo a disciplinary procedure that involves a review by a prison official. Depending on the severity of the violation and its final adjudication, various punitive measures are imposed on the violator. Records of offenses are placed into inmates’ files and form a part of their permanent records. Infractions cover a broad spectrum of misbehavior, ranging from possession of contraband to rape and homicide. For this study, all types of infractions were considered in determining AVP effectiveness, not just violent behaviors. The rationale for this lies in an understanding of how the AVP curriculum is structured. In order to help the participants address violent behavior, AVP teaches negotiation, tolerance, communication and self-confidence. These are social skills, so AVP graduates should, theoretically, be better able to deal with their peers, as well as corrections officials and “get

along” better in the prison. This should be evident through a reduced number of recorded infractions. It is probably fair to assume that an inmate with an inability to follow prison rules would also be unable to follow societal rules on the outside and this would likely put him or her in a higher risk category for violent or anti-social behavior. Measuring all types of infractions is, therefore, an appropriate measure of the effectiveness of AVP. Table 1 provides a summary of infraction statistics for the combined group under study. Table 1a presents the infraction statistics

**Statistics**

#Behavioral infractions previous year

|                |         |         |
|----------------|---------|---------|
| N              | Valid   | 68      |
|                | Missing | 0       |
| Mean           |         | 3.19    |
| Median         |         | 2.00    |
| Mode           |         | 1       |
| Std. Deviation |         | 3.550   |
| Variance       |         | 12.605  |
| Range          |         | 0 to 18 |

**Table 1 – Behavioral Infractions/Combined Groups**

**Statistics**

#Behavioral infractions previous year

|               |                |         |    |
|---------------|----------------|---------|----|
| Control group | N              | Valid   | 37 |
|               |                | Missing | 0  |
|               | Mean           | 4.35    |    |
|               | Median         | 3.00    |    |
|               | Mode           | 0       |    |
|               | Std. Deviation | 3.967   |    |
|               | Variance       | 15.734  |    |
| Completed AVP | N              | Valid   | 31 |
|               |                | Missing | 0  |
|               | Mean           | 1.81    |    |
|               | Median         | 1.00    |    |
|               | Mode           | 1       |    |
|               | Std. Deviation | 2.372   |    |
|               | Variance       | 5.628   |    |

**Table 1a – Behavioral Infractions/Control and Experimental Groups**

for the control and experimental groups, respectively. As is apparent from the data, the experimental group has a lower average infraction rate than the control group.

Corrections officers come with a wide variety of behavioral biases and this was a potential threat to validity in this study. For example, paper coffee cups are contraband and inmates are not allowed to have extra ones in their cells. While possession of contraband is a

violation of the rules, corrections officers exercise some degree of discretion in whether or not they deal with the violation formally, by “writing up” the offender, or informally by simply confiscating the paper cup and disposing of it. This inconsistency could not be formally controlled in the study, but the random selection of inmates from the control and experimental groups brings with it “randomness” in corrections officers (inmates are housed in various tiers and corrections officers rotate tiers and shifts) and that problem should, therefore, be minimal. Also, while there is obviously a great deal of difference between possession of a paper coffee cup and a violent act such as rape, the lesser offense still reflects an inability to follow the rules and is therefore an appropriate measure of anti-social behavior.

Inmates who exhibit violent behavior or who commit serious infractions (such as drug abuse) tend not to be AVP participants because they are usually restricted to higher security level tiers and are not allowed to participate in training programs. It would be of great interest to measure the effectiveness of AVP on the most violent of inmates, but this was not possible due to prison security rules. However, it should be kept in mind that the control and experimental groups are representative of the entire prison population in terms of the offenses that brought about conviction. An examination of their files showed that most of them had prior offenses, had been convicted for violent crimes, and most had multiple offenses as well (for example, using a gun during commission of a robbery or a knife during commission of a rape results in at least two separate felony charges in each situation). The findings of the study should, therefore, be relevant to the broader population.

### *Research Findings*

The data for this study was extracted by manually examining the prison records of the control and experimental groups. In addition to data on age, race, education, and nature of offense, numbers of infractions (all types) for the preceding twelve months were recorded. The data was then entered into the SPSS statistical software for analysis. My primary interest here was to determine if there is a difference between the control and experimental groups in terms of numbers of infractions (consistent with the research hypothesis). Inmates in the experimental group had completed at least the basic AVP training. Many had completed advanced AVP training and one or more of the additional modules (bias awareness, manly awareness, forgiveness).

The data in Table 1a showed that there is a difference between the control and experimental groups, with the experimental group lower in average number of infractions. The mean number of infractions for the control group is 4.35, while the median is 3.00. The mean for the experimental group is 1.81, while the median is 1.00. The mean difference between the control and experimental groups is 2.54,  $t=3.27$ , which is significant at  $p<.05$  ( $df = 66$ ).

As explained earlier, the control and experimental groups differ in this research design. It is important, therefore, to determine whether the effects of AVP are caused by other factors such as age, education or race. To analyze these factors, the control and experimental groups were organized into under/over 40 years old (the median for the combined groups is 39), less than/more than a high school education, and minority/non-minority sub-groups and subjected to statistical

analyses (t test) to determine whether or not these factors were significant. The results are presented in Table 2.

|           |              | <b>Control Group</b> | <b>Experimental Group</b> | <b>t</b> |
|-----------|--------------|----------------------|---------------------------|----------|
| Age       | <40          | 6.10                 | 1.91                      | 4.138*   |
|           | >40          | 2.06                 | 1.75                      | .35      |
| Race      | Minority     | 4.24                 | 1.56                      | 3.146*   |
|           | Non-Minority | 4.75                 | 2.07                      | 1.57     |
| Education | <HS          | 4.20                 | 6.82                      | 1.43     |
|           | >HS**        | 4.67                 | 1.53                      | 2.93*    |

\* significant at  $p < .05$     \*\* includes GED

**Table 2 – Sub Group Analysis**

The results show that AVP is effective for those under 40 years old age, but not significantly effective for those over 40 years old. It is effective in the minority sub-group, but not in the non-minority sub-group (more on this later). It is also effective in the more educated (high school or above), but not for those with less than a high school diploma.

*Age*

Age is a potentially important explanatory variable in this study (perhaps more mature individuals have learned to comply with the rules or have “mellowed” with age, irrespective of AVP training). Tables 3 and 3a present the age distributions for the combined group and the control and experimental groups, respectively.

**Age in Years**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Mean  | 38.69   |
| Median  | 39  |
| Mode  | 29 (multiple modes exist, lowest value shown) |
| <b>Table 3 – Age Distribution/Combined Groups</b> |   |
| <b>Age in Years</b>                               |   |

|                    |        |       |
|--------------------|--------|-------|
| Control group      | Mean   | 34.14 |
|                    | Median | 31    |
|                    | Mode   | 29    |
| Experimental group | Mean   | 42.02 |

|        |    |
|--------|----|
| Median | 42 |
| Mode   | 38 |

**Table 3a – Age Distribution/Control and Experimental Groups**

As the data in Table 2 showed, AVP is effective in the younger members of the group. There are several possible explanations for this. It could be that younger inmates are more receptive to the training, that they are less set in their ways. Perhaps older inmates attend AVP less from a desire to change than from a position of boredom with prison routine. They may simply be seeking something to do and are less receptive to the training as a result. The important finding here, however, is that AVP is effective in the younger inmate population. This is the segment that we would most want to help modify their behavior, as they are most likely to be released at some point. Inmates who are in prison after the age of forty tend either to be habitual offenders, or serving very long sentences. In either case they are less likely to be released.

*Education*

The second sub-factor that is important in this study is education. Tables 4 and 4a present education profiles for the combined group and the control and experimental groups, respectively. The t-test shows AVP is effective for those inmates who have at least a high school education. Again, we can speculate as to why that would be the case. First, education may be a proxy for motivation to change behavior (to better one’s self). Second, the training may be more tailored for a higher education level. That is, it may be too complex conceptually for inmates who lack certain literacy skills or knowledge. There may be other explanations, as well. Whatever the case, the findings suggest that an assessment of AVP would be appropriate to determine whether a change to the curriculum is warranted. For example, perhaps AVP exercises should be designed for a lower reading level to make them more effective for inmates lacking high school literacy levels.

**Education**

|       |                   | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | <hi school        | 36        | 46.2    | 46.2          | 46.2               |
|       | GED               | 16        | 20.5    | 20.5          | 66.7               |
|       | Hi school diploma | 19        | 24.4    | 24.4          | 91.0               |
|       | Some college      | 7         | 9.0     | 9.0           | 100.0              |
|       | Total             | 78        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 4 – Education Levels/Combined Groups**

**Education**

| recoded AVP   |       |                   | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------------|-------|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Control group | Valid | <hi school        | 25        | 67.6    | 67.6          | 67.6               |
|               |       | GED               | 7         | 18.9    | 18.9          | 86.5               |
|               |       | Hi school diploma | 5         | 13.5    | 13.5          | 100.0              |
|               |       | Total             | 37        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |
| Completed AVP | Valid | <hi school        | 11        | 26.8    | 26.8          | 26.8               |
|               |       | GED               | 9         | 22.0    | 22.0          | 48.8               |
|               |       | Hi school diploma | 14        | 34.1    | 34.1          | 82.9               |
|               |       | Some college      | 7         | 17.1    | 17.1          | 100.0              |
|               |       | Total             | 41        | 100.0   | 100.0         |                    |

**Table 4a – Education Levels/Control and Experimental Groups**

*Race*

Tables 5 and 5a provide data on the racial distribution of the combined group and control and experimental groups, respectively. The t-test data showed that AVP is effective for minorities, but not for non-minorities. Age explains this finding. African-Americans average five years younger than whites in the study groups (36 vs. 41). A partial correlation of numbers of infractions by racial group, controlled for age, shows that the differences in the racial sub-groups are not significant at  $p < .05$  (AVP was not significantly different between racial groups). Based on this

**Table 5 – Racial Characteristics/Combined Groups**

**Table 5a – Racial Characteristics/Control and Experimental Groups**

**Race**

|                |                  | Frequency | Percent | Cumulative Percent | Relative Percent |
|----------------|------------------|-----------|---------|--------------------|------------------|
| recod<br>Contr | Valid            |           |         |                    |                  |
|                | Asian            | 1         | 1.3     | 1.3                | 2.7              |
|                | African American | 42        | 53.8    | 55.1               | 64.9             |
|                | Hispanic         | 6         | 7.7     | 62.8               | 75.7             |
|                | Other            | 1         | 1.3     | 64.1               | 100.0            |
| Comp           | White            | 28        | 35.9    | 100.0              | 46.3             |
|                | Total            | 78        | 100.0   |                    | 51.2             |
|                |                  |           |         |                    |                  |
|                | White            |           | 19      | 46.3               | 100.0            |
|                | Other            |           | 1       | 2.4                | 53.7             |
|                | Total            |           | 41      | 100.0              |                  |

information, we must revise the t-test findings and conclude that the observed effects of AVP are not a function of race.

### *Other Factors*

Some thought was given to analyzing other characteristics of the groups, such as number of offenses (multiple charges), first offenders vs. recidivists, and type of offense. However, without exception, the control and experimental groups all had multiple offenses and extensive sentences. Almost all were incarcerated for violent crimes. Further analyses were, therefore, determined to be of little value for this study.

### **Conclusion**

The data show that AVP is effective in younger inmates and those with a high school education (or greater), irrespective of race (based on the partial correlation). The null hypothesis is rejected, but with the above qualifiers.

### *Analysis*

As has been shown above, AVP had a noticeable effect on the participants. This leads to questions about how and why it is effective, and about the motives of the participants. Many inmate participants are serving long-term (>20 years) or life sentences. Several are serving multiple life sentences for multiple murders, rape with aggravating circumstances and other very violent crimes. Approximately 50% of the inmates in the control and experimental groups will never leave prison. This led me to ponder why someone with no hope of release would be motivated to change his behavior.<sup>2</sup> Why would they bother with AVP? In order to gain insight into this, interviews were conducted with seven inmates who had completed AVP advanced training and some number of additional modules. The questions asked included:

- From your perspective, does AVP work?
- If so, can you provide specific examples of why you would make that claim?
- Why do you believe it works?
- How have you employed what you learned in AVP in your everyday life here in the institution?
- What motive would you have for participating in AVP if you are serving a life sentence and have no opportunity for release?

Inmate interviews were conducted at the Delaware Correction Center. All of the interviewees were serving life or multiple life sentences except one inmate who had served twelve years of a twenty-year sentence. Tape recorders are not allowed in the prison, so notes were taken during the interview and subsequently transcribed. Interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes. The transcriptions were then subjected to a thematic analysis (see Boyatzis 1998) in an effort to find consistent patterns among the interviews. Common themes were consolidated and descriptive phrases were then created to represent the results, which are presented below. Only themes that were common to at least six of the seven interviewees are included.

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<sup>2</sup> A serious concern I had at the start of this study was that inmates might be attending AVP for some ulterior motive, not to change their behavior, but to facilitate obtaining parole. As a result of this concern, I decided to focus interviews on only those inmates with no near-term chance of release.



*Major Themes* (language used is my interpretation)

Is AVP effective (does it “work”)? How do you know? Have you applied it?

- Yes; eyewitness accounts or “stories” of times when it worked (for self and others) were provided
- Personal conviction was expressed that it works (I “know” it works), either by observation or from experience

Why do you think it works?

- It provides new perspectives on how to deal with problems
- It affords concrete examples of alternate approaches to conflict
- It offers tools and techniques that I can apply to potentially violent situations
- It provides role models that I can emulate
- Other AVP alumni pressure me to act in accordance with AVP principles
- It builds respect for self and others
- The program is offered in a non-threatening environment (away from the tiers)
- It breaks old habit patterns
- It builds empathy for others
- It gives me practice in communicating with others

What are your motives for participating in AVP?

- Discontinuity (I need to do something different)
- I desire to help others avoid my mistakes
- I want this to be a better place to live
- I want to make it a safer place to live
- I want to make a contribution
- AVP is enjoyable (camaraderie, change of pace from the tier)

Further analyses of the interview narratives suggests these key interpretations:

- Interviewees were unanimous in their opinion that AVP is effective
- AVP develops respect for self and others
- AVP develops critical social skills (communicating, interpersonal trust)
- AVP helps participants develop alternate approaches to conflict resolution by providing examples, practice and positive reinforcement.
- Participants desire a better “community” within the institution (community here is interpreted to mean a safer, more social environment, greater (more meaningful) interaction with fellow inmates and a desire to be a participant in socially oriented activities)
- AVP operates within a reinforcing social system in the institution
- Participants have altruistic motives (or seek altruistic outcomes)

*Self-Respect and Regard for Others*

When dealing with inmates, it is important to keep in mind that many of them are themselves victims. In my interviews, all of the men indicated they had grown up in environments where they were physically or sexually abused. Three of the seven had suffered sexual abuse from family members. All seven grew up in homes without one or both parents.

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. Four said they were encouraged by fathers, uncles or other male family members to employ violence as a means of resolving issues. They were told things such as, “be a man and kick his ass,” or “don’t take any shit” when confronted with conflict situations. In two instances, the interviewees cited personal stories where they were instructed to employ violence as a means of revenge against some other youth who had either inflicted a beating or proffered an insult. When I asked if their parents or guardians ever discussed negotiating skills or techniques with them, interviewees responses ranged from, “you’re kidding, right?” to simple laughter.

These men simply did not have a normal childhood development and it is important to understand that they come to AVP with marked deficiencies in the kind of social skills that most people are fortunate enough to have developed when they grew up. This is offered not to make excuses for their crimes, but rather as a way to understand why AVP is effective: the participants are starting from a position of significant deficiency in social skills as compared to the general population. I should interject a caution here about generalizing about a population from a mere seven interviews. That is not my intent. I wish only to suggest that the seven interviewees are typical of the larger inmate population and that findings that are relevant to them might be useful in thinking about how AVP might produce the results it does.

This lack of normal social development is a recognized cause of anti-social behavior in youthful offenders. Granic and Butler (1998) identify some of the behaviors associated with anger and anti-social behavior:

“Aggressive youth tend have been found to exhibit specific information processing patterns including the hostile attribution bias – they tend to attribute hostile intent to others, especially where the social cues are ambiguous.

“Anti-social beliefs can be characterized by distrust of authority figures...perceptions of the world as hostile and unsafe, endorsement of aggressive solutions, and identification with aggressive peers.”

These are cognitive factors, but Granic and Butler (1998) also cite emotional factors as potential cause for anti-social behavior:

“Anger in particular seems to play an important role in the tendency for individuals to engage in aggressive and anti-social acts.”

Anger also seems to play a role in adult criminal behavior according to Novaco (1986).

While Granic and Butler are addressing youthful offenders principally, there is no reason to believe that any of these anti-social behaviors are “self-correcting” in maturing or adult offenders. The lack of social skills that contribute to delinquent behavior in youthful offenders does not get corrected in the environments that led to the problem in the first place.

Youths with cognitive or emotional processing deficits, “tend to believe their anti-social behavior leads to increased self-esteem and helps avoid a negative image among peers.” (Granic and Butler 1998, p.759). It seems logical that a young person lacking self-esteem would be particularly vulnerable to adopting anti-social behaviors reinforced by an errant peer group. These behaviors are perpetuated throughout maturation and into adulthood, or at least they were for the inmates interviewed for this study. AVP may provide the first opportunity for many of

its participants to see pro-social behaviors in practice. Perhaps it replaces socially dysfunctional “paradigms,” with functional ones?

### *Social Skills Development*

AVP is a revelation to many of the inmates. 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. The notion that they can trust someone else is, for most, a totally new concept. Trust is frequently mentioned in discussion with the inmates, and according to interview data, is something with which many of the inmates have an issue. Early childhood experiences, as well as the institutional environment mostly contribute to this. This is consistent with Granic’s and Butler’s (1998) findings related to “distrust of authority figures” and “perceptions of the world as hostile and unsafe,” both major risk factors for criminal behavior in youthful offenders.

It is important to distinguish between cognitive trust (trust that others are competent to carry out a particular task or tasks, e.g. trust in skills or abilities) and affective trust (interpersonal trust, e.g. friendship) in this context. Inmates seem quite capable of dealing with cognitive trust. They readily rely upon corrections officers to carry out their functions, upon other inmates to provide institutional services (such as laundry, library) and upon the institution to provide food and shelter. Affective (or interpersonal) trust is a different story, however. Inmates are deeply distrustful of others at a personal level. Lack of affective trust is cited as major problem and something generally viewed as a life long issue for most of the men, according to the interviewees. AVP specifically attempts to build trust and empathy, and once again, it is the first time many of the inmates experience a setting where they can learn to develop affective trust. Once trust is established, pro-social behavior develops quickly in the inmates.

### *Skill Building and Reinforcement*

All of the interviewees talked about AVP providing skills and enabling them to practice these in a non-threatening environment. They said the tiers are not conducive to trust building due to a macho atmosphere that treats feeling, caring and negotiation as weaknesses. AVP is conducted in a closed setting, away from the tiers. The facilitators (inmate trainers) understand life on the tiers and are careful to make the workshops places where expression of emotion or discussion of intimate thoughts are accepted, positively reinforced and kept confidential. It is important to note that the AVP workshops are led principally by inmate facilitators. They bring a perspective to the sessions that an outsider simply does not have and this likely contributes to the effectiveness of the program.

Most of the interviewees said that once they developed confidence in themselves, they were less intimidated by the prevailing ethos in the tiers. AVP helped them accomplish that. Six of the seven interviewees made statements to the effect that they wished they knew then (before they committed their crimes) what they learned in AVP because they might have been able to deal with the situation in a different way. While “self-reports” are somewhat suspect in determining effectiveness in this setting, they are important as a measure of offenders’ self-perceptions, according to a report by the Canadian Correctional Service (2002). They seem particularly relevant when analyzing issues around affective-trust or other cognitive or emotional issues associated with AVP.

### *Sense of “Community”*

Another interesting theme that came out of the interviews was the notion of community. All the interviewees cited this as a motive for attending AVP. They wanted to make the prison a better place to live and gave examples of how AVP facilitated that. They talked about AVP alumnae as a community within the prison that served as role models and exerted peer pressure on other alumnae to behave in accordance with AVP principles. There are several hundred AVP graduates in the institution and most of the interviewees said this has served to make DCC one of the best (more civil, more pleasant to live at) prisons. One inmate had been previously incarcerated at Riker’s Island jail awaiting extradition to Delaware and he talked about the much lower level of violence and greater levels of safety and civility at DCC.

AVP has a high level of visibility in the institution and the graduates tend to perpetuate its teachings. In the workshops, the men are taught to express emotion, that this is a good thing. This expression is manifested in brief hugging. Several of the interviewees told me that you can always tell AVP graduates because they will hug each other to express greetings or thanks when out on the tiers. This creates a fraternal community, highly visible, and perceived as worthy of emulation by the other inmates. It also creates curiosity in new inmates who are apprehensive about prison life and are drawn to this fraternal community within the institution.

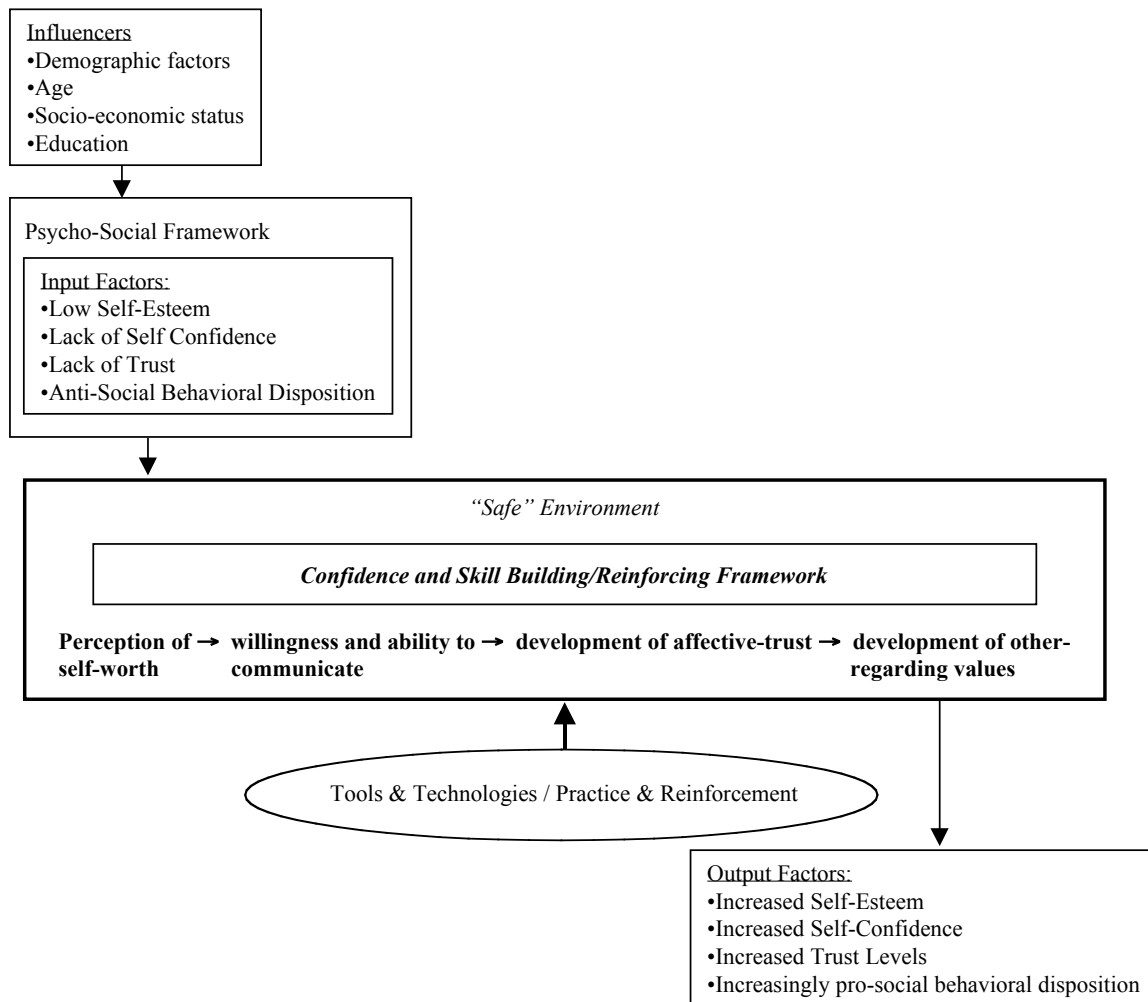
### *Altruism*

One final thing that struck me as unusual was the expression of altruistic motives by the interviewees. Five of the seven specifically cited a desire to give something back, leave some small legacy or make some contribution to society to either atone for harm caused or to try and help other men avoid the same mistakes that they had made. I had expected that inmates serving life sentences and with no chance of release would have little motive to try and improve theirs or others’ situations. The notion that these men had found a sense of purpose, developed a sense of community and wanted to make a contribution to society, albeit a limited segment of society, was insightful and counterintuitive. It does serve partially, at least, to explain the findings presented earlier.

### *Conceptual Model*

A conceptual model that helps describe the AVP “process” is provided in Figure 1. In this model, inmates come to AVP with unique personal backgrounds and characteristics. Most of the group is similar in the sense that members lack normal social development and have characteristic traits (input factors) that are influenced by various demographic factors such as age, education, and socio-economic status. AVP starts by establishing a sense of dignity or self-worth in the participants. This serves to instill a willingness and ability to communicate. Participants first have to see themselves as worthy of communicating with in order to initiate the process. As they begin communicating, they develop affective trust (it is OK to “open up” a little). As trust builds, they begin to share feelings and learn that others are more like them than they are different. This leads to recognition that others are “OK.” As affective trust increases, participants begin to see others as having value. The process helps to modify the input factors

into output factors that are a closer approximation to “normal” social behavior (or at least a small step in that direction). This may explain the sense of community and altruism found during the interviews. The process takes place within a framework that builds skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution and communication. All elements of this process are supported by tools that



**Figure 1 – AVP Conceptual Model**

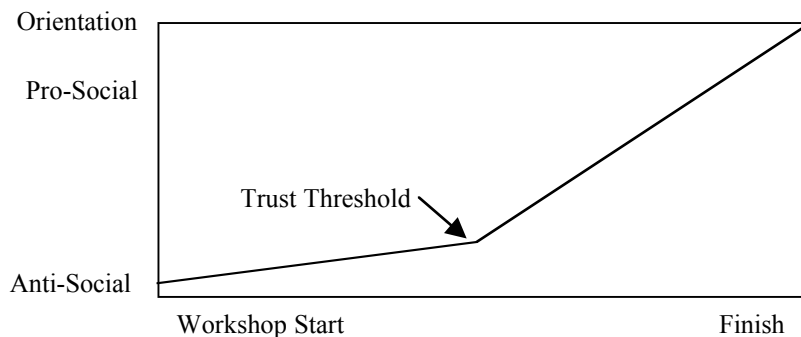
provide the “how,” as well as exercises that provide positive reinforcement within a safe (emotionally) and non-attributive environment.

The degree to which output factors are modified by AVP training is, to a large extent, shaped by the starting point of the participants; namely the input factors. Input factors are, in turn, shaped by demographics. This explains some of the research finding related to age and education. Younger inmates, perhaps, are less “hardened” and therefore more receptive to influence. More educated inmates are, perhaps, better able to understand the training. Whatever the specific operational factors, demographics are important in understanding how AVP works, and how to make it more effective.

The model helps to explain the decrease in infraction rates between the control and experimental groups in this study. As AVP participants develop a sense of self-esteem, they

start to shed the notion that they have no recourse in confrontational situations (whether with corrections officers or other inmates) other than reaction. They begin to see themselves as more equal and more in control of their situations. They begin to apply logic and rationality in their thought process. As they learn how to communicate more effectively and practice these techniques, they become more comfortable that they can control outcomes. They experience positive reinforcement in the AVP sessions that these techniques work in practice and develop increasing self-confidence. They see others behavior similarly and develop a notion that they can be trusted. These factors contribute to increasingly pro-social behavior, which fosters communication and discussion. Because they become easier to talk to and negotiate with, the corrections officers and other inmates alike are better able to elicit cooperation with the AVP grads, and this results in noticeably reduced infraction rates.

One finding from my earlier research (Sloane 2001) was that the attributes identified in the conceptual model do not develop linearly. Viewing the model as a progression from an anti-social to a pro-social bias, there appears to be a “tipping point” prior to which levels of trust and interaction do not support pro-social behavior in the workshop. The tipping point is characterized by a noticeable change in level of interaction, increased communication and behaviors that suggest increased levels of intra-group trust and comfort (e.g. laughing, conversation level, handshaking, story exchanges). Past the tipping point, development of trust, social skills and other-regarding behavior accelerate quickly. This is depicted graphically in Figure 2. The tipping point seems to occur when a certain level of affective trust is reached within the group. Observation suggests that different inmate groups reach the tipping point at different stages of the workshops, but there appears to be consistency in the general pattern from group-to-group and workshop-to-workshop.



**Figure 2 – Non-linearity of Social Skills Development**

The conceptual model is also consistent with interview findings that trust is a major pre-condition for further pro-social behavior. The AVP/social skills development model is supported by other research, as well. For example, the Correctional Service of Canada found that a cognitive skills program produced significant improvements in almost all psychometric measures in participants (Correctional Service of Canada, 1991); measures that have been shown to be effective predictors of criminal behavior. Hunter (1993) found that, “treated offenders [in a ten-

week anger management program] showed significant gains relative to non-treated offenders...” Hughes (1993) found similar results in a twelve-week program, as did Guerra and Slaby (1990).

Another way to perhaps explain how AVP works is through the notion of power (control and influence of one’s life and environment). AVP is structured around a notion of “transforming power.” The workshops aim specifically to instill the idea that the inmates do have the ability to control their lives and influence their environments. They are not powerless; they are “actors.” This, hopefully, translates into a perception that the men have the power to change themselves for the better. Because many of them come from environments where they were victimized or abused, or lacked socialization (and succumb to negative peer pressure as a result), they do not see themselves as actors. Giddens (1984) explains:

“What is the nature of the logical connection between action and power? Although the ramifications of the issue are complex, the basic relation involved can easily be pointed to. To be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the daily flow of life) a range of causal powers, including that deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference,’ that is to exercise some sort of power.”

AVP operationalized, therefore, creates a sense of power, a notion of being an actor in Giddens’ terms. This is a significant difference in perspective for the inmates that come into the program feeling powerless and alienated. While they cannot control their environment to the extent that the general population can, it is still a great leap forward for them to feel they have even a modicum of control within the institutional setting (control here refers to control of themselves and their behavior).

### *Validity*

The research design for this project, static-group comparison, with the most significant threats to validity reasonably well controlled, results in a study with high internal validity. The project makes no attempt to address external validity. Other potential threats to validity, such as history and maturation are well controlled in the prison setting. The principle concern regarding validity in this study is self-selection bias. Structuring the control group as described in the preceding paragraphs controls for this problem. Threats to validity resulting from sub-group variances have been analyzed, and where problematic, have been addressed appropriately in the research finding section.

Self-reporting is a potential threat to validity associated with the interview data collected for this study. While that cannot be completely controlled, selection of interviewees minimizes the problem because all those selected are serving long-term sentences and have little motive for “over-reporting” results. Also, coding only for themes reported by at least six of seven interviewees increased the significance of findings.

### *Audience*

The target audiences for this research are social scientists interested in correctional education, prison administrators, state governments and budget authorities, and federal

corrections officials. The intent is to inform them of the effectiveness of AVP programs and their potential impact on prison operating costs. It is hoped also, that the study can inform a more general audience that may have an interest in reducing the societal impacts of crime and the growing problem of incarceration rates in this country. Correctional educators may also be interested in the correctional social skills training effectiveness.

## **Summary**

The current political climate is not conducive to sympathy for prisoners, and I make no claim here that we owe convicts a kinder, gentler existence. My argument is only that we need to find a way to deal with growing prison populations and the escalating costs to society of operating prisons and keeping people incarcerated. If that means a greater investment in training, that should be supported as long as it can be shown that this is an effective employment of resources. The effectiveness of AVP has been demonstrated in this report. The conclusions argue, first, for an increase in resources for AVP (increased number of trainers, materials, etc.) and increased willingness on the part of prison officials to support this program, and second, for an increase in resources devoted to improving AVP, including more research on how, and why and in what settings it is effective, as well as its potential extensibility to post-release behavior.

If we can demonstrate the effectiveness of AVP in a very controlled setting, we can conjecture that it would be effective in a wider application. While I have been very careful not to claim AVP would be effective in reducing recidivism, I also cannot avoid speculating that this would be the case. We have to recognize that there are many uncontrolled variables between measures of education and training, and claims of effect on recidivism, but that should not deter us from investigating the matter. My guess is that AVP is a useful step in helping inmates who lack normal social skills development develop a foundation upon which they could more effectively operate in the outside world. I doubt that AVP alone can reduce recidivism. If we take, as an example, an inmate who leaves prison and is thrust into society without family support, employment opportunity, positive role models, a peer support group, or interim means of financial support, I doubt his or her ability to avoid repeating criminal behavior. No amount of AVP or any other training can supplant hunger, poverty, frustration, and rejection.

Perhaps a better model would be to think of the recidivism issue as a “systems” problem. It is complex, multi-faceted, and requires an engineered solution that comprises an end-to-end support structure. This has to start at release from prison and continue for some time until a point of stability is reached. It entails continued social skills development, training and education, employment assistance, community support and moral guidance. While AVP is not capable of providing all of these elements, it is clearly capable of providing a first, and very important step in the process.

In the interim, until we have in place this “systems solution,” AVP can be effective in making prisons more civil places for the inmates and corrections staff. This helps make the prisons better places for inmates to learn and rehabilitate themselves (very difficult if the institution is in lock-down because of violence). It fosters a sense of community that inmates can transfer upon release. And, it makes the institution a better place to work, which should help correction staff turnover (a problem today). These factors help reduce the cost of operating the institution and benefit the taxpayer. Besides the economic factors, there is an issue of humanity



that is important here. A peaceful institution is simply a more humane environment for the inmates.

A suggested expansion of this study would be to investigate the effectiveness of social skills training in helping former inmates integrate into society. This would require controlling for a variety of factors such as those mentioned above, but co-variance analyses should be able to address that problem. If we found, for example, that former inmates who had completed AVP, or other social skills programs, have a lower recidivism rate (controlled for other variables) then we would have a powerful argument for expanding the program. If we can uncover what determines success (in terms of recidivism) through co-variance analyses, then we have a good start on my “systems” approach described above. That would be compelling research.

The notion of community building within the prisons is also an area that may afford new perspectives on how to develop social skills in inmates. I would suggest that, too, as an area for further research and analysis.

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