

Recreational Drumming in the Correctional Setting

By Rex Bacon

You pull into a large parking lot labeled “Visitors,” wondering what you’ve gotten yourself into. As you carry your bags of instruments to the entrance building, you notice the large double fences with razor wire intertwined. The “greeter” views you suspiciously. He calls his superior, who then calls your “contact.” He looks through your stuff slowly, pulling out pointed guiro scrapers and saying, “These can’t go in.”

After passing through a metal detector and two solid glass doors, you enter the “yard.” A thousand eyes begin to stare. You are used to being the center of attention, but this is unsettling. The eyes are wondering if you are another authority figure, someone who might help relieve the boredom, or someone who can be taken advantage of.

Another employee acknowledges you as you arrive at the destination, explaining to those around about the noise that will soon be heard. Your contact reassures you that the “guys” will really enjoy and benefit from your services. You mentally review your game plan, including what you will do to escape if need be. You also remind yourself of the goal of this experience. You may have been contacted to provide an educational experience for the musicians’ organization or for a community-building experience for the therapeutic unit.

As the “participants” enter in uniform blue and start to verbalize their excitement over this new event that awaits them, you pull out your trusty cowbell and begin.

This is a possible description of the beginning of a recreational drum circle in a correctional setting.

Recreational drumming is defined as “interdisciplinary, percussion-based music activities that foster hands-on participation for people of all abilities and age levels in settings including education, personal, and group social development, wellness, and leisure” (PAS Recreational Drumming Committee, 2007). The benefits of group drumming continue to grow and permeate into many new settings. One area that recreational drumming facilitators may now begin to find themselves in is the correctional setting. Recreational drumming has been found to be an attractive, accessible, and authentic musical experience by many groups. Correctional settings may utilize recreational drumming because of these same attributes. Inmates in a

correctional setting may receive benefits from recreational drumming including improved peer relations, stress management, community development, and improved feelings of self-worth.

As a music therapist working in a medium-security prison, I believe recreational drumming can be used successfully in this setting. This article will discuss the benefits of recreational drumming with this population, obstacles often inherent in prisons, and techniques that can be used in this setting.

Inmates face many challenges in the correctional setting. At the prison where I currently work, inmates identify experiencing

in a correctional setting experience a sense of cooperation and easing of pain and distrust. Music therapists have successfully utilized group drumming in treatment focus interventions with juvenile offenders, sex offenders, dual diagnosed offenders, and forensic patients. Drumming-based interventions have been used in clinical contexts to improve socialization, reality-focused behavior, and emotional expression.

I facilitate drum-based interventions for inmates who suffer from a variety of mental illnesses. In addition to the group drumming, I encourage the participants to focus their attention and remain fully present while they are playing hand drums. Inmates have often reported a reduction in stress, a feeling of connection with each other, and less distrust of their peers after a group drumming session.

A facilitator may want to be aware of some of the obstacles that are often a component of this setting. First, there is a dynamic related to staff and inmates in which all staff is viewed as authoritarian and inmates are expected to be compliant. Drumming may be viewed as something that will get the inmates “all worked up,” leading to potential problems after you leave. Also, many staff may be resistant to the inmates receiving anything that might be construed as an unnecessary privilege despite any of the benefits. It is important for potential facilitators to be aware of this and not take any comments personally.

Due to the infrequency of special events like a drum circle, inmates may use the drum circle as an opportunity to bend the rules or attempt to get away with something. It is important that facilitators be very vigilant during the entire time they are within the prison. If you are unsure about something you witness, error on the side of caution and alert the staff. The inmates are used to being searched and questioned. It is better to make sure than to find out you will not be returning due to some problems that occurred during your program.

If you are working with a particular group within the prison, you may also experience resistance from the participants, possibly demonstrated through disinterest or defiance. An example of this is facilitating a drum circle for a housing unit with members from different gangs. The facilitator would likely experience some resistance from the inmates. One way to



such feelings as boredom, fear, negative self-image, and disconnection. In addition, many inmates are diagnosed as anti-social and have difficulty maintaining appropriate interactions with others.

In his book *The Healing Power of the Drum*, Robert Lawrence Friedman observed that his drumming workshop in a correctional setting helped focus attention and provide a temporary escape for the detainees. In the same book, drum circle facilitator Jim Greiner shared how group drumming helped women

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minimize dealing with this is to make participation in the drum circle voluntary instead of mandatory. By offering it as opportunity for an enjoyable, open musical experience instead of requiring attendance, the facilitator may experience less resistance.

Finally, when working in the prison setting, you will be working with either all males or all females. This can cause the group's energy to lean a particular way. For example, an all-male drum circle may feel like a competition to see who can play the loudest and fastest. Encouraging the participants to balance the music's feel from loud to quiet and from fast to slow may dispel a drum circle that has "too much testosterone."

Recreational drumming facilitators begin to recognize the best practices that work with special-needs groups. There are techniques utilized with this population and similar groups that have demonstrated positive results. In his drum programs within the prison setting, Jim Greiner introduces a cultural context and provides real-world examples of how ancestors and contemporary cultural relatives use their male energies to serve their communities. Jim's approach encourages young men to use their power in productive ways. He then follows his introduction with interactive rhythm play as a vehicle through which to experience personal power and the power of group collaboration. One musical example is a triplet-based rhythm of RLR LRL played over and over, used to increase energy levels and demonstrate in a real-world way how to create positive life rhythms by focusing on specific intentions.

Music therapist Barry Bernstein discussed his approach to a similar population in an article titled "A group drumming intervention for at-risk youth" (www.healthysounds.com/feature.html). He recommended starting with Yoga or Tai chi exercises followed with an ice-breaker such as a group juggle or a name game. The rest of the session focuses on teaching traditional West African drumming. In an article titled "Beating Drugs, Gangs, and Violence with Drums and Rhythm" (www.drumjourney.com under the articles menu in the "Drumming for Community, Health and Spirit" section), drummer Dave Mancini echoes the idea of presenting traditional rhythms including

African, Brazilian, and calypso to illustrate drumming as a positive alternative. In a *Drum!* magazine article titled "Rhythm Therapy in Juvenile Hall," author David Weiss outlined a series of activities led by Robert Lawrence Friedman including an egg pass, playing

name rhythms, soloing, handclap orchestras, and vocalizations inspired by Babatunde Olatunji. The article also describes a free-form jam that spontaneously occurred at the end.


In my own experience, I have taught adapted versions of traditional rhythms and facilitated improvisational drumming. Each approach has its own unique benefits. It is important to be aware of how much structure is needed, especially at the beginning of the experience. I like to start with a strong structure and gradually move towards less structure in order to allow the inmates to have an increased sense of control over the music. It is also important to counterbalance this freedom with enough structure so that the participants feel safe and the music does not become too chaotic. A fellow drummer or an employee providing a strong pulse on a bass drum can help maintain this.

The burgeoning field of recreational music-making and its benefits to our well being continues to grow. Recreational drumming facilitators will encounter new groups and facilities that are inquiring about these benefits. I have found many ways to help prepare myself for a new population that I have never worked with. I try to have an idea of what the person contacting me wants me to do. It is important for me to respond honestly to their inquiries and confidently be able to say if I can help or to refer them to someone else who may be more appropriate. Also, I research the population I am going to work with. This can be done by reading articles or related literature about music, drumming, and this population. Consulting either a drum circle Yahoo list or speaking directly to more experienced facilitators also can provide some ideas of how to approach the experience.

Once you have identified all the best ideas for working with a specific group, create an agenda of how you wish the experience to flow. But remain unattached to this agenda and be present to the experience while it is occurring. The group may wish to move another way than you have planned. It is best to really tune in to the group's direction and safely support it as best as you can. This allows the participants to feel the true joy of their own unique music-making.

Rex Bacon is a board certified music therapist, professional drummer, and drum circle facilitator. He received his B.A. in Music Therapy from the University of Dayton in 1997. As a full-time music therapist, Rex has worked in various healthcare settings including mental health centers, children's homes, and an alternative school. Currently, Rex is working in a psychiatric unit in a medium-security prison. Rex has facilitated hundreds of drum circles in churches, schools, libraries, hospitals, wellness centers, corporations, colleges, camps, and weddings. He has presented drumming workshops to colleges, social service agencies, and music-therapy conferences. As co-director of Rhythm Culture, a Cleveland-based drum circle facilitation business, he has placed drums and percussion in the hands of thousands of children and adults. Rex is a member of the American Music Therapy Association, the PAS Interactive Drumming Committee, and the Disabled Drummers Association. Rex has had articles published by PAS and the Drum Circle Facilitators Guild. PN

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