

# **THE IMPACT OF A GARDEN PROGRAM ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL CLIMATE OF A PRISON YARD AT SAN QUENTIN STATE PRISON**

Kathryn E. Waitkus (Beth)

The George L. Graziadio School of Business and Management, Pepperdine University  
Master of Science in Organization Development

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the fact that the physical environments and social climates of prisons have been found to be physically and mentally stressful to inmates, more than 70% of those within the California prison system return to prison within three years after being paroled. As part of an effort to reduce these high recidivism rates, a rehabilitative gardening program was started at San Quentin State Prison. The intent of this project was to determine the impact of a garden project on the physical environment and social climate of a prison yard, from both inmate and staff perspectives.

Research was primarily qualitative, consisting of interviews conducted with inmate program participants, an inmate control group, and prison staff before and after the garden was planted. Data were analyzed to determine opinions relating to the physical environment and social climate of the prison yard, the impact of the garden on those environments, differences between inmates and staff, and whether expectations about the potential impact were met.

The evidence suggested that (a) gardens invited attention, use, and refuge; (b) being in or near a garden could reduce stress; (c) gardens might provide “neutral” territory in a segregated prison yard; (d) inmate participants gain benefits from directly working with nature; (e) gardens create the possibility for hope and further change; and (f) prison staff are generally more concerned about the impact of change than are the inmates themselves. Inmate and staff expectations about the impact of the garden in the prison yard were met or exceeded.

Recommendations and implications propose using the Garden Program to enhance collaboration, trust, and respect between inmates and staff through active staff participation in classes. The program also could be expanded to prison systems throughout California. Once inmates are paroled, they could collaborate with local communities to help design and build community gardens and begin to transform the prevailing attitudes about having “done time.”

Limitations of the research included the reduction of the program scale during the project planning stages as well as the short length of time between pre- and post-garden research. Suggestions for future research would be to expand the Garden Program and to conduct a longitudinal study to determine the impact of the program on inmates after they are paroled.

The outcomes of this study suggest the potential for organization development practitioners to facilitate gardening projects as an intervention approach to creating healthier physical environments and social climates within other types of organizations.