

Community employment centres for offenders: A preliminary exploration

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The success of offender employment programs and interventions is most often measured by recidivism. Other, more proximal factors, such as job acquisition are important measures of program success but are often difficult to obtain. The current study was conducted as part of a mid-term review of the implementation of Correctional Service Canada's community employment centres, designed to offer employment services to federal offenders on conditional release. This brief review provides a profile of a sample of offenders who used the centres shortly after their inception, and presents results on job acquisition for these offenders. Results are compared to a recent study exploring factors associated with community-based outcomes for offenders. This was undertaken to explore implications to help guide future research on the impact of employment interventions on offenders' reintegration outcomes.

Employment and offender reintegration

Recent research findings provide support for the role of employment in facilitating offenders' successful transition to the community.³ Social support for employment (i.e., resources for finding work and affective ties to employment) was one of the most powerful factors identified by Gillis and Andrews as contributing to offenders' ability to find and keep a job in the community. Importantly, social support for employment was also linked to offenders' ability to remain in the community. These results corroborate previous research findings by Azrin & Besalel, 1980, as cited in Cellini & Lorenz⁴ relating social support to community-based employment outcomes for offenders. Community employment centres have the potential to fulfill this critical social support role by providing required assistance to offenders in their job preparation and job search techniques. Moreover, the centres contribute to the broader mission of the Correctional Service of Canada in their role of facilitating offender job acquisition, with the related intention of enhancing offenders' successful community reintegration. These roles are consistent with Corcan's mandate to aid in the safe reintegration of offenders into Canadian society by providing employment and training opportunities to offenders incarcerated in federal penitentiaries and, for brief periods of time, after they are released into the community.

Community employment centres were established in selected metropolitan areas in each of CSC's five regions, as part of a larger initiative designed to create community infrastructure, to provide increased support to offenders during their reintegration process.⁵ A total of 25 employment centres currently exist, with 6 in the Atlantic region, 8 in the Quebec region,⁶ 2 in the Ontario region, 4 in the Prairie region and 5 in the Pacific region. The centres offer employment services to offenders through Corcan, in partnership with CSC and other government and community partners such as Human Resources & Skills Development Canada, John Howard Society, St. Leonard's Society and the private sector. The primary objectives of CSC's Community Employment Centres are to provide a spectrum of employment services, including individual employment assessment, counseling, job search techniques and on-the-job placements to offenders released to the community. Since the inception of the employment centres in 2001/2002, more than 1000 offenders have been placed in jobs and/or training each year, and more than 3000 provided with employment services.

Method

This interim study* was conducted to provide a profile of offenders who used employment centres shortly after their inception in 2001/2002, focusing on the assessment of offenders' employment-based needs and competencies, for their hypothesized and demonstrated contributions to offender employment outcomes in the community.⁷ Employment counsellors were contacted by a Corcan staff member and asked to conduct the assessment as part of the intake protocol at the employment centres. Given that many centres were not yet fully established, those in existence for a longer period of time (i.e., those in the Atlantic and Prairie regions) participated in the study. A booklet was distributed to employment counsellors which contained the study explanation, informed consent form, intake assessment (comprised of historic employment information and dynamic items, including offenders' opinions about work), employment counsellor questionnaire (containing ratings of the offender on dynamic employment-related factors such as work ethic, motivation to find work, and support for employment), and

a three-month follow-up questionnaire designed to explore offender employment outcomes. A sample of 255 offenders participated in this voluntary research, from the Atlantic ($n=34$) and Prairie ($n=221$) regions.

Results

Employment-related needs assessment

Given that most of the users of the employment centres were male (95.3%), results are presented only for this group. Approximately 75% of the offenders using the centres were not currently married. The sample presented with significant overall risk (75%) and need (80%) levels, based on an assessment conducted prior to offenders' community release. These identified risk and need levels are lower than those of the overall male offender population (with 94% identified as medium to high risk and 95% as medium to high need), recently profiled by Boe and colleagues.⁸ Concomitantly, more than half (54.2%) had 'some' or 'considerable' employment needs identified prior to their release from the institution, consistent with the 56% of men in the overall population identified with employment needs.⁹

Some protective factors were evident; notably, almost 50% of the sample of offenders had a high school diploma or some post-secondary education, and nearly 50% were rated by employment counselors as having a 'significant' or 'solid' employment history. These percentages are higher than those found in the overall population. Specifically, 70% of the male offender population profiled had an unstable job history, and three-quarters (76%) did not have a high school diploma.¹⁰ Conversely, two-thirds of the sample using employment centres had been employed in the year prior to incarceration, with the highest concentration (46.1%) in semi-skilled or unskilled labour. More than half (54%) had participated in employment training/programming during their incarceration period. Of these, a total of 44.0% participated in Corcan programs, with the remaining taking part in vocational programming (15.7%), work release (15.7%), skills for employment programming (21.6%) or other initiatives (28.4%).¹¹ Slightly more than one-third (38.1%) received a certificate or diploma from an external group during incarceration, and a similar percentage (32.8%) had received certificates for employment or vocational training prior to the current incarceration period.

The percentages reported by offenders were corroborated by employment counselors' perceptions of offender needs and competencies, rated on the basis of the employment intake assessment they conducted with the participants. Almost three-quarters (72.9%) of the sample were

rated by counselors as 'motivated' or 'highly motivated' to find work, but only 42.6% were rated as having support (either 'good' or 'excellent') and only one-third with 'good' (25.4%) or 'excellent' resources (8.2%). Nearly one-half (47.1%) of offenders were rated as having a 'high' or 'very high' level of ability to find work, which corresponds to the 47.3% of offenders rated by counselors as having 'good' or 'excellent' work experience, and the 79.4% of offenders rated as having a 'good' or 'excellent' attitude toward work.

Employment counselors rated the following areas as most problematic for offenders: certification in a marketable skill, with fewer than 20% of offenders having completed certification; educational attainment, with only 36.5% rated by counselors as having education 'assisting somewhat' or 'considerably' with the ability to work; and skill level, with less than 50% (44.7%) assessed as having 'good' or 'excellent' skills. Only 12.2% of offenders were rated by employment counselors as having derived 'considerable' or 'excellent' benefits from institutional employment interventions. However, almost half (48.0%) of the offenders in the sample were rated as having 'few' or 'no' barriers to work, and over two-thirds (68.9%) were assessed as 'job ready' or 'extremely job ready'.

Employment status

Approximately one-half (46.6%) of offenders were working at the time of the initial assessment, with more than two-thirds (71.4%) in a full-time position. The average number of hours worked per week was 40.5, with an average weekly salary of \$481.91. The majority of offenders (81.1%) indicated that their salary was sufficient to meet their basic needs, and slightly more than one-half (56.0%) were satisfied with their income. Offenders were asked to rate their likelihood of keeping their job over the next three months. The vast majority (92.7%) said they had a 'good' to 'excellent' chance of maintaining their employment.

Employment services

Offenders can seek services at any of the centres, or may receive services as a function of a referral process. Within this sample, the highest percentage of offenders came to the employment centres through a referral by their parole officer (36.4%), followed by a referral by a friend/acquaintance (21.9%). Referrals by the offenders' CCC/CRC, walk-in and 'other' each accounted for about 11%. Less than 2% of the referrals came from the institution. Recently, CSC developed an Employment and Employability Case Management Bulletin and

process within institutions to better involve case management officers in the employment process (including referrals to the community employment centres), to promote continuity in employment interventions from institution to community.

Offenders reported that they were most in need of interventions in the area of job search techniques (27.3%), followed closely by résumé preparation (26.2%) and computer skills (26.2%). A list of services and the percentage of offenders indicating that they have a need for these services is presented in Table 1.

These areas correspond with the primary functions described by employment counselors in their work with offenders. Résumé preparation and job search were listed most often (21.9%) by employment counselors as their main function. Conducting intake assessment interviews with offenders to determine their level of job readiness was the second most performed function (18.6%). The third function most often listed by employment counselors was communication with parole officers for referrals (15.6%). Employment counselors were asked to list, in order of preference, the areas they would wish to address, given more time and /or resources. Counselors listed the ability to work with a database of community-based employers¹² as the most desirable function, with 44.5% agreeing this should be a priority. Job readiness programming was a close second, with 41.4% of counselors identifying this as an important area for future intervention. Better linkages with community resources were

also identified by 40.2% of the counsellors as an important area for intervention.

Three month follow-up employment status

A total of 139 (of the initial 255) offenders completed the three-month follow-up questionnaire. More than two-thirds (69.1%) of the 139 offenders were employed, and of this group, 83% were employed on a full-time basis. The average number of hours worked per week was 44.7, with an average weekly salary of \$513.80. Of those offenders who reported working ($n = 96$), 88.3% indicated that their salary met their basic needs, and 69.9% were satisfied with their income. Over one-half (51.1%) were employed in a semi-skilled or unskilled labour job, and just over one quarter (26.6%) in skilled labour positions. Almost one-fifth (18.3%) reported working in an area related to training or work experience obtained during incarceration. This sub-sample of offenders was very optimistic about working; 91.6% felt they had a 'good' to 'excellent' chance of maintaining their job in the next six months.

Summary and implications

This research presented information not typically readily accessible regarding offenders' community employment status. Specifically, as part of this profile of offenders using the services of employment centres, information was obtained not only on whether they found work, but on the details of their job, including pay and their level of satisfaction with their salary. The study also explored the various static and dynamic factors associated with employment outcomes, as previous employment research has noted the incremental contribution of dynamic variables to the prediction of employment outcomes.¹³ A research report is in progress, exploring the relationships between the various static and dynamic factors in the current study, for their relative contributions to employment outcomes.

Social support has been identified as an important contributing factor to offenders' job acquisition and retention in recent research¹⁴ and to successful community reintegration.¹⁵ Community employment centres play an important role in supporting offenders in their attempts to find work, and particularly, in areas of need defined by offenders (i.e., job search techniques, resume preparation, and computer skills).

Research conducted by Andrews and Gillis demonstrated a strong positive relationship between offenders' ratings of their chance to find/maintain a job (i.e., their intention) and community-based outcomes (i.e., job acquisition, retention and length

Table 1

Services needed most as identified by offenders¹

Service	% of respondents
Vocational interest	17.6 % (45)
Employment counselling	12.5 % (32)
Résumé preparation	26.2 % (67)
Job search	27.3 % (70)
Interview skills/practice	10.2 % (26)
Computer skills	26.2 % (67)
Basic/generic skills	5.9 % (15)
Forklift	12.5 % (32)
Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System	12.9 % (33)
English as a second language	2.0 % (5)
Literacy	2.3 % (6)
Other program needs	5.9 % (15)
Other	16.4 % (42)

¹These percentages will not add to 100% as individuals may have listed more than one service.

of time in the community). Although the relationship between intention and community reintegration was not explored as part of this profile of offenders who used the services of employment centres, it is encouraging that over 90% of offenders indicated they had a good to excellent chance of maintaining their job over the next six months. However, a comprehensive evaluation of CSC's employment centres, recently conducted by the Evaluation

Branch, showed that offenders report feeling more confident about their ability to find and keep work after using the services of the centres (see Gillis et al., 2005). Future research/evaluation on employment centres should explore the relationship between dynamic competency-based measures, including offenders' confidence in their ability to find/keep work, and community-based employment, and reintegration, outcomes. ■

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² 284 Wellington Street, Ottawa, ON K1A 0H8

³ Gillis, C. A. (2002). *Understanding employment: A prospective exploration of factors linked to community-based employment among federal offenders*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON. See also, Gillis, C. A., & Andrews, D. A. (2002). Understanding employment: A prospective exploration of factors linked to community-based employment among federal offenders. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14(1), 3–6. Also, see Gillis, C. A., & Nafekh, M. (In press). The impact of community-based employment on offender reintegration. *Forum on Corrections Research*, this issue.

⁴ Cellini, H. R., & Lorenz, J. R. (1983). Job club training with unemployed offenders. *Federal Probation*, 47(3), 46–49. See also, Soothill, K., Francis, B., & Ackerley, E. (1997). The value of finding employment for white-collar ex-offenders: A 20-year criminological follow-up. *British Journal of Criminology*, 37(4), 581–591. Also, see Soothill, K., Francis, B., & Escarela, G. (1999). White-collars and black sheep: A twenty-year criminological follow-up of white-collar ex-offenders. *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 32(3), 303–314. See also, Soothill, K., & Holmes, J. (1981). Finding employment for ex-prisoners: A ten-year follow-up study. *The Howard Journal*, 20, 29–36.

⁵ Correctional Service Canada (2004). *Effective Corrections Progress Report*.

⁶ An additional 13 centres are in the Quebec region, supported by Correctional Service of Canada. The 8 listed are supported by Corcan.

⁷ Gendreau, P., Goggin, C., & Gray, G. (1998). Case need domain: "Employment." *Forum on Corrections Research*, 10(3), 16–19. Also see, Gillis, 2002.

⁸ Boe, R., Nafekh, M., Vuong, B., Sinclair, R., & Cousineau, C. (2003). *The changing profile of the federal inmate population: 1997 and 2002*. Research Report 132, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, Ottawa, ON.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ These percentages do not add to 100, as offenders may have participated in a number of different employment programs or interventions.

¹² At the time of the study, the Prairie region had developed and maintained a database of community-employers willing to hire ex-offenders, called Employment for Conditionally Released Offenders (ECRO).

¹³ Op. Cit., Gillis, 2002. Also, see Gillis & Andrews, 2005.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Op Cit., Cellini & Lorenz, 1983.

* Gillis, C.A., & Crutcher, N. (in preparation). *A preliminary exploration of community employment centres*. Research report, Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, Ottawa, ON.

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