

Women offenders' employment needs: Research for a gender-informed employment strategy

Kendra Delveaux and Kelley Blanchette¹
Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

Employment as a treatment target for women

Past research has clearly established that a considerable proportion of women offenders has employment-related needs both at intake to federal institutions² and on release in the community.^{3,4} In addition, results of other studies have provided support for the link between employment problems and recidivism. For example, results of a meta-analytic study conducted by Gendreau, Goggin, and Gray (1999), indicated that the level of need in the employment domain was a moderately strong predictor of recidivism.⁵ Other researchers have reported evidence for an association with recidivism specifically for women offenders.^{6,7,8}

Despite evidence that employment is a promising correctional treatment target, several recent reviews of programs and services for women have highlighted concerns regarding the state of employment programming for federal women offenders in Canada. Both the Auditor General's Report (2003)⁹ and the report of the Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003)¹⁰ noted several gaps in service for women offenders, including the paucity of meaningful work opportunities and employment programs, as well as a lack of community-based work releases for women offenders.

To address these concerns, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is currently in the process of developing an employment strategy for women. The aim of the study described herein was to provide a detailed description of current employment programs and services available to federal women offenders and to examine relevant aspects of women's employment history, needs, and interests. Results of this research will inform the aforementioned employment strategy for women.

Research methodology

Information was gathered related to women offenders' pre-incarceration employment history, current experience with CSC training/employment, employment intentions and interests, and post-incarceration employment experiences. This information was obtained from CSC's automated database (Offender Management System; OMS)

and from questionnaires completed by women offenders in the institutions and in the community.

Participant summary

In order to provide a profile of the total offender population and their needs at intake and release to the community, a snapshot of the women offender population on May 1st, 2004 was obtained from the automated database (OMS). In addition to file information, women offenders residing in federal institution and in the community were asked to complete questionnaires to obtain more detailed information regarding their needs, interests, and perceptions related to current and future employment programming. A summary of the total number of study participants, by data source, is presented in Table 1.

Profile of women's employment needs at intake

Information regarding offender needs at intake was available for the majority of inmates currently incarcerated or under supervision in the community. For the Dynamic Factors Identification and Analysis (DFIA) component of the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process, offenders' criminogenic needs are assessed in seven domains: employment, marital/family, associates/social interaction, community functioning, attitude, personal/emotional, and substance abuse. Multiple indicators are assessed within each domain. For example, the employment domain includes 35 employment indicators which are scored as being either present or absent for each offender. An overall score is also generated for each offender in the employment domain which is scored

Table 1

	Description of study sample	
	OMS data snapshot (May 1st, 2004)	Questionnaires
Women Offenders		
Institution	384	58
Community	459	34
Total N	843	92

as either: 'asset to community adjustment', 'no need for improvement', 'some need for improvement', or 'considerable need for improvement'.

In order to investigate women's pre-incarceration employment histories, women's employment needs were first profiled through an examination of the employment domain ratings at intake. Overall, results indicated that the majority (57%) of women were perceived to have either "some" or "considerable" need for intervention in the employment domain. A little over one-third of women (36%) were perceived to have "no immediate need for improvement", and employment was assessed as an "asset to community functioning" for only 7% of women.

Examination of the specific indicators within the employment domain yielded some notable findings. More than half (58%) of women offenders did not have a skill, trade, or profession. An overwhelming 72% of women were unemployed at the time of their arrest, and almost half (47%) were unemployed 90% or more of the time. Finally, although fairly high percentages of women reported that their jobs were lacking in rewards (e.g., lack of benefits, lack of security, insufficient salary), relatively few women reported any prior employment interventions.

A series of between-group analyses were performed to compare incarcerated offenders to those in the community, younger to older women, and Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal women offenders. Overall, significant results showed that women *incarcerated* at the time of the study, *younger* women, and *Aboriginal* women quite consistently displayed greater educational needs and less extensive job histories than women residing in the community at the time of the study, older women, and non-Aboriginal women.

Questionnaire respondents were asked to describe their own perceptions of their criminogenic needs (i.e., factors that contributed to their involvement in criminal behavior) and also what factors would help to keep them out of trouble with the law in the future. Not surprisingly, the factor noted most commonly by women as a contributing factor to their criminal behavior was substance abuse, followed by difficulties in the personal/emotional domain. Interestingly, although few women identified factors related to the employment domain as contributing to their involvement in criminal behavior, assistance in the employment domain (having a job, job-related training, educational upgrading) was most commonly listed by women as a factor that would help them to *desist from criminal activities* in the future. Other factors commonly

mentioned as helping them to stay out of trouble included assistance with personal/emotional issues (e.g., self-esteem, counseling), positive associations (e.g., good relationships/support, avoidance of negative associates), positive marital/family relationships, and the avoidance of substances.

Pre-incarceration employment history: women's self-reported information

In addition to the overview of women's employment needs that was obtained via the Offender Intake Assessment data, more detailed information regarding pre-incarceration sources of income, education levels, work experience, and salary levels was solicited from women offender questionnaire respondents.

The majority of women (58%) reported that they had achieved less than a grade 12 education level while attending school in the community. However, most (64%) also reported that they had engaged in some upgrading since that time. According to questionnaire respondents, *main* sources of income prior to incarceration included: employment (34%), welfare/social assistance (27%), illegal activities (24%), or other sources such as family, friends, or mother's allowance (15%). Notably, none of the questionnaire respondents indicated a reliance on unemployment insurance or disability as a main source of income. A number of respondents also reported reliance on other legal or illegal sources of income including: the drug trade (32%), prostitution (20%), working "under-the-table" (14%), and/or exotic dancing (8%).

The majority of women (74%) indicated that their salary for their most recent job prior to incarceration was sufficient to meet their basic needs, with a reported average hourly salary of \$11.21 (SD = 5.72). This was fairly similar to the salary that women offenders suggested that they would require in order to meet their basic needs: \$11.63 (SD = 3.88). Notably, non-Aboriginal women reported a significantly higher average salary prior to incarceration (M = 11.55, SD = 4.67) than Aboriginal women (M = 7.92, SD = 2.23), $p < .001$.

Women were also asked whether they were *qualified for any jobs* that would allow them to make a salary sufficient to meet their basic needs. The majority of respondents (77%) indicated that they were. However, more older (93%) than younger women offenders (67%) reported that they were qualified for jobs with a salary sufficient to meet their needs $p < .01$. When asked to describe the types of jobs that they were qualified for (allowing them to make a sufficient wage), women reported mostly

qualifying for jobs in the sales and service areas and in business, finance, and administration.

Education and vocational training

Data regarding any educational or vocational training programs that had been *completed* by incarcerated federal offenders by the date of the snapshot was obtained from the OMS system. Results indicated that 137 of the 384 women residing in CSC institutions (36%) had completed some sort of educational or vocational training, either full-time (15%) or part-time (85%) by May 1, 2004. These 137 women had completed a total of 285 educational or training programs. Of all training programs listed ($N = 285$), the most common program placements completed involved vocational training (54%), secondary education courses such as Adult Basic Education Levels I to IV (22%) or General Educational Development (7%), or employability skills/computer skills training courses (9%). The three most common types of vocational training courses completed by women offenders included: Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, Food Handling and Safety, and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation.

Institutional employment

Information regarding offender employment was obtained from the OMS system for all offenders employed in the institution on the date of the snapshot. According to results obtained from the automated database, 211 of the 384 women residing in CSC institutions (55%) were employed, either full-time or part-time, on that day. These 211 women were involved in a total of 249 work placements. The majority of placements were recorded in the database as “full-time” (75%), and the remaining placements were considered to be “part-time” (23%) or “other” (2%). Most placements were classified as CSC employment (229/249; 92%), a small percentage were Corcan placements (20/249; 8%), and no women were recorded in OMS as participating in work releases on that date.

Almost all women (98%) reported that they would be *interested* in participating in a work release program. Some work release interests included the trades (15/54), such as construction, welding, or mechanics, and business or administration (13/54), including “office work”, working in a library, or customer service. However, a fair number of women’s responses appeared to reflect interest in care-giving or helping people on work release, although their descriptions were fairly broad, with several women simply noting that they wished to “work with” animals, seniors, or children.

Intentions to work and importance of employment: Incarcerated women

Almost all (57/58 who responded to this question) incarcerated women offenders indicated that it was at least somewhat important for them to have a job. Most also (50/58) reported that they *did intend* to find a job on release, 6/58 reported that they *might* be looking for a job at release, and only 2/58 women indicated that they *did not intend* to find a job on release. Reasons for not seeking a job upon release included: needing to complete other education programming/deal with other needs first, being pregnant, and being past retirement age. When asked about their chances of finding a job upon release, about half of respondents (27/55) thought that their chances were “good” and the other half (28/55) thought that their chances were only “OK” or “poor”.

Incarcerated women were also asked about their future career interests. Overall, the most common areas of interest for future careers were in *sales and service* occupations (45% of women), with the food and beverage industry, retail, sales, cashier work, and animal care or training being some of the most commonly reported interests within this category. This was followed by interest in business, finance, and administration (e.g., administrative, clerical, secretarial), trades, transport and equipment operators (e.g., “trades”, construction), and social science, education, government service, and religion (e.g., social work, counseling).

Income and employment: Women under community supervision

Twenty of 32 offenders (63%) in the community who responded to this question indicated that they were employed outside the home at the time of the study. However, when asked to describe their main source of income at the time, only 40% of women reported that employment was their main source of income. Thus, many of these women have been relying on other sources of income as well. Other main sources of income listed included: unemployment insurance or disability (12%), welfare/social assistance (12%), or spouse/family (12%).

Of the community respondents who were unemployed at the time of the study, 10/12 (83%) reported that they *intended to, or might try to find a job*, and 6/12 (50%) indicated that they were *searching for work* at the time. Unemployed women reported an average of 24 jobs applied for since release and an average of 6 hours a week looking for work. A few of these women (3/11; 27%) thought that their chances of finding a job in the next 6 months were good, but the majority of them (8/11; 73%) thought that their

chances were only “OK” or “poor”. Reasons for unemployment included: being unable to find a job (3/12), attending school (3/12), unable to work for disability or health reasons (2/12), and working in the home caring for children (1/12).

About half of the employed women on release in the community (55%) reported that they were either somewhat or very satisfied with their *current job*. Average reported weekly salaries for women’s jobs in the community at the time of the study (take-home) was \$374.80 (SD = 183.82), and less than half (40%) reported that they were somewhat or very satisfied with their *current pay level*. However, most reported that their current salary was adequate to meet their basic needs (72%) and that their chances of keeping their jobs for the next 6 months were good (79%).

Of those who were employed in the community, the majority (13/20; 65%) reported that their current employment was related to *work experience they had prior to incarceration*. However, women reported little association between their current employment and *institutional work or vocational training programs* (11%), *Corcan work experience* (0%), or *employment skills training programs* (10%).

Summary

Results of the study described herein highlight the importance of offering good quality employment services to women offenders. The majority of women offenders have employment-related needs at intake, and the women themselves highlight the importance of addressing employment-related needs to desist in future offending. Among women who were incarcerated or unemployed in the community at the time of the study, most reported that they did intend to find a job, and about half of those unemployed in the community reported that they were searching for a job at the time. Only about half of incarcerated women and about one-quarter of unemployed women in the community thought that their chances of obtaining employment were really good.

Although only a small portion of the large-scale women’s employment research study has been presented here, results highlight the importance of implementing a national employment strategy designed specifically for federal women offenders. Particular consideration should be given to younger, incarcerated, and Aboriginal women offenders. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, ON K1A 0P9

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