

Women offenders and employment

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Despite the identification of employment as an important dynamic risk factor,² the topic of employment has received little empirical attention, relative to other female offender needs. In fact, until recently, employment research, theory and practice were oriented primarily toward male offenders.³ Researchers have attributed the relative lack of employment and vocational programs for female offenders to the traditional view of a woman as “guardian of home and family.”⁴ Researchers have also noted that not all vocational programs are traditional in orientation⁵ and that an evaluation of programs offered during the current decade is necessary to update empirical knowledge regarding the availability of less-traditional employment programs for women.⁶ The provision of effective correctional programs that respond to the specific needs of women presents a unique set of challenges for the correctional system.

Based on the available research, the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women⁷ provided a framework for the reconceptualization of women’s corrections by advocating changes in many facets of the structure, operation and philosophy of women’s institutions. The report promoted enhanced community release preparation for women in education, vocational training, employment and life skills. Furthermore, in the call for meaningful employment for women, the report proposed the establishment of partnerships with the business community. Such partnering would provide long-term opportunities, advanced skills development and work experience in all aspects of a business, including trades, marketing, business management, clerical work and administration.

The need for distinctive women’s programming was reiterated and made law in Section 77 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA)*.⁸ More specifically, the CCRA decrees that the Correctional Service of Canada:

a) provide programs designed particularly to address the need of female offenders; and

b) consult regularly about programs for female offenders with:

- i) appropriate women’s groups, and
- ii) other appropriate persons and groups with expertise on, and experience in working with, female offenders.

The requirement to examine the specific program needs of female offenders was reinforced in the Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women.⁹ Recommendations in the *Arbour Report* accorded priority to the development of work programs that incorporate a vocational training component in women’s corrections, include a pay incentive, or provide “a meaningful occupation.”¹⁰ Thus, the call for meaningful work for female offenders has been identified within both reports and policy recommendations, indicating that it warrants further systematic exploration to develop comprehensive and appropriate employment strategies.

Employability

The concept of ‘meaningful’ employment, in the context of offenders, would imply that it addresses offender needs at an intermediate, or proximal level, as well as contributing to more long-term outcomes, including safe community reintegration. Offender employment needs are most frequently addressed through institutional employment experience and training. Within the Canadian federal correctional system, such training is incurred primarily through CORCAN, a special operating system that comprises institutional manufacturing (industries), agribusiness (farming), construction, services (e.g., keyboarding, data entry and telemarketing) and textiles operations.

The goal of employment training is to develop positive work habits that contribute to offender rehabilitation.¹¹ Consequently, in 1992, CORCAN reoriented its focus to the development and enhancement of generic employability skills, rather than specific job skills, to contribute to offender reintegration potential.¹² It is anticipated that this reorientation will provide institutional employment opportunities that cater to the development of attitudes, skills and abilities transferable to community employment situations.

CORCAN's focus on the development of employability skills is consistent with the perception of employment as a dynamic risk factor, amenable to change through effective intervention strategies. However, few studies have examined change in skills as a result of participation in employment training programs. Moreover, the limited empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that traditionally, female offenders have not been offered the same number, variety or type of employment and vocational programs that contribute to skill development as male offenders.¹³ For instance, Morash and colleagues¹⁴ surveyed U.S. state and federal prisons to compare programs offered to male and female offenders during the 1980s. They found that female offenders were not provided with equitable employment opportunities in institutions, either in terms of potential for skill development or remuneration. Such an approach, it may be argued, contributes to the perpetuation of stereotyped employment roles for women and serves to exacerbate the obstacles faced by women in their community reintegration efforts.

Employment of female offenders in the Service

Attempts to adhere to CCRA requirements and recommendations from the Arbour report are

evident in the Service's provision of several innovative employment programs and work opportunities. Current vocational- and education-based initiatives include a canine program and horticulture program at Nova and Joliette Institutions, designed to offer therapeutic benefits to offenders, provide them with a nurturing sense, and teach them about care and responsibility. Grand Valley Institution provides training for women in informatics and hairdressing. Currently, no vocational programs are offered at Edmonton Institution, although it is examining various options.

At Edmonton Institution, however, CORCAN operates a silk screening shop, employing 11 offenders. A telemarketing operation at Joliette Institution employs 19 offenders. These types of work provide marketable skills that are readily transferable to similar positions that are typically available in the community.

Despite certain advances, the small number of women offenders presents a challenge to CORCAN. Although one of the primary mandates of CORCAN is to contribute to offender rehabilitation through the provision of employment skills, an additional objective is to sustain economic viability as a special operating agency. The challenge exists in the effort to integrate the two, sustaining the economic side, while balancing offender rights to access programs that provide the

opportunity for employment skills development and enhancement.

The emphasis on skills development has been dealt with in the *Report to EXCOM on Employment*,¹⁵ stating that institutional and community employment work should be re-examined and integrated to better address offenders' various employment needs. Future deliberations and recommendations should devote special attention to the examination of women-specific employment needs.

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Future directions

Before developing formalized employment strategies and instituting comprehensive intervention approaches for female offenders, it would be useful to conduct a survey with incarcerated women and women on conditional release.¹⁶ It is important to obtain an enhanced understanding of women's work experience, training and skills before and during incarceration. An evaluation of women's interests in pursuing particular vocational training and employment experience should also be conducted. Thus, the research should address women's perceived employment competencies and propose strategies for overcoming impediments to obtaining and maintaining meaningful work in the community on release.

The research should attempt to gain an understanding of the type of work women define as meaningful by considering the context and unique experiences of women, consistent with the strategy espoused by the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women. This information can contribute to future program development and delivery at the institutional and community levels. Another consideration is the provision of employment training that coincides with employment opportunities in the community. This would consider the projected availability in the community of fulfilling and challenging work that provides adequate remuneration, critical to women's self-reliance and successful reintegration. Such an approach is important, as women identify finding and maintaining work in the community on conditional release as a central problem.¹⁷

Concrete employment-specific proposals to assist women on conditional release, as advocated by Shaw and colleagues, include assistance to find jobs, particularly in remote areas and with older women, and increased availability of skills and job training programs. Currently, CORCAN operates a work site in Toronto which aims to provide offenders with assistance in finding employment on release.

In Moncton, a community work site offers offenders the potential for full-time employment in an industrial setting for up to six months. Evaluation and expansion of these programs is advocated to better meet the employment needs of offenders on conditional release in other regions.

Once a strategy has been established for the implementation of employment interventions designed specifically for women, through consultation with female offenders and the appropriate stakeholders, a number of additional factors must be considered. Consistent with the risk principle,¹⁸ intensive employment interventions should be allocated to female offenders manifesting high employment needs and whose criminal

offending is related to employment deficits. Moreover, analysis of the treatment literature indicates that intervention is most effective when provided in the community.¹⁹ Although institutional employment training is important, and contributes to a reduction in reoffending rates for male offenders (relative to offenders who did not participate in such training),²⁰ it is proposed that an intensive community employment strategy be adopted for women. Employment programs should include an evaluative component to assess whether they are contributing to intermediate outcomes for women (e.g., their

perceptions of skills development and enhancement), consistent with the current focus on accreditation and program evaluation within the Service. Furthermore, women's community adjustment should be examined on release, to assess whether institutional employment programs facilitate the release process and to evaluate whether their community employment needs are met through existing structures.

Finally, given the negative impact of traditional forms of vocational and employment stereotyping on women offenders, it would be interesting to replicate and extend U.S. research²¹ to examine the influence of these

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stereotypical views on women offenders' perceived self-efficacy to pursue non-

- ¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.
- ² P. Gendreau, T. Little and C. Goggin, "A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works!," *Criminology*, 34 (1996): 575-607. See also P. Gendreau, C. Goggin and G. Gray, "Case need domain: Employment," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 10, 3 (1998): 16-19.
- ³ R. P. Dobash, R. E. Dobash and S. Gutteridge, *The Imprisonment of Women* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986).
- ⁴ Dobash, Dobash and Gutteridge, *The Imprisonment of Women*, p. 159. See also J. M. Pollock-Byrne, *Women, Prison, and Crime* (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1990). See also R. A. Weisheit, "Trends in programs for female offenders: The use of private agencies as service providers," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 29 (1985): 35-42.
- ⁵ Weisheit, "Trends in programs for female offenders: The use of private agencies as service providers."
- ⁶ M. Morash, R. N. Haarr and L. Rucker, "A comparison of programming for women and men in U.S. prisons in the 1980s," *Crime and Delinquency*, 40 (1994): 197-221.
- ⁷ Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, *Creating Choices* (Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).
- ⁸ *Corrections and Conditional Release Act, R.S.C., C-20* (1992).
- ⁹ L. Arbour, *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women* (Ottawa, ON: Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1996).
- ¹⁰ Arbour, *Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women*, 252.
- ¹¹ C. A. Gillis, *The Influence of Shop Supervisor Characteristics on Employee-Reported Work Attitudes in a Prison Industry Setting*, unpublished master's thesis, Department of Psychology, Carleton University, 1994. See also E. Fabiano, J. LaPlante and A. Loza, "Employability: From research to practice," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 1 (1996): 25-28. See also R. Guynes and R. C. Grieser, "Contemporary prison industry goals," American Correctional Association (Ed.), *A Study of Prison Industry: History, Components, Goals* (College Park, MD: American Correctional Association, 1986): 19-29.
- ¹² Fabiano, LaPlante and Loza, "Employability: From research to practice."
- ¹³ Dobash, Dobash and Gutteridge, *The Imprisonment of Women*, 159. See also Pollock-Byrne, *Women, Prison, and Crime*. See also Weisheit, "Trends in programs for female offenders:

traditional forms of vocational training and employment opportunities. ■

- The use of private agencies as service providers." And see B. A. Koons, J. D. Burrow, M. Morash, and T. Bynum, "Expert and offender perceptions of program elements linked to successful outcomes for incarcerated women," *Crime and Delinquency*, 43 (1997): 512-532.
- ¹⁴ Morash, Haarr and Rucker, "A comparison of programming for women and men in U.S. prisons in the 1980s."
 - ¹⁵ Correctional Service of Canada, *Report to EXCOM on Employment* (Ottawa, ON: 1998).
 - ¹⁶ A current research project is examining factors that contribute to community employment stability among a sample of federal offenders during their first six months of conditional release. The research is exploring how employment experience before incarceration, institutional vocational and/or employment training (CORCAN), and community employment status ultimately influence offenders' community reintegration.
 - ¹⁷ M. Shaw, K. Rodgers, J. Blanchette, T. Hattem, L. S. Thomas and L. Tamarack, *The Release Study: Survey of Federally Sentenced Women in the Community*, no. 1991-5 (Ottawa, ON: Corrections Branch, Ministry of the Solicitor General, 1991).
 - ¹⁸ D. A. Andrews, J. Bonta and R. D. Hoge, "Classification for effective rehabilitation: Rediscovering psychology," *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 17 (1990): 19-52. See also D. A. Andrews and J. Bonta, *The Psychology of Criminal Conduct*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 1998).
 - ¹⁹ D. A. Andrews, I. Zinger, R. D. Hoge, J. Bonta, P. Gendreau and F. T. Cullen, "Does correctional treatment work? A psychologically informed meta-analysis," *Criminology*, 28 (1991): 369-404. See also M. Lipsey, *The Efficacy of Intervention for Juvenile Delinquency: Results from 400 Studies* (Reno, NV: Paper presented at the 41st annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology, November, 1989).
 - ²⁰ W. G. Saylor and G. G. Gaes, "The effect of prison employment and vocational/apprenticeship training on long-term recidivism," *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8, 1 (1996): 12-14. See also M. Lipsey, "What do we learn from 400 research studies on the effectiveness of treatment with juvenile delinquents?" J. McGuire (Ed.), *What Works: Reducing Reoffending* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1995): 63-78.
 - ²¹ P. J. Schram, "Stereotypes about vocational programming for female inmates," *The Prison Journal*, 78 (1998): 244-270.

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