

# Reconceptualizing offender employment

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**O**ffender employment has played a pivotal role in corrections since the introduction of institutions,<sup>2</sup> although the purpose of employment has changed with prevailing correctional ideologies.<sup>3</sup> Even though employment is an important rehabilitative tool, little is known about the factors and processes that contribute to employment stability among offenders.<sup>4</sup> Recent meta-analyses<sup>5</sup> provide empirical verification of employment as a moderate risk factor for recidivism among offenders. This finding reiterates the importance of enhancing our understanding of the employment construct in order to provide effective assessment and to assist in the reduction of this need through appropriately directed intervention strategies. This article describes current employment measurement techniques and proposes modified measurement strategies. It also describes a theoretical framework for the exploration of community employment stability, and provides recommendations regarding directions for future employment intervention with offenders.

## Assessment of employment needs

**E**mployment is a prevalent need among incarcerated Canadian offenders, with approximately 75% of offenders (76% of men, and 74% women) identified with employment needs at the time of entry to a federal institution.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, offenders have indicated that they perceive employment deficits as contributing to their criminal behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Although employment deficits are firmly entrenched as a moderate predictor of recidivism,<sup>8</sup> the impact on recidivism may be underestimated due to oversimplified definition and measurement of the construct. Employment risk factors have traditionally been assessed in a dichotomous manner (i.e., presence/absence of employment deficits), thereby potentially reducing their predictive ability. In addition, many items are historical in nature, limiting the utility of this information for directing current interventions.

The Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process,<sup>9</sup> used to evaluate offenders' criminogenic needs upon entry to federal correctional institutions, incorporates employment as one of the major seven offender need areas in the Dynamic Factors Identification and

Analysis (DFIA). The employment domain in the DFIA is more comprehensive in its assessment of static and dynamic employment risk factors. It is therefore useful not only in predicting an individual's risk for recidivism but also for guiding the level of employment intervention required to decrease an individual's risk for recidivism, in accordance with the risk principle. Moreover, items from the DFIA employment domain may be used to suggest specific areas requiring attention, consistent with the need principle.<sup>10</sup>

The advent of dynamic risk assessment tools such as the DFIA has contributed not only to our ability to more effectively appraise offender needs and competencies, but also to our ability to track change in employment needs as a function of treatment participation. Nonetheless, there is a need to progress toward improved dynamic assessment of competencies, attitudes, values, beliefs and satisfaction with employment, as proposed by Gendreau and colleagues.<sup>11</sup> Gendreau advocated the enhancement of dynamic assessment within the DFIA, using a compilation of scales such as those proposed in Gillis.<sup>12</sup> In accordance with the principles of effective classification,<sup>13</sup> dynamic assessment would contribute to better understanding of an offender's criminogenic needs and employment competencies and strengths, consequently increasing the potential to prioritize offender employment needs and to guide effective intervention strategies. Furthermore, a dynamic assessment strategy in relation to offender employment needs would allow for reassessment to track change in employment needs as a function of training. An amalgamation of static and dynamic risk and needs assessment protocols would most effectively appraise competencies that potentially contribute to safe reintegration, in addition to evaluating factors that place the individual at risk for future involvement in crime. Such an approach is consistent with Correctional Service of Canada's *Correctional Strategy*, which advocates prioritizing offender criminogenic needs and providing correctional intervention on the basis of effective needs identification.

## Employment as treatment

Just as employment assessment has often been conducted using a dichotomous approach to the identification of employment needs (i.e., absence/presence of needs), program evaluations have typically used an approach that likewise limits the utility of the information provided. Numerous researchers attempting to review the employment literature have noted these methodological weaknesses.<sup>14</sup> For instance, many evaluations of employment intervention strategies have defined the independent variable in a dichotomous manner (i.e., participated/did not participate in employment program). Such an approach precludes examination of integral factors such as quality of participation, length of time in the program, and reasons for attrition. Additionally, many program evaluations fail to report important information pertaining to offender employment needs and competencies prior to program participation. Moreover, the issue of comorbidity in offender needs, such as the combination of employment and substance abuse needs, is important to consider for its potential impact on work performance and treatment gain. Ryan<sup>15</sup> summarized many of the methodological flaws that inhibit our ability to formulate conclusive evidence on the impact of employment training on offenders, including: "problems in research methodology and program development, including comparability of experimental and control groups, selection of participants, tracking of ex-offenders, differentiation between structural and subcultural variables, and definition of job retention". A comprehensive evaluation of employment program effectiveness must therefore consider a variety of factors that may moderate the impact of the program on the criterion of interest (e.g., job attainment and retention, successful community performance).

In assessing the impact of employment training on offenders, one must be cognizant of the aforementioned limitations. To date, findings have been equivocal, with some studies reporting positive effects of employment on recidivism, and others reporting limited or no effects. Pearson and Lipton<sup>16</sup> aptly summarize the state of the employment literature, based on results from their meta-analytic review of educational and vocational programs: "Although some types of educational and vocational programs appear *promising* in terms of reducing recidivism, due to a lack of studies using high-quality research methods we are unable to conclude that they have been *verified* effective in reducing recidivism."

In light of meta-analytic findings on the overall treatment literature,<sup>17</sup> theorizing regarding treatment efficacy has progressed from the question "Does treatment work" for, as Lipsey contends, it is no longer a question of *whether* intervention is effective in reducing recidivism.<sup>18</sup> We know that treatment "works" and we must use the information derived from research to develop effective intervention strategies for offenders who manifest employment needs.

As a subset of overall risk, employment offers real potential for change among offenders with its focus on combining concrete skills-based training with the development and enhancement of generic employability skills, transferable to community employment settings. The provision of such intervention is consistent with a perspective that offenders have the capacity to change and that society is best protected through the reformation of offenders.

In evaluating program effectiveness, it is important to keep in mind that many evaluations have used recidivism as the sole criterion of program effectiveness. These studies, therefore, do not account for more intermediate outcomes that one would anticipate as resulting from employment programs, namely, increase in specific and generic skills, and employment status upon release. Understandably, these factors are often excluded due to the difficulty in monitoring long-term, and even short-term, outcomes associated with community adjustment.

## Theoretical model

The need for an integrated theoretical perspective on employment cannot be disputed. Before effective programs can be developed, one first requires an understanding of the various factors and processes that combine to influence not only reintegration potential, but also employment stability in the community.

As previously mentioned, many studies to date have explored employment primarily in relation to recidivism, an approach which neglects important proximal outcomes. Exploration of intermediate targets is crucial for several reasons. First, many employment programs promote the development of job specific skills, but often, community employment opportunities are not consistent with those offered in the institution. Use of recidivism as the sole criterion of program effectiveness ignores other important potential gains from employment participation,

including job attainment, job retention, and increased prosocial orientation. Safe community reintegration, however, is the ultimate objective of the provision of programs to offenders, and should be included in a comprehensive theoretical perspective on employment.

A theoretical model was recently formulated to assist in the prediction of employment stability.<sup>19</sup> Revised from a theoretical model to predict criminal behaviour,<sup>20</sup> the model adopts a social learning/social cognition perspective in its amalgamation of the theoretical perspective proposed by Andrews and Bonta<sup>21</sup> and by Ajzen.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the model incorporates the risk factors most predictive of recidivism.

The Personal Interpersonal Community-Reinforcement perspective (PIC-R)<sup>23</sup> was formulated to account for inhibitory and facilitatory factors related to criminal offending. The theory employs a social learning perspective in its specification of the interrelationships between: (a) personally-mediated events, comprised primarily of the individual's attitudes, values and beliefs, and personality, which in turn, impact upon personally-mediated control (e.g., self regulation and cognitive functioning); (b) interpersonally-mediated control, consisting of the influence of others (i.e., associates/social support) via modelling, expressed approval, etc.; and (c) automatic rewards, which typically gain their rewarding properties through previous experience. These proximal factors, in interaction with more distal contextual elements (such as neighbourhood), influence the manner in which the individual perceives the costs/rewards for criminal behaviour.<sup>24</sup> For the present study, this model was modified to predict employment stability for offenders on conditional release by incorporating relevant work attitudes and beliefs.

The pre-test data collection phase for this research on employment stability was completed in September 1999, and post-test data collection in March 2000. Initially, the research explores factors that contribute to employment stability. Ultimately, the study will be extended to evaluate the impact of employment stability on long-term community reintegration. Thus, this research will explore proximal and more distal outcomes potentially related to attaining and maintaining employment in the community.

The current community-based employment research will also contribute to the development of a brief employment checklist comprised of factors that are most strongly linked to community success. This list of protective factors, coupled with known employment risk factors, will assist parole officers in tracking important employment factors among offenders who manifest employment needs.

Furthermore, rather than pure reliance on the assessment of static employment deficits among offenders, this research strategy involves exploration of dynamic employment factors. Accompanying the evolution of employment assessment strategies is the potential for renewed effort to target employment strengths and competencies that will assist offenders in their community adjustment.

### Innovations and future directions

It can safely be asserted that there is a resurgence of interest in employment as an important factor in the safe reintegration of offenders. However, the systematic study of employment as a risk and need factor is still in its infancy. Although we know employment is important in contributing to outcomes for offenders, we are in the preliminary stage of understanding the processes and factors that are important to employment success and community reintegration.

This parallels the status of risk and needs assessment in corrections. Our knowledge of risk is good, but our understanding and ability to effectively intervene to decrease criminogenic needs is constantly evolving as our knowledge base increases. Employment, as a subset of offender needs, constitutes an important area of study. Once an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms and processes associated with employment stability is attained, this information may be used to guide the development of intervention strategies, both at the institutional and community level. Moreover, once this level of understanding has been achieved, subsequent intervention efforts should focus on responsivity issues (including gender, ethnicity, and motivation, and different learning styles), which have received relatively little exploration to date in the correctional literature.

There is reason to adopt an optimistic outlook that current research and endeavors to intervene with offenders with employment needs will yield valuable information for the development of a comprehensive and systematic employment strategy. ■

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- <sup>5</sup> Gendreau, P., Little, T. and Goggin, C. (1996). "A meta-analysis of the predictors of adult offender recidivism: What works!". *Criminology*, 34 (4) p. 575-607 and see P. Gendreau, C. Goggin and G. Gray, "Case need domain: Employment". *Forum on Corrections Research*, 1998 10 (3), p. 16-19.
- <sup>6</sup> See "Employing Offenders" (1996). *Forum on Corrections Research*, 8 (1), p. 3-51. See also Gendreau, Goggin and Gray G. (1998).
- <sup>7</sup> Erez, E. (1987). Rehabilitation in justice: The prisoner's perspective, *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services and Rehabilitation*, 11, p. 5-19.
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- <sup>24</sup> Andrews (1988). See Andrews in McGuire (1995), p. 35-62.

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