

Conditional release: A federal parole officer's perspective

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When I tell people what I do for a living, they often ask, “How can you work with those people?”

This reaction illustrates the parole officer's constant problem: reintegrating offenders into the community is difficult. As a federal parole officer with 10 years of experience in the Correctional Service of Canada, I have worked with many convicted offenders and, although parolees come from all walks of life and a wide variety of backgrounds, I have observed common themes in their lives.

Reintegration of offenders is complicated by society's opposition to and abhorrence of them. Although society's position is understandable and some incarceration is necessary for preserving security, society also needs to accept more responsibility for the problem correctional agencies routinely face — that is, reintegrating offenders into society so that they won't reoffend, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.

Clearly, reintegrating offenders would be easier if the community were more involved in the process. The criminal justice system does not operate in isolation; it needs help and cooperation from all members and facets of society if *our* offenders are to have a chance at success. Community involvement or, at least, promoting society's role in the criminal justice system — specifically the mission, duties and successes of the Service — can only help the overall reintegration process.

Public participation is crucial to the reintegration process: for example, continuing to support friends and loved ones as they proceed through the criminal justice system, offering employment to those who need it, or volunteering to spend time with people in distress.

The truth is, by the time most incarcerated offenders are in federal custody they have already fallen through the cracks elsewhere. Our poor, our unemployed, our unemployable,

our neglected, our disenfranchised and our visible minorities are significantly over-represented in our prison population. Research has shown that the early years of any person's life set the tone for the rest of that individual's existence. It is well established that poverty, physical and sexual abuse, illiteracy, inadequate housing, school failure, unemployment, inequality and dysfunctional families breed crime, so a focus on early interventions, designed to change the path of young people at risk, is most likely to produce long-term benefits.

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Offenders who “graduate” to the federal correctional system bring with them many years of damage that need to be responded to and repaired — a daunting task for any parole officer; one could argue that the Service can only hope to minimize further damage, whether it be to the community, to the offender or to our resources. However, if we are to make any inroads in the crime rate, we need to explore and expand positive interventions in the lives of

disadvantaged and neglected people. Such interventions include job training, skills development, literacy and language training, counselling and violence-prevention programs, adequate child care, and treating everyone equitably and with dignity.

There are reasons to be optimistic about working with offenders in the community, but educating the public remains a difficult task. Research shows that community supervision works — as long as the offender has reintegration potential, and the risk he or she presents is managed. The cognitive-behavioural approach (or social learning theory) is based on the idea that community-based intervention strategies (e.g., responding to an offender's needs) can and do reduce recidivism. Successful treatment depends on targeting the offender's criminogenic needs (specifically, criminal

companions and antisocial attitudes) and taking his or her personality and history into account. Offenders who complete their programming in the community rather than in an institution are also less likely to reoffend. Indefinitely warehousing offenders (often put forward as the only real safeguard for society) may actually increase recidivism, especially if it is done without meaningful interventions and appropriate correctional planning.

Locking more people up for longer periods is expensive and ultimately futile. If high levels of imprisonment made society safer, then the United States would be the safest country in the world. Failing to address offenders' criminogenic needs sets them up for failure; on their release, they return to the community with the same needs and risks that led to their incarceration — and more.

To date, the research on treatment has produced no evidence to suggest that mandated intervention is less likely to succeed than voluntary intervention. What the research has shown is that offenders given inappropriate interventions or treatment, whether in the community or in an institution, are more likely to reoffend.

One of a parole officer's primary responsibilities is to analyze and assess risk while working to reintegrate offenders in the community *safely*. Simply put, public safety is paramount. An ongoing, comprehensive examination of conditionally released offenders' static and dynamic risk factors is critical. Addressing their needs quickly and appropriately is also essential. Therefore, information is the cornerstone of risk assessment and management, so the parole officer must have the relevant data — especially an accurate criminal history not based solely on interviews with the offenders. Confirmation of all relevant data is also important; uncorroborated information takes on a life of its own and becomes "fact" compromising the ensuing risk/needs assessment, and possibly causing the programming to target domains that are not necessarily criminogenic.

Corrections professionals are constantly under fire from the news media — after all, good news does not sell papers. Generally, the Canadian public reads and hears about the Service only on its bad days. It's a rare news story that reports or discusses how an offender has actually succeeded in some manner. The public reaction to the hard work corrections staff put into monitoring conditionally released offenders and helping them reintegrate is often silence.

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The benefits to society of assisting even one offender to reintegrate safely cannot be underestimated or undervalued. The financial and social benefits of one individual no longer requiring a prison cell, a welfare cheque or access to food banks or other community support services are staggering. The pain, suffering and financial trouble that a family endures while one of its members proceeds through the correctional system can be overwhelming. Seeing and being a part of that individual's successful reintegration can be more than emotionally cleansing, it can even improve family relationships, for example, by breaking a cycle of domestic violence or substance abuse.

The truth is that the Service's approach to the management of offenders is working. The overwhelming majority of offenders are able to reintegrate into society safely. One indication is the dramatic decline in the number of sensational incidents over the past several years. Many factors have contributed to this decrease:

- the implementation of research-validated risk-assessment tools;
- thorough risk management and correctional planning by case management staff;
- the expansion of accountability levels in the Service and the National Parole Board;
- the strong link between case management staff and programming staff;
- the cognitive-behavioral treatment approach, which is based on the working principles of targeting risk, need and responsivity of offenders; and

- the continued dedication and hard work of Service employees.

We all need to work harder on increasing the participation of the community in the criminal justice system. The advantages of involving the public more fully in reintegration are substantial. Encouraging volunteer participation in parole offices is a good start. Creating innovative ways for community groups and the criminal justice system to discuss concerns would also be useful. Publishing the Service's research findings and improving relations with the news media may also help break down some barriers between the criminal justice system and the community. Accomplishing this goal means remaining open and responsive to

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our communities and sharing our ideas, knowledge, values and experience. Successful reintegration depends on attaining and maintaining the community's support and involvement in crime prevention and social justice interventions.

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