



Improving Post-release Employment Outcomes for People Leaving Prison

# A Future Beyond the Wall

Disability Employment Australia Conference  
Presentation



Sydney 2015



Improving Post-release Employment Outcomes for People Leaving Prison

Prisoner numbers in Australia are growing and there are high rates of recidivism

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) people are over represented in the prison population



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At 30 June 2014

There were 33,791 prisoners (sentenced and unsentenced) in Australian prisons, an increase of 9.8% from 30 June 2013

This is the highest number since 2004



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At 30 June 2014

Three in five prisoners had been imprisoned previously

ATSI prisoners accounted for just over a quarter of the total Australian prisoner population compared to approximately 2% of the Australian population





#### Improving Post-release Employment Outcomes for People Leaving Prison

It is well established that people with disabilities are over represented in the criminal justice system as suspects, defendants, offenders and victims of crime (French, 2007; McGuire, 2012).

In 2013 the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee drew attention to a wide range of studies and submissions indicating that people who interact with the criminal justice system often have:

- High levels of hearing impairment
- Cognitive disabilities
- Acquired brain injury
- Mental illness
- Language impairment



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International studies indicate that the prevalence of Mental Health Disorder amongst prisoners is significantly higher than that found in the rest of the population.

A NSW Corrections Health Survey (Butler & Allnutt 2003) found a high prevalence of mental illness in the NSW prisoner population. The twelve-month occurrence of any psychiatric disorder (psychosis, anxiety disorder, affective disorder, substance use disorder, personality disorder or neurasthenia) was 74% amongst prisoners compared to 22% in the general population.



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A 2011 study (Dowse et al) described a group of people with complex needs and their involvement with community services and the criminal justice system in New South Wales. (N=2000)

## **Profile of primary diagnoses**

Intellectual disability (n=680),

Borderline intellectual disability (n=783),

Mental illness (n=965),

Substance abuse disorder (n=1276),

ABI (n= 511)

No diagnosis (n=339).





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It is clear that there is such a high prevalence of prisoners with ABI, intellectual disability and mental illness within prisons it is arguable that employees of the Department of Justice work as much in a disability system as a justice system.





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## Employment

Employment is a key issue in the successful reintegration of ex-prisoners and ex-offenders.

Employment provides more than the income necessary to support adequate material conditions.

It also provides structure and routine, while filling time. It provides opportunities to expand one's social network to include other productive members of society. In addition to all of this, employment can contribute to enhanced self-esteem and other psychological health.



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## Employment

At June 2015 over 4000 people in the DES system had an ex-offender status (2.6% of total caseload)



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Graffam et al identified six main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Personal conditions

- ✓ Behavioural problems
- ✓ Lacking basic life skills and key employment skills, Limited education
- ✓ Low levels of numeracy and literacy
- ✓ Poor social competencies





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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Social network and social environment

- ✓ Level of family support
- ✓ Peer influences



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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Accommodation

✓ Unstable and unsafe housing exacerbates the difficulties of ex-prisoners with histories of substance abuse and medical and mental health problems



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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Workforce participation and training

- ✓ Patchy work history
- ✓ Lack of basic skills
- ✓ Employer discrimination
- ✓ Lack of job contacts due to segregated social networks
- Financial difficulties impacting on interview attendance and purchase of clothing or equipment
- ✓ Problems making the transition from benefits to employment





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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Criminal justice system

- ✓ Legal barriers such as job restrictions and court-ordered requirements for release, (e.g., daily reporting) may impact significantly on both obtaining and maintaining employment
- ✓ Criminal history checks



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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

## Drug and alcohol rehabilitation

- ✓ As many as 80% of prisoners report that drug problems related to their reason for imprisonment.
- ✓ Ex-prisoners appear particularly vulnerable to returning to the lifestyle that brought them to prison in the first place
- ✓ Access to treatment is limited



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Main barriers to employment for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders

Empirical work suggests that ex-prisoners are disadvantaged in terms of finding and maintaining employment despite the fact that more than half of incarcerated prisoners report that they were employed in the month prior to entering prison (Ditton 1999)





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Corrections Victoria estimates that approximately 60–70% of people who re-offend are unemployed at the time that they re-offend (Victorian Department of Justice 2000–2001), indicating that unemployment contributes significantly to recidivism.



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## What works (ex-prisoner's perspective)

- ✓ 'Readiness to change', and the strength to resist long-ingrained habitual behaviour
- ✓ Dealing with profound social isolation and boredom, being alienated from former friends, family, and alienated within the community
- ✓ Creating a stable housing situation



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## What works (ex-prisoner's perspective)

- ✓ Avoiding any further difficulties, including antagonistic interactions with police, complying with court-ordered mandatory reporting, and managing to integrate those obligations into a recovery schedule that might include a range of training and support activities, as well as employment

Succeeding at drug rehabilitation often with little or no substantial formal support in the attempt, apart from mandatory testing and reporting and occasional brief counselling sessions about “how things are going”





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## What works (ex-prisoner's perspective)

Remaining free of drug and alcohol dependency, addressing basic education and training needs, being patient and realistic enough to keep to a process of slow growth and recovery; and finding a source of support that will provide long-term, ongoing assistance in all aspects of the process of obtaining and maintaining employment.



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## ARC Funded Research Project

### Aims

The PEOPLE project represents a first attempt to describe and analyse pre- and post-release cross-jurisdictional offender vocational, education, training and employment initiatives.

The study comprises two key components:

The 'Recidivism Study' will gather and analyse comparative data from Australian jurisdictions and employment agencies on the relationship between in-prison and post-prison vocational education and employment programs, employment and recidivism



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## ARC Funded Research Project

### Aims

- ✓ The 'Programmes and Services Study' will identify effective elements, strategies, program and policy directions in offender training and employment.
  - ✓ Two nested studies will address specific issues, program approaches, and outcomes for Indigenous Australians, and those with mental and/ or cognitive disorder.
- This will assist in the development of a theoretical framework and practice models that are appropriate to the development of future services.





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## How employment services can be involved

- ✓ Complete our short survey at [www.surveymonkey.com/r/LNL3TYS](http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/LNL3TYS)
- ✓ Be involved in a case study
- ✓ Contact us via email [jcrosbie@deakin.edu.au](mailto:jcrosbie@deakin.edu.au) or (03) 9251

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✓ <https://socialsciences.arts.unsw.edu.au/research/research-initiatives/a-future-beyond-the-wall/>