



# Emerging Research Results

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## Perspectives of employment needs: Emerging results from qualitative focus groups with Aboriginal offenders

**KEY WORDS:** *Aboriginal, offender, prison, employment*

### Why we are doing this study

Aboriginal offenders, comprising diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit identities, are overrepresented in Canadian federal custody and are more likely to be unemployed on admission and have lower levels of education than non-Aboriginal offenders (Trevethan, Moore, & Rastin, 2002). We undertook this research to better understand the actual lived experiences of diverse Aboriginal offenders in relation to employment both in the community and while incarcerated.

### What we are doing

Consistent with Aboriginal oral traditions, we approached this research using a qualitative methodology. During the summer of 2011, focus groups were conducted with Aboriginal offenders in each of CSC's five regions. Two focus groups were conducted in each region for a total of ten groups with 49 offender participants. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure offenders from all three Aboriginal cultural groups were represented and that offenders who had experienced a previous release were included where possible.

### What we have found so far

When discussing experiences with employment prior to incarceration, the participants described a disjointed history of often uncertified work in the vocational, trade, or labour industries. Frustration with the current educational system, and the relationship between the offenders' addictions and maintaining employment, also emerged as themes. Without prompting, participants openly discussed the impact they felt colonization and racism has had on their past experiences with employment.

Regarding employment while incarcerated, the offenders expressed a strong desire for skills-based trade training and accreditation and greater opportunities for meaningful work in the institution.

They clearly expressed that opportunities should match Aboriginal learning styles to be of most benefit. Although the participants acknowledged efforts being made by institutional and community groups to assist Aboriginal peoples regarding employment, they noted communication barriers around receiving accurate and timely information on services which often made it difficult to benefit from such opportunities.

As illustrated below, the challenge of the transition from the institution to the community was clear:

*"When I was out I had to get those tickets on my own - I had to find the resource people out there but if a person is prepared with that stuff before they walk out of here - they have a better chance of finding and securing employment out there."*

Additional discussion regarding employment experiences once released included the challenges of work on the reserve and in the community and, consistent with experiences prior to incarceration, the impact of one's addiction on maintaining employment.

### What it means

This preliminary analysis supports the ongoing need for a focus on skills-based employment programs in the institution, as well as employment related support upon release. Efforts to assist Aboriginal offenders in these areas should take into account the potential impact of cultural differences, societal expectations, intergenerational trauma, and experiences of racism.

### References

Trevethan, S., Moore, J-P. & Rastin, C.J. (2002). A profile of Aboriginal offenders in federal facilities and serving time in the community. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14(3), 17-19.

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