

Alpha Australia

2023 Study on the Effectiveness of Alpha in Prisons



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Abstract

Alpha Australia is one of a number of Christian organisations that offer faith-based programs within Australian prisons - Kairos, Crossroads and Prison Fellowship being among other major prison ministries. Alpha International has adapted its popular exploratory course in the Christian faith for delivery within prisons worldwide, achieving demonstrable success. The present study examines feedback from participants in Alpha courses held in Australian prisons during 2022 and 2023 in New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia ($n = 89$). Alpha in prisons is at an early stage in Australia. The present study does not seek to contribute to the developing research into how effective faith-based prison programs are in reducing recidivism (there is no control group or post-release research, for example). The focus is confined to an analysis of the participant assessments of the Alpha courses held in prisons in three Australian states in 2022-23. Future areas of research may include the assessment of course effectiveness by prison chaplains and prison officers, as well as the effect of the Alpha courses on recidivism rates.

Introduction

Alpha is a series of interactive sessions that allow people from all walks of life to explore the big issues of faith, meaning and God. There is no obligation to say anything and there is no viewpoint that cannot be respectfully expressed. Participants hear from others and contribute their own perspective in a safe, honest, friendly and open environment. In 2022, over 80,000 people joined the free course in Australia alone. It was hosted by 1,892 churches and organisations (across every major Christian denomination) in 3,621 Alphas (Alpha Australia 2023).

Alpha has been successfully run in prisons, youth detention centres and secure facilities throughout the world since 1995 in response to demand from inmates. This study reports on the effectiveness of Alpha in Prisons within Australia. Alpha Australia supports local churches in planning, hosting and presenting Alpha in Prisons under the supervision of the Prison Chaplain and with the full cooperation of the prison management and corrective services. In partnership with the prisons, Alpha Australia also provides contextual and security training for Alpha volunteers before they commence ministry.

Acknowledgements

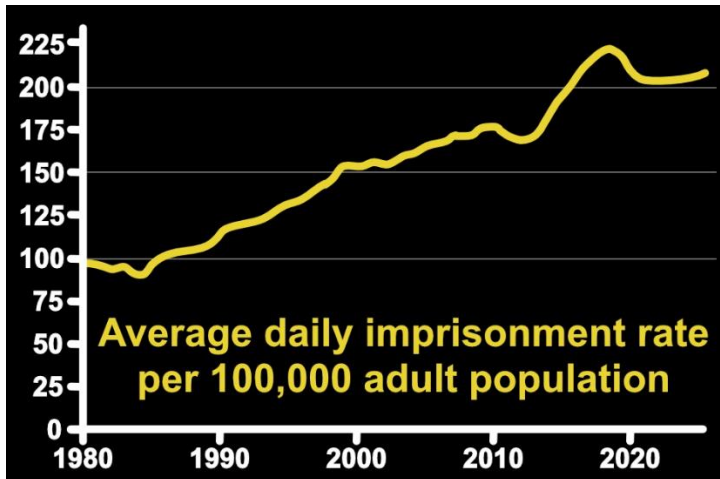
The author wishes to thank all Alpha participants for their thoughtful responses; all those who ran the courses for compiling the surveys; and Liza Kelder, National Alpha Prisons Director for providing the necessary data.

Funding

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Australian prisons

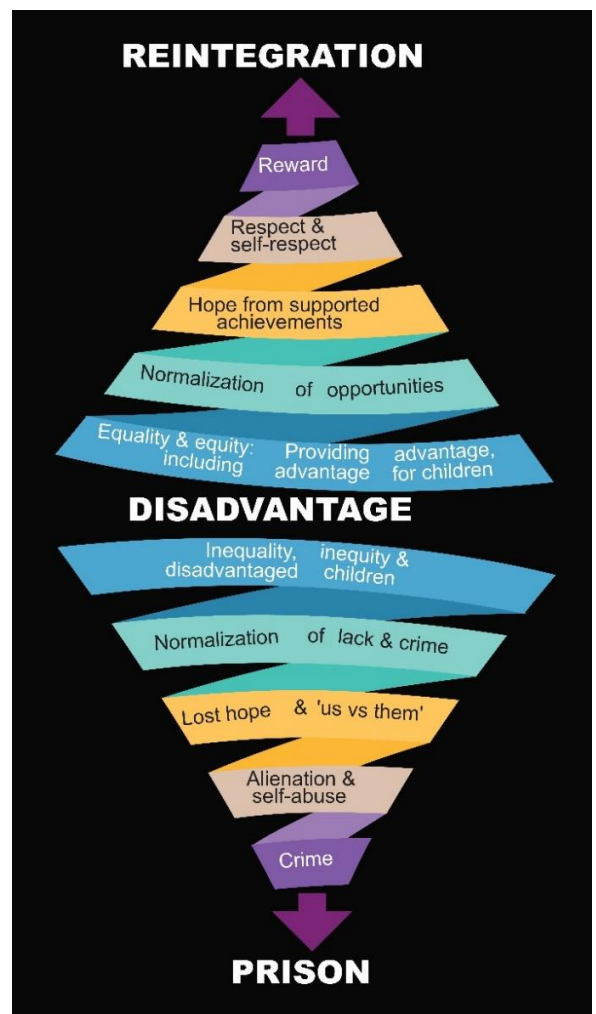
In Australia, there are currently 42,215 people in custody, with an imprisonment rate of 204 persons per 100,000 adult population (ABS Sept Qtr 2023). Apart from a couple of explicable dips, the imprisonment rate has been growing rapidly over the past 40 years, lately at one of the fastest rates in the OECD.



The imprisonment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is even higher at 2,500 persons per 100,000 adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (ABS Sept Qtr 2023). This is the highest rate for any people group in the world (Anthony 2017). The 14,183 Indigenous prisoners represent 33% of all Australian prisoners. Only 3.8% of the Australian population are Indigenous, so Australia's First Nations peoples are severely overrepresented in Australian prisons.

People in prison experience higher rates of chronic illness, mental health disorders, communicable disease, family violence, trauma, risky behaviours and addiction than the general population. Upon release, they are stigmatized and a high proportion are homeless, unemployed and depressed. Over half (51.5%) of released prisoners return to prison within two years (Sentencing Advisory Council 2023). The downward spiral towards prison usually starts with disadvantage (Tanton et al. 2021).

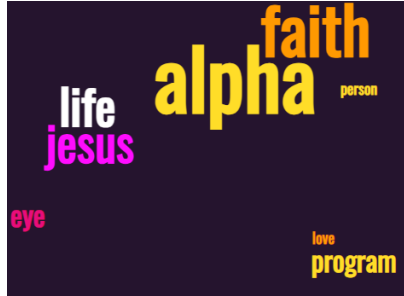
One of the objectives of Alpha is to bring hope and positive transformation in the lives of those behind bars. Alpha Australia also works with local churches, prison chaplains and other faith-based community organisations to reconnect and reintegrate people who have been released from prison so that they are less likely to reoffend. Alpha Australia is implementing the UK Caring for Ex-Offenders (CFEO) program across Australia. Alpha Australia equips churches, through training and advice, to enable them to support ex-offenders in living transformed lives. Alpha therefore seeks to reverse the downward spiral from disadvantage to prison by providing faith-based hope, dignity, encouragement, tools and support.



Alpha surveys

This study presents the feedback of 89 participants in Alpha courses held within Australian prisons in 2022-23. All participants completed the course, after which they completed the Alpha questionnaire. Almost every participant provided a response to every question, including a written response for the final question. Percentages provided in this study exclude the rare non-responses.

Impact



Before Alpha...

%	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
Interested in spiritual things	56.7	33.3	7.8	1.1	1.1
Believed in God	62.1	26.4	9.2	2.3	0.0
Attended church/mass	38.8	22.4	24.7	9.4	4.7
Read Bible regularly	25.0	17.9	38.1	9.5	9.5

During Alpha...



During Alpha (cont.)...



Built friendships with other guests

"Created new friends & got closer."

— PARTICIPANT IN WA (2023)

"Really enjoyed getting to know everyone in the group and learning about the Alpha program and I hope that I can do the program again!!!!"

— PARTICIPANT IN QLD (2022)



Felt cared for by the Alpha hosts/helpers

"Doing Alpha has broadened myself in ways that no other program could have. In Alpha with Julie & Chris I couldn't have had better volunteers that make me feel I belong with Alpha. I just totally recommend that anyone & everyone do this course because it helps in everyday life that we deal with faith, belief and love."

— PARTICIPANT IN QLD (2022)



Grew in my understanding of Christianity

"More of a connection with God and a better understanding of life."

"Grown in faith and understanding and guiding my relationships and self worth."

"It has brought me closer in my understanding in God."

— PARTICIPANTS IN NSW (2023)



Began/grew in my relationship with Jesus

"Finding faith again."

That there is help. With a little faith you can change your path."

"Made me more spiritually connected."

"Helped me grow my relationship with God."

— PARTICIPANTS IN NSW (2023)



Encountered the Holy Spirit

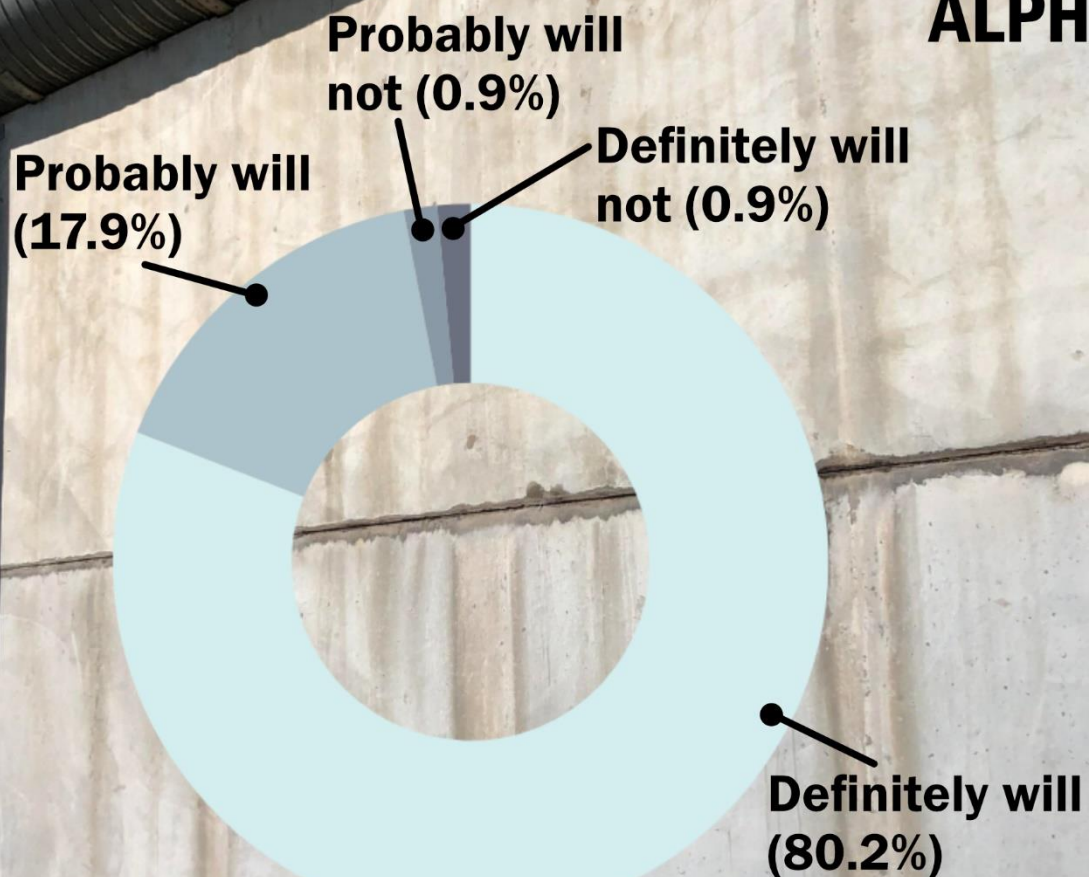
"I like god. It's helped me better understand god and how Jesus did the Holy S did. Amen."

"Reconfirmed my belief in Lord the Father, Lord the Son, Lord the Holy Spirit."

"It has made my belief in Jesus more real and confirmed. Has helped me to grow faith in the church and the Holy Spirit."

— PARTICIPANTS IN WA AND NSW (2023)

LIKELY TO RECOMMEND ALPHA?



Findings

The feedback from the surveyed Alpha participants has been overwhelmingly positive. The only aspect of the survey results that could potentially be interpreted in a negative light are the percentage of people who expressed 'no change' in their prayer life (22.9%); chapel attendance (40.2%); sharing of their faith (30.8%); service in prison (41.5%); and growth in Bible knowledge (16.5%) when comparing their spirituality before and after Alpha. There was a similar lack of change for the ability to deal with daily changes (20.4%); ability to deal with anxiety (34%); attitude to life (16.5%); and relationship with others (21.3%). However, it appears that these statistics showing 'no change' may partly be explained by the fact that a strong majority of participants already had a relationship with God prior to the commencement of Alpha so lack of change does not necessarily represent a failure of the course (refer to the 'Before Alpha' table above).

This positive interpretation is supported by the fact that there was a strong majority of responses to question 4 that recognised that there was improvement in prayer life (74.3%); chapel attendance (58.9%); sharing of their faith (67.3%); service in prison (58.5%); and growth in Bible knowledge (81.7%). There was an even stronger assessment of improvement in responses to question 3: improved ability to deal with daily changes (79.6%); ability to deal with anxiety (66.0%); attitude to life (83.5%); and relationship with others (78.7%); and that there was not a single response stating there had been a decline in these areas.

The comments are also positive, usually expressing positive change and/or benefits. There was only one exception, which was 'I have more questions about God than when I started.' Even this seemingly negative comment could be interpreted in a positive way because the respondent is expressing an interest in having his or her spiritual questions answered. The respondent could repeat Alpha in the future for precisely this reason. One final indication that the 'no change' statistics are not necessarily negative is that 97% of people who completed Alpha stated that they would probably (16.1%) or definitely (80.9%) recommend Alpha to their friends.

Conclusion

The statistics, comments and testimonies for Alpha in Australian prisons reveal positive regard amongst participants for the course due to the development of relationships with God, hosts and guests; the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the Trinity, the Bible and Christianity; and spiritual transformation (with resultant positive changes in attitude, actions and ability to cope).

Appendix - Testimonies

What has ALPHA done for me?

"When I received the first slip that I was starting Alpha I was a bit skeptical cause I've never really believed in anything other than what is in solid form right in front of me. The first session we had with Judy and Chris wasn't anything like I expected it to be. It was actually really good and when we watched the first video for the first time I was wondering if I was willing to build a relationship with God. As more sessions passed I found that I was letting the holy spirit into my life. I am wanting to change my life and Alpha has given me the motivation to do so! I am so thankful for Judy and her loving and welcoming spirit as well as Chris! They are both truly a blessing for us women in prison! I have now let the holy spirit into my life and if it wasn't for Alpha I never would've considered it. Alpha has made me more open minded and if it wasn't for the kind words of Judy I would never have realised my potential or pursued my dreams of studying criminology. Judy, Chris and Alpha are God sends for us women in prison. I owe a lot to Alpha and for that I am forever grateful!"

Bre-Ann Hueban

ALPHA

"My name is Cherise Ellis. I'm a 28 year old single mother of 2 Beautiful children. At this very moment I'm also a prisoner, But this does not define me. I'm saying this because people come from all walks of life & yet many have found gifts from God in each of them.

I am one of these many, my Gift was of God. Being a prisoner & still Getting the opportunity to open my doors for God show me that he is unjudging, Kind & Most of all forgiving.

This eye opening opportunity has come from being A student in an ALPHA course Held here by two amazing people Judy & Chris. I do strongly believe that having such amazing teachers has been the Body an God the soul of my ability to find faith in A place like this. It's because of ALPHA that I am willing to pursue my faith in God further. I recommend ALPHA to anyone & everyone. When I began I'd lost faith so if I can walk away Being filled with love & the faith I'd lost my hope is that you can too.

In the beginning I doubted my strength & my connection with the Lord, But I knew I needed to continue I knew I wanted more.

In many of the sessions I was full of emotions many times I cried, Along side those tears was A power that filled me with strength inside.

As I walk away from ALPHA today, I Feel full of kindness & love, thank you god for all your wisdom sent from Above. It's because of your wisdom that I can now stand tall , that when I need help god on you I can call.

Written by Cherise Ellis

02-JUNE-2021

My Alpha Journey ❤️ WE LOVE JESUS

My name is Ngatokoono & am 42 yrs of age in 10 days. I have 7 kids & 2 grandchildren I have been locked up for 5 & a half years & I am missing them so so much so dearly within my personal life things are falling apart around me, I thought it was ironic but at the same time there was a course available to me called the Alpha, I thought I've lost all hope.

Coming into Alpha I wasn't entirely sure as to what it was that I wanted to gain from this course, so I have learned to put everything in God's hands & hope that He will do what's necessary to help me through this chapter of my life. During this experience although I already had belief in the powers that God does possess, Alpha has opened doors for me that I felt I could not open on my own. My faith throughout Alpha has grown immensely.

I've learnt how to be more patient, more kindness, more loving & humble. All this is due to the fact that I participated in Alpha I've explored deeper than ever before thanks to Alpha & our beautiful, teachers Judy & Chris, I believe that I've become more dependent on Christ. Without doubt I really appreciate what Alpha has given me & the tools I am now equipped with.

Thank you, May GOD bless our ALPHA

Love

Koko XOXO

ALPHA



My time in Alpha

I have been born into a Christian family and so coming into Alpha I didn't expect to learn as much as I did, I was so surprised to look closer into the works of God and what amazing things were happening around me all the time.

What have I gotten out of Alpha, I feel as though I have come closer to God, and my self-esteem and confidence to pursue the things that strive to succeed in. In my life have become clearer of what they are... And how to get them and I have become more patient and understanding of others so thank you to Judy and Chris for taking the time to bring the Word into US. I'm going home 2 my children/grannies.

Amen. So thank you so much, Roz.

I will never forget the help & support you have given me!

And the 'hope' you have both given me & the strength to fight to get me & my life back!

I just want to say thank you for being absolutely, positively over the top AMAZING!

All my love & respect!

Thank you, Judy & Chris.

Sarah Crawford XXX

The way. I always walked away from every situation feeling lighter & uplifted.

Stephanie S

I had been accepted into the second round of Alpha. I was very connected in the beginning but due to a big personal hit within my life I cut myself off from Alpha & the group as I had lost faith as I couldn't see how a lord who cared could let the incident happen that happened. With all faith lost I had given up on myself & the lord. I then received the slip for the final session & felt it was a sign that I needed to reconnect. So as I write this I'm happy to see other girls graduate & see their growth & hopefully find some inspiration to reconnect & find faith again.

I have participated in Alpha twice now. The first time around I gave it my 100%. I enjoyed every minute of it & for the short time of each session I escaped from myself & felt a lot of weight lift from my shoulders. I learnt about forgiveness & acceptance within every aspect of my life.

My biggest turning point Alpha taught me was to forgive myself & learn to love myself without judgement which is exactly what Chris & Judy have done endlessly. No judgement, just love & the want for all of our group to grow together & individually. They have shown us that everybody deserves a second chance & to never feel alone or lost as the lords love is endless & the lord will shepherd us wherever we are in life & always show us.

ALPHA

What has alpha done for me?

When I first started alpha I didn't really know how to feel. I wouldn't of said I was much of a believer but then again I really didn't understand what it was like to believe in something or someone who perhaps believed in you/me! Since doing the course it has taught me that I can do bigger and greater things and that if I let god in I can have a better Life.

FeedBack

Thank you, Judy and Chris for being here for us girls. I really loved this course.

Teagan Hall

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