



CRIME and UNEMPLOYMENT: What's the link?

An Overview

Predicting who will commit crimes, what programs and factors reduce the likelihood of criminal behaviour, and how prisoners can be treated to prevent them from re-offending is an extremely complex business. Fortunately, researchers and service providers in criminal justice services are constantly gathering new knowledge and untangling the knots of interrelated criminogenic factors.

One issue has emerged as a clear and crucial factor: employment. The research literature is showing that the existence, quality and stability of employment appear to be powerful protective factors against criminal behaviour.

This is no great surprise: employment provides us not only income, but also the opportunity to be productive, to contribute and become socially valued members of our communities, to develop networks of support, and to build knowledge and self-esteem. For many, employment can also play the role of informal social control by preventing anti-social behaviour through the natural social conditions of the workplace.

The research literature, as well as the extensive experiences of John Howard Society staff across Ontario, shows that employment can have a wide range of meaningful crime prevention effects. Perhaps most importantly, employment

provides one way for people to connect or belong to their communities. And those who develop a sense of connectedness with their community, meaning that they become invested in its social institutions such as family, school or work, are less likely to offend against it.

“the existence, quality and stability of employment appear to be powerful protective factors against criminal behaviour”

As economic crises loom, the importance of stable employment and maintaining community bonds becomes even more critical. The rate of unemployment in Ontario surged to 8% in January 2009 and job losses in manufacturing industries (in which many of our clients who

have come into contact with the criminal justice system find work) have been particularly high. The need for comprehensive and evidence-based employment support services for people with criminal records and other barriers is higher than ever.

This document provides a brief overview of the relationship between employment, employment services and crime. By reviewing the research and practices in this area, we seek to encourage Ontarians to ask questions about how our criminal justice system responds to crime. With comprehensive information, we can begin to work together to create a system that is effective, just and humane - a system that works to make Ontario communities safer.

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A reading list:

Gendreau et al (1999). *The effects of prison sentences on recidivism*. Ottawa: Solicitor General of Canada.

Gillis & Andrews. (2005) *Predicting Community Employment for Federal Offenders on Conditional Release*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.

Griffiths et al. (2007) *The Social Reintegration of Offenders and Crime Prevention*. Ottawa: National Crime Prevention Council.

Human Resources and Social Development Canada. (2006). *When Working is not enough to Escape Poverty: An Analysis of Canada's Working Poor*.

Statistics Canada. (2005). *Criminal Justice Indicators*. Catalogue no. 85-227-XIE.

Statistics Canada. (2007) *Education Indicators in Canada: Report of the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program*. Catalogue no. 81-582-XIE.

Statistics Canada. (2008). *Educational Portrait of Canada, 2006 Census*. Catalogue no. 97-560-XWE2006001.

Statistics Canada. (2008) *Juristat: Adult correctional services in Canada 2005/2006*. Catalogue no. 85-002-XIE. Ottawa

Welsh, Brandon. (2007) *Evidence-Based Crime Prevention: Scientific Basis, Trends, results and Implications for Canada*. Ottawa: National Crime Prevention Council.

Unemployment as a criminogenic factor

The rates of unemployment of those entering prisons, compared to the general population, illustrate the strong relationship between employment and crime. One study showed that 75% of those admitted to federal institutions were assessed as having some or considerable difficulty in the area of employment. The latest Canadian data indicate that both sentenced and remanded prisoners show dramatically high unemployment rates at admission of over 40%, while the national rate is normally between 6 and 7%.

Further to this correlation, researchers have identified unemployment as a significant risk factor for criminal activity and property crime in particular. Interesting evidence of this is found in Statistics Canada's examination of crime and the broader labour market. The data below suggest that unemployment and property crime have been closely synchronized over the last 40 years.

These relationships, while significant and correlative, do not prove causality nor tell the whole story - after all, most unemployed people do not resort to crime. There are a myriad of predictive factors that interact to increase the likelihood that someone will commit crime.

Indeed, lack of employment may be entangled with the interrelated issues of education, literacy and learning delays. The relationship between employment and criminal behaviour can also be influenced by a variety of other social and health and factors, such as addictions, mental health concerns, developmental disabilities such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, poverty, discrimination and lack of stable housing.

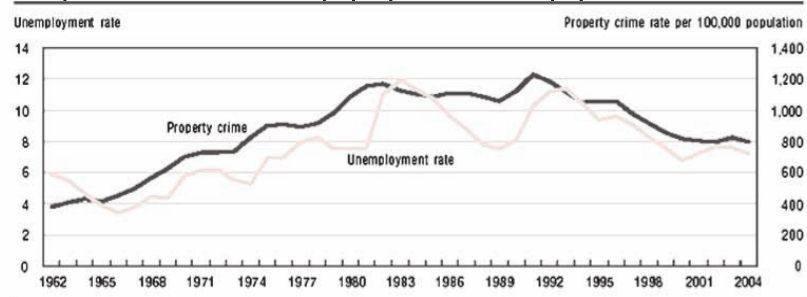
Educational is a prime example of this interaction. Educational attainment has a clear relationship with stability and quality of em-

ployment, with, for example, unemployment rates in the general public being 12% for those with less than high school level education and 4% for those with university degrees, in 2006. Workers with less than a high school education unsurprisingly have significantly lower earnings on average.

It is also clear that educational attainment is related to criminality. While the 2006 census showed that 15% of the general population had not completed high school (with the concentration of this group being people over 55 years), the latest data show that *more than half* of those in custody have not graduated from high school. Given the increasing demand for higher levels of education and skill in the Canadian labour market, these low rates of educational achievement within the prisoner population underscore the need for employment-related interventions for those at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system.

While the research in this area continues to clarify the nature of the relationship between crime and employment, we can confidently conclude that they are closely related. Offering client services that increase potential for stable employment for those at risk of future or further involvement in the criminal justice system can only have a positive impact on reducing criminal behaviour.

Comparison over time in rates of property crime and unemployment



Source: Statistics Canada. 2005. *Criminal Justice Indicators*. Figure C1.18. Catalogue #85-227-XIE

Employment support as crime prevention

While the relationship between crime and employment is clear, the ability of employment support services to reduce the likelihood of involvement in the criminal justice system is not. Employment programs that have been studied have shown only inconsistent results thus far in reducing criminal behaviour. However, it appears most likely that employment services will have greater success in reducing criminal behaviour when they provide more customized and intensive services.

Researchers have identified the importance of determining the *specific* needs of participants in employment support services that seek to reduce the likelihood of offending or re-offending, such that individual needs may be matched to specific interventions. Indeed, the recognition that criminal behaviour is caused by a variety of entangled social and personal factors necessitates that every client be comprehensively assessed and provided unique services. As with most social services, one size will not fit all.

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Employment services that are likely to have success are also those that include a variety of interventions, such as job readiness, vocational training, educational equivalencies, job placement and case management. Researchers also suggest that intensive employment interventions should be focused on those with the lowest skill and prior employment levels, to maximize efficiency.

Employment programs within prisons, however, have shown clear success in reducing recidivism after release. Prisoners who participated at length in the CORCAN work program offered within federal institutions, for example, showed a 28% reduction in readmission to federal custody when compared to the national average. Experts caution, however, that such programs may “cream skim” the prisoners who already have the skills to participate and also that issues such as frequent

lock-downs disrupt the progress of the programs.

The John Howard Society’s long history of providing employment-related services in communities across Ontario affords us particular insight in this area. Our Affiliates offer employment services as primary crime prevention programs or as part of the comprehensive reintegration support services offered to those released from prison, together with assessments and other social supports. As further research into specific employment interventions is completed, the programs offered by social service agencies such as the John Howard Society can be accordingly refined.



Finding work after conviction and incarceration

While many hope that release from prison or completion of a sentence will mean a transition to a more productive and contributing life, the reality is often not so straightforward. Many aspects of involvement in the criminal justice system can have long-term impacts that *negatively* affect one’s ability to lead a more pro-social life. A primary example of this negative impact is found in the area of employment, as those with criminal justice involvement face a variety of obstacles to obtaining quality, stable employment.

Many people find that their criminal record is an automatic barrier to finding work, as employers are increasingly using criminal record checks to reject any applicants with records of conviction, even if the conviction is not related to violence, aspects of the potential job or employment capacity in general. Those with records often apply for pardons for this reason, as a pardon seals the record of conviction so that no third party can obtain access to it.

However, the pardon process cannot be initiated until several years after the completion of a sentence, and in the intervening years, life can be on hold for many of those with criminal records.

Years spent in custodial institutions can also dramatically decrease the employability of those released from prison, not only because of the glaring gaps on their resumes. Many have little knowledge of new technologies or the latest developments in their prior line of work. For example, with no internet access available in institutions, many releasees have no experience with email or the web, thus reducing their attractiveness to potential employers.

Finally, the experience of institutional life can in itself be a barrier to employment. The often anti-social skills that are developed to survive on “the inside” can often hinder success in work and other settings after release.

The impact of employment on reducing recidivism after incarceration

Employment plays a centrally important role in preventing re-offending by those already involved in the criminal justice system. Much excellent Canadian research has focused on the predictors of recidivism for those leaving prison.

In a broad meta-analysis, researchers found that many of the most powerful predictors of recidivism were related to employment, such as the prisoner's level of education and employment prior to imprisonment, their employment needs at discharge and employment history.

Employment instability after release has been shown to have a significant statistical relationship with revocation of parole, violent re-offending and re-incarceration. For example, one study of men at one year after release from prison found that those who were unemployed had re-offended at a rate of 40% compared to

17% for those who were employed. Notably, ex-prisoners themselves have identified employment as a central factor to their own post-release success in several studies.

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It is also important to note, however, that the simple existence of a job has not been clearly or reliably shown to reduce recidivism; rather it is the stability and quality of employment that appear to act as important protective factor. Quality of employment can be measured in many ways, including skill level

requirement, salary adequacy in terms of meeting certain needs, job satisfaction reported by the worker, working conditions, and hours. Jobs that are low-paying and require less skill, for example, have been shown to have the least potential for upward mobility. In this way, poor quality jobs, or under-employment, may in fact be as important a criminogenic factor as unemployment.

Factsheets are a publication of the John Howard Society of Ontario on a variety of social and criminal justice policy issues, intended for our Affiliate staff and community partners. All Factsheets are available online.

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The John Howard Society Position

The John Howard Society advocates for a criminal justice system that meaningfully protects our communities from the impact of crime, by taking an approach that is grounded in the research about what works to prevent crime and re-offending.

Our mission statement is “effective, just and humane responses to crime and its causes” and as such we support preventative and rehabilitative, rather than punitive, criminal justice policies. John Howard Society staff are concerned with facilitating meaningful positive changes in the lives of our clients because we know that this approach stands the best chance of preventing future criminal behaviour. Punishing people simply does not work, if the goal is to prevent crime.

Based on the research evidence and the experiences of John Howard Society Affiliate staff across Ontario, it is clear

that obtaining stable, quality employment is a key predictor of the success of our clients. People who are at risk of future or further involvement in the criminal justice system will not become employed as a result of the punishment or deterrence of prison; the social issues, conditions and attitudes that create the criminal behaviour must be changed. Quality, stable employment can serve just that purpose by naturally creating conditions that can prevent crime, such as income stability, community connectedness, opportunities to be productive and responsible, and informal social control.

For this reason, John Howard Societies offer employment services across Ontario that are grounded in the research

and a crime prevention approach. We seek comprehensive assessments and meaningful, tailored solutions for each of our clients because we know that one size does not fit all. The social and individual issues that cause criminal behaviour are complex and multi-faceted; so too must be our response. Comprehensive employment services have an important role to play in making Ontarians communities safer and healthier for us all.

