

Offender employment: What the research tells us

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Education and work programs are the cornerstone of correctional intervention. They have been shown to reduce criminal futures^{2,3} and increase positive behaviour⁴ in prison. Historically, these programs have been a fixture of correctional efforts in North America for more than 150 years. The rationale for providing educational/vocational services and work opportunities to inmates flows directly from the educational/employment skills deficits that many offenders bring with them to prison. For that reason, identifying and analyzing offender employment needs on admission to prison and monitoring offender employment patterns while under community supervision can provide programming targets that could potentially lead to safer returns to the community.

Through offender population profiling and trend analysis, this article illustrates the value of systematically assessing and reassessing employment as a major risk and need factor throughout the correctional process.

Employment needs identification and analysis

In November 1994, the Correctional Service of Canada implemented the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process⁵ to produce a comprehensive and integrated evaluation of each offender as they enter the federal correctional system.

The OIA process involves the systematic collection and analysis of comprehensive information on each offender's criminal and mental health background, social situation and education, factors relevant to determining criminal risk (such as criminal record) and factors relevant to identifying offender needs (such as employment). The results help determine offender institutional placement and correctional plans.⁶

A major component of OIA is called 'Dynamic Factors Identification and Analysis (DFIA)'. It is comprised of seven dynamic factors and indicators within each domain: employment (35), marital/family (31), associates and social interaction (11), substance abuse (29), community functioning (21), personal and emotional orientation (46), and attitude (24). Each factor is subsequently divided

into principal components that are further broken down into sub-components. Moreover, a series of yes/no indicators and, in some cases, 'help messages' accompany the indicators to enhance rating clarity. In total, DFIA consists of seven dynamic factor domains, 35 principal components, 94 sub-components, and 197 indicators. The primary objective of the DFIA is to provide a straightforward yet systematic means for identifying dynamic factors that inform the correctional plan. Specifically, the DFIA identifies and prioritizes factors that are directly linked to an offender's criminal behaviour. The focus of this research is on the employment domain comprised of six principal components and 35 indicators (see Figure 1) and rated using the following guideline:

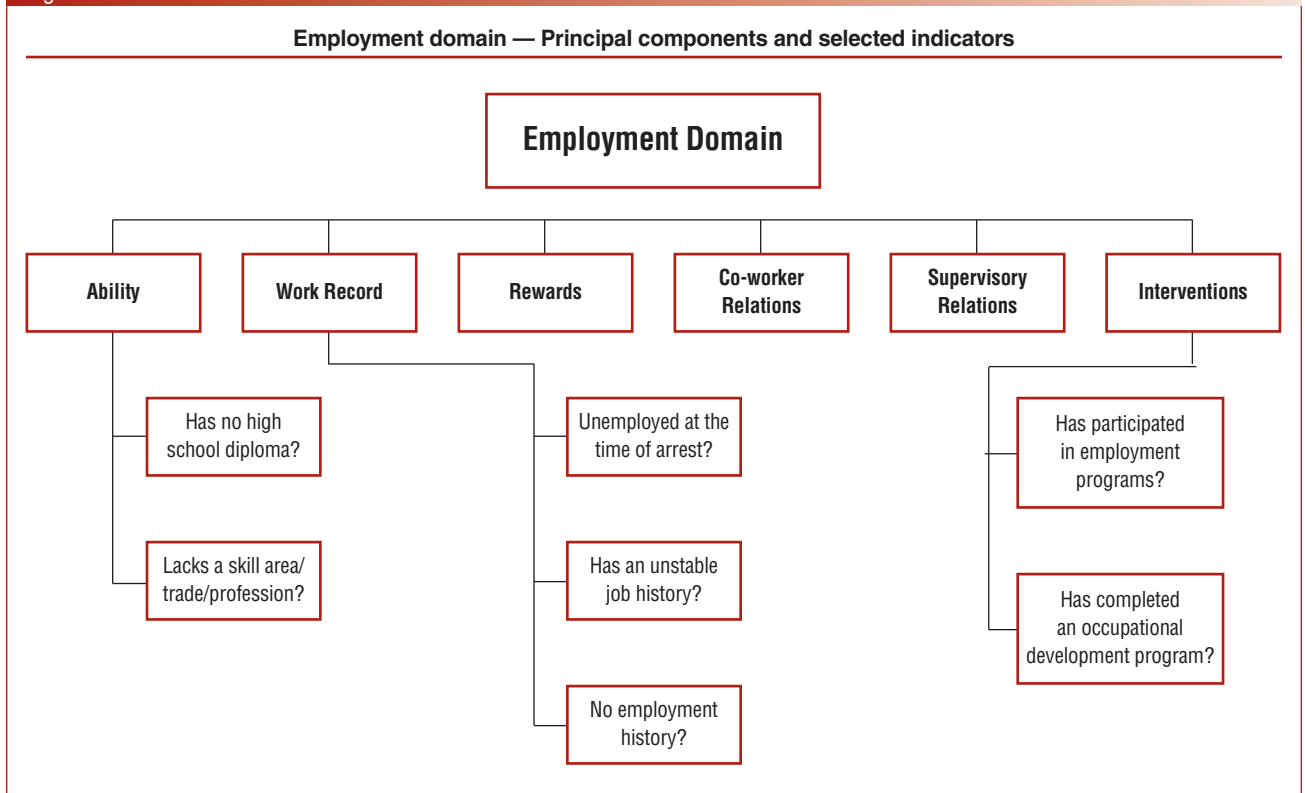
For this category, a rating of "FACTOR SEEN AS AN ASSET TO COMMUNITY ADJUSTMENT" indicates that employment has been stable and has played an important role for the offender. A rating of "NO IMMEDIATE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT" indicates that neither employment, under employment, sporadic employment, nor chronic unemployment have interfered with daily functioning. An offender receives a rating of "SOME NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT" if any of the aforementioned have caused minor adjustment problems while in the community and "CONSIDERABLE NEED FOR IMPROVEMENT" if the employment situation has caused serious adjustment problems.

Employment domain validity

A meta-analytic review⁷ of employment factors and recidivism among adult offender populations (the authors identified 67 studies that generated 200 individual effect sizes with recidivism) confirmed that employment history and employment needs at discharge were predictive of criminal recidivism. Although education was predictive of recidivism the strength of the relationship was considerably less than employment.

A predictive validity study⁸ conducted on federal release cohorts revealed that unemployment related indicators (e.g., 'unemployed 50% or more', 'unstable job history') along with 'lacks a skill, area, trade

Figure 1



or profession' were strongly associated with the employment domain rating and readmission for men and women. Moreover, unstable job history was a strong predictor of readmission. Interestingly, the indicator 'lacks a skill/area/trade/profession' was also found to be moderately predictive of readmission.

Employment needs of federal admissions

As Table 1 shows, more than half of newly admitted men and women were identified as "needy" (rated as "considerable" need or "some" need combined) in the area of employment (53.8% and 56.2%, respectively). More specifically, Figure 2 presents the proportions of newly admitted men and women

identified at intake with employment needs between 1998/1999 and 2003/2004. As Figure 2 shows, the proportions of newly admitted men assessed to have employment needs have been steadily increasing since 1998/99. However, a consistent pattern emerges where the proportion of newly

Figure 2

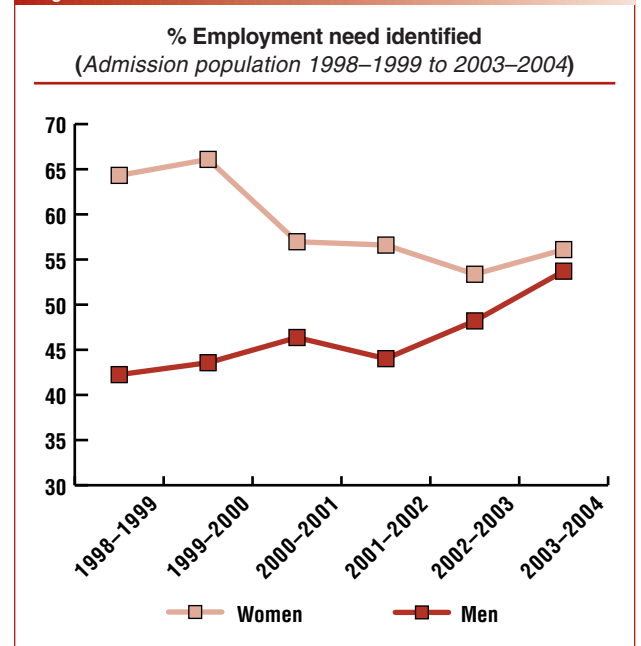


Table 1

Employment needs assessed at intake (Admission population 2003–2004)			
Need level ^{ns}	Men (4,048)	Women (246)	Combined (4,294)
Considerable	10.3%	15.5%	10.6%
Some	43.5%	40.7%	43.3%
No Need	42.9%	39.8%	42.7%
An Asset	3.4%	4.1%	3.4%

Note: ns = non-significant.

Table 2

Selected employment indicators from the OIA Process
(Admission population 2003–2004)

Indicator	Men (3,953)	Women (246)	Combined (4,199)
Has no high school diploma*	75.3%	69.1%	74.9%
Lacks a skill area/ trade/profession ^{ns}	56.0%	52.9%	55.8%
Unemployed at arrest*	62.9%	70.3%	63.3%
Has an unstable job history ^{ns}	64.5%	60.6%	64.2%
No employment history**	8.4%	13.8%	8.7%
Has participated in employment programs*	22.6%	29.3%	23.0%
Completed an occupational development program ^{ns}	12.9%	10.6%	12.8%

Note: Numbers may vary slightly; ns = non-significant; * = p < .05; ** = p < .01; *** = p < .001.

admitted women identified with employment needs is higher than men. Furthermore, it appears that the gap between the proportions of newly admitted men and women identified with employment needs has converged in recent years.

A summary of the distribution of selected employment indicators assessed during the OIA process was also obtained for 3,953 men and 246 women (see Table 2). Although women offenders as a group were significantly more likely than men to possess a high school diploma at time of their admission to prison, they were less likely to have been employed at time of arrest or have stable job histories.

Employment needs of federal prisoners

Another way to look at the employment needs of an entire prison population is to take a snapshot. In Table 3, the proportions of men and women in federal custody identified at intake with employment needs were found to be 44.4% and 39.4%, respectively.

Figure 3 displays the proportions of men and women in prison who were identified at intake with employment needs. It would appear that the proportions of men and women who were assessed at intake to have employment needs have declined since 1998/99. Again, a pattern emerges where the proportion of women identified with employment needs in prison is higher than men.

Table 3

Employment needs assessed at intake
(Prison population on March 31, 2004)

Need Level	Men (11,170)	Women (346)	Combined (11,516)
Considerable	4.4%	6.7%	4.5%
Some	40.0%	32.7%	39.8%
No Need	38.5%	42.5%	38.6%
An Asset	17.1%	18.2%	17.6%

Note: * = p < .05.

Figure 3

% Employment need identified
(Prison population 1998–1999 to 2003–2004)

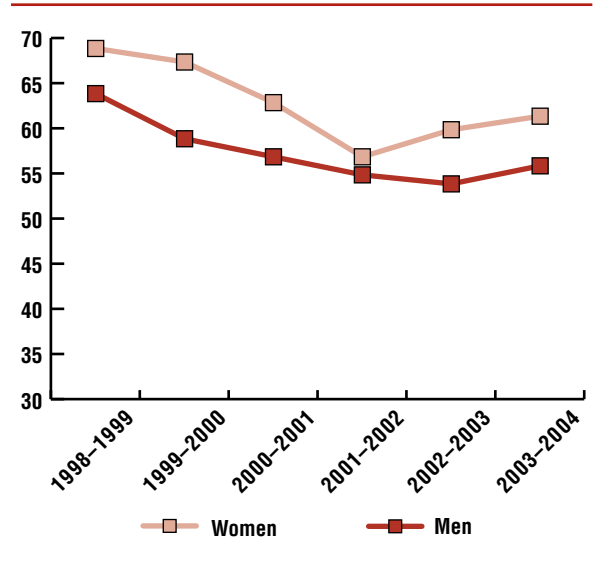


Table 4 presents the distribution of selected employment variables assessed during the OIA process for 9,005 men and 324 women in prison. As found with the admission population, women offenders, as a group, were significantly more likely than men to possess a high school diploma at the time of their admission to prison. In addition, women offenders were less likely to have been employed at time of arrest or possess an employment history.

Discussion

In contributing to safe reintegration, correctional systems need to be able to produce timely and accurate profiles of the education/vocational and work histories of their offender population. This information can be used to raise awareness about specified offender needs of institutional populations. More important, this data can help correctional

Table 4

Selected employment indicators from the OIA Process
(Prison population on March 31, 2004)

Indicator	Men (9,005)	Women (324)	Combined (9,329)
Has no high school diploma*	77.9%	71.9%	77.7%
Lacks a skill area/trade/profession ^{ns}	61.8%	62.3%	61.8%
Unemployed at arrest***	66.5%	78.8%	66.9%
Has an unstable job history ^{ns}	71.5%	72.4%	71.6%
No employment history***	12.0%	24.2%	12.4%
Has participated in employment programs ^{ns}	22.7%	26.6%	22.8%
Completed an occupational development program ^{ns}	11.0%	11.0%	11.0%

Note: Numbers may vary slightly; ns = non-significant; * = p < .05; *** = p < .001.

agencies to direct resources and interventions to particular segments of their populations to reduce risk and need.

The Correctional Service of Canada’s ability to systematically target and monitor the employment need levels of its admission and prison populations has, therefore, moved the Service further toward the delivery of an effective and well-integrated offender rehabilitation and case management program. ■

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- ^{5,6} Motiuk, L.L. (1997). Classification for correctional programming: The Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9(1), 18–22.
- ⁷ Gendreau, P., Goggin, C., & Gray, G. (1998). Case need domain: Employment. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 10(3), 16–19.
- ⁸ Brown, S.L, & Motiuk, L.L. (2005). *The Dynamic Factor Identification and Analysis (DFIA) component of the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process: A meta-analytic, psychometric and consultative review*. Report 164. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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