



INDIANA UNIVERSITY

# PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE

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## PROCESS EVALUATION OF THE INDIANA PRISON WRITERS WORKSHOP

### BACKGROUND

The Indiana Prison Writers Workshop (IPWW) is a 12-week creative writing program that serves incarcerated men. IPWW operates in four prisons across Indiana and is led by an executive director and two volunteer program facilitators. These facilitators teach 90-minute classes every other week that provide educational material, writing prompts, and feedback on individual work in each session. The program helps participants explore the craft of writing—including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, rhetoric, and play writing—with the goal of improving their writing skills and enhancing communication skills so they are better prepared to successfully reenter society. Since the program began in 2017, IPWW has served at least 84 men across four facilities.

Researchers from the Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) partnered with IPWW stakeholders and the Indiana Department of Correction (IDOC) to evaluate the program and its activities to better understand the impact on participants. The following brief presents the findings from this evaluation and provides additional insight into the program's potential effect on rehabilitation and successful reentry for justice-involved individuals.

### FINDINGS

Site visits to workshops within IDOC facilities and interviews with IPWW facilitators provided evidence to suggest that the program was being delivered as intended and described by IPWW stakeholders. The research team also found consistency in how the program was administered, including facilitator recruitment practices, training or experience, and knowledge of the program's goals and effects. Facilitators shared similar perceptions

### KEY FINDINGS

- IPWW serves a larger proportion of Black/ African American and Hispanic/Latinx individuals in relation to the racial and ethnic makeup of Indiana's prisons.
- The average IPWW participant is in his late 30s, with a high school diploma or equivalency, is serving an 11-year term for a higher-level felony conviction, and is classified as a moderate to high risk of future recidivism.
- Participants opt-in to IPWW to improve knowledge and writing skills in a structured setting.
- Participants agree that writing is an important tool and brings them joy.
- While in prison, IPWW participation is associated with certain positive outcomes, including enrollment in addiction recovery services, steady in-prison or post-release employment, and starting or continuing other programming while incarcerated.
- Additionally, IPWW participation is associated with a 38 percent reduction in prison conduct violations.
- After release from prison, IPWW may provide immediate or future benefits, including enhanced communication and coping skills, awareness of personal actions, improved sense of empathy, and unique opportunities such as outside publication and speaking engagements.

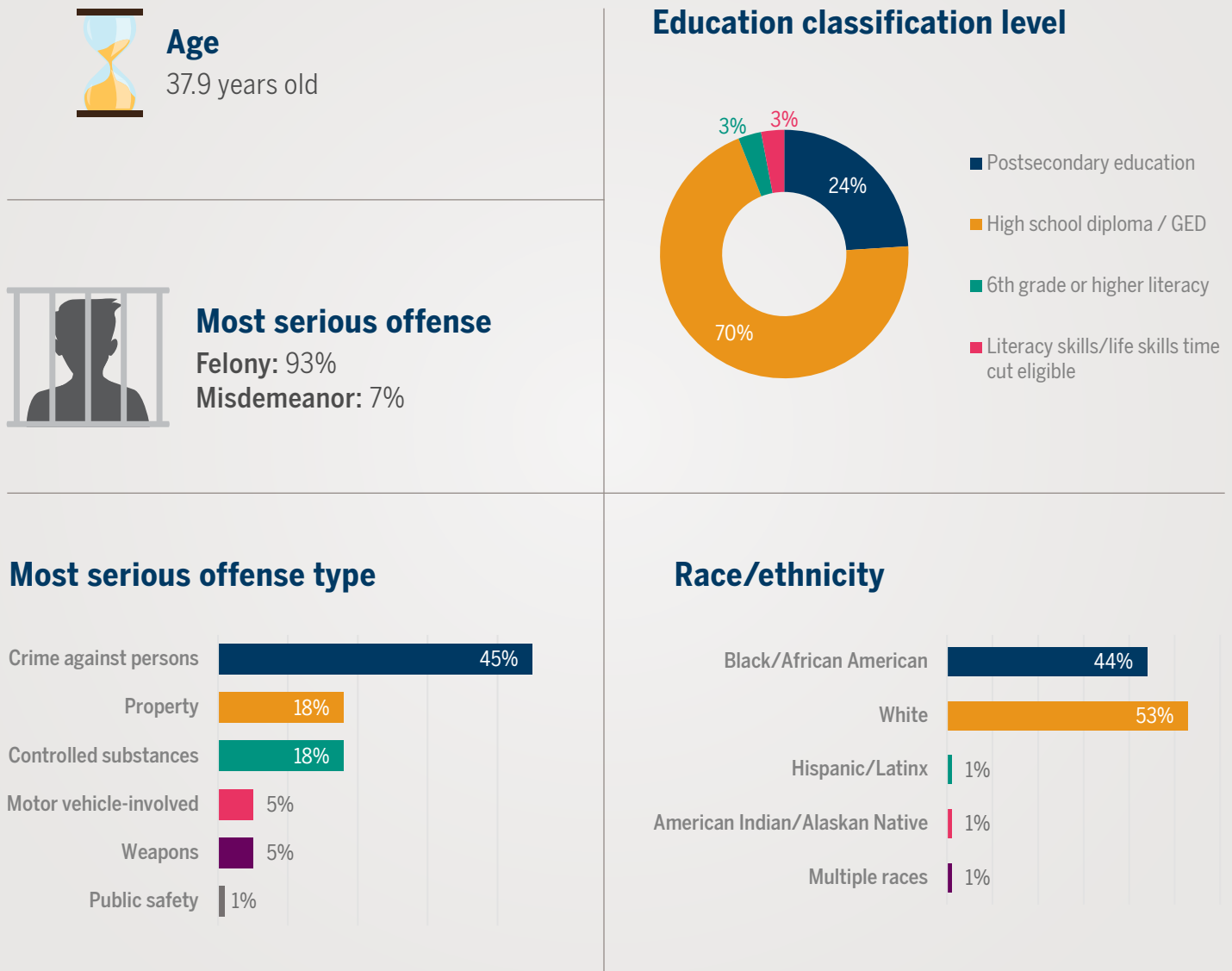
of promoters and barriers to delivering the program, emphasizing the importance of utilizing a curriculum and getting buy-in from the facility.

IPWW and IDOC participant data allowed researchers to develop a general profile of individuals who opt in to IPWW programming. The average IPWW participant is in his late 30s, with a high school diploma or equivalency, is serving an 11-year term for a higher-level felony conviction, and is classified as a moderate to high risk of future recidivism. However, 45 percent of participants were Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx—a larger proportion in relation to the racial and ethnic makeup of Indiana's state prisons. Additionally, 45 percent of all participants were convicted of offenses involving a crime against a person, 18 percent

were convicted of offenses involving controlled substances, and 10 percent had received a habitual offender sentence enhancement. The majority of participants—93 percent—were classified to medium and minimum custody, while the remaining 7 percent were classified to maximum or close custody.

The average participant held writing in high regard and agreed that writing can help communicate ideas that cannot be stated. Participants wanted to write on their own in a structured setting, learn how to write well, revise their

**FIGURE 1. IPWW participant demographics**



previously authored works, and receive instructor feedback. Eighty-four percent of participants felt the program would provide a break from daily routines and 77 percent thought it would serve as an outlet for various forms of expression.

As a result of program exposure, initial trends suggest that the program setting enabled participants to safely express themselves and that they valued instructor feedback. Participants also agreed that the program provided training to improve their writing and that they became better writers because of IPWW. Participants attributed their improvement to the writing skills learned in the program.

Analysis of IDOC data suggests that certain positive outcomes can be associated with IPWW program participation, including enrollment in available addiction recovery services, steady in-prison or post-release employment, and starting or continuing other available programming while incarcerated. IPWW participation is also associated with a 38 percent reduction in conduct violations after participants joined the program.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

### **INITIATE OR EXPAND IPWW PROGRAMS IN PRISONS**

Literature and preliminary IPWW findings suggest that taking part in creative writing programs may help participants develop skills that are important for reentry, such as enhanced communication and coping skills, awareness of personal actions, problem-solving skills, improved ability to constructively deal with criticism and feedback, and empathy. Participants said they got the most out of creative writing programs if they were in the program consistently and for a relatively long time. More people behind bars may benefit from expanding the program to other facilities and recruiting more volunteer program facilitators.

### **IPWW PROGRAMS CAN REDUCE MISCONDUCT**

Participants of IPWW programming demonstrated a reduction in official conduct violations after program participation, suggesting direct benefits to prison operations. Although it is possible that individuals who

are ready for positive changes in behavior self-select into programming, results suggest that participation in IPWW or similar programming could help them adjust to incarceration, reduce misconduct, and foster a safer prison environment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **CONSIDER PROGRAM CHANGES TO ENHANCE PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES**

Classes should be conducted weekly with an emphasis on external publishing and guest lecturers, such as writers, employers, and IDOC staff. The program would also benefit from the creation of a standardized program manual, detailing IPWW's program curriculum and goals.

### **IMPLEMENT COMPREHENSIVE DATA COLLECTION**

Moving forward, IPWW data collection should include records on program start and end dates, participant demographics and length of participation, modified pre-program and post-program surveys, and participant outcomes including recidivism. Collecting this data is essential to monitoring IPWW performance and informing IPWW stakeholder decisions.

### **CONDUCT ONGOING FUTURE RESEARCH**

To better understand the unique effects of IPWW, future research should incorporate robust, long-term data collection on IPWW participants and suitable comparison groups of individuals, programs, or facilities. This research will enable IPWW stakeholders to examine outcomes important to their mission, including recidivism, employment, and well-being.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In addition to conducting a process evaluation of IPWW's program, the CHJR team reviewed existing research on the characteristics and effects of other in-prison creative writing programs. CHJR worked with IPWW and IDOC to access, collect, and analyze data on participants and program delivery. The IPWW data included information on recruitment, attendance, program curriculum, whether the activities followed the program model, and participant pre-

and post-program surveys. The team also analyzed IDOC data on participant demographics, program participation, and case notes. Researchers participated in two site visits to observe programming. In addition, they conducted semi-structured interviews with current program facilitators to highlight the barriers to delivering IPWW programming. These interviews also identified elements facilitators cited as critical to the program's continued operation and

success. A separate round of interviews with select past IPWW participants focused on exploring their experiences during and after the workshop. The team modified its research methods given the restriction of access to institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, which occurred concurrently with research efforts.



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The Center for Health and Justice Research (CHJR) works with public safety agencies, social service organizations, and residents to conduct impartial applied research on public and justice system policy choices. CHJR is housed within the IU Public Policy Institute (PPI), a multidisciplinary institute within the Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs. PPI also supports the Center for Research on Inclusion & Social Policy (CRISP), the Manufacturing Policy Initiative (MPI), and the Indiana Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (IACIR).

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