

# Unemployment risk trends and the implications for Canadian federal offenders

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**A**n examination of employment trends for Canada's labour force shows that rates of unemployment for younger workers — as a group — are invariably higher than for older ones. Moreover, unemployment rates are higher for those workers with the least formal education. In the analysis that follows, we have used the unemployment rate of a person in Canada who has completed high school as a benchmark for comparison with rates for persons with a lesser education.

We found that the risk for youth being unemployed was twice as high for those who had completed grade 8 or less, as compared to the high school graduate. Moreover, the unemployment risk for youth with less than high school appears to have been increasing since 1990.

The higher risk of unemployment for poorly educated youth in Canada has particular significance for the Correctional Service of Canada, where federal offenders tend to be amongst Canada's most poorly educated. For example, as many as 2 in every 3 men admitted to federal institutions were unemployed at the time of their arrest.

Moreover, deficits in education have contributed to the criminogenic history of a very significant proportion of new admissions to federal penitentiaries every year. As many as 8 of every 10 new admissions were found to have completed less than a high school diploma, 5 in every 10 had less than grade 10, and 2 of every 10 new admission had completed less than grade 8.

Fortunately for Canadian public safety, the Correctional Service has a very comprehensive Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process, which means the Service can readily identify offender employment issues. It also has a set of core programs that address basic adult literacy skills training for offenders. Nevertheless, as one can imagine, it remains a challenging task to prepare offenders for their eventual safe and productive reintegration into society as law-abiding citizens.

## High employment and education needs

**T**his study looks specifically at the circumstances of the male federal offender. By the time that a new offender has completed the CSC's intake assessment process, assessment staff will have obtained a comprehensive documentation of their education and employment history. Since November 1994, the Correctional Service of Canada has conducted an Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) on every new inmate admitted into federal custody.<sup>2</sup> These intake assessments serve to identify the appropriate level for initial security placement, as well as the information needed to develop an individual correctional plan tailored to provide correctional interventions targeted towards the most significant contributing factors presented by an offender.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining historical research files of all intake assessments has enabled the CSC to develop very comprehensive statistical profiles of its offender population, and to track such changes over time.<sup>4</sup> Federal women offenders have a somewhat unique education and employment experience, as compared to male offenders and need to be studied separately.

## Employment status at admission

In order to establish some baseline statistics on labour force unemployment rates of male offenders at the time of their admission to federal facilities, an examination was made of assessment records from the OIA historical database. This examination found that:

- About 65% of male federal offenders had been unemployed at the time of their arrest
- This proportion increases to 77% for the younger male offenders (i.e., those under age 25 at the time of their admission)

- An additional one-third (32%) overall had been unemployed for 90% or more of the time before their arrest, and this proportion also increases sharply to 50% for males under age 25

Clearly, we see from Table 1 that the unemployment status for male offenders under age 25 differs substantially from the rates for male offenders 25 years and older. The same will be found when we next examine education needs. Therefore, the analysis that follows will concentrate on this younger (i.e., under 25) population and the analysis of trends for those offenders 25 and older will be left for another time.<sup>5</sup>

A major issue for younger federal offenders is their unemployment status at the time of their arrest. Fully, 65% of the males admitted since April 1995 were unemployed at the time of arrest, and unemployment is even greater an issue for those males under age 25, where 77% were found to have been unemployed. Moreover, for this latter group, fully half reported they were unemployed 90% or more of the period leading up to their arrest.

Table 1

Unemployment status of federal offenders at admission			
	Males ages 18-24	Males ages 25 or more	All male admissions
Unemployed at the time of arrest?***	77%	61%	65%
Unemployed 90% or more of the time leading to arrest?***	50%	27%	32%
(N)	7,454	26,131	33,585

\*\*\* P < .0001.  
Source: CSC Offender Management System (OIA Database), including all male new federal admissions between April 1st 1995 and March 31st 2004.

### Education needs at admission

From previous research, we know that the federal offender population was also a very poorly educated group.<sup>6</sup> Examining the more recent OIA assessment records has revealed this to still be the case today. The offender admission population is found to be severely lacking in the most basic formal education qualifications:

- 78% of all men admitted since April 1995 had not completed their high school at the time they were admitted, and this proportion increases to 89% for men under age 25 at the time of their admission
- Amongst this group of younger offenders, 55% had not completed their grade 10, while 19% had completed less than grade 8

Table 2

### Educational attainment of federal offenders at admission

	Males ages 18-24	Males ages 25 or more	All new male admissions
Less than grade 8?***	19%	21%	20%
Less than grade 10?***	55%	49%	50%
No high school diploma?***	89%	75%	78%
(N)	7,455	26,063	33,518

\*\*\* P < .0001.

Source: CSC Offender Management System (OIA Database), including all male new federal admissions between April 1, 1995 and March 31, 2004.

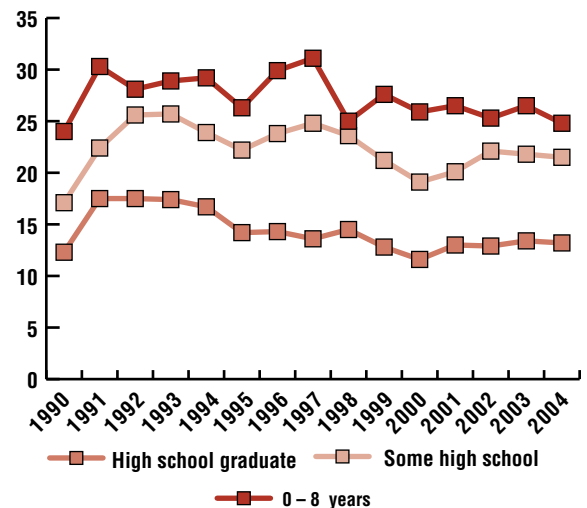
One surprising result from Table 2 is the fact that in recent years there are more younger offenders (89%) than older ones (75%) that have not completed high school. Does this mean that more young people today are dropping out of school, or that more school dropouts are being sentenced to federal prison for some offence?

### Canada's unemployment rates for younger men

An examination of results from Statistics Canada's labour force survey over the last one and a half decades has consistently shown much higher unemployment rates for younger men who are without a high school education. As seen in Figure 1 (below), unemployment rates for those under 25 young males with a completed high school

Figure 1

### Unemployment rates (%) of men under age 25, by educational attainment



Source: Statistics Canada, Labour Force Historical Review, 2004 (Cat. 71F0004XCB).

education has consistently exceeded 10% since 1990. Moreover, the unemployment rate for those younger workers with less than a high school completion has tended to exceed 20%, and for those with grade 8 or less, over a 25% rate of unemployment.

The health of the job market for younger (i.e., under age 25) workers depends significantly on whether these workers have completed a high school education. The risk of being unemployed for a younger person

in Canada, as compared to someone of the same age with a completed high school education, can be estimated by taking the unemployment rates for each education group as the numerator, divided by the rate for a high school graduate (the denominator). The calculated risk rates are shown in Figure 2 (below), with trends since 1990:

- For someone with less than a completed high school education, the risk of unemployment is estimated to be about 1.6 times higher than for a high school graduate, and has increased since 1990
- For someone with a grade 8 education or less, the risk of being unemployed is estimated to be about 2 times higher, and has increased since 1990

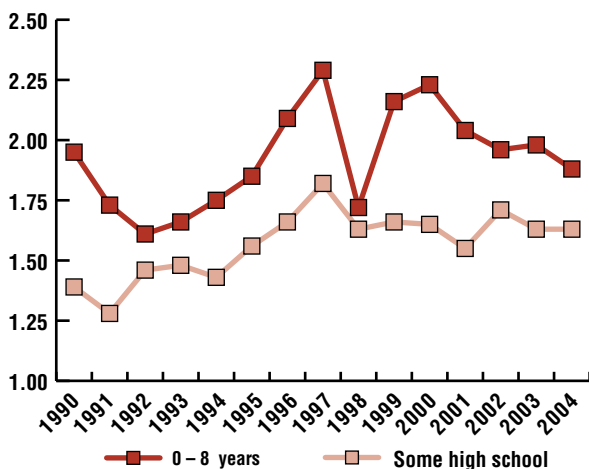
Based on the trends found in Figure 1, it is reasonable to anticipate significant and continuing labour market re-entry problems for younger workers in Canada.

### Conclusions

As part of this wider population demographic, younger federal offenders are clearly going to be at an even greater labour force disadvantage than their civilian contemporaries when they return to the community after serving their sentence, if their significant education deficits have not been successfully addressed during the time that they are under federal sentence. Indeed, absent this remedial intervention the risk of young male offenders returning to unemployment can be anticipated to remain unacceptably high. ■

Figure 2

Unemployment risk for men under age 25, when compared to rate for the high school graduate (risk = 1.00)



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<sup>2</sup> OIA is a comprehensive and structured risk assessment process that the Correctional Service uses to systematically identify each new offender's prior record of criminal conduct (i.e., individual criminal history — or *static* indicators), and also assess the major factors contributing to their criminogenic behaviour (i.e., *dynamic* factors contributing to criminogenic behaviour).

<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of the criminogenic factors that are assessed at intake, as well as other aspects of this intake assessment process, have been widely documented in other *Forum* articles and CSC Research Reports.

<sup>4</sup> An example of an offender population profile can be found in: *The Changing Profile of the Federal Inmate Population: 1997 and 2002*, by Roger Boe, Mark Nafekh, Ben Vuong, Roberta Sinclair and Colette Cousineau, Research Report 132, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Education plays a different role for older rather than younger offenders. In many cases, older offenders may also not have completed their high

school, but neither had their contemporaries. However, they may have since acquired much more on-the-job experience so that education no longer presents the same barrier to job entry (or re-entry) as it does for the younger offenders.

<sup>6</sup> *A Two-Year Follow-Up of Federal Offenders who Participated in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program*, by Roger Boe, Research Report 60, 1997. For example... "Offenders admitted into the custody of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) typically rank among our nation's most poorly educated citizens. Nearly 2 out of 3 offenders (64%) have not completed their high school diploma, of which 30% have not even completed grade eight. Furthermore, inmates may actually lose some of their initial literacy skills if they make little active use of them. Standard literacy testing of offenders entering federal custody confirms these statistics: 70% score below a Grade 8 literacy level; more than 4 out of 5 (86%) test below Grade 10; the average inmate scores at approximately Grade 7.5."