

# Work Release Program: How it is used and for what purposes

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The Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), which became law in November 1992, made a number of changes to the release of inmates from federal custody in Canada. These changes affected temporary absences, day and full parole, and statutory release.

One important innovation in the CCRA was work release. Work release gives offenders opportunities to work away from the institution, but generally requires a return to custody or a halfway house each day. Granting authority for work releases rests with the Correctional Service of Canada, and these releases do not require approval from the National Parole Board. Although the supervision requirements and other criteria for work releases make them similar to temporary absences, their length — 60 days with opportunity for renewal — makes them similar to day parole.

In Canadian penitentiaries, work release is used to give offenders meaningful work opportunities at any point in the custody portion of their sentence, not just close to their release date. Work releases permit offenders to work outside the institution on community projects, for non-profit organizations, and for paid employment such as fire-fighting and crop harvesting.

Although the nature and conditions of the work must be clearly specified, especially supervision of the offender, the work does not have to be directly related to the offender's correctional plan. These requirements make work release a very flexible program that allows correctional managers to respond to local projects and labour needs, and provides useful opportunities for community restitution, development of work habits and, in some cases, acquisition of skills that the offender can use after release.

Compared with other short-term release programs, work release is used with only a few offenders. In 1995–1996, approximately 315 offenders received a work release while 2,000 offenders were released on escorted temporary absences, 800 were released on unescorted temporary absences and 2,600 were released on day parole.

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The CCRA required a review of its provisions five years after it came into force. The review was completed at the end of 1997 and the report<sup>2</sup> from which this summary was made is one of several that address issues and components of the CCRA.

## Data development

Data for this study was obtained from the Offender Management System (OMS) of the Correctional Service of Canada. The OMS is an automated administrative records system that covers all offenders under the jurisdiction of the

Service. Specialized data sets were created from the OMS for this research and, as a consequence, the numbers presented in the report may not match official figures presented elsewhere, although the differences should be minimal and should not affect the conclusions significantly.

The data set included all work releases from November 1992, when work releases were introduced by the CCRA, to September 30, 1996. During the study period, 4,569 work releases were granted to 1,167 offenders. When presenting annual trends, the years 1992–1993 and 1996–1997 are excluded because they were not 12-month periods. Work release did not exist before the CCRA, so pre-CCRA comparisons were not possible.<sup>3</sup>

The number of work releases is based on the number of departures from institutions and is not a count of the number of work release programs, which would include many departures from an institution. The number of offenders granted work releases may indicate the number of work release programs more precisely, but it would produce a low estimate because many offenders are granted more than one work release program.

A second data set was created to obtain more detailed information on work releases. This data set covers 223 cases from 1994–1995 and includes information from text-based records. The text-based records include information such as the type of activities involved in a work release, its objectives and how long an individual offender would take part.

### All work releases

Table 1 shows the numbers of work releases and offenders granted work releases, and the inmate population of the federal correctional system for each fiscal year from 1993–1994 to 1995–1996. The number of work releases granted over the three-year period was 3,751, of which almost 60% occurred in 1993–1994. On further investigation, it was found that the majority (1,608) of the work releases granted in 1993–1994 were in the Pacific region, and almost all of them (1,553) were for one day. In the next year, the number of work releases granted decreased significantly, suggesting a shift from one-day work releases to multiple-

day work releases. Results for the last two years suggest that about 800 work releases were granted per year. Although the total number of work releases varied over the years, the number of offenders granted a work release remained consistently around 300 per year, indicating that case managers did not use this release option more as they became more familiar with it.

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### Regional comparison

The use of work release varies considerably from region to region. The Atlantic and Pacific regions provide work release opportunities for the largest percentage of their offenders. In the Ontario and Pacific regions, the number of days an offender is on work release tends to be less than in other regions but, paradoxically, the Pacific region also has the highest percentage of offenders on work release, with 130 or more work release days. The regional variation in the number of days on work release suggests that different regions use work release for different activities. The median number of work release days for offenders is approximately 60, the maximum allowed for any single work release without the approval of the regional deputy commissioner.

### Offender characteristics

Female offenders accounted for only 1% of offenders on work release, and Aboriginal offenders accounted for only 8% of offenders on work release. Given that female offenders account for 2% of the offender population and Aboriginal people account for 12% (in 1994) of the offender population, these results suggest that work release may be under-used for these groups of offenders, although the difference is not great. Offenders in the study were approximately 37 years old at the time of their first work release.

Offenders given work releases are less likely than offenders in the general population to have committed a violent

Table 1

#### Work Releases, Offenders Granted Work Release and Inmate Population, by Fiscal Year

Fiscal year	Work releases	Offenders	Inmate population
1993–1994	2,165	300	13,322
1994–1995	742	286	13,948
1995–1996	844	315	14,090
Total	3,751	901	41,360
Three-year average	1,250	300	13,787

offence. About 65% of offenders on work release have committed a violent offence, compared with 76% of the offender population.

However, about 12% of offenders who received work releases were serving life sentences for murder.

Less than 40% of the work release population applied for a day parole during the year before their first work release and, of those that applied, only 24% received it.

During the year following the first work release, however, the proportion of day parole grants rises sharply. Of those that applied for day parole after work release, 73% received it. The results indicate that work release increases the offenders' chances for day parole and this probably occurs because success on work release demonstrates the offender's ability to function at an acceptable risk in the community.

While 70% of the offenders who were given work releases had at least one escorted

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temporary absence for reintegration purposes (see Table 2), only 30% had an unescorted temporary absence (see Table 3). Overall, 26% of work release offenders had not received any type of temporary absence before their work release. These results are a bit surprising, given that a work release may be less closely supervised than an escorted temporary absence.

About one sixth of the work release offenders received their first work release before the date they were eligible for day parole, while almost 40% received their work release before the date they were eligible for full parole. Work releases were also commonly used later in the sentence, with almost 40% of the offenders receiving their

first work release after having completed half the custody portion of their sentence.

The most common form of release after the work release was day parole, suggesting that work release helps offenders obtain day parole. However, more than 50% of the work release offenders were released on their statutory release date, rather than earlier, on full parole.

A two-year follow-up revealed that 65% (see Table 4) of the offenders included in the follow-up were not readmitted during the study period. The most common form of readmission was for technical violations of release conditions (24%), and 20% of released offenders had committed a new offence, with 6% committing a violent offence. These rates are slightly higher than rates for a comparable group of offenders released on day parole as shown in the last column of Table 4.

Table 2

**Reintegration Escorted Temporary Absences (ETAs) per Offender Before First Work Release**

Previous ETAs	Percentage	Number
None	29.6%	346
1-3	16.5%	193
4-9	13.9%	162
10-25	19.1%	223
26 or more	20.8%	243
Total	99.9%	1,167

Table 3

**Reintegration Unescorted Temporary Absences (UTAs) per Offender Before First Work Release**

Previous UTAs	Percentage	Number
None	69.8%	814
1-3	16.4%	191
4-9	8.7%	101
10-25	4.5%	53
26 or more	0.7%	8
Total	100.1%	1,167

**File review**

Documentation for a sample of 223 work releases was reviewed to determine how and for what reasons work release was used. The review indicated that some of the work release criteria were not addressed in the progress summary report made before the release. In addition, approximately 20% of cases were not assessed on the criterion of risk to society. Similarly, post-work release documentation

Table 4

**Admissions to Custody After Completion of Work Release**

Outcome	Percentage <sup>1</sup>	Number	Comparison group <sup>2</sup> (Day parole release)
No readmission	65.0%	128	77.3%
Any readmission	35.0%	69	22.7%
Technical violation	24.4%	48	11.4%
New offence	19.8%	39	14.9%
Violent offence	6.1%	12	4.5%

<sup>1</sup> Percentage represents the percentage of the follow-up group (n = 197).

<sup>2</sup> B. A. Grant and C. A. Gillis, *Day Parole Outcome, Criminal History and Other Predictors of Successful Sentence Completion* (Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1998). Average follow-up was 21 months.

Table 5

**Type of Work Placement**

Work placement	Percentage	Number
Community	26.5	59
Manual labour	24.7	55
Maintenance	15.7	35
CORCAN	9.0	20
Other	8.5	19
Fruit picking	6.7	15
Farm work	3.6	8
Forestry	3.6	8
Education	1.8	4
Total	100.1%	223

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<sup>2</sup> B. A. Grant and C. A. Beal, *Work Release Program: How It Is Used And for What Purposes*. (Ottawa, ON: Research Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1998).

was limited, with only 17% of the cases having this information in the file. For the cases that included a post-work release report, about 80% indicated that the work release had met expectations. Other results indicated that less than 0.5% of work releases resulted in the offender failing to return to the institution.

The file review indicated that, although work release is not required to fit into the offender's correctional plan, it did in fact address a number of correctional goals for offenders.

As indicated in Table 5, most work releases provided opportunities for low-skilled labour in a variety of settings. Assisting in community projects was the most common form of work, while other placements involved manual labour and agricultural work.

Work releases give offenders opportunities to engage in productive activities outside the penitentiary. The results suggest that work release meets the general goals of the CCRA, including helping offenders prepare for release. In addition, an offender who successfully completes a work release is more likely to be granted day parole. ■

<sup>3</sup> Offender counts are based on offenders within one sentence. If an offender reaches the end of his or her sentence and is subsequently readmitted to custody, this will result in a new sentence. However, if new offences are committed during sentence and new time to be served is added, it is counted as part of the same sentence.

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