

Innovation in reintegration programming: Skills for Employment program

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Employment plays a key role in our society and is crucial to the successful reintegration of offenders. The Skills for Employment program developed at Drumheller Institution, Alberta, has two components: a three-week, in-class course, and three months of on-the-job training. Preliminary findings suggest that the program is attracting its target group of offenders (those with unstable employment histories) and experiences a high completion rate. A second stage of research had been introduced to continue tracking the program's completion rates, release and readmission rates, and the employment success rate of offenders released in the community. The Skills for Employment program is a valuable tool for building reintegration skills.

Employment gives us purpose and fulfills our need to be independent and productive. Although many offenders express a similar connection with employment, federal inmates often identify employment as an area of concern. It has long been suggested that the employability² of an offender is positively associated with lower rates of recidivism³ and, hence, successful reintegration. This article gives a preliminary assessment of the Skills for Employment program initiated by Drumheller Institution.

Background

In April 1993, the Correctional Service of Canada contacted the Centre for Career Development Innovation (Concordia University College, Edmonton, Alberta), and together developed the Skills for Employment program for Drumheller Correctional Institution.⁴ This program has two components: a three-week, in-class course and three months of on-the-job training. Profiles of the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to obtain entry-level positions in each job area⁵ were created. Successful participants receive a certificate that is recognized by the Centre. However, affiliation with Drumheller Institution is not acknowledged on the certificates so potential employers will focus on the training obtained by the applicant.

The primary goal of the Skills for Employment program is to help inmates learn specific job skills and become competitive in the job market after their release. These skills are expected to help inmates reintegrate into the community. The goals of the program are to provide inmates with⁶ marketable entry-level skills and clearly defined on-the-job training opportunities.

Although case managers are encouraged to solicit participation, the inmates must initiate entry to the program, mirroring the self-initiation process required to find a job on release.

Methodology⁷

The project has two phases. The first is an evaluative framework, as summarized in this article. Program information was gathered from Drumheller Institution and compiled into a data set that captured program type (three-week and /or three month), program start and completion dates, course completion status,⁸ and Statistical Information on Recidivism (SIR) Scale scores.

The second phase will include expanded information on course status (successful, continuation, withdrawn, interrupted or unsuccessful), readmission information and information on reintegration success. Plans are being developed for a pre- and post-program evaluation of the three-week and three-month components. However, since these data were not available at the time of writing, the article focuses on descriptive findings.

The following methodological limitations of this study should be noted: the SIR scale has been applied only to federal, male, non-Aboriginal offenders, although 16% of the sample population is Aboriginal, and SIR scores were available for only 66% of the remaining offenders.

Participant profile

The participants in the Skills for Employment program at Drumheller are similar to the inmate population as a whole.⁹ This population is male, Caucasian (55%), English-speaking, married / common-law (42%) and aged 21 to 39 when admitted for their current offence (65%). A large majority (73%) have experienced a previous incarceration,¹⁰ about 50% once and about 50% twice. Of those previously incarcerated, more than half (60%) were first convicted by the age of 18. As Table 1 illustrates, the largest groups of offenders are serving a sentence for armed robbery (which includes break and enter), narcotics offences or homicide.

Employment at the time of offence¹¹

As expected, employment was identified as a challenge for these offenders: at the time of their current offence, 66% were unemployed.

Table 2

Demographics by Program

Demographics	Only three-week	Only three-month	Both programs
Employment status at time of offence:			
Employed	32%	47%	24%
Unemployed	68%	53%	75%
Race:			
Caucasian	48%	65%	77%
North American Indian	37%	26%	11%
Other	14%	9%	11%

As Table 2 illustrates, those who participated in both programs also had the highest unemployment rate (75%). The unemployment rates for participants in the three-week course and three-month course are relatively similar (68% and 53% respectively). It is interesting to note that the highest rates of unemployment at the time of offence were in the theft (83%), and break and enter (77%) categories. Those who had been incarcerated five or more times had the highest rate of unemployment (74%). This rate dropped slightly with three to four previous incarcerations (70%), and one to two previous incarcerations (68%). The lowest

unemployment rate was in the no prior conviction category (54%). The highest rate of unemployment was associated with the 21 to 39 age range, in which 63% were unemployed.

Course participation and completion¹²

Most offenders (83%) participated in the three-week program, 12% took the three-month training, and 5% both. Referring to Table 2, the most significant difference in race and program occurs in the both program category (Caucasian 77%, Aboriginal 11%). The difference in race in the three-week course is not as substantial as it is in the

Table 1

Participants in Skills for Employment Program by Type of Offence

Current Offence	Description	Percentage
Armed robbery	Break and enter and commit or with intent, forcible entry, unlawfully in dwelling, illegal possession or firearm, carrying concealed weapon	32%
Possession of or trafficking in narcotics or controlled drugs	Offences under the <i>Food and Drug Act</i> , <i>Narcotics Control Act</i>	24%
Homicide	Act resulting in death, except by automobile (refers to <i>Criminal Code</i> definition of murder and manslaughter)	22%
Dangerous driving	Criminal negligence while operating a motor vehicle, arson, kidnapping, hijacking, abduction, obstructing a peace officer	11%
Receiving or possession of stolen goods		7%
Sexual offence(s)	All possible sexual offences listed in the <i>Criminal Code of Canada</i>	3%
Offences while incarcerated	Conviction for escape or attempted escape from a federal or provincial correctional facility or court, or from an escort; not including unlawfully at large	2%

Source: Revised Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale (SIR-R1)

three-month course. This research focused on two groups: those who successfully completed the course; and a combined category of unsuccessful, withdrawn, transferred and continuing participants. Of the 510 individuals with a course status attached to their program, 61% have successfully completed the course. The three-week course completion rate was 67%; in the three-month course, the completion rate was 33%. Of those offenders who participated in both courses, 35% successfully completed. The three-week course may have had a higher completion rate because it was shorter.

Concluding comments

As highlighted above, the Skills for Employment program appears to attract its target offenders. Preliminary research on the Skills for Employment program at Drumheller Institution suggests that a high percentage of

offenders who take these programs are unemployed at the time of offence, have a criminal history before their current offence, and identify employability as a concern. By preparing offenders with relevant employment skills, we can give them another tool to help them reintegrate into the community thereby reducing the chances of recidivism.

To evaluate this program as a reintegration tool, the second phase of this study will focus on readmission rates. It will be beneficial to include release and readmission dates and intake assessment values relevant to offender employment in evaluating the Skills for Employment program.

Everyone agrees, offenders and non-offenders alike, that work plays a large role in our society. By giving offenders a chance to build on their current employment skills and learn new skills, we help them

prepare to find employment after release. ■

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¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.

² Employability refers to an individual's ability to find, adapt to and keep a job. J. Brouillard and A. Siroise, "Employability in practice," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 1 (1996): 32-34.

³ P. Rossi, R. Berk and K. Lenihan, *Money, Work and Crime*. (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

⁴ Drumheller Correctional Institution is a medium-security federal establishment near Edmonton, Alberta, that houses a variety of inmates ranging from high to low security risks. Approximately 95% of the inmates are general population; however 5% are administrative segregation.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of these profiles, see P. Mulgrew, "Generic and employability skills for inmates," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 1 (1996): 29-31.

⁶ See P. Mulgrew, "Generic and employability skills for inmates," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 1 (1996): 29-31 for further details of the skills in each section.

⁷ The data set was compiled with the assistance of the Correctional Service of Canada Research Branch Analyst Mark Nafekh.

⁸ In this study, those who have completed the course successfully are grouped together, and the second group consists of offenders who have the following course statuses: continuation, withdrawn, paroled or transferred, unsuccessful. This is a limitation of the database and will be expanded in the second phase. Future research will investigate these groups exclusively to provide more information on how many are finishing the course successfully, reach a different course status, or both. In this way, we will be better equipped to determine whether and how those offenders differ from offenders who successfully finish the course.

⁹ Draft in progress, Roger Boe, "Drumheller Skills for Employment Program: The First 100 Graduates."

¹⁰ Previous incarceration: Previous refers to a period of incarceration that expired (i.e., Warrant Expiry Date) before the current total aggregate sentence. Incarceration is a separate original admission to a custodial place; penal institution refers to jail, prison or penitentiary in each case.

¹¹ Excluding Aboriginal offenders and missing cases, the results are based on n=291.

¹² The term "associated" is used to indicate that they are all included in the analysis, regardless of course status (for example, completion, continued, withdrawn, transferred or unsuccessful).