

# Understanding employment: A prospective exploration of factors linked to community-based employment among federal offenders

Doctoral Dissertation, Carleton University<sup>1</sup>

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**O**ffender employment has played a pivotal role in corrections since the introduction of institutions, and has long been a topic of interest within criminological and correctional theory and practice. Employment, as one of the “Big Eight” factors related to recidivism, offers potential for intervention on various levels. Although employment is an important rehabilitative tool, little is known about the factors and processes that contribute to employment stability among offenders, as few systematic empirical studies have been conducted in this area. Furthermore, although recognized as important in contributing to offender reintegration, the employment construct has not been operationalized to adequately reflect its multidimensional nature. This study adopted a multimethod prospective approach to the assessment of factors that contribute to offender employment outcomes in the community. These factors were integrated within Andrews’ personal-interpersonal-community-reinforcement perspective (PIC-R) on criminal conduct. Additionally, the PIC-R perspective was operationalized within the current paper according to the framework of the theory of planned behaviour. This model, which predicts criminal behaviour from beliefs, attitudes, subjective norm, perceived behavioural control and intention, was extended within the present study to account for additional factors (for example, work attitudes) that are hypothesized to contribute to an offender’s employability. This article presents the model, results exploring employment outcomes for offenders during their first six months of release, and implications for developing and enhancing current employment interventions for offenders.

## Predicting employment using the PIC-R perspective

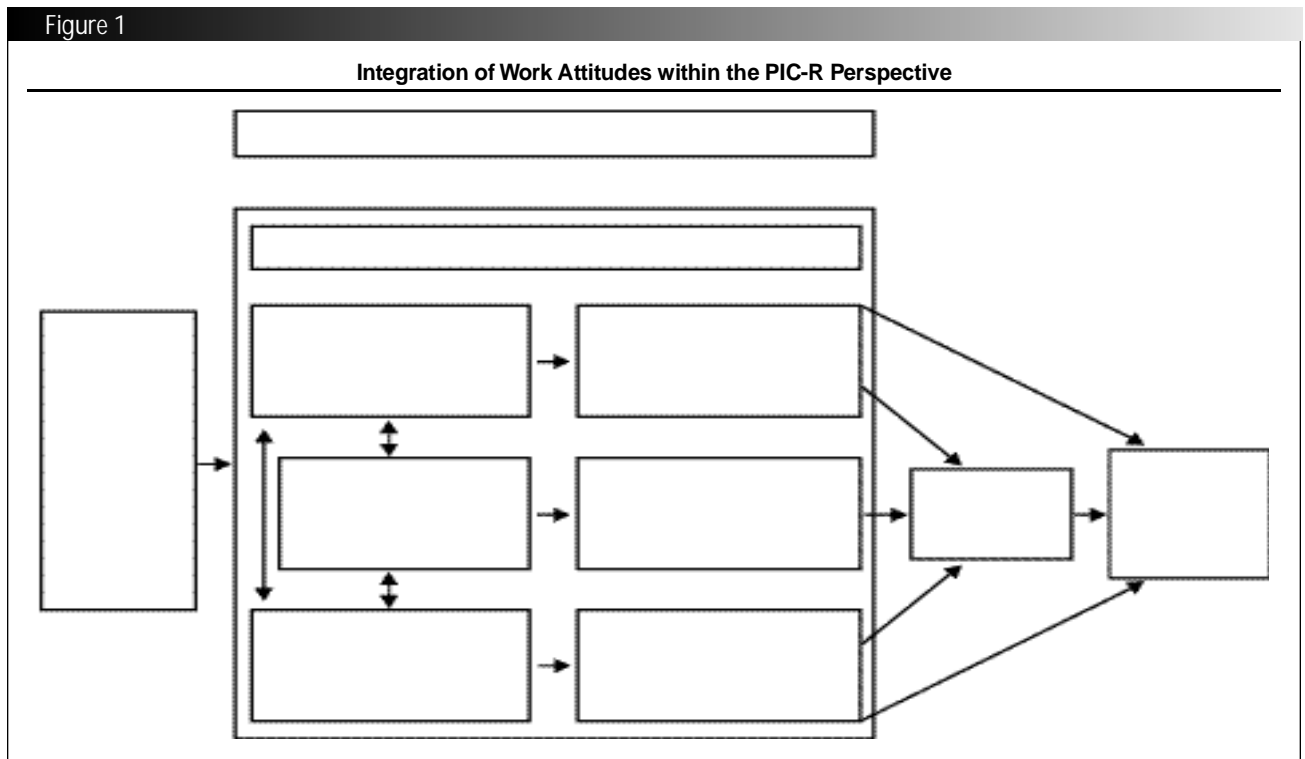
**T**he PIC-R perspective, formulated to account for factors related to criminal offending,<sup>4</sup> was operationalized by borrowing from Ajzen and Fishbein’s theory of reasoned action and Ajzen’s theory of planned behaviour. The theory employs a social learning perspective in its specification of the interrelationships between: personally-mediated events, comprised primarily of the individual’s

attitudes, values and beliefs, and personality, which in turn, impact upon personally-mediated control (such as, self-regulation and cognitive functioning); interpersonally-mediated control, consisting of the influence of others (such as, associates/ social support) via modeling, expressed approval, etc.; and automatic rewards, which typically gain their rewarding properties through previous experience. These proximal factors, in interaction with more distal contextual elements, influence the manner in which the individual perceives the costs/ rewards for criminal behaviour.

In the present study, the PIC-R perspective adopted the framework, and operationalized constructs used in predicting employment outcomes, according to the theory of planned behaviour. The pathway delineated by the theory of planned behaviour was retained, in its specification of intention as the immediate determinant of behaviour. Beliefs contribute to attitudes, which in turn contribute to intentions. Further, the various components of the model were reconceptualized to fit the theoretical framework espoused by the PIC-R perspective.

Moreover, the present study, in predicting community employment status for a group of offenders on conditional release, incorporated relevant work attitudes within the PIC-R perspective. The factors that were explored were either postulated to relate to employment outcomes (based on a comprehensive review of the literature), or those with a demonstrated empirical link to either employment outcomes, or reduced recidivism. Therefore, in examining the factors presumed to affect community employment status, both criminal attitudes and work attitudes were hypothesized to have an impact (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>

Given that this study is one of the first comprehensive explorations of employment outcomes for offenders, the analyses are exploratory and hypotheses were therefore proposed at a general level. The primary objective of this research was to gain an enhanced understanding of factors related to offender employment outcomes, and to determine if the



model would be of use in contributing to this enhanced understanding.

### Method

Newly released male federal offenders (between December 1998 and September 1999) from five different sites (in the Atlantic, Ontario and Prairies regions) were requested to participate in research designed to explore factors linked to community-based employment success. A total of 302 offenders volunteered to take part in the study. These participants shared similar risk and need profiles as the release population, with over 80% identified with medium to high-risk and need levels during intake assessment.

Offenders were asked to respond to a survey administered by a research assistant, and to complete a questionnaire. The survey explored issues related to employment experience prior to the current period of incarceration, during incarceration, and attempts to find work since release. The questionnaire was comprised of a number of standardized scales exploring the different constructs within each component of the model. The survey and questionnaire were supplemented with data derived from the Research Branch's automated systems, including the Offender Management System (OMS), offence and release databases. There were two assessment periods, the first approximately six weeks following release, and the second, six months after the first assessment period. The same survey and questionnaire were

re-administered during the six-month assessment period, with revisions in the checklist reflecting employment-related activity since release. Only 106 offenders participated in the six-month assessment; these offenders differed significantly from offenders who participated only in the one-month assessment,<sup>6</sup> somewhat limiting the conclusions that can be derived from the results.

This multiwave longitudinal design was used to assess change over time in the predictor variables (for example, attitudes, self-efficacy, etc.) and to track change in employment status during the first six months of release. Analyses were conducted to evaluate the factors most strongly linked to employment outcomes at one month (status, quality of employment) and six months (status, quality of employment, number of weeks employed).

Employment status was simply a dichotomous measure of whether the offender was employed (yes/no) at the time of the assessment (at one month and at six months). Forty four percent of the sample were employed at one month, and 70% (of the 106 remaining offenders) at six months. The following components were used to evaluate the quality of employment at one month: type of occupation (skilled/unskilled); salary meeting needs (meets needs/does not meet needs); satisfaction with income (satisfied/not satisfied), with a higher score indicating a higher perceived quality of employment. The same factors were used to assess quality of employment during the second assessment at six months.

At six months, employment retention was assessed by evaluating the number of weeks employed since release. Thus, the six-month behavioural criterion accounted for frequent job changes evidenced by the offender. It is anticipated that these employment factors measure the *extent* to which the offender is employed, and avoids strict reliance on dichotomous assessment (employed/unemployed) that does not necessarily reflect change in employment status over time. These indicators were obtained from the Community Employment Checklist, administered verbally by the research assistant to the offender.

## Results

A series of analyses were conducted to explore relationships between predictor and outcome variables at one and six months. First, correlational analyses explored the association between each component of the model (such as, distal factors, behavioural beliefs, etc.), and employment outcomes (status, quality, and number of weeks employed). Variables with significant relationships with the outcome variables were then entered into individual regression equations, and these variables with significant relationships were entered into an overall regression equation. This approach allowed for exploration of the contributions of individual variables within each component of the theoretical model.

Results showed that a number of variables were related to employment status and quality at one month. Not surprisingly, unemployment rates were negatively linked to employment status and quality, with higher rates linked to unemployment and a lower quality of employment at one month. Likewise, Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) employment need ratings and overall need ratings were both negatively associated with employment status. Offenders who reported higher levels of affective ties to employment were more likely to be employed. Similarly, offenders who said they had a good chance of finding/keeping a job over the next six months (with options ranging from "Poor," "OK," to "Good") were more likely to be employed at one month. Virtually identical findings were obtained for quality of employment at one month: unemployment rate, chance, and overall need were predictive. Additionally, skill level was linked, with skilled employment prior to incarceration associated with higher quality of employment. Finally, the extent to which offenders associate with individuals involved in the crime was negatively linked with quality of employment (those with more criminal association had lower levels of quality of employment).

At six months, unemployment rate was related to employment status, but not to quality of employment

or number of weeks employed. The offenders' perceived chance of finding/keeping employment was the primary predictor of employment status and number of weeks employed, whereas offenders' skill level prior to incarceration was the most important predictor of quality of employment at six months.

Finally, results obtained from the six month test re-administration showed that generally, dynamic assessment contributes incrementally to the prediction of employment outcomes at six months (see dissertation for a more detailed presentation of the results).

## Discussion and Implications

This study was one of the first to adopt a comprehensive theoretical model in the exploration of employment outcomes for offenders on conditional release. Preliminary results demonstrate that intention (chance) was one of the most important and consistent predictors of employment outcomes, which provides supports for the model, given its proximity to behaviour. Additionally, social support (and particularly, affective ties to employment) was significant in its contribution to employment outcomes. The model was useful in providing a framework for the study of employment, and will be subjected to further analyses to explore the relative contributions of each component of the model to employment outcomes.

Moreover, rather than pure reliance on risk factors to predict negative outcomes (for example, recidivism), the present study incorporated the assessment of relevant competencies, attitudes, values, and beliefs in exploring employment outcomes. Results indicated the utility of incorporating offender competencies, along with risk and need factors, in evaluating employment status, quality of employment, and retention.

This research demonstrated the importance of considering risk and need factors for their contributions to employment outcomes for offenders. Results provide further validation of the ability of the OIA process to accurately identify offenders with employment needs. Notably, these need ratings were predictive of employment outcomes, with employment needs consistently negatively related to work-related outcomes (for example, offenders with higher employment needs were less likely to find work).

Findings from the regression analyses reveal specific areas that should be targeted for intervention. A finding of particular interest was the strong relationship between the offender's rating of his chance of finding/maintaining a job over the six months.

These ratings are useful in that they show that offenders' employment outcomes are strongly linked to their intention to find and/or keep a job, which offers potential for intervention. Intention is intertwined with employment experience and the offender's sense of self efficacy; it is, therefore, amenable to change, in that the provision of relevant vocational/employment training and experience that contributes to skill development is likely to influence the offender's perception of what is attainable (for example, outcome expectancies). Furthermore, skill development emanating from vocational training is important, given the demonstrated relationship between skilled employment and quality of employment obtained in the community.

Numerous implications may be derived from this research, including areas in which to allocate resources, with the intention of increasing the likelihood that offenders are able to attain and retain employment. First, the increased knowledge of factors linked to employment status, quality of employment, and length of time employed since release derived from this research can be used to complement current assessment procedures. This will enable parole officers and employment counsellors to systematically evaluate and track offenders' progress on factors that have been identified as problematic and that have a demonstrated link with community-based employment outcomes for offenders. With the ability to better identify individuals who have employment needs, parole officers and employment counsellors can then monitor offenders' progress and guide them into

appropriate employment interventions (for example, job search and placement versus job skills training for offenders with fewer employment needs, intensive programming/training for offenders with considerable needs).

A secondary outcome of this research relates to employment programming. In 1980, Braithwaite advocated the following: "*On the face of it, the solution seems simple enough — train prisoners in legitimate occupational skills which will enable them to get a job which is remunerative and satisfying; then criminal behaviour will become a relatively less satisfying option*" (p. 15).<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, in the decades following Braithwaite's pivotal work, employment intervention has been eclipsed by other programs (such as, cognitive skills programming), to the extent that we cannot unequivocally claim that employment interventions systematically reduce recidivism. Employment must be reinstated as an important need area requiring intensive and systematic consideration. Findings from the present research can be used to complement our existing knowledge of program effectiveness as a gateway to the development, implementation, and evaluation of effective intervention strategies (for example, employment placement and/or programs) for offenders with identified employment needs. It is only by providing offenders with effective programming that allows for skills development and work experience (provided in accordance with their level of identified employment need), that they will be given a legitimate opportunity to successfully reintegrate into the community. ■

<sup>1</sup> Abstract from Gillis, C. A. (2001). *Understanding employment: A prospective exploration of factors linked to community-based employment among federal offenders*. Doctoral dissertation, Ottawa, ON: Carleton University.

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<sup>4</sup> The PIC-R perspective explores both facilitating (i.e., risk) factors, such as a history of criminal behaviour, and inhibitory factors (i.e., strengths), such as endorsement of pro-social attitudes.

<sup>5</sup> These factors, unified into the theoretical model, include: beliefs regarding outcomes associated with employment and crime, work involvement, work ethic, and the value attributed to employment; social support for employment and crime (resources/models and

affective ties to employment and crime); employment history (employment stability and skill level before incarceration, employment needs) and criminal history (SIR score, risk/need levels, and previous number of offences); occupational and criminal self efficacy (the degree to which offenders feel they are competent with respect to employment and criminal behaviour); attitudes about employment and crime; and intention to find employment (chance of finding/maintaining work over the next six months).

<sup>6</sup> Offenders who participated in both assessments were older, lower risk as measured by the revised SIR scale, had a more stable history of employment and fewer offences prior to this sentence.

<sup>7</sup> Braithwaite, J. (1980). *Prisons, education and work: Towards a national employment strategy for prisoners*. Queensland, Australia: Australian Institute of Criminology.