



making a
difference

The Impact Of Arts In Reach

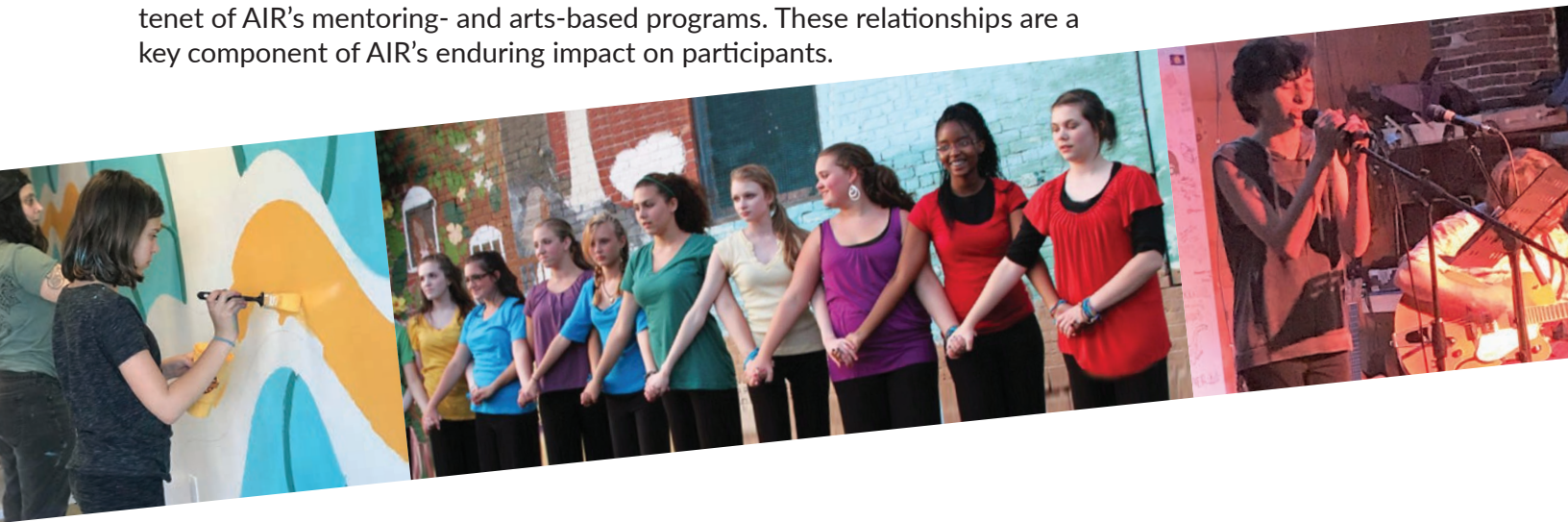


“AIR changed my life. It came to me at a time in my life when home was chaos and school was bullying. AIR made me a strong woman; it made me a woman who isn’t afraid to pursue my dreams, to ask for what I want! It made me a compassionate human. It taught me the value in loving others for who they are, not where they come from. Through art, [my mentors] showed me the value in being kind, loving, understanding, and empathetic.” — AIR Alumna

Executive Summary

Arts In Reach (AIR) is like no other program that serves youth in New Hampshire. Its unique blend of interdisciplinary arts programming and mentoring by professional artists and staff is transformational. The alumna quote on the previous page speaks to AIR's far-reaching influence on participants throughout their lives.

AIR's mission has consistently focused on empowering teenage girls through an inclusive, creative community. Building community and healthy relationships among teens and supportive adults is a central tenet of AIR's mentoring- and arts-based programs. These relationships are a key component of AIR's enduring impact on participants.



Context

AIR began in 1997 as a summer camp for a small group of at-risk girls. Today, AIR serves approximately 100 teens annually, with over 50% participating in multiple programs. As of 2020, AIR has empowered over 1,800 teens of southeastern New Hampshire and Maine, primarily from lower-income and vulnerable backgrounds. All AIR programs are free of charge. Additionally, almost 70% of participants rely on AIR's free transportation to access our programs.

AIR offers fall, winter, and spring after-school programs and six vacation programs during the school year and summer for teens, between 11-18 years old. Year-round bi-monthly workshops for teens and young adults between 13-22 years of age include Writers Workshop, Theatre Series, and Artist Outpost. Advance On AIR is offered to participants between 16-22 years old and is designed to assist these young women in their transition to adulthood with advanced workshops, mentoring, and apprenticeships to build post-secondary opportunities.

Most AIR teens experience social challenges, straddle the poverty line, and face food insecurity. Some live in homeless shelters, overcrowded homes, or children's homes. Some deal with unstable, incarcerated, and abusive family members. Close to half receive free or reduced-price lunch, and one-third come from households living at or below the poverty line. Nearly 90% of AIR teens experience mental health issues. Over one-third have diagnosed learning disabilities, and one-quarter have chronic health conditions. Half of AIR participants face multiple diagnoses.

AIR programs take place during high-risk times when teens are out-of-school, often unsupervised, and vulnerable to poor self-image, bullying, substance use, and suicidal thoughts. Before participating in AIR, three-quarters of participants struggled with anxiety and depression. Teens with untreated anxiety and depression are more likely to perform poorly in school, develop eating disorders, use substances, and consider suicide. For NH teens, suicide is the second leading cause of death.

Key Findings

The 2020 AIR Alumnae Survey is the second comprehensive survey of AIR alumnae, following the first in 2015. This report of the 2020 survey findings describe the impact of AIR in terms of what participants gain and the types of risk behaviors AIR helps to prevent. The findings show that AIR supports teens' social and emotional development and, crucially, coping with trauma and adversity. Participation in AIR also improves teens' communication and essential skills for future success in education, careers, and as involved members of their communities.

Over 80% of alumnae report improved self-confidence from participating in AIR. Close to 90% of alumnae agree that as an AIR participant they learned how to advocate for themselves. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of alumnae respond that in AIR they made healthy friendships. Significantly, the longer a teen participated in AIR, the greater the impact.

Alumnae credit AIR for helping them manage bullying (80%), depression (84%), and eating disorders (55%). Participation in AIR also helps prevent substance use. The following percentages of alumnae say that AIR aided them to avoid drinking alcohol (62%), smoking (70%), and using marijuana (65%) or other drugs (70%). Most importantly, AIR enabled 75% of alumnae to allay suicidal thoughts.

"I learned so much about myself, my passions, and learned it is okay to speak up for myself in all aspects of life."

— AIR Alumna

The survey results document the essential skills participants develop that promote success in their pursuit of education and careers, such as communication (96%), creative problem-solving (96%), critical-thinking (96%), goal-setting (95%), and teamwork (99%). In doing so, AIR contributes to a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. These skills enable 98% of alumnae to graduate from high school, compared to 73% of lower-income NH students. Seventy-five percent (75%) of AIR alumnae pursue post-secondary education, a 20% increase over the state's average for post-secondary enrollment.

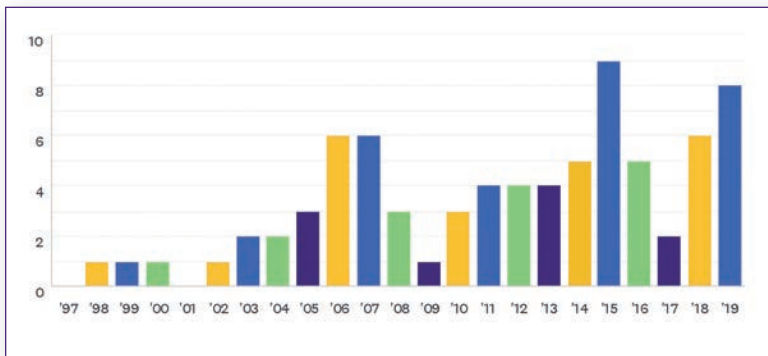
Alumnae also attribute their civic engagement and continued community service to their participation in AIR. While the national rate of volunteerism for 20-24-year-olds is 17%, 55% of alumnae continue to volunteer in their communities after AIR. Additionally, 75% of AIR alumnae have voted in the last two years, compared to 30%-36% of women age 18-24-years-old nationally.

These data demonstrate the powerful and lasting impact of teens having the opportunity to be involved in an inclusive community that values creative self-discovery, expression, and connection. Research suggests that there is often a gap in these opportunities for vulnerable teens confronting inequalities based on income, gender, race, and sexual orientation. Such opportunity gaps deny teens the transformative benefits of the arts. Engaging teens in the arts and mentoring today also can nurture the next generation.

Introduction

In 2015, Arts In Reach (AIR) conducted its first comprehensive alumnae survey, with the intention of repeating it every five years. The 2020 AIR Alumnae Survey results validate the findings from 2015 and provide key insights about the long-term impact of AIR on participants' lives. The 2020 survey gathered both qualitative and quantitative data from alumnae spanning 22 years of AIR (1997-2019). In total, 79 respondents completing the survey on "Survey Monkey," with only two partially completed. Respondents consisted primarily of recurring participants; 93% completed multiple programs, of whom half completed more than five programs.

FIGURE 1. WHAT YEAR DID YOU COMPLETE YOUR LAST AIR PROGRAM?



Respondents represented a wide range of ages—18-21-year-olds (42%), 22-25-year-olds (23%), 25-29-year-olds (14%), and 30-year-olds or older (21%). The majority of respondents (55%) were single, 17% were married, 23% were living with a partner, and 4% were divorced. Although alumnae from 2015-2019 represent the largest group of respondents (39%), alumnae from a wide range of participation years responded to the survey (see Figure 1).

This report organizes the survey findings from intrapersonal to interpersonal and community-related impacts. The ten sections of the report are as follows:

1. Resiliency
2. Confidence
3. Self-Advocacy
4. Prevention of Risk Behaviors
5. Leadership
6. Skills for Success
7. Healthy Relationships
8. Civic Engagement
9. Community Service
10. Enduring Impact



Results

Resiliency

During high school, AIR alumnae reported experiencing bullying (71%), anxiety/panic attacks (91%), depression (77%), eating disorders (36%), self-harm (34%), and suicidality (36%). These rates are significantly higher when compared to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results for New Hampshire Seacoast high schools (see Figure 2).

Many alumnae described becoming more resilient while participating in AIR. “I was struggling and unhappy. Without the opportunity of a program free and accessible to all, I don’t think I would’ve learned the coping skills I needed at the time.”

“AIR informed me that I was capable of a lot more than I ever thought and helped me cope through some of the roughest, most painful years of my life.”

— AIR Alumna

FIGURE 2. COMMON TEEN CHALLENGES

Experienced...	AIR Alumnae	NHYRB Seacoast Survey, 2019 (Females)
Bullying	71%	28%
Symptoms of Depression	77%	42%
Suicidal Thoughts/Attempts	36%	24%



In response to these challenges, alumnae reported that AIR helped them manage anxiety/panic attacks (83% of respondents), cope with depression (84% of respondents), deal with eating disorders (55% of respondents), alleviate self-harm (68% of respondents), and allay suicidal thoughts (75% of respondents). In AIR alumnae learned to take positive risks (91% of respondents), to find and create support systems (83% of respondents), and to cope with stressful life situations (83% of respondents) (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. TO WHAT EXTENT DID AIR HELP DEVELOP AND IMPROVE THE FOLLOWING SKILLS?

	Not At All	A Little	Somewhat	A Great Deal
Willingness to take positive risks	1%	8%	26%	65%
Developing support systems	4%	13%	39%	44%
Coping with stressful life situations	4%	13%	43%	40%

By providing teens with tools for healthy coping skills and resilience, AIR empowered those who faced mental health challenges and/or adversity. Many alumnae shared personal stories about AIR helping them manage mental health challenges in their teenage years. A common theme among these stories was the power of AIR to introduce teens to positive adult role models and healthier ways to express and deal with personal challenges.

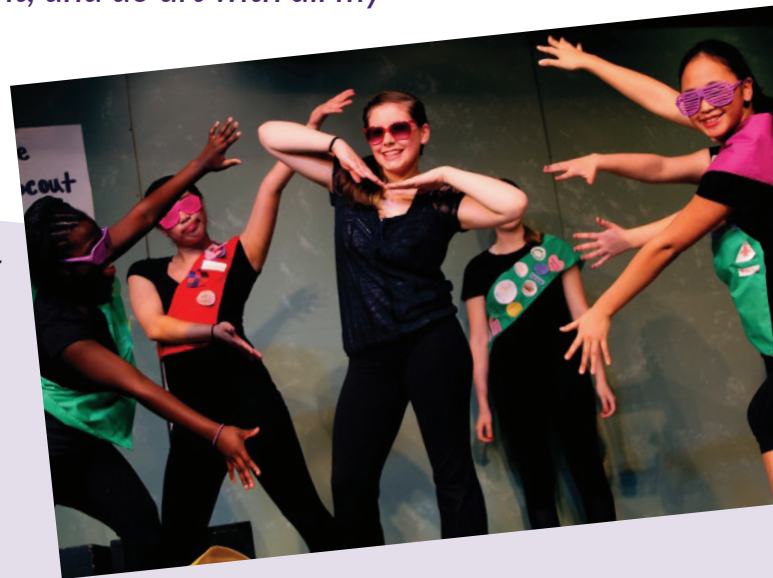
“I don’t think anything I can say can emphasize enough how lucky I was to be a part of AIR. I struggled so much with my mental illness through my teenage years, but the programs I was in were always these wonderful bright spots that introduced me to this whole new world. I’m happier now, and content, and do art with all my heart. I owe a lot to AIR.” — AIR Alumna

Confidence

Research on adolescent girls shows that they face major challenges during this critical developmental period. Girls often experience a “crisis of confidence” in their teenage years (American Association of University Women, 1992; Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Past research focused on participation in AIR documents the “restorative power” of the arts, enabling participants to express their voices and be heard, see new possibilities for themselves and others, and develop agency to pursue their life goals (Holloway, 2001; Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Holloway & Rielly, 2015).

The 2015 AIR Alumnae Survey was the first comprehensive study to investigate the long-term impact of AIR on its participants’ confidence. It revealed that AIR’s impact was deep and enduring. Five years later, the 2020 AIR Alumnae Survey results confirmed these findings.

A majority of alumnae (78%) reported they did not feel even moderately self-confident before participating in



“I was heard, looked at as an individual, and appreciated. I felt like I mattered when that wasn’t the message I was receiving at home.” — AIR Alumna

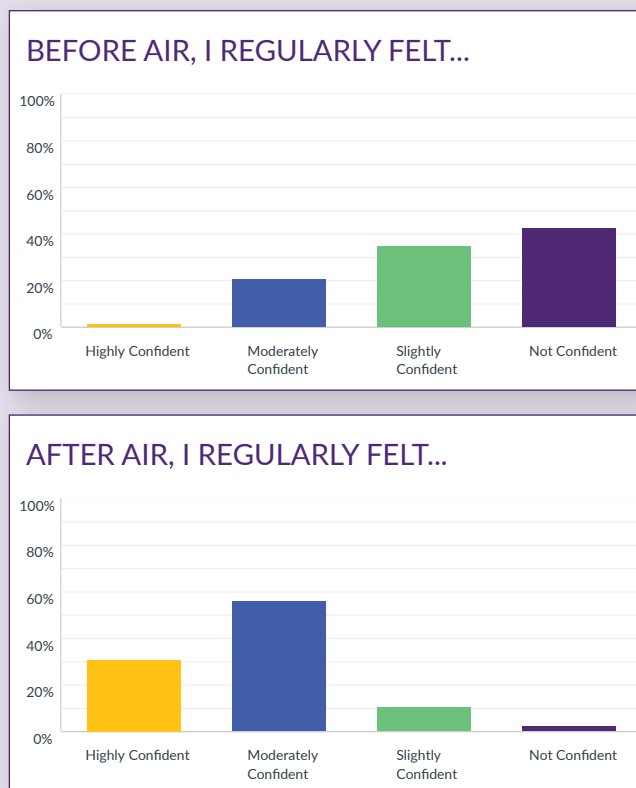
AIR. Only one survey respondent claimed to be “highly confident” before AIR. After participating in AIR, 87% of respondents felt at least moderately confident, with 31% feeling highly confident. Eighty-two percent (82%) of alumnae responded that their confidence improved after AIR, while 13% maintained their same level of confidence (see Figure 4).

Alumnae who attended multiple AIR programs were more likely to report an increase in overall confidence than those who completed one or two programs. Of the 15 respondents who claimed to be highly confident after participating in AIR, 87% completed more than five AIR programs. This trend was consistent throughout the survey responses; recurring participation in AIR resulted in a greater degree of positive long-term impact.

“AIR taught me to always be myself and to know that I have value.”

— AIR Alumna

FIGURE 4. CONFIDENCE GROWTH



Self-Advocacy

Alumnae reported that AIR’s arts programming enabled them to find their voice and to express themselves. Most (88%) agreed that participating in AIR helped them learn to advocate for themselves. Alumnae echoed these data in their written responses about how AIR’s encouragement of self-advocacy had long-lasting effects.

“I would have never known my true artistic potential if it wasn’t for my experience in AIR. That confidence and experience instilled in me a lifetime of self-advocacy and self-expression. AIR gave me the tools I needed in developing my ability to advocate for myself then and now—something I’ll carry forever.” — AIR Alumna

Prevention of Risk Behaviors

This survey aimed to better understand the prevalence of risk behaviors among AIR teens as well as AIR’s influence on their decision-making. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, risk behaviors have become increasingly common for female teens living in the Seacoast region.

The 2020 AIR Alumnae Survey data reveal that AIR had a positive influence on participants in regards to these high school risk behaviors. For those who had engaged in risk behaviors, AIR positively influenced them in making informed and responsible choices about refraining from consuming alcohol (62%), smoking (70%), and using marijuana (63%) or other drugs (69%) (see Figure 5). Of surveyed female teens in the Seacoast, 60% have tried vaping or currently vape, 62% drink alcohol, 48% have tried marijuana, and 45% engage in sexual activities. Although many alumnae responded that these risk behaviors did not apply to them, alumnae generally agreed that AIR prevented poor choices during their critical developmental years.



“In many ways AIR saved my life.”

— AIR Alumna

FIGURE 5. TO WHAT EXTENT DID AIR PREVENT RISK BEHAVIORS?

	AIR definitely influenced me	AIR somewhat influenced me	AIR made no difference
Drinking alcohol	17%	45%	38%
Smoking	25%	44%	31%
Using marijuana	22%	41%	37%
Using other drugs	41%	28%	31%
Engaging in sexual activity	21%	38%	42%

“Participating in AIR gave me opportunities to not only be creative, but to work on my leadership skills.”

— AIR Alumna

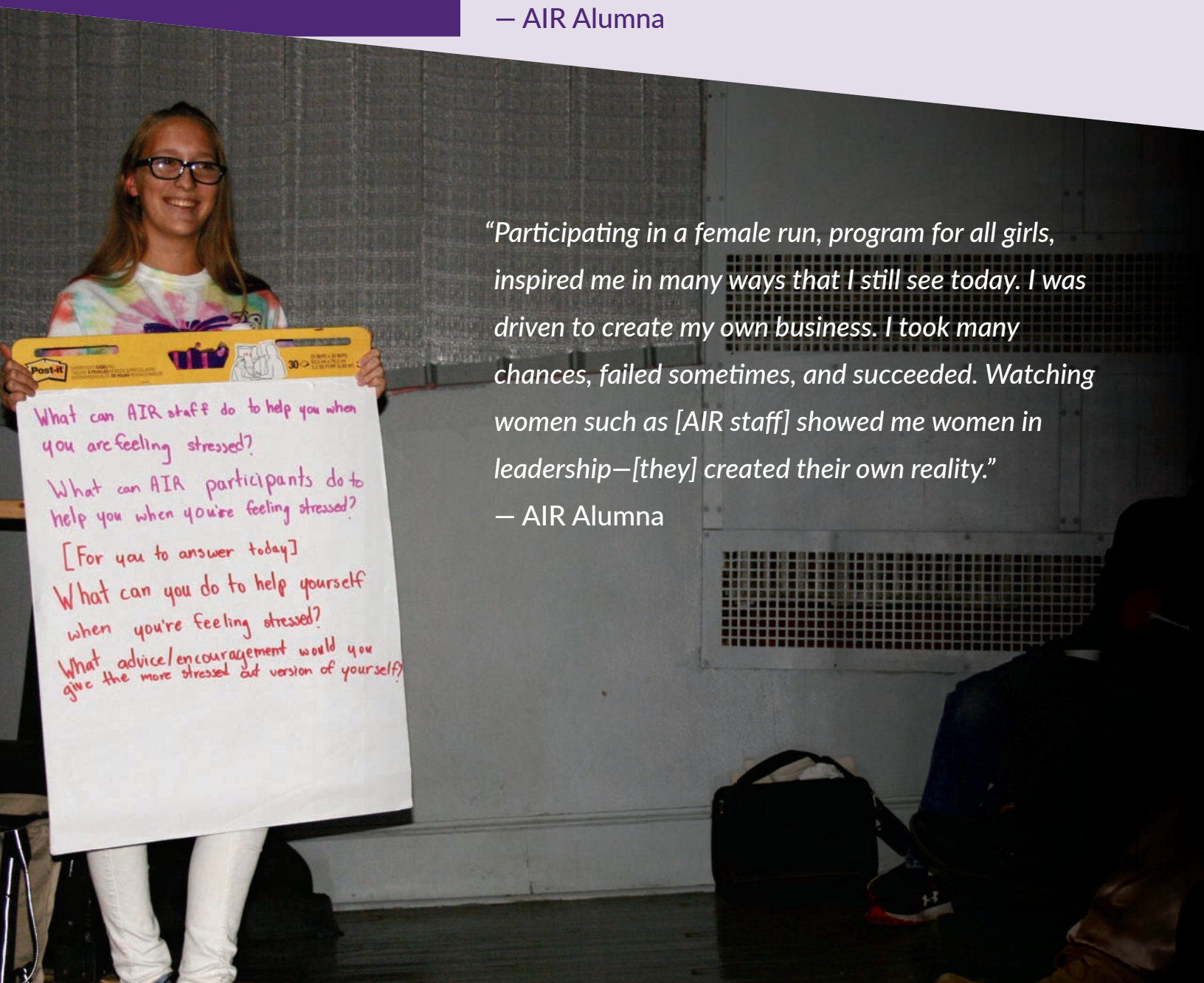
Leadership

Alumnae indicated that AIR programs encouraged them to take on leadership roles, both during their teenage years and as they grew older. Ninety-six percent (96%) said AIR improved their ability to take on leadership roles, and 97% developed their ability to make presentations and speak with confidence.

Many alumnae articulated the importance of having strong female role models at AIR for their own leadership development.

“AIR leaders were strongly educated and not defined by men. Thank God for these positive role models.”

— AIR Alumna



“Participating in a female run, program for all girls, inspired me in many ways that I still see today. I was driven to create my own business. I took many chances, failed sometimes, and succeeded. Watching women such as [AIR staff] showed me women in leadership—[they] created their own reality.”

— AIR Alumna

“AIR gave me different tools to work on day-to-day and kept me feeling inspired of what I was capable of.” – AIR Alumna



Skills for Success

Many alumnae shared the profound impact AIR has had on both their education and career paths. All survey respondents agreed that they improved essential skills as a result of participating in AIR. AIR helped the following percentage of alumnae develop and improve specific skill areas: goal-setting skills (95%), communicating with co-workers and superiors (96%), listening to co-workers, clients, and superiors (97%), creative problem-solving (96%), critical-thinking (96%), and working as part of a team (99%). Alumnae used these skills to pursue future educational and career goals. Several respondents shared that in AIR they explored career aspirations.

In *Ready for College and Career?* (2014) authors Hess, Gong, and Steinitz found that college professors and employers prioritize aptitudes that go beyond typical academic skills, such as communication, collaboration, and creativity. *Essential Skills And Dispositions* (Lench, et al., 2015) further defined these skills and how they play a crucial role in the development of agency, self-efficacy, and college/career/civic readiness. AIR alumnae gained these skills and increased their college readiness, career success, and economic mobility. In this way, AIR contributes to a more highly skilled and competitive workforce.

“[AIR] changed the entire course of my life. I had no idea what I’d study in college before AIR. The creativity pushed me to pursue video production, and I have been at my current job for six years.” – AIR Alumna

Healthy Relationships

Building an inclusive, creative community is at the core of AIR's mission. Many alumnae reported that they faced difficulties building friendships before participating in AIR, yet AIR's inclusive community enabled them to form stronger relationships. Alumnae suggested that AIR fostered their ability to create healthy relationships, both with teen peers and adult mentors. Seventy-four percent (74%) agreed that they applied what they learned about developing and maintaining relationships while in AIR to their current relationships. Most alumnae (97%) responded that they made friends while in AIR, with 81% of respondents maintaining some contact with AIR friends today, 25% indicating that they continue to speak on a regular basis with AIR friends.

"The relationships that I formed really helped to guide me in all my current and future relationships." — AIR Alumna

When asked to rank the most important aspects of AIR, alumnae strongly agreed that adult mentors were the most important factor, followed closely by a supportive community. Performance, art activities, and field trips, while important, were ranked lower in comparison to these two community factors. Alumnae valued the inclusive community and relationships with adult mentors above all other elements of AIR.

"I was able to keep my confidence up and build trusting friends that I would've never met if it wasn't for AIR. I also loved having awesome adults that I could talk to about anything." — AIR Alumna

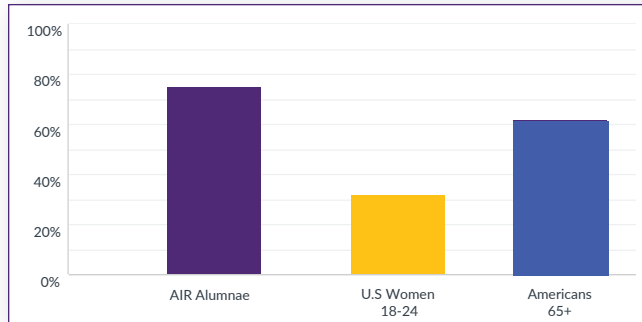


"It is important for women to come together and support and inspire one another. This practice at a young age has definitely carried on throughout my life. I still gather with women . . . to create, share, process, motivate, and support one another. AIR showed me this at a young age." — AIR Alumna

Civic Engagement

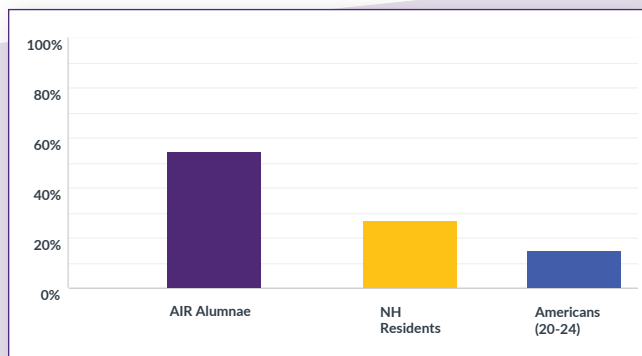
After continued exposure and connection to the Greater Seacoast community in AIR, alumnae are motivated to participate as active community members through civic engagement. AIR alumnae are more likely to be civically engaged than young people nationally or statewide. Seventy-seven percent (77%) of alumnae are registered to vote, and 75% have voted within the last two years, which is more than double the national average U.S. voter turnout rate for women age 18-24-years-old (30%-36%). AIR alumnae turn out to vote at even higher rates than Americans ages 65-years-or-older, the age group with the highest voting rates nationally (61%) (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. VOTER TURNOUT RATES



“AIR gave me the confidence to stand up for myself and my beliefs. To not only advocate for myself, but for people whose voice might not be heard otherwise.” – AIR Alumna

FIGURE 7. VOLUNTEER RATES



Community Service

AIR alumnae valued their community service involvement while in AIR and carried it into their adult lives. Fifty-five percent (55%) of alumnae continue to participate in community service activities after their time in AIR. In comparison, the overall New Hampshire resident volunteer rate is 28.6%, while the national rate of community service for 20-24-year-old women is 17.3% (Dietz & Grimm, 2016) (see Figure 7).

When asked to share their current community service experiences, alumnae described a variety of ways that they help support their local communities, including organizing art walks for charity, volunteering at animal shelters and local fire departments, and leading Girl Scout troops. AIR helped participants experience what Robert Coles called the “transformative influence of volunteer work.” According to Coles, the satisfactions of service are plentiful and sustaining, providing “affirmation through reciprocity” (1993). This “call to service” is a common theme for AIR alumnae, not only in their volunteer service but also in their career choices as well.

“I find that I always feel drawn to give back.” – AIR Alumna

“I really don’t know where I would be today without my time at AIR.” — AIR Alumna

Enduring Impact

For all survey respondents, 38% were currently in school and 62% were not. Ten percent (10%) of respondents were still in high school. Of those pursuing post-secondary education, alumnae reported enrollment in a wide variety of programs, including 11% in technical/vocational/certificate programs, 42% in associate degree programs, 54% in bachelor’s degree programs, and 4% in graduate school programs. Excluding current high school students, 98% of alumnae reported graduating high school as compared to the 73% of lower-

income NH students. Nearly 75% pursued post-secondary education, 20% more than the state’s average for post-secondary enrollment. For those not currently pursuing education, 88% were employed, 9% unemployed, and 3% disabled.

Many alumnae responded that their experiences in AIR made them feel empowered and prepared to pursue educational and career goals. AIR alumnae follow a variety of career paths, including education, healthcare, nonprofit work, parenting, and professional art.

When asked whether they would want a daughter to participate in AIR, 95% of alumnae said “yes” because they would want a daughter to have a similar experience as their own.

“I began AIR when I was about 14 and had a lot of emotional pain. I was very poor at self-expression and coping with my emotions. I hope AIR is able to continue, so once I have children, my daughter can participate in a program that is fun, beneficial, and necessary for any and every teenage girl. I am eternally grateful for my ability to become an AIR alumnae.” — AIR Alumna



Conclusion

These survey results demonstrate the profound impact that AIR has had on teens across the Greater Seacoast region for the past 22 years. The 2020 AIR Alumnae Survey supports the findings of the 2015 survey, validating the consistency and durability of AIR's impact. As the 2015 and 2020 findings illustrate, teens continue to be empowered by the arts, mentoring, and the inclusive, creative community of AIR. AIR supports underserved teens during critical developmental years. Teens grow in their social and emotional development and, crucially, learn to cope with trauma and adversity. As National Medal of Arts recipient Louise Bourgeois said, "Art is a guarantee of sanity." Participation in AIR not only propels young women to pursue education and career goals but also contributes to the development of a highly skilled workforce.

According to Robert Putnam (2015), the key to addressing inequality is to close the gaps between those who have opportunities for growth and success and those who do not. By providing accessible arts education within an inclusive community, AIR enables teens to gain the cultural and social capital necessary to enact future possibilities for their lives. Teens with supportive role models and a safe, creative community go on to instill healthy values in their own children and pass along the same encouragement, confidence, and sense of self-worth. AIR closes the opportunity gap for teens to become strong, self-reliant women as it nurtures the next generation of creative thinkers.

"AIR changed my life. I don't know who I would be without this program."

— AIR Alumna



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