

## Raising awareness of persons with disabilities in Canadian federal corrections

A major survey of persons with disabilities in Canada and an examination of staff and offenders in the Correctional Service of Canada suggest that the provision of specialized or technical aids or services may be one of the new challenges facing federal corrections. This is becoming particularly evident as the number of offenders serving long-term sentences and the average age of the institutional population continue to rise.

In 1991, long-term offenders (10-year sentences or more) represented 26.4% of all federal inmates.<sup>(2)</sup> More importantly, there was a 41.5% increase in the number of long-term offenders under federal jurisdiction between 1981 and 1991 (from 2,672 to 3,782). Further, an offender population forecast indicates that over the next two decades, the greatest increase in admissions (into the federal correctional system) will be from the "over-40" population.<sup>(3)</sup>

This trend reflects the projected change in the age structure of the Canadian population -the bulk of population growth (from 1991 through 2011) will occur in the "over-50" category. Taken together, these leading indicators suggest that the Correctional Service of Canada may need to increase specialized programming and services for offenders with disabilities. Persons with disabilities in Canada Based on their responses to questions about disability on the 1991 Census questionnaire, individuals were asked by Statistics Canada to participate in a more detailed survey about their limitations in daily living. The responses to the *Health and Activity Limitation Survey*,<sup>(4)</sup> therefore, reflected the participants' perception of their situation and are considered subjective in nature. However, the survey revealed some remarkable facts about the age and gender of Canadians with disabilities and about the prevalence, nature and severity of their disabilities.

The survey defined disability according to the World Health Organization definition: "any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being." Among the adult Canadian population (age 15 to 64), 12.7% reported some level of disability relating to mobility, agility, sight, hearing, speaking or other in 1991.<sup>(5)</sup> The "other" category included respondents who perceived themselves as limited because of a learning disability, a mental health condition, a mental handicap or labelling by others.

As expected, the prevalence and severity of disabilities increased with age. Of the respondents who were 65 or older, nearly half reported some level of disability and one third reported a severe disability.

The survey also indicated that 93.7% of persons with disabilities lived in private households, while 6.3% lived in health care institutions (such as hospitals, nursing homes, senior citizens residences, psychiatric institutions, and treatment facilities for individuals with physical disabilities). It should be noted that persons living in penal institutions and correctional facilities were excluded from the survey for operational reasons.

In a more focused look at the prevalence, nature and severity of disabilities among the adult (age 15 to 64) Canadian population,<sup>(6)</sup> Table 1 indicates that the most prevalent disability is related to mobility (the ability to walk, move or stand), at 6.6%. The rate of disability related to agility (the ability to bend, dress

or handle small objects) is 6.4%; hearing, 3.1%; sight, 1.2%; and speaking, about 1%.

**Table 1**

<b>Disability Rates for Adult Men and Women (Ages 15-64) in Canada</b>			
	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Type</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>	<b>(%)</b>
Mobility	5.68	7.59	6.64
Agility	5.99	6.71	6.35
Sight	0.95	1.39	1.17
Hearing	3.85	2.42	3.13
Speaking	1.19	0.78	0.99
Other	4.10	4.18	4.02
Total population with and without disability 18,156,165			
Total men: 9,045,720; total women: 9,110,445			

Interestingly, total population disability rates are almost the same for adult men and women, at 12.5 and 12.7%, respectively. However, a different pattern emerges when distribution of disabilities is broken down by gender. Men are more likely than women to perceive themselves as having hearing and speaking disabilities, while women are more likely than men to perceive themselves as having mobility, agility and sight disabilities. Correctional Service of Canada employees with disabilities In recent years, an increased public awareness of disability has resulted in a number of studies being conducted in the workplace. Of particular interest are the employment and education data on the 2.3 million Canadians who reported some level of disability in the 1991 *Health and Activity Limitation Survey*.<sup>(7)</sup>

In 1991, the unemployment rate of persons with disabilities in the labour force was 14%, while the unemployment rate among Canadians without disabilities was 10%. Overall, 48% of working-age persons with disabilities were employed, and 35% had some post-secondary education.

It is important to note that while this survey comprehensively enumerated persons with disabilities, its findings may (at least in part) reflect the willingness of people to report the limitations and barriers encountered in their daily lives. Accordingly, any change in survey methodology could result in a wide variation in the reporting of disabilities. Caution is advised, therefore, in drawing conclusions from the various surveys reported here.

In order to implement the federal government's policies of equal access to employment, training, development and career progression for all of its employees, employment equity personal information databases are maintained for statistical purposes.<sup>(8)</sup>

Disability rates for Correctional Service of Canada employees can be established by examining staff response to questions on employee identification forms (as retrieved from the databases). These self identifying questions are checked off by individuals who consider themselves disadvantaged by a

persistent and severe disability.

Overall, the disability rate among Service staff is estimated to be 2%. This disability rate applies to all staff categories: scientific, professional, administrative, technical, administrative support and operational.

Table 2 displays the disability rates for 11,269 full-time, part-time and term Service employees in five categories of disability: mobility, agility, sight, hearing and speaking. Although data are available for learning, psychiatric and mental health disabilities (as well as for an "other" category), this information is not reported here.

**Table 2**

<b>Disability Rates for Correctional Service of Canada Employees</b>		
<b>Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>
Mobility	63	0.56
Agility	28	0.25
Sight	45	0.40
Hearing	46	0.41
Speaking	7	0.06
Total Correctional Service of Canada Population with and without disabilities 11,269.		

The most prevalent disability among Correctional Service of Canada staff is related to mobility. This is followed by hearing and sight disabilities (which are present in almost identical numbers) and then agility and speaking disabilities. Of those reporting hearing disabilities, 11% <sup>(5)</sup> are deaf, while of those reporting difficulties with sight, 13% <sup>(6)</sup> are blind. Inmates with disabilities There were no available data on the prevalence of disabilities among incarcerated offenders. Therefore, the Research and Statistics Branch conducted an in-house Special Needs Survey to gather information on offenders who, for health related reasons, are limited in their day-to-day activities.

Using the *Health and Activity Limitation Survey -1991 User's Guide* as a model, research staff designed a short survey instrument. Three penitentiaries (a maximum-, a medium- and a minimum-security-level penitentiary) were then selected in the Correctional Service of Canada's Ontario region, and disability data were gathered through a systematic review of each institution's health care files.<sup>(9)</sup>

The disability rate for the institutional population (according to this survey) is 4.1%. Interestingly, the disability rate for the maximum-security population is the highest (4.9%), followed by the rates of the medium-security (4.1%) and minimum-security (3.3%) populations. Overall, 49 offenders in the three institutions accounted for a total of 69 disabilities. The most prevalent disability was again related to mobility (1.85%) (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

<b>Disability Rates for Institutions by Security Level</b>								
	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Medium</b>		<b>Minimum</b>		<b>Total</b>		
<b>Type</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>
Mobility	4	0.81	16	2.63	2	6.64	22	1.85
Agility	3	0.61	1	0.16	0	0.00	4	0.34
Sight	2	0.41	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	0.17
Hearing	2	0.41	4	0.66	1	1.11	7	0.59
Speaking	1	0.20	0	0.00	0	0.00	1	0.08
Other	14	2.85	18	2.30	1	1.11	33	2.77
Total institutional population: 1,191								
Total maximum-security population: 492; total medium-security population: 609;								
total minimum-security population: 90								

Table 4 lists assistive devices used by inmates to facilitate their daily living. The range of specialized equipment used to help inmates with disabilities is fairly broad.

**Table 4**

<b>Technical aids used by inmates with disabilities</b>	
<b>Type of disability</b>	<b>Technical aid</b>
Mobility	Special shoe lifts Back or leg brace Artificial leg Wheelchair Cane Crutches Orthopaedic footwear
Agility	None noted
Sight	Glass eye Computer assisted
Hearing	Hearing aids
Speaking	None noted

A basic understanding of the cause of inmate disabilities was arrived at by reviewing offenders' health care records. The major causes of their conditions are best described as disease or illness (51%), the natural aging process (17%), motor vehicle accidents (11.3%) and other accidents (9.4%).

Additional descriptive analyses of offender characteristics yield some interesting findings about federal inmates with disabilities. These offenders are more likely to be older than 40 (57%), serving sentences longer than 10 years (51%), admitted since 1991(70%), serving their first federal term (62%), and violent (83%). Of the 38 violent offenders with disabilities, 47% were convicted of a homicide(s) and 34% are

sex offenders. Offenders with disabilities under community supervision There is little information on the prevalence of disabilities among offenders on conditional release. The only known source of data on this topic is the offender needs assessment that is systematically administered by case managers (parole officers) in the Correctional Service of Canada's Ontario region.

To estimate the prevalence of disabilities among offenders under community supervision, a sample of 604 federally sentenced adult offenders (573 men and 31 women) released from institutions in the Ontario region over a six-month period was gathered for study

These offenders were under the supervision of 22 different parole offices (including one community correctional centre) and 7 private agency offices. From information contained in the Case Needs Identification and Analysis protocol, it is estimated that about 12% of the community supervision population have physical disabilities.<sup>(10)</sup>

Interestingly, the presence of a physical disability was unrelated to the likelihood of failure or success on conditional release. What does it all mean? This examination of disability among Canadians, among federal correctional staff and among federal offenders yielded important information on a topic that has received little attention.

The practice of systematically identifying staff and offender needs for specialized or technical aid(s) and services is clearly warranted. The increasing number of persons with disabilities in both the Canadian workforce and the offender population will make it a worthwhile, and perhaps necessary, correctional strategy.

Hopefully, a systematic approach to assessing and reassessing special needs, coupled with an awareness of the limitations and barriers experienced by persons with disabilities, will improve the Correctional Service of Canada's provision of services. As a result, we may need specialized programming and services for staff and offenders with disabilities.

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(1) Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 4B-340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

(2) J.R. Weekes, "Long-term Offenders: Who Are They and Where Are They?" *Forum on Corrections Research*, 4, 2 (1992): 3-7.

(3) Correctional Service Canada, *CSC Offender Population Forecast for 1990 to 2000* (Ottawa: Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).

(4) Statistics Canada, *Health and Activity Limitation Survey - 1991 User's Guide* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1991).

(5) Statistics Canada, *1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey - The Daily* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1992).

(6) This information was provided in January 1994 by Statistics Canada for comparative analysis. A note of appreciation is extended to Bernice Campbell of the Post-censal Surveys Program, who provided the specialized data from the Health and Activity Limitation Survey.

(7)Statistics Canada, *1991 Health and Activity Limitation Survey: Employment and Education - The Daily* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1993).

(8)A note of appreciation is extended to Joce-Lyn Hamel and Steven Statham at Correctional Service of Canada national headquarters. They provided employee data from the Personnel Management System in January 1994.

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(10)L.L. Motiuk and S.L. Brown, *The Validity of Offender Needs Identification and Analysis in Community Corrections - Research Report* (Ottawa: Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1993).