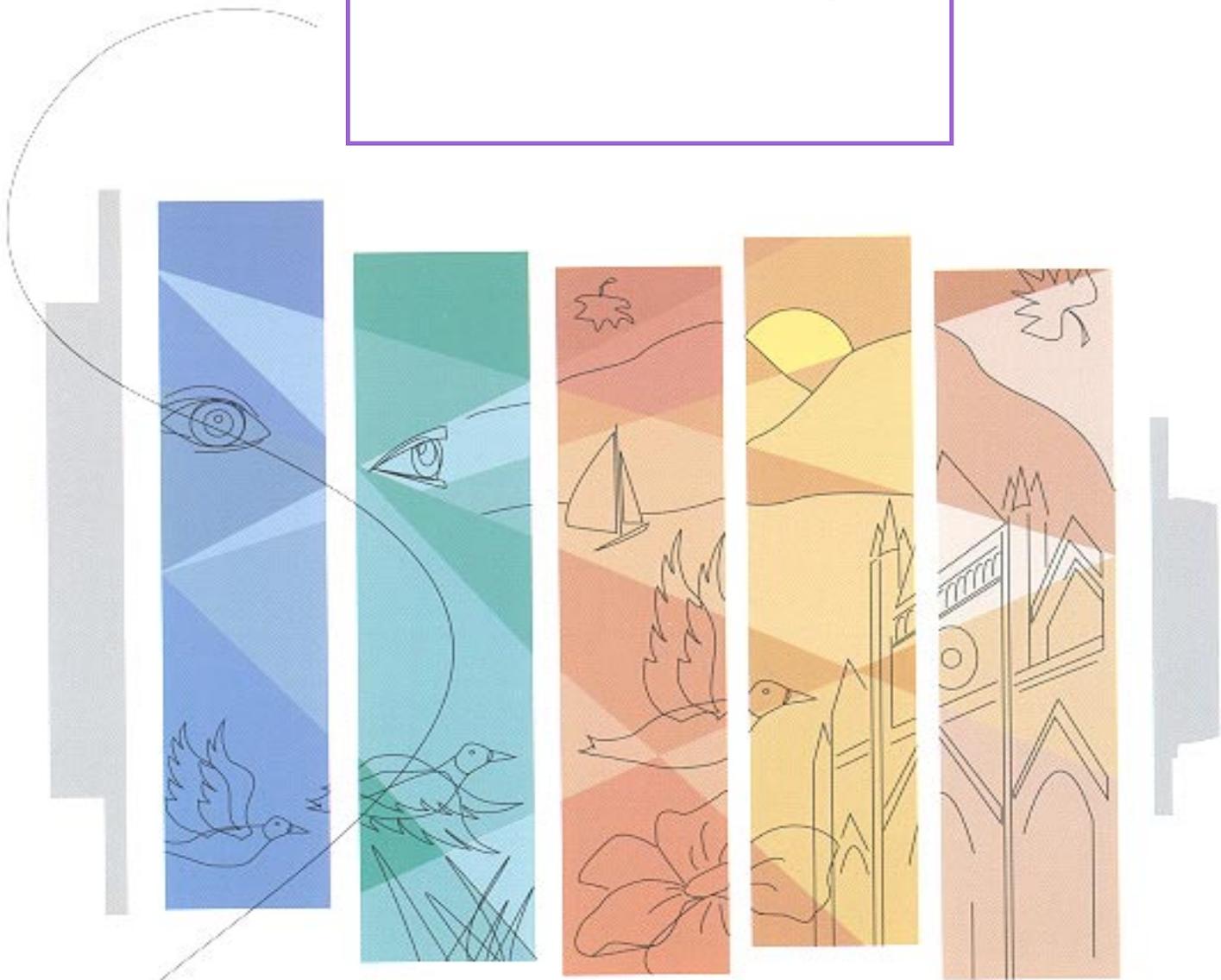




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**Prison Work Programs and Post –Release
Outcome: A Preliminary Investigation**



Prison Work Programs and Post-release Outcome: A Preliminary Investigation

by

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I: Introduction

A considerable amount of correctional effort, both in Canada and the United States, has been directed towards the development and maintenance of prison industries (Miller, Funke, & Grieser, 1983). In addition, it has been widely accepted that the occupational skills developed during participation in prison industries enhances offender post-release employment, thereby decreasing the likelihood of recidivism (Rossi, Berk, & Lenihan, 1980). In keeping with this view, offender employment programs such as CORCAN in Canada and UNICOR in the United States have been established to provide offenders with work experience and training comparable to workers in the private sector. The expectation is that employing offenders will offset both industry and incarceration costs, improve the employability of offenders upon release and have some impact on post-release recidivism.

Although preliminary evaluations of Canadian prison industry programs revealed that program participation increased inmate employability (Moors & Naoum, 1982), further investigation was recommended to obtain information on post-release outcome. Despite the fact that recidivism statistics are often used as a benchmark for assessing the "effectiveness" of correctional programs, the use of this outcome criteria has been questioned in this area (Hylton, 1979/80). However, as Gottfredson (1980) pointed out, stressing a criterion problem is a common technique for attempting to refute claims of "effectiveness" or to dismiss claims of "ineffectiveness". Nevertheless, several published studies have reported on the extent to which prison work experience is related to post-release recidivism (Knox & Stacey, 1978).

In a Canadian study, Waller (1974) compared adult offenders released from Ontario federal penitentiaries who remained free in the community with those who were re-arrested within 12 months. Waller found that having held a skilled job(s) in prison, holding a prison job less long, and having spent fewer months in occupational skills training were unrelated to post-release recidivism.

Similarly, Markley, Flynn, and Bercaw-Dooen's (1983) five year follow-up study of adult offenders that compared 101 inmates who had completed at least three-fourths of an occupational skills

training program to a matched group (i.e., age, sex, ethnic origin, educational attainment, and skill level prior to training) of adult offenders sentenced to the same detention center found no significant difference in the rate of post-release recidivism (arrest). Although offender skills training was shown to be unrelated to recidivism, Markley et al. (1983) did report that other variables seemed to affect outcome. For example, those offenders who were younger, single or divorced/separated, and not living with family prior to their incarceration had higher levels of recidivism. It was further suggested that inmates involved in work programs may require additional programming (such as educational, financial, family, substance abuse/use and emotional) to obtain maximum benefit from occupational skills training.

Prison industry participation appears to be logically consistent with the notion of offender rehabilitation (Parker, 1978). But, as Glaser has pointed out (1964), many prisons have trouble providing meaningful work, lack incentives to properly motivate offenders, poorly record work performance, and place only a small number of offenders in jobs that utilize their prison industry experience in community jobs.

Although Glaser (1964) contends that it would be surprising to find anyone expecting to find a relationship between prison work experience and recidivism rates, there has been (and continues to be) widespread interest in modernizing both the goals and operations of prison industries (Miller, Funke, & Grieser, 1983). A list of well-established correlates of criminal behavior includes long periods of unemployment and points to low levels of personal educational, vocational or financial achievement and, in particular, unstable employment as a major recidivism risk factor (Andrews & Bonta, 1994). Indeed, a follow-up study of 573 recent releases from federal institutions (within six months) found that offenders with employment problems had a greater likelihood of failing on conditional release (Motiuk & Brown, 1994).

This study is a first look at the relationship between inmate participation in CORCAN programs and post-release outcome. Our focus in this first report is limited to one important aspect of a post-release investigation -- specifically, the ability of an industrial program to impact on recidivism.

II Present Study

A. Major Aim of the Study

The primary focus of this research was to explore the post-release recidivism of former CORCAN participants.

B. Sample Selection

A pool of potential participants was obtained from CORCAN program site representatives for the calendar years 1992, 1993 and 1994. A study sample was then created by identifying adult male offenders who had started and completed a prison work program within the three-year period. Inmates whose participation in a CORCAN program was less than six months (from start to end) were excluded from the sample.

From the 2,026 offenders who had uninterrupted participation in an offender employment program for at least six months, 300 were selected because they were within one-month of their release date. That is, they had been employed over an extended period just prior to their return to the community. Further selection criteria produced a sample of 277 offenders who had been released and were available for at least a one-year follow-up.

C. Data Gathering Strategy

Three types of information was gathered: 1) background characteristics -- admission date, release date, release status, region, age, ethnicity, type of offence, sentence length; 2) work program information -- institution, type of program, start date, end date, time spent in program; and 3) post-release recidivism data -- information on re-admission to federal custody (with and without new offenses) and new convictions.

Most of the information was extracted from the Correctional Service of Canada's Offender Management System (an automated database). Information as to each offender's nature of work, starting date and termination date were obtained from the various CORCAN sites. Reconviction data was obtained directly from the Canadian Police Information Centre system.

III Findings

A. Sample Characteristics

The former CORCAN participants in the follow-up sample were mostly non-native (88.4%), about half were younger than 31, two-thirds were single, and nearly three-quarters were serving their first federal term of incarceration and serving a sentence of less than five years (76.5%). Nearly one-half of the sample was incarcerated for a new offence, while the other half had their conditional release revoked (about 15% for a new offence). The offenders participated in 32 different federal institutions and were involved in either fabrication (36.9%), industries (28.2%), agriculture (21.8%), painting (8.7%), micro-filming (1.5%), welding (1.5%), printing (1%) or other (.5%). Job description codes were not made available for about one-third of the sample.

Of the 277 offenders who were available for at least a one-year post-release follow-up, 65 (23.5%) were released on day parole, 52 (18.8%) were released on full parole and 152 (54.9%) were released on statutory release. Eight participants (2.8%) were released at the end of their sentence. The average length of post-release follow-up was 1.6 years (range = 1 to 3 years).

B. Post-release Recidivism: Federal Re-admission

Table 1 illustrates the relationship between type of release and return to federal custody -- both for any re-admission (conditional release revocation for technical reasons or for a new offence, or commission of an offence while not on conditional release) and re-admission for a new offence(s). For any re-admission to federal custody, we see that the day parole group had the highest rate of return (54.5%) relative to the follow-up sample base rate of return (39.5%). However, this changes dramatically when we look at returns to federal custody for a new offence(s). The former CORCAN participants released on statutory release had a significantly higher rate of return for a new offence(s) relative to the other release groups ($p < .03$).

It would appear that the overall rate of (any) re-admission to federal custody for CORCAN participants is comparable to the general offender population (39.5% versus 37.1%). However, former participants in prison work programs released on full parole and statutory release seem

to have fared considerably better than the general population in terms of any return to federal incarceration (17.3% versus 25.1% and 40.8% versus 46.6%, respectively) but did not do as well as the general population on day parole (54.5% versus 41.6%) [Nouwens, Motiuk & Boe, 1993].

Table 1. Federal Re-admission Rates by Release Type

| RELEASE TYPE | | FEDERAL RE-ADMISSION (ANY) | FEDERAL RE-ADMISSION (NEW OFFENCE) |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| DAY PAROLE | 23.5% (65) | 54.5% (38) | 9.2% (6) |
| FULL PAROLE | 18.8% (52) | 17.3% (9) | 1.9% (1) |
| STATUTORY RELEASE | 54.9% (152) | 40.8% (62) | 17.8% (27) |
| SENTENCE EXPIRY | 2.8% (8) | n/a | n/a |
| BASE RATE | | 39.5% (109) | 12.3% (34) |

Note: n/a = not applicable.

Table 2 sets out the regional distribution of federal re-admission rates [any and for a new offence(s)] of the former CORCAN participants. Offenders from the Quebec (35.4%) and Prairies (28.9%) regions accounted for the largest proportion of the follow-up sample. For any return to federal custody, we see that the Quebec and Pacific regions had the highest rates of re-admission (46.9% and 46.7%, respectively), and both rates were higher than the follow-up sample base rate of return (39.4%). Interestingly, only the Quebec region had a significantly higher rate of return for a new offence(s) relative to the other regions ($p < .001$), while no CORCAN participants in the Pacific region were returned to federal custody for a new offence.

Table 2. Regional Distribution of Federal Re-admission Rates

| REGION | | FEDERAL RE-ADMISSION (ANY) | FEDERAL RE-ADMISSION (NEW OFFENCE) |
|------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|--|
| ATLANTIC | 11.2% (31) | 32.3% (10) | 3.2% (1) |
| QUEBEC | 35.4% (98) | 46.9% (46) | 23.5% (23) |
| ONTARIO | 13.7% (38) | 23.7% (9) | 7.9% (3) |
| PRAIRIES | 28.9% (80) | 37.5% (30) | 8.8% (7) |
| PACIFIC | 10.8% (30) | 46.7% (14) | 0.0% (0) |
| BASE RATE | | 39.5% (109) | 12.3% (34) |

C. Controlling for Risk: Statistical Information on Recidivism

To estimate the level of risk of re-offending for the former CORCAN participants, we administered the Statistical Information on Recidivism-(revised) scale. However, unavailable criminal history information only allowed for the assessments of 269 offenders. Table 3 breaks down the SIR-(revised) risk groups by release type. While the average SIR-(revised) total score for the CORCAN participants was -1.3 (SD = 9.6, R = -22 to 23), slightly more than half of the group were in the "very good" to "fair" risk groups (meaning 50% or better probability of no re-arrest within three years post-release).

Table 3
The Distribution of CORCAN Participants Assessed
by
the Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale-
(revised)

| Risk Category | p | Day Parole | | Full Parole | | Stat Rel/Sent Exp | |
|------------------|-----|------------|------|-------------|------|-------------------|------|
| | | n | % | n | % | n | % |
| Very Poor | 66% | 21 | 35.0 | 4 | 7.8 | 43 | 27.4 |
| Poor | 60% | 5 | 8.3 | 9 | 17.3 | 34 | 21.6 |
| Fair | 50% | 7 | 11.7 | 6 | 11.5 | 28 | 17.8 |
| Good | 33% | 11 | 18.3 | 7 | 13.5 | 26 | 16.6 |
| Very Good | 20% | 16 | 26.7 | 26 | 50.0 | 26 | 16.6 |
| Total | | 60 | 22.3 | 52 | 19.3 | 157 | 58.4 |

Note: p = probability of re-arrest within three years.

Table 4 breaks down the re-admission, conviction for any new offence and conviction for a violent offence rates according to risk level (low, high) and release type. The SIR-(revised) scale was significantly related to re-admission ($r = .23, p < .001$) and conviction for any new offence ($r = .21, p < .01$) but unrelated to conviction for a violent offence. While higher risk level was associated with increased rates of negative post-release outcomes, the former CORCAN participants were found to be performing as well as, or better, than expected in relation to new offences post-release.

Interestingly, more than three-quarters of the former CORCAN participants assessed as high-risk and released on day parole were returned to federal custody, but 40% of these offenders were never convicted of a new offence. A similar result occurred for those assessed as low-risk and released on day parole. On the other hand, an almost equivalent percentage of former CORCAN participants assessed as high-risk and released on either full parole or statutory release were both re-admitted and convicted of a new offence.

Table 4
Outcomes of CORCAN Participants by
Risk Level

| Risk | | Day Parole | | Full Parole | | Stat Rel/Sent Exp | |
|------------------------------|--------------------|------------|------|-------------|------|-------------------|------|
| | | n/N | % | n/N | % | n/N | % |
| Low p=33% | Re- | 14/34 | 41.2 | 6/39 | 15.4 | 30/80 | 37.5 |
| | admission | 6 | 17.7 | 4 | 10.3 | 22 | 27.5 |
| | Reconvicted | 3 | 8.8 | 0 | 0.0 | 9 | 11.3 |
| | Violent | | | | | | |
| High p=63% | Re- | 20/26 | 76.9 | 4/13 | 30.8 | 39/77 | 50.7 |
| | admission | 12 | 46.2 | 4 | 30.8 | 35 | 45.5 |
| | Reconvicted | 6 | 23.1 | 1 | 7.7 | 13 | 16.9 |
| | Violent | | | | | | |
| Total p=48% | Re- | 34/60 | 56.7 | 10/52 | 19.3 | 69/157 | 44.0 |
| | admission | 18 | 30.0 | 8 | 15.4 | 57 | 36.3 |
| | Reconvicted | 9 | 15.0 | 1 | 1.9 | 22 | 14.0 |
| | Violent | | | | | | |

D. Release Timing, Risk and Outcome

An important question that remains, however, is whether there is a relationship between prison work program participation and the subsequent timing of release. To examine this possibility, we postulated that an offender released before having served four-ninths of their sentence could be considered as having been released "early" while offenders released after serving more than four-ninths of their sentence could be considered as having been released "late". The assumption is that being eligible for full parole at one-third and, within one-third of the time left to serve until statutory release, would constitute an "early" release which is well below the average time served by offenders prior to release. Using this framework, two-thirds of the CORCAN participants were released "early" in their sentences. Although SIR-(revised) risk categories were found to be unrelated to timing of release, type of release was significantly related to the amount of time served. Interestingly, the majority of former CORCAN participants on day parole and full parole were released "early" in their sentence (97% and 85%, respectively).

IV: Discussion

The results of this preliminary investigation indicate that uninterrupted participation in prison work programs immediately prior to release may have some positive impact on offender post-release recidivism, particularly for lower risk offenders. Specifically, we found that CORCAN participants released on full parole were considerably less likely to return to federal custody for any reason than offenders without such experience. The further finding that employment program participants released on day parole had higher rates of return to custody than other offenders is not surprising given the relatively large proportion (more than one third) of "very poor" risk cases in this sample. The fact that a higher risk level was associated with negative post-release outcome is consistent with the literature on risk prediction. This points to the importance of risk assessment in identifying candidates for discretionary release. However, despite this, CORCAN participants performed as well as, or better than, expected in relation to the commission of new offences post-release.

Apart from the other potential effects of prison industry participation (such as reducing idleness and providing a chance to earn money) and some offenders' need for enhanced occupational skills training prior to release, a few tentative conclusions can be drawn as to further positive results. Apparently, some inmates receive positive reinforcement for working before entering prison. Once they begin serving a period of incarceration, work seemingly becomes a coping mechanism. It is, therefore, suggested that participation in prison work programs be encouraged early in the incarceration of lower risk offenders who must serve a portion of their sentence in custody.

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