
The Role of Arts in Ending Homelessness

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Introduction

Across time, arts and creativity have been an intrinsic part of being human. From the 15 000-year-old cave paintings in Lascaux to football supporters singing at the tops of their voices on a Saturday, it is part of the daily life of many people – from poetry at weddings and funerals to dancing in nightclubs, even if sometimes we don't notice it as creativity. Before we could speak as infants, we communicated through artistic means, from drawing to role-playing stories. It is how we express our feelings, make sense of the world around us, bring comfort to ourselves, and connect with others. After childhood, creativity often becomes less relevant, and then as adults, most of us regard arts as something of a hobby or a memory confined to the past.

So how does this theory of creativity relate to modern day homelessness prevention? In attempting to answer this, I would like to take us on a journey through five key areas to show how a holistic approach to homelessness with arts (and sports) as core components is growing and gaining traction.

Multiple Solutions to Multiple Needs

It has long been accepted that homelessness is not just about a lack of housing and that underneath the 'heading' of homelessness lies a whole story of causes and consequences – from childhood trauma, poor physical and mental health, isolation, family breakdown, addiction, experiences in the military, and more. This is the case primarily for those experiencing long term homelessness, and the majority of those who experience an episode of homelessness do not exhibit the characteristics outlined above.

Homelessness prevention and support has become more sophisticated over the last decades. One way this is manifested is the multiplicity of solutions that are often on offer in many services across Europe. Those familiar with Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs may see the flaw in an otherwise sound model that humans need primary interventions of food, water, and shelter before other, less pressing needs are met such as education and culture. However, in my experience, humans do not operate like this. From my experience after 20 years of working and speaking with people who are newly homeless, they report needing more than the basics from day one.

We explored this in Manchester in 2018 while working with the Manchester Homelessness Charter and the Booth Centre. We asked people who were using the centre what they felt they needed in order to prevent/move on from homelessness. They came up with a holistic, jigsaw approach with interlocking areas of intervention – health care, housing, arts, sports – coming together in one place and at one time rather than a chronological hierarchy. This model became the Jigsaw of Homeless Support and is now being used in UK Local Authority homelessness strategies in Manchester, with Coventry and Haringey following soon, and was cited as an example of Best Practice by the UN.

Better Evidence

As a Support Worker at the Passage night shelter in London in the late 1990s, I was aware of a handful of ‘formalised’ arts projects such as Cardboard Citizens in London and the Accueil Bonneau Choir in Montreal. As I write this, Arts & Homelessness International (the global network of arts and homelessness) has around 500 members across the world from Sokerissa, a dance company in Tokyo, the Apropos choir in Salzburg, to JAM, a theatre company specialising in Shakespeare in Johannesburg. This growth of activity is the result of many factors, one such being a better understanding and demonstration of impact measurement plus a development of the use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Projects still struggle to put into words and data the changes that result from someone ‘feeling better’, more positive and happier after experiencing or taking part in an arts intervention. We see people smile for the first time in a long time, make friends, get out of their hostel rooms more, have better eye contact, and feel more motivated to try other things. Sometimes it is hard to answer the inevitable question, ‘so what?’

Many impacts are unexpected and depend on the journey someone has taken up to that point – I remember while working for Streetwise Opera, we were putting on a show and were rehearsing in a hostel in Newcastle in the northeast of England. One man sat in the corner not taking part but also not leaving – this carried on for a few months – we always asked him if he would like to join in and he always politely declined. As we got closer to the production, we asked around if anyone not

performing would like to help back-stage. He volunteered and worked in stage management. We always gave everyone free tickets to the show in case they had friends, family, or support staff they wanted to invite. I saw Terry (not his real name) after the show beaming with two women and a child – his two daughters he had not seen for 10 years and his 6-year-old granddaughter he had never met before.

Expressing that story in terms of impact involves an explanation/case study and also a realisation that pride, family reconciliation, and the shift in identity Terry felt are important areas of consideration when evidencing the impact in arts interventions.

This has led many projects to use recognised evaluation indicators and national metrics for positive mental health; better research methodologies and data capture; and using triangulation of evidence from different sources – observers, participants, and support workers. The arts and homelessness sector is still learning and a long way behind other areas of good practice in impact measurement (high quality evaluations with a counterfactual are rare as highlighted in CHI's Evidence Tools) – but it is going in the right direction.

Two years ago, we commissioned the first international Literature Review of impact reports on arts and homelessness (Shaw, 2019). We looked at over 60 evaluation studies about arts and homeless across the world, cataloguing trends and drawing together conclusions. The findings showed that all projects resulted in one or more of four impacts: Improvements in participants' well-being, resilience, agency, and knowledge/skills (Shaw, 2019).

Global Differences and Trends

Where there are specific regional needs, arts projects try to answer these through the design of the projects. In North America, there is a collection of NGOs such as Urban Voices from LA and Sketch from Toronto currently exploring Restorative Approaches where the arts can bring understanding and reconciliation between communities, based on the learning from Restorative Practice in the criminal justice field. The arts can shift perceptions through showing 'another side' of people and challenging myths and stereotypes. Colleagues in North America talk of wanting to shift the perception of homelessness from an individual's responsibility to society's responsibility.

Meanwhile in the Global South, our new research project, Building Transnational Solidarity: Arts and Homelessness in the Global South (Fry et al., 2021a) studied 104 projects across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Oceania, and Asia. Projects identified the key challenges as being the privatisation of land and housing, criminalisation of poverty, climate change, war, forced evictions, and economic

crisis. These projects were using nine main art forms from visual arts to fashion and all were addressing one or more of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. A great number strive to create economic empowerment in their communities. A group of young creatives from Mathare, Nairobi's second-largest informal settlement, are paving the way for a creative economy that shapes a more equal and sustainable society (Fry et al., 2021b).

Agency and Co-Production

Agency can be manifested in people feeling that they have something to say, the confidence to say it, and that their views are valid and will be listened to. Arts and sports interventions – any positive activity – focus on what you *can* do rather than what you *can't*: what is strong about you not wrong. This inevitably raises confidence levels particularly in a community who often feel looked down upon and who are more aware of their needs rather than their achievements.

What is interesting in the last five years is that agency and confidence compliments the wave of co-production that is in evidence in many homelessness services in many countries. Services are changing from working 'for' people to working 'with' them – making sure that people with lived experience of homelessness are fully part of the design and delivery of services. Organisations like Expert Link are leading the way in this. At Arts & Homelessness International (AHI), 50% of our board and staff are or have been homeless and we are starting the first leadership programme for creatives who have been homeless in 2022.

There is a great opportunity to capitalise on the agency and confidence people achieve from being involved in the arts to having their voices heard in homelessness more widely. This is not just at service level, but also at policy level. This is beginning to happen in the arts/homelessness sector through Legislative Theatre – a methodology that uses real-life challenges and problems in a social issue to create short plays, which are then presented in front of an audience. The audience is invited to intervene and change the narrative, literally taking to the stage to move the story in a different direction. Often, these plays can find new perspectives on an issue since creativity can approach problems from a different direction. The policy-makers in attendance commit to implementing the suggestions.

This process has worked effectively recently in creating the Greater Manchester Homelessness Prevention Strategy. AHI is now working with Coventry City Council and Haringey Borough Council to use Legislative Theatre to deepen co-creation within the council teams themselves. This will result in people who are/have been homeless having a seat at the table where decisions are made and power sharing

becomes more normalised. Already in Coventry, as a result of the project, the City Council has committed to employing more people who are/have been homeless in the Council and working towards making the Homelessness Forum fully co-created.

Conclusion: The COVID-19 Effect

As the pandemic hit, the homeless sector rolled up its sleeves and began finding innovative ways to house and support people in crisis. Quickly, it became clear that people staying in hotels, temporary accommodation and single occupancy tenancies were facing other challenges such as isolation and poor mental health. In the UK, Local Authorities and homelessness agencies turned to the arts to stave off boredom and build well-being. As one colleague in the arts and social welfare field said, 'The people behind the doors we were once knocking on are now knocking on our door.'

In any crisis, activism flourishes. A huge number of arts projects were started which responded to the fact that many people who were facing homelessness were also digitally excluded. Some highlights included:

- Art packs given to people by hand or post (Accumulate delivered over 4000 art packs to people in hotels and isolation during the pandemic in 2020);
- St Mungo's, Cardboard Citizens and The Reader ran assisted reading workshops over telephones in a hotel as well as other creative projects;
- The Museum of Homelessness became a homelessness hub for a whole borough of London and moved almost all its activities to front line work;
- Artist Geraldine Crimmins raised funds to buy people who were homeless phone credit;
- Underground Lights in Coventry started a postal postcard project called 'Send a Smile' which spread to every continent and is being exhibited at UK City of Culture in Coventry in October – some of these postcards were created at the Days Hotel in Coventry which was run by the City Council who, with Crisis created the UK's largest weekly schedule of arts workshops in any hotel;
- A consortium of European projects from Germany, Spain, Slovakia, and Hungary launched a photography project called Look Talk Act;
- Path With Art in Seattle raised funds to buy all members a tablet so that they could stay connected through online workshops; and

- FEANTSA, the European body for homelessness have been more involved in the arts during the pandemic and organising events about homelessness during the C'est Pas du Luxe Festival in Avignon. It is a privilege to write this piece and celebrate the work of so many projects and people in Europe and around the world. As a sector, arts and homelessness has come so far in a relatively short space of time. AHI will be here as long as we are needed to connect and strengthen projects, give opportunities to artists who are or have been homeless, and use art practice to create more equal power sharing around the homelessness sector.

› References

Shaw, P. (2019) *A Literature Review of Arts and Homelessness* (London: Arts & Homelessness International).

Fry, A., Villalobos, C., and Waweru, Y. (2021a) *Building Transnational Solidarity: Arts and Homelessness in the Global South* (London: Arts & Homelessness International).

Fry, A., Villalobos, C., and Waweru, Y. (2021b) *How Creative Industries in Nairobi are Uplifting Communities* (London: Arts & Homelessness International).

