

The impact of community-based employment on offender reintegration

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Research findings have solidly situated unstable employment and a lack of conventional ambition as important risk and need factors among offenders (i.e., linked to an increased likelihood of recidivism when not effectively addressed). However, many methodological deficits have been noted in the research methodology exploring the impact of employment on offender reintegration. Given these constraints, we cannot unequivocally claim that employment interventions systematically reduce recidivism. The current research was not undertaken to examine the impact of an employment program in reducing recidivism. Rather, the intent of this study was to explore the specific relationship between employment status and community outcomes for groups of federal offenders: those employed while on conditional release, and a matched comparison group of offenders who were unemployed. Results are presented, and implications discussed as they relate to future research and community employment initiatives for offenders.

Background

Research has identified unstable employment and lack of conventional ambition as important need factors among offenders² with as many as 75% of offenders identified with employment needs upon entry to federal institutions.³ Furthermore, researchers have reported the reintegrative effect of skilled employment, or a history of employment prior to incarceration, for offenders released to the community.⁴ These findings illustrate the importance of assessing factors construed as employment deficits (e.g., lack of employment skills) and competencies (e.g., strong employment history prior to incarceration) for their contributions to community-based outcomes for offenders⁵ and also demonstrate the potential role of employment intervention in contributing to successful community reintegration for offenders. In sum, whether employment is viewed as a protective factor or a deficit, empirical evidence supports the role of employment in contributing to community outcomes for offenders.

Employment programming and outcome

Methodological weaknesses have been noted by numerous researchers attempting to review the employment literature,⁶ including definitional issues (e.g., defining variables in a dichotomous manner), which overlook important 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 co-morbidity 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.

The limitations in research methodology designed to explore the efficacy of employment interventions in contributing to reduced recidivism were aptly and succinctly summarized by Ryan:⁷ “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 thus 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).

Findings regarding the impact of employment training have been equivocal,⁸ with some studies reporting positive effects of employment on recidivism, and others reporting limited or no effects. Some reviewers, based on a qualitative analysis of the literature, have adopted a fairly optimistic outlook on the impact of employment training on recidivism.⁹ Pearson and Lipton,¹⁰ in their meta-analytic review of educational and vocational programs, stated: “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” (Abstract, italics in original).

Method

The present study was designed to explore the impact of employment on offenders’ community-based outcomes (i.e., measures of sustained reintegration, including length of time in the community), while controlling for risk and need variables that impact community reintegration. For the purpose of these analyses, all available data for federally sentenced offenders were extracted from the Correctional Service of Canada’s (CSC’s) automated database (Offender Management System; OMS). Community employment information was available for 23,525 federal offenders released on a conditional release between January 1, 1998 and January 1, 2005. Approximately 95% were men ($N=22,269$) and 5% were women ($N=1,256$)*.

The employment experiences of federal offenders conditionally released to the community was identified through CSC’s Offender Management System. Upon identifying the ‘employed’ group, the matched group was developed using SAS (Statistical Analysis System) software. Next, offender identifiers for both groups were linked to those in the OMS data containing information relevant to the study (demographic information, sentence information, and ratings associated with the static and dynamic levels of intervention).

The population was divided into two groups: offenders recorded as being employed between their release date and the end of their sentence and those who were unemployed. The ‘employed’ group was then randomly matched to the ‘unemployed’ group, with the matching criteria controlling for time, opportunity and tendency. Matching criteria also addressed the issue of co-morbidity in offender needs.

Specifically, the groups were matched on gender, risk level, release year, sentence length, several dynamic factors,** and the regional statistic area classification (SAC)*** groupings which corresponded to the offenders’ designated supervision office. The matching process yielded samples of 4,640 men and 156 women.****

The information was subjected to survival analysis, a statistical technique that estimates the time taken to reach an event and the rate of occurrence of that event. This type of analysis was used to draw comparisons between employment groups across three events or outcome measures: 1) any return to federal custody before the end of sentence; 2) a return to federal custody with a new offence before end of sentence; and 3) a return to federal custody without a new offence before end of sentence. Comparisons were drawn for men and women separately.

Results

The median time to outcome was used as a measure of central tendency for the survival data. An examination of the release cohort revealed that the survival curves for employment were significantly different for men and women [$\chi^2(1, N=24,061)=19.40, p.001$]. The median time to employment was 6 months for men and 10 months for women. However, as illustrated in Figure 1, both survival curves eventually converged, indicating that over time, there were fewer differences in employment rates by gender.

When compared to their matched counterparts, employed men were more likely to remain on conditional release until the end of their sentence [$\chi^2(1, N=4,653)=357.40, p.001$]. The median time to return was also later for the employed group (11 months versus 37 months, respectively). Employed men were also less likely to return to federal custody with a new offence [$\chi^2(1, N=4,653)=86.71, p.001$] or technical revocation [$\chi^2(1, N=4,653)=128.62, p.001$] (see Figures 2, 3 and 4).

For women offenders, the employed group was more likely to remain on conditional release until the end of their sentence [$\chi^2(1, N=156)=9.09, p.01$]. An examination of the survival curves (see Figure 5) reveals that at the end of the study period, approximately 70% of the employed group remained on conditional release compared to approximately 55% of the unemployed group. Low base rates for returns with a new offence precluded any estimation of the median time in the community. However, the employed group was less likely to return with a new offence than their matched counterparts [$\chi^2(1, N=156)=8.54, p.05$]. There were no significant between group differences for technical revocations.

Figure 1

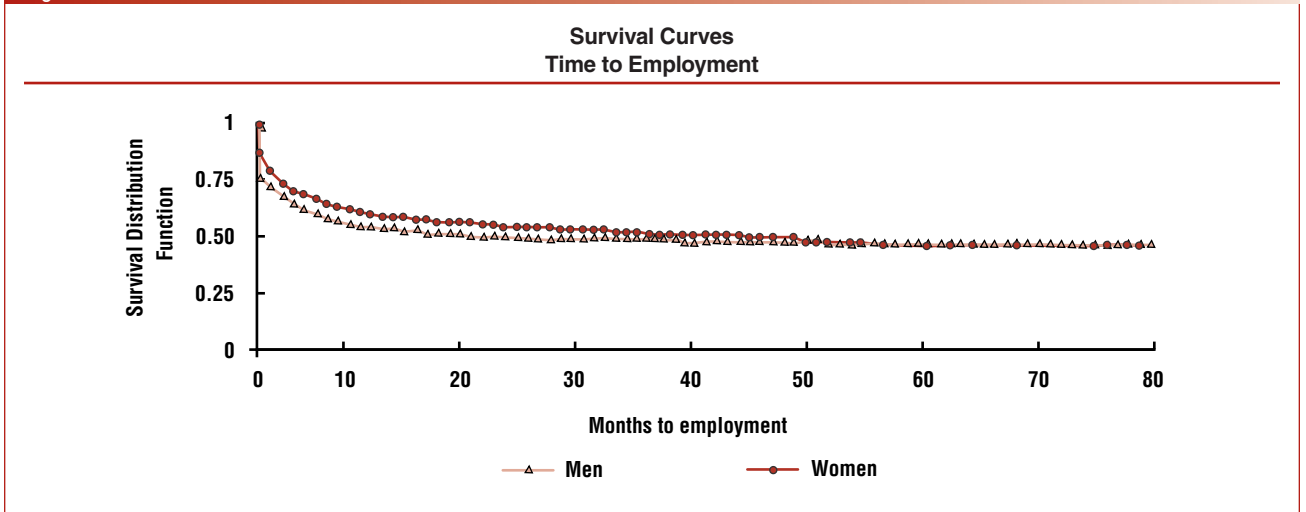


Figure 2

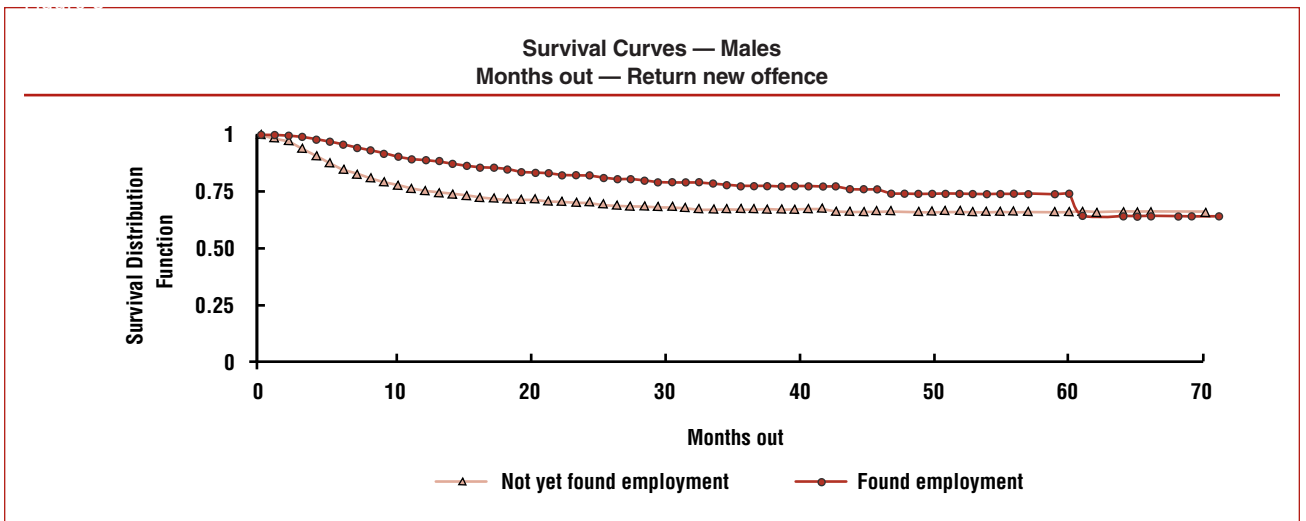
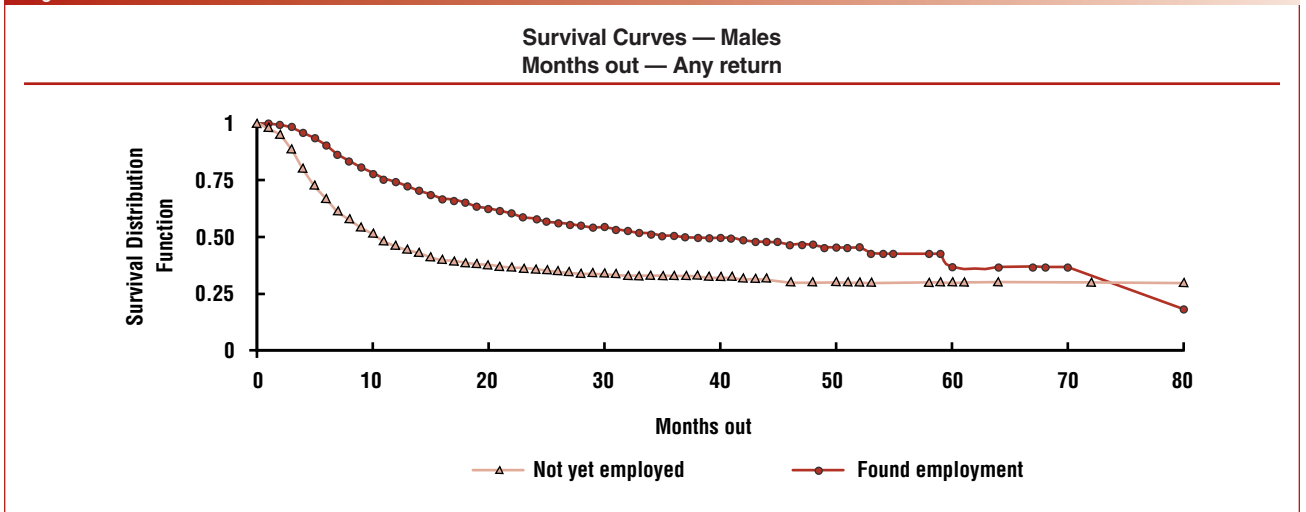


Figure 4

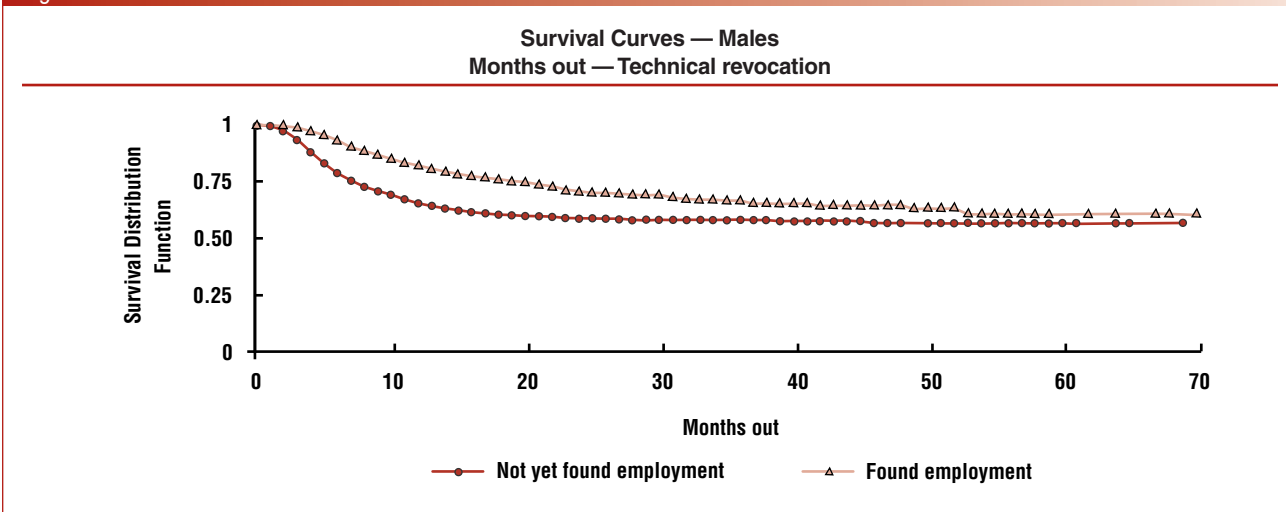
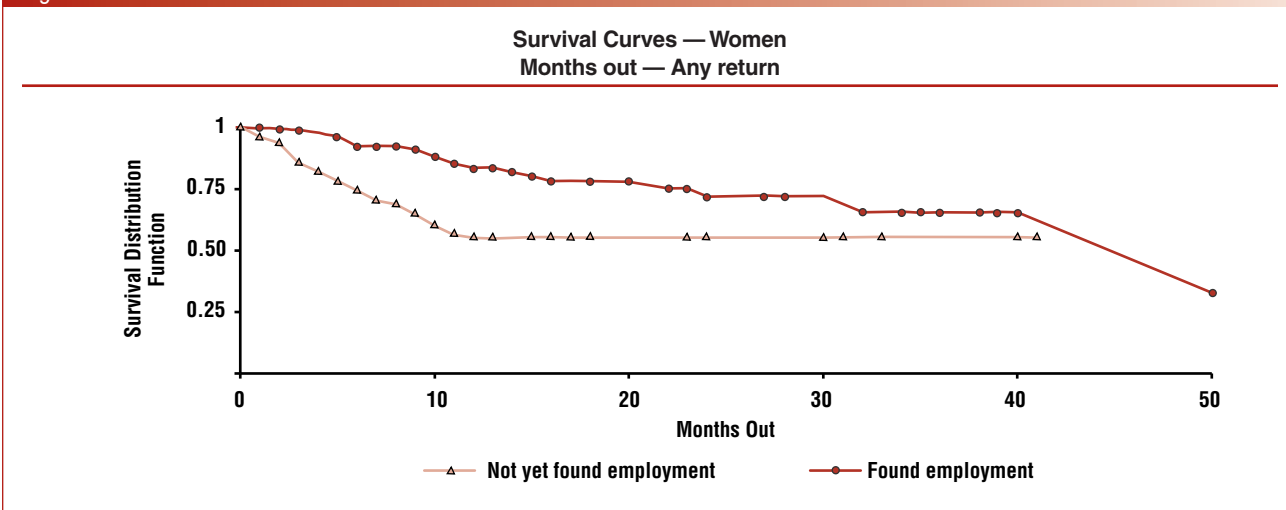


Figure 5



Discussion and Implications

This research provides information on federal offenders' community employment outcomes, yielding data that to date, has not been available. First, the results provide a baseline estimate of the average length of time it takes for men and women offenders to find work while on conditional release. Whereas men who find work take a median time of 6 months, women tend to obtain work after 10 months in the community.

Additionally, this study provides an important contribution to the employment literature, using systematic and controlled data to situate job acquisition in the community as an important factor in offender reintegration. Specifically, the study responds to many of the criticisms levelled at previous employment research, namely, the lack of

a comparison group. Comparisons on community-based outcomes for the offenders in the current sample showed the impact of employment in contributing to an increased likelihood of successful sentence completion, a longer period of time in the community, and a decreased likelihood of returning to the institution for a new offence or technical violation.

These findings have implications for community-based programming, emphasizing the need for readily-accessible employment interventions for offenders as they are released to the community. Although not a program per se, CSC's community employment centres provide employment services to conditionally-released offenders to prepare them to find work. The services focus on providing employment services to offenders, including individual employment assessment, counselling, job search techniques and on-the-job placements

to offenders released to the community. A preliminary exploration of the centres was recently conducted by Gillis & Crutcher.¹¹ This profile, along with recent evaluation findings,¹² demonstrates that the centres are meeting an important demand, responding to the risk and need principles in providing services to offenders with identified employment needs. For offenders with considerable barriers, more intensive employment programming may be necessary, and should be accessible to offenders prior to release, or as they are released to the community.

Employment, as a program, has been eclipsed over the past decades with the advent and wide

distribution of programs designed to address other need areas (e.g., substance abuse and violence). Employment initiatives have existed since the advent of institutions, yet as noted by Andrews et al.,¹³ it can be said that “the employment factor, for all of the traditional attention it has received in corrections, has not received the quality of attention it deserves”. It is hoped that this research will contribute to solidifying the perception of employment as an important factor in offenders’ community reintegration, and to furthering its status as a significant program area. ■

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² Enocksson, K. (1981). Correctional programs: A review of the value of education and training in penal institutions. *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services and Rehabilitation*, 5(1), 5–18. Also, see Finn, P. (1998). Job placement for offenders in relation to recidivism. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 28(1/2), 89–106. See also, Gendreau, P., Goggin, C., & Gray, G. (1998). Case need domain: “Employment.” *Forum on Corrections Research*, 10(3), 16–19.

³ Motiuk, L. (1997). Classification for correctional programming: The Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) process. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 9(1), 18–22.

⁴ Markley, H., Flynn, K., & Bercaw-Dooen, S. (1983). Offender skills training and employment success: An evaluation of outcomes. *Corrective and Social Psychiatry and Journal of Behavior Technology Methods and Therapy*, 29, 1–11.

⁵ Gillis, C. A., & Andrews, D. A. (2002). Understanding employment: A prospective exploration of factors linked to community-based employment among federal offenders. *Forum on Corrections Research*, 14(1), 3–6. Also, see Gillis, C. A., & Andrews, D. A. (2005). *Predicting community employment for federal offenders on conditional release*. Research report, Research Branch, Correctional Service Canada, Ottawa, ON.

⁶ Gaes, G. G., Flanagan, T. J., Motiuk, L. L., & Stewart, L. (1999). Adult correctional treatment. In M. Tonry and J. Petersilia (Eds.), *Prisons* (pp. 361–426). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Also, see Gerber, J., & Fritsch, E. J. (1995). Adult academic and vocational correctional education programs: A review of recent research. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 22(1/2), 119–142. See also, Pearson, F. S., & Lipton, D. S. (1999). *The effectiveness of educational and vocational programs: CDATE meta-analyses*. Paper presented at the annual meeting

of the American Society of Criminology, Toronto, ON. Also, see Ryan, T. A. (1998). *Job retention of offenders and ex-offenders: Review and synthesis of the literature*. Unpublished manuscript, College of Criminal Justice, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.

⁷ Op. Cit., Ryan, 1998, p. E5.

⁸ Op. Cit., Gaes, 1999; Gerber & Fritsch, 1995; Pearson & Lipton, 1999; Ryan, 1998.

⁹ Op. Cit., Finn, 1998. Also, see Gerber & Fritsch, 1995.

¹⁰ Op. Cit., Pearson & Lipton, 1999.

¹¹ Gillis & Crutcher, 2005, this volume.

¹² Op. Cit., Gillis & Andrews, 2005.

¹³ Andrews, D.A.; Pirs, S.; Walker, J. & Hurge, A. (1980). A theoretical, research and program framework for employment-oriented services in probation and parole: (An interim report). Parts I, II, III, IV, and VI. Ontario: Ministry of Correctional Services. (p. 3).

* The analyses examined unique sentences, thus it is possible for offenders to appear more than once in the population.

** Dynamic factors were those assessed just prior to the offenders’ release dates. They are comprised of the following domains: employment, family/marital relations, associates, substance abuse, community functioning, personal emotional orientation, and attitudes.

*** The SAC’s identify geographic zones based on population counts and densities resulting from the 2001 Canadian Population Census. The zones are classified as being a component of 1) Census Metropolitan Areas (CMA) which have a population over 100,000, 2) Census Agglomeration (CA) areas which have a population that is less than 100,000 but more than 10,000 and 3) Rural Communities (RC) which include all other town, villages but excludes reserve communities. This geographic designation was based on the premise that offenders resided relatively close to the location where they were being supervised.

**** Each sample was comprised of unemployed offenders (50%), and employed offenders (50%).

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