

Using temporary absence in the gradual reintegration process

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Temporary absences are the first opportunity for incarcerated offenders to be released into the community. The time away from an institution may last a few hours with a correctional officer escort, a few days if the individual is unescorted, or several weeks if the purpose is to attend a treatment program in the community. A review of each case ensures that temporary absences are only granted to offenders who are low risk to reoffend. The extremely low failure rate demonstrates the effectiveness of these reviews.

The objective of temporary absences is to “encourage offenders to maintain family and community ties and avail themselves of rehabilitative activities, with the goal of safely reintegrating them into the community as law-abiding citizens through a gradual and controlled release program of temporary absences.”² Medical and compassionate TA’s are used to ensure the humane treatment of offenders by providing access to health care and time for offenders to be with seriously ill family members or to attend funerals.

Temporary absences (TA’s) can be either escorted (ETA’s) or unescorted (UTA’s). Escorted TA’s require supervision by an approved escort. Escorts may supervise a single offender or a small group of offenders. Unescorted TA’s are always individual, with no escort, but the offenders may be required to report to police or a parole supervisor. Temporary absences may also be classified as either reintegration or non-reintegration. Reintegration TA’s are for

purposes such as community service, family contact, parental responsibility, and personal development for rehabilitative purposes while non-reintegration TA’s are granted for administrative, medical or compassionate reasons.

Temporary absences are the first opportunity for the Correctional Service of Canada and the National Parole Board to gauge how well an offender adjusts when the restrictions of the penitentiary environment are removed. Therefore, they are the first step in the gradual reintegration process that will ensure a safe return to the community.

If temporary absences are usually successful, and are beneficial to the reintegration of offenders into the community, then their use should be encouraged. While an earlier study³ found that the granting of TA’s for purposes other than medical ones declined from 1990-91 to 1995-96, more recent statistics show a steady increase in both the number of reintegration ETA’s and UTA’s and the number of offenders granted reintegration TA’s (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). Results are shown for both TA releases and offenders granted TA’s because an offender may receive multiple TA’s in one year.

The recent increase in reintegration TA use is encouraging, but it is also important to know if reintegration TA’s contribute to successful reintegration.

Figure 1

Changes in the number of reintegration ETA’s and the number of offenders granted ETA’s, 1994 to 1999

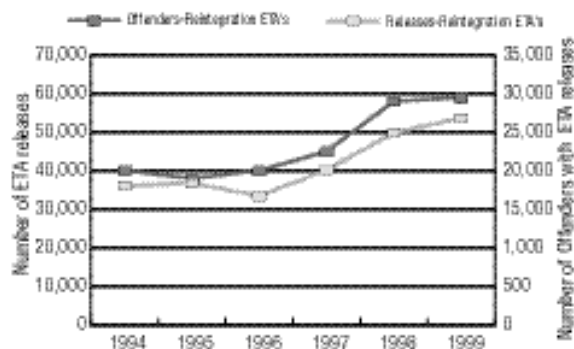
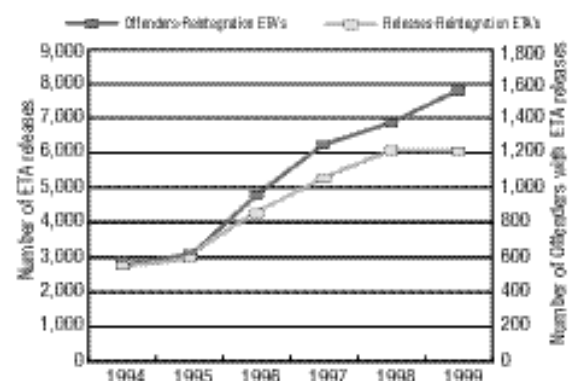


Figure 2

Changes in the number of reintegration UTA’s and the number of offenders granted UTA’s, 1994 to 1999



What is the success rate of TA releases?

Two studies examined the rate of failure for offenders participating in TA's. Grant and Millson³ found a failure rate of 0.2% for reintegration group TA's, 0.2% for reintegration individual ETA's, and 1.1% for reintegration UTA's. Molhman⁴ reports similar results, and he found that two-thirds of the TA failures did not result in additional charges being laid against the offender. Overall, only 4 in every 10,000 TA releases resulted in additional court or legal system activity. Grant and Belcourt⁵ found that the rate of failures for those offenders convicted of murder and other serious crimes is lower than the already very low failure rate for other offenders (approximately 1% for UTA's and 0.1% for ETA's). Given that even offenders convicted of serious offences by and large successfully complete their TA's, the use of TA's, as part of the reintegration process, appears to be pose a minimal amount of danger to public safety.

Does the use of TA's benefit offender reintegration?

The use of temporary absences could potentially benefit offenders in several ways. Since they have proven that they can successfully remain in the community for short periods of time, offenders who are successful on temporary absences may be more likely to be granted day parole or full parole. Motiuk and Belcourt⁶ found that approximately half of the offenders who had received ETA's received a future discretionary release, while two-thirds of offenders who had received UTA's were subsequently granted discretionary release. Therefore, TA participation increases the likelihood of offenders being granted parole, especially when the TA's are unescorted.

Another measure of the benefit of TA participation is outcome after release from prison. Several studies have examined the rate of success following release, and in general, offenders who have participated in TA's had a higher likelihood of success on future conditional release. Grant and Gal⁷ reported that reintegration TA's had a positive effect on the rates of success of offenders granted day parole, with approximately three-quarters of offenders with previous reintegration TA's being successful versus less than two-thirds without reintegration TA's. Furthermore, Motiuk and Belcourt found that approximately 20% of offenders granted ETA's prior to release were returned to federal custody within a two year follow-up period while only 8% of offenders who had participated in UTA's were returned. These results indicate that TA's appear to

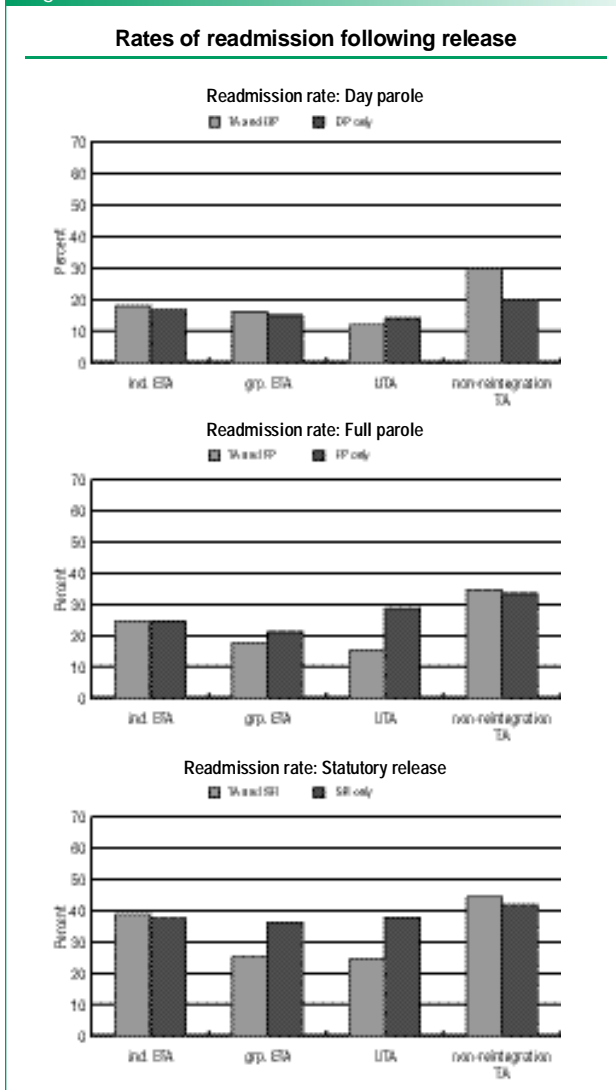
have a positive effect on offender outcome following release, with those receiving UTA's showing the greatest benefit. However, these results are limited in the conclusions that can be drawn due to the lack of proper comparison groups.

In a well controlled study, LeClair and Guarino-Ghezzi⁸ compared the recidivism rates pre and post implementation of a TA program. Overall, they found that offenders granted TA's had lower recidivism rates than predicted, with only 16% recidivating compared to the predicted rate of 25%. Therefore, the results of this study indicate that offenders who participate in TA's do derive some benefit post-release.

A recent study⁹ examined rates of readmission, technical violation, and new offence among several groups of offenders, with the primary comparison between those with and without reintegration TA participation. This study examined four types of TA's (individual reintegration ETA's, group reintegration ETA's, reintegration UTA's and non-reintegration TA's) and three types of release (day parole, full parole, statutory release). For this study, comparison groups were constructed, using offenders without the relevant TA experience. Study and comparison groups were matched on 11 critical variables that are known to be associated with risk of offending: race, gender, age, aggregate sentence length, previous federal admissions, previous offences, previous violent offences, total number of current offences, current violent offence, criminal history risk score, and proportion of sentence served. Overall, there were a total of 12 study groups and 12 comparison groups that were compared on recidivism following release.

Comparisons were made between offenders with and without TA's on readmission rates for a fixed two year follow-up period following day parole, full parole, and statutory release (see Figure 3). Positive impacts on release outcome were observed for offenders released on full parole and statutory release. Overall, offenders participating in reintegration UTA's appeared to derive the most benefit. As expected, given that non-reintegration TA's should not impact outcome, differences were not observed between offenders released on full parole or statutory release with and without non-reintegration TA's. There appears to be minimal effect of reintegration TA participation on readmission rates following day parole release. In addition, individual reintegration ETA's were not found to have an effect on outcome following day parole, full parole or statutory release.

Figure 3



A further examination of the effect of risk level (low, high) indicated that both lower and higher risk offenders released on full parole or statutory release had lower readmission rates than offenders who did not participate. This benefit is greatest for offenders with reintegration UTA's and to a lesser degree for offenders with group ETA's.

These results indicate that offenders participating in group reintegration ETA's and reintegration UTA's prior to release on full parole or statutory release have lower rates of readmission than similarly matched offenders without these TA experiences. These results may reflect the accumulation of experiences offenders gather with multiple TA releases. Once a TA that requires a high level of supervision is

completed, such as an individual ETA, the next logical TA which is less supervised, such as a group ETA, is attempted. If, once again, the offender successfully completes the group ETA, an unescorted TA (UTA) may then be attempted. Therefore, by the time offenders are participating in UTA's, they are likely to have already participated in individual and group ETA's. The seemingly large effects of participation in UTA's may, in fact, reflect this accumulation of experiences, more so than the unique effect of UTA experience. If this is the case, then there is further support for the concept of gradual release as an important component of successful reintegration.

Conclusions

Given the low rate of failure (less than 1%) while on temporary absences, and the positive effect of TA participation on outcome, TA's are a safe and effective method of providing offenders opportunities for short periods of release and are a good first step in the process of gradual reintegration. In this way, TA's provide offenders with opportunities to establish credibility for future release, and once released, offenders with prior TA experience are likely to have better outcomes following release than those who had not participated in TA's. ■

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