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Closing the gap clearinghouse

Strategies to enhance employment of Indigenous ex-offenders after release from correctional institutions

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Summary

What we know

- Indigenous Australians are over-represented in all Australian state and territory correctional systems.
- On release, adult Indigenous prisoners typically experience complex, wide-ranging limitations to employment.
- Indigenous Australians are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the Australian labour market. Criminal history adds a layer of complexity to employment in addition to the socioeconomic disadvantage Indigenous ex-offenders experience.
- There are numerous prison-based and community-based programs aimed at improving employability and sustained employment for which Indigenous prisoners and ex-prisoners are eligible. However, only a small number of Indigenous-specific programs have been developed.

What works

- Programs incorporating Indigenous knowledge and practices, particularly those involving Indigenous facilitators or traditional elders in delivery.
- Programs with a long-term focus (minimum 1 year) and a strong case-management approach. A comprehensive and personalised case-management approach can have a significant positive impact on employment outcomes for individuals.
- Transition programs that begin pre-release and continue for several months post-release, with clearly stated program objectives and individualised assistance.
- Programs that take a broad approach to post-release support by tackling issues relating to social disadvantage as well as employment.



- Programs that incorporate on-the-job work experience with other forms of support, such as mentoring.
- Use of mainstream Job Services Australia (JSA) employment services or specialist employment services for (non-Indigenous) offenders.

What doesn't work

- Leaving individuals unassisted to overcome all the known barriers to employment success and achieve sustained employment.

What we don't know

- The area of employment services for Indigenous ex-offenders is broadly under-researched.
- Few evaluations of 'best practice' and effectiveness of employment services for Indigenous ex-offenders have been conducted, and there is a resultant lack of specific knowledge of employment programs for Indigenous ex-prisoners.
- Beyond what is suggested about performance by the JSA star rating system, the effectiveness of mainstream and specialist employment services in assisting Indigenous ex-prisoners to gain employment and other program goals compared with non-Indigenous participants is not well demonstrated.

Introduction

Employment is an important element of successful integration within one's community. Across Australia, nearly two-thirds of prisoners were unemployed when they committed the crimes for which they were incarcerated. For Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners alike, there are numerous benefits associated with employment. They include benefits related to the individual (for example, increased earning capacity, improved prospects for sustained employment, increased social contact, improved self-esteem and confidence, improved financial conditions, and less idle time) and to their family (for example, greater self-sufficiency, better lifestyle, provision of financial assistance to family networks), as well as wider system benefits, including reduced likelihood of reoffending and reimprisonment.

This resource sheet discusses the issues surrounding employment of Indigenous ex-prisoners, existing support programs, and strategies to employ more ex-prisoners after their release from correctional institutions. To be effective, programs and strategies need to acknowledge the social and cultural origins of disadvantage for Indigenous offenders. We give an overview of what works in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage and focus on regional and urban programs that help Indigenous offenders gain employment.

Background

Prevalence of Indigenous offending

Indigenous people are disproportionately represented in the Australian correctional systems (e.g. ABS 2010; SCRGSP 2011). Currently, they represent 28.3% of the prisoner population (SCRGSP 2011), and more than 90% of Indigenous prisoners are male (ABS 2010). The rate of imprisonment of Indigenous Australians is much greater than non-Indigenous Australians, with a national age-standardised imprisonment rate of 1,811.1 per 100,000, about 14 times that of non-Indigenous adults (SCRGSP 2011). Like their non-Indigenous counterparts,



Indigenous offenders are characterised by high rates of repeated short-term incarceration (ABS 2010). As well, there is an over-representation of Indigenous males convicted of a violent crime, with alcohol and substance use linked to this outcome (Willis & Moore 2008).

Origins of disadvantage for Indigenous offenders

Complex social and cultural factors contribute to Indigenous offending behaviour and also create barriers to successful community reintegration. While many of these factors are also experienced by the general Australian community and by non-Indigenous ex-prisoners, their effect may be greater for Indigenous people and, in particular, Indigenous offenders seeking to reintegrate into the community and achieve sustained employment. They include, but are not limited to:

- poor physical and mental health
- drug and alcohol use
- financial strain, limited finance and conditions of poverty
- insufficient literacy skills and/or low educational attainment
- unstable, unsafe or crowded housing
- family dysfunction, social alienation and low or inadequate social support.

Indigenous Australians experience significant physical and mental health problems, with higher prevalence observed for asthma, diabetes, physical disability and kidney disease than non-Indigenous Australians (SCRGSP 2011). Among Indigenous prison entrants there is evidence of higher rates of communicable diseases (such as hepatitis B and C) and some chronic conditions (for example, diabetes) than for non-Indigenous prison entrants (AIHW 2010). Hospitalisation rates for physical health problems and mental disorders are also much higher among Indigenous ex-prisoners than non-Indigenous ex-prisoners and the general population (Hobbs et al. 2006).

Indigenous Australians consume less alcohol on average than non-Indigenous Australians but are more likely to engage in harmful drinking that places them at risk of serious short-term and long-term health problems and alcohol-related harm (e.g. AIHW 2010; Gray & Wilkes 2010). Indigenous offenders are more likely than non-Indigenous offenders to have been alcohol-dependent before their arrest (Makkai & Payne 2003; Putt et al. 2005). Although rates of illegal drug use are lower for Indigenous offenders, in particular poly-drug use (Makkai & Payne 2003), there are indications that Indigenous offenders are more likely to be dependent on cannabis and alcohol (e.g. Putt et al. 2005).

Limited financial means and/or poverty also create a condition of disadvantage that may have flow-on effects for employment. Indigenous offenders are at high risk of financial strain, which may underpin contact with the criminal justice system (Weatherburn et al. 2006). Indigenous Australians are less likely to receive adequate formal education, and those who do consistently score below national minimum standards in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 reading, writing and numeracy compared with non-Indigenous students. The retention rate of Indigenous students from the start of secondary school until Year 10 is 90.9% (in 2009) compared with 99.8% for all students (SCRGSP 2011). Being Indigenous and an early school-leaver is a risk factor for imprisonment (Weatherburn et al. 2006).

The most pressing issue facing a newly released ex-prisoner is accommodation. Indigenous Australians generally have poorer housing conditions than the general Australian population, with overcrowding identified as a particular concern (SCRGSP 2011). Many ex-prisoners have great difficulty finding and maintaining stable accommodation (Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003). As such, homelessness is a common problem for ex-prisoners (Baldry et al. 2006). Problematic drug use and reincarceration are also common outcomes of unstable and unsafe accommodation (Baldry et al. 2003). All these factors may make it even more difficult to obtain and sustain employment.



Social networks, too, are critical to successful community re-entry for prisoners. Ex-prisoners typically have a limited social network that consists, in many cases, of friends who have been in prison or who have participated in criminal activity (La Vigne et al. 2004). This is also generally the case for Indigenous offenders returning to the community.

While the issues faced by Indigenous female offenders are much the same, Indigenous women also typically experience higher rates of substance use and mental health problems than non-Indigenous women, and report long histories of sexual and/or physical abuse (e.g. AIHW 2010; Hobbs et al. 2006).

Employment disadvantage

It is well established that ex-prisoners as a group are underemployed compared with the general population (e.g. Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003). Indigenous working-age Australians have a much lower employment participation rate than the non-Indigenous population. Actual unemployment is higher among Indigenous Australians than the general community, especially in rural and remote areas (ABS 2009). In 2009, the unemployment rate for Indigenous Australians was 18% compared with 5% for non-Indigenous Australians, with many Indigenous Australians being long-term unemployed. There is, of course, some variation by location. In major cities, the unemployment rate for Indigenous people was 19%, compared with 20% in regional areas and 10% in remote areas (ABS 2009), although the latter figure should be interpreted with caution given high sampling errors.

When criminal history is taken into account, the picture is even more disconcerting; in fact, the disparity in arrest rates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians may account for at least 20% of the difference in employment rates between these two groups (Borland & Hunter 2000). Moreover, unemployment is higher among Indigenous Australians who have been arrested within the past 5 years (29%) than among Indigenous persons who were not arrested (11%) in that time (ABS 2007). Given research evidence that unemployment is related to reoffending and reconviction (Baldry et al. 2003; Webster et al. 2001), it is clearly important that Indigenous ex-prisoners receive the support they need to become employed, productive and integrated members of their communities.

Ex-prisoners generally have poor work histories and are typically employed in low-wage jobs with few tangible rewards. There are numerous identified barriers to employment that may affect Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners (Graffam et al. 2008; Graffam et al. 2005; Webster et al. 2001). These include:

- a lack of personal and work-related skills
- educational disadvantage/low literacy levels
- unfavourable employer attitudes (resistance related to ex-prisoners and crime)
- racism on the part of employers
- lack of work opportunities in their neighbourhood/community
- lack of job contacts because of segregated social networks
- financial difficulties affecting interview/job
- problems making the transition from benefits to employment
- behavioural problems
- lack of qualifications
- low self-esteem, confidence and motivation
- absent or poor work experience history
- difficulty adjusting to the routine of work.



Current employment assistance programs

Indigenous offenders are eligible for numerous and varied employment-related programs before and after release from a correctional institution. JSA, the national system funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), provides mainstream and specialist employment services for which ex-prisoners and offenders are eligible. State and territory correctional services offer in-prison programs, including prison-industry training and a wide range of vocational training and education courses. Transition and post-release programs often include vocational training and education, plus employment assistance for job seeking and even post-placement support. In practice, such programs may be employment-specific or part of a holistic program in which employment is one component of a broad program agenda. With respect to Indigenous-specific and Indigenous ex-offender-specific employment services, there are a range of services available, some funded by the Australian Government, some by states and territories, and some by industry.

Australian Government

Job Services Australia

Indigenous offenders are eligible to participate in mainstream JSA programs. There are also a small number of specialist JSA employment services contracted to assist ex-prisoners and offenders. Similarly, individualised services are provided through case-management models, for which Indigenous offenders are also eligible. Annual figures suggest generally favourable employment outcomes for Indigenous job seekers under the former Job Network (now JSA) model (Dockery & Milsom 2007).

Example of a mainstream employment service that provides a range of employment programs, including Fresh Start, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-offenders and pre-release prisoners.

PVS Workfind

PVS Workfind provides a holistic service to job seekers and works collaboratively with community agencies, not-for-profit service providers and government and non-government organisations. It is a mainstream employment service that provides a range of employment programs, including Fresh Start, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-offenders and pre-release prisoners. PVS Workfind is a large employment service provider operating across the full range of Australian Government-funded programs. It has three specialty divisions:

- PVS Workfind, JSA
- PVS Workfind Disability Employment Service
- PVS Workfind Indigenous Services, which provides Indigenous job seekers with five key services: initial assessment, pre-employment support services, employment placement services and cross-cultural training for employers, and access to an Indigenous mentor, who provides a least 26 weeks post-placement support. These services are aimed at Indigenous job seekers generally, but can also be accessed by Indigenous ex-offenders.

To help achieve sustainable employment outcomes, specialised training programs have been developed, including Fresh Start, for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-offenders and pre-release prisoners.

See: <<http://www.pvs.com.au/?id=2101010084BF536633B0A065CA257590002F918C>>.



From the beginning of JSA in July 2009 to March 2011, ex-offender job seekers have comprised about 11% of the total caseload. About 22% of ex-offender job seekers have been Indigenous. Over that period, 87,472 ex-offender job placements were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 16% of the total. With respect to 13-week outcomes, 27,069 job placements were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 16%. With respect to 26-week outcomes, 13,985 ex-offender outcomes were achieved, with Indigenous ex-offenders accounting for 15%. As can be seen, although somewhat under-represented in the outcomes, Indigenous ex-offenders have been effectively assisted into employment by JSAs (figures courtesy of DEEWR).

In a review of Indigenous employment programs in Australia, including the former Job Network, Dockery and Milsom (2007) reported that the main programs directed specifically toward Indigenous job seekers appeared to have been effective in promoting employment outcomes, at least in the short term. Important features of these programs included a mix of on-the-job work experience (via wage subsidies or brokered placements), combined with other support (for example, mentoring). Like Willis and Moore (2008), the authors recognised that the inclusion of Indigenous staff in program or service delivery was beneficial.

Example of a Job Services Australia provider working specifically with Indigenous job seekers. The program is not specific to Indigenous offenders.

Tangentyere Employment Service (TES)—Tangentyere Council

TES is a specialist Indigenous provider for the town camps of Alice Springs. It has 10% of the total number of Indigenous job seekers in Central Australia, with about 500 clients. Tangentyere's JSA has a unique service delivery model that includes two campervans set up as mobile offices to assist clients in the town camps. Weekly visits are made to each town camp, with attempts to meet each client fortnightly. This business model has allowed Tangentyere Council to integrate its several services and better assist job seekers.

As at 30 June 2010, TES had started working with more than 90% of its allocated caseload of clients. TES had placed 241 clients in employment, with more than half still in employment, which constitutes more than 30% of all placements by all providers in Central Australia.

See: <<http://www.tangentyere.org.au/enterprises/employServices/jobAustralia.html>>.

DEEWR provides the Indigenous Employment Program (IEP), which supports a broad range of program initiatives throughout Australia. The IEP funds programs aimed at employers, job seekers, employees, Indigenous communities, industry bodies, employer groups and entrepreneurs seeking to develop a sustainable business. Project funding is provided through a panel of service deliverers.

The reformed IEP began with the introduction of JSA in July 2009. In its first year, about 12,000 Indigenous Australians were placed into employment and about 14,000 engaged in training and other activities (DEEWR 2010). IEP figures for Indigenous ex-prisoners placed into employment through the program were not available for this paper. Although these sources of employment assistance have proven reasonably effective for Indigenous Australians generally, the non-specialist approach may be less effective with Indigenous ex-prisoners. However, the number of Indigenous-specific employment services is very small.

DEEWR also provides a pre-release employment preparation program for prisoners for which Indigenous prisoners are eligible. Although pre-release-only programs present certain difficulties, particularly due to the prevalence of short sentences, transition programs that begin pre-release and continue for several months post-release, with clearly stated program objectives and individualised assistance, have been shown to lead to successful reintegration.



State and territory-funded employment programs

In addition to the Australian Government-funded services, there are several state and territory-level employment services for prisoners and ex-prisoners, though they are not Indigenous specific. The cases presented are not an exhaustive set; rather, they illustrate the types of services provided from the various funding sources.

Examples of employment-focused programs for minimum-risk, job-ready prisoners within 12 months of release. The programs are not specific to Indigenous offenders.

Prisoner Employment Program—Department of Corrective Services, Western Australia

- This is a five-stage program, comprising application, assessment, case management, placement and post-placement support. It is a pre-release to post-release program.
- Participants must have completed more than half their sentence.
- Paid employment is at award levels, with all standard clearances (for example, police check, worker's compensation cover).
- The program operates from nine locations in Western Australia, including metropolitan and regional prisons.

The program has been successful in placing ex-prisoners in employment after their release, but the extent of involvement and employment outcomes of Indigenous offenders is not known at this time.

For more information, contact the Department of Corrective Services, WA.

Prisoner Employment Program—Northern Territory Correctional Services

The Prisoner Employment Program has three elements: the Community Service Work Parties, the Volunteer Employment Program, and the Prisoner Paid Employment Program (PEP). This program has shown considerable success in helping prisoners make the transition from prison to the community. For example, in the past 12 months since the PEP was restarted, 16 prisoners have participated in full-time paid employment, seven in paid training programs (with two achieving full-time paid employment on completion of their sentence) and an average of 4 to 6 prisoners are on paid employment each month. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of PEP participants are Indigenous.

For more information, contact Northern Territory Correctional Services.

Example of an employment service for prisoners and ex-prisoners provided by Queensland Corrective Services.

Advance2Work—Queensland

Advance2Work, formerly the Pre-Release Employment Assistance Program, has operated across Queensland since 2000. It provides support from five locations to prisoners who are released from all custodial centres in Queensland. To be eligible, prisoners must begin the program within 6 months before release. Program providers are expected to ensure that the participant profile is representative of the state's prisoner population. The program provides a range of employment-related supports, including training needs analysis, vocational training, job search skills development, job placement, post-employment support, and referral to other services.

A review of program performance between July 2007 and December 2009 (30 months) was conducted in 2010. During that time, 7,460 persons were assisted, with 1,918 (25.7%) placed in employment and 1,337 (17.9%) retaining employment for at least 13 weeks. Of the total program participants, 2,063 (27.7%) were Indigenous. Of the total achieving 13 weeks of continuous employment, 232 (17.4%) were Indigenous. This performance is comparable with mainstream JSA performance, and shows the effectiveness of the program in supporting Indigenous participants, although this was lower than for non-Indigenous participants.

For more information, contact Queensland Corrective Services.



Industry-funded employment programs

Numerous industry-funded employment training programs may also be effective in improving employment outcomes for Indigenous ex-prisoners, though further evaluations are required to demonstrate this.

Example of an employment-specific program tailored for, and operated by, Indigenous people.

JobTrainWA

JobTrainWA is an Indigenous-owned and operated program in Western Australia that provides training pertinent to Indigenous ex-offenders. Its main focus is on preparation and placement for work in the mining industry. The program is tailored for the Indigenous community and offers:

- Certificate I and II Business
- cross-cultural awareness training
- Aboriginal school-based training
- pre-employment training
- the IEP.

See: <<http://www.jobtrainwa.com.au/staff/>>.

The mining industry in Western Australia is working with local Indigenous support services to improve the general wellbeing of Indigenous communities and their education and employment skills, with a long-term view to increasing employment opportunities for Indigenous people in the mining industry. In South Australia, OZ Minerals offers a pre-employment training program to local Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, with all graduates offered guaranteed employment. In Western Australia and the Northern Territory, Rio Tinto has a similar work-training program for Indigenous people that engages Indigenous ex-prisoners.

See: <http://www.riotintoironore.com/ENG/careers/183_indigenous_employment.asp>.

<<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/careers/mining-talent-from-nearby/story-fn71714s-1226011809234>>.

Issues affecting success

In-prison programs can provide valuable employment-relevant skill acquisition; however, nationally and internationally, low participation rates in vocational training and education programs within prisons remain a problem. The low proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous prisoners achieving a certification or qualification may be explained to some extent by the impact of typically short sentences on program participation. There are long waiting lists for courses, indicating that demand is much higher than availability. There is an urgent need to improve program participation in prisons so that individuals leave prison with a skill base that can improve their chances of successful employment after release. Policy and program reform is also urgently needed to reduce waiting lists for courses and to increase resources to provide vocational training and education.

In a review of programs in Australian prisons, Howells et al. (2004) suggested a range of program improvements specific to Indigenous offenders, including the need to meet the training needs of the majority of prisoners who have short sentences, to consider language difficulties (for example, where English may be a second or third language, the use of jargon) and to recognise the diversity of Indigenous cultures and the subsequent need for guidance from local Indigenous groups. There is also evidence that male Indigenous prisoners may prefer male facilitators (Willis & Moore 2008).



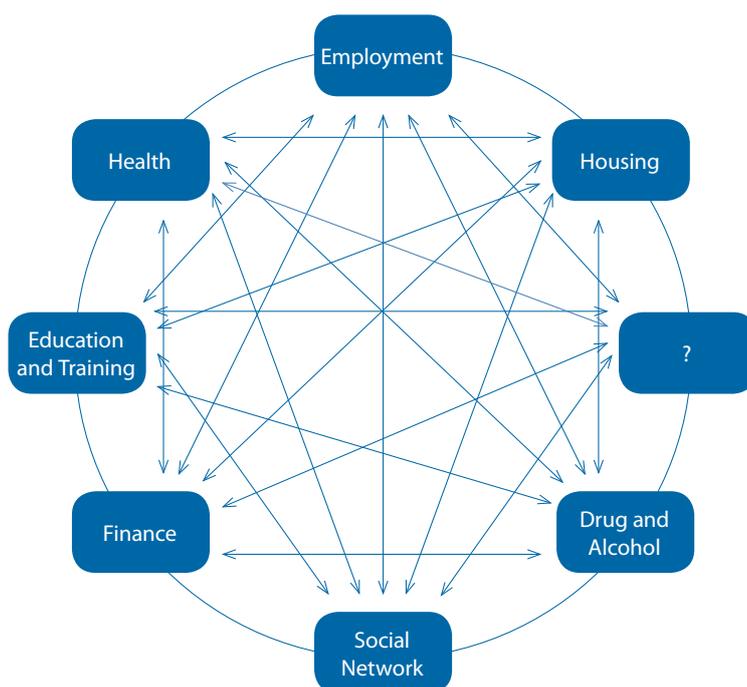
Researchers have identified the key qualities of successful post-release employment programs (Borzycki 2005). These include networking with the labour market; modifying recruitment and placement procedures in line with labour market needs; and providing employer incentives, information about job opportunities, appropriate vocational training, work-release opportunities for suitable offenders, job retention skills, assistance to offenders in appropriate disclosure of criminal history, and long-term follow-up support.

In addition to the need for employment assistance, there is the issue of stakeholder attitudes toward the employability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners. Employers, employment service providers and corrective services staff have been shown to rate the employment prospects of ex-prisoners as poor (Graffam et al. 2008), with variations related to the type of crime and whether training had been completed in prison. Attitude change can be promoted by exposing employers and employment service providers to ex-prisoners through job fairs and work trials, and by publicising success stories. Employer incentives have also been shown to be effective in warming employers to hiring Indigenous people (refer Giddy et al. 2009) and ex-prisoners (e.g. The Bridge Project 2011).

In any case, progress must be understood and managed in terms of small steps. Ex-prisoners often require a slow rate of change to maintain more-or-less stable progress, and even then progress is likely to be difficult (Graffam et al. 2005). It is unreasonable to expect 6-week rehabilitation programs, or so-called intensive assistance, to be either intensive or long enough to produce lasting results. Those providing employment assistance should also take into account the frequent interdependence of employment, housing, drug and alcohol treatment, and family and social network support needs, when structuring and delivering support.

Documenting effective practice is important. JSA ratings measure the relative performance of JSA providers against two contractual key performance indicators. This is to inform job seekers, JSA providers and DEEWR about the comparative performance of providers. Beyond what is suggested about performance by the JSA star rating system, the effectiveness of mainstream and specialist employment services in assisting Indigenous ex-prisoners to gain employment and other program goals compared with non-Indigenous participants is not well documented. Few evaluations of best practice and effectiveness of employment services for Indigenous ex-offenders have been conducted, and there is a resultant lack of specific knowledge of employment programs for Indigenous ex-prisoners. However, evaluation has been viewed as particularly important (Gilbert & Wilson 2009). Program evaluation is a critical component of program integrity. The short-term or pilot status of many programs has made thorough evaluation difficult.

Chart 1: An integrated system of holistic support





A holistic approach to employment assistance

Having noted the extent of disadvantage, the range of programs available and some of the good work being done, there is clearly much more to be done to help Indigenous ex-prisoners reintegrate into their communities. Acknowledging the depth of change required to transform a life, and that self-sufficiency is an ambiguous point along the developmental path, it is essential to build a support system that will serve Indigenous ex-prisoners. Given the complexity, multiplicity and pervasiveness of disadvantage among Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners, comprehensive local networks of formal and informal support are needed. A support model that provides personalised case management is ideal. Such a model accounts for the diverse and often dynamic needs of individual program participants and can accommodate differing rates of progress.

As an example, vocational training should often begin with short courses that provide tangible outcomes, such as certificates or licences. Longer-term training for Indigenous ex-prisoners should be considered in reference to readiness, and not simply desire. Employment, too, should be approached with an expectation of gradual progress. That may mean work trials with an employer, volunteer work for some time to build general work skills, and minimum part-time paid employment as starting points. Such activities can contribute to skill development and the development of a useful résumé to obtain more substantial and ongoing paid employment.

Because the real issue for many ex-prisoners is not merely employment, but lifestyle change, a more comprehensive and personalised approach is important. It is also important to integrate the pieces of a personalised approach into a whole, so that a cohort of individuals can be supported, each in terms of their needs. For these reasons, an integrated local support system of networked providers, organised and managed well and using a personalised case-management model, can provide the means to achieve sustainable, positive lifestyle change for Indigenous and non-Indigenous ex-prisoners.

Such a system would be structured through a central transition support program that coordinates and case manages support services for individual program participants. The model for this program is shown in Chart 1. The '?' in the model is meant to indicate that it is an open system that can accommodate any number of additional pieces as required or are available. In the case of many Indigenous participants, the '?' is likely to include elders and community members.

Strategies to promote sustainable employment for Indigenous ex-prisoners

Strategies for promoting sustainable employment for Indigenous ex-prisoners can be identified from existing literature and emerging employment service models and practices. These strategies are not mutually exclusive. They involve:

- incorporating a culturally appropriate focus with culturally relevant methods of service delivery, as well as involving Indigenous community members and elders, in the design and delivery of the program
- from an 'infrastructure' perspective, strengthening family and community connections to the employment service and encouraging individual program participants, family members and elders to be active agents in the reintegration process locally—this can include a mentoring component
- developing a social enterprise employment model based on local business opportunities that involves apprenticeships, trade certification, career advancement and prospects of spin-off businesses from the original enterprise
- developing local networked transition support programs that include all of the appropriate elements of the model described above with the required local network facilitation

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- using a case-management model to ensure that individualised attention is given and that an appropriate support package is provided to program participants
 - tailoring employment preparation to locally available job opportunities, individual readiness, and availability of resources for support.

Facilitators and barriers

There is evidence that numerous program-related factors either facilitate, or are barriers to, success in employing Indigenous offenders. In short, to be effective, employment programs should ideally:

- be designed specifically for Indigenous offenders and any subgroups within the Indigenous offender community
- have the support of, and include input from, the local Indigenous community
- be culturally sensitive and appropriate
- include provision for long-term support
- use a strong case-management approach
- be part of a planned, integrated set of services designed to meet the wide-ranging, complex needs of Indigenous offenders
- have adequate resourcing and support that can be sustained beyond pilot project status
- include scope for both process and outcome evaluation to better understand the extent to which the program is appropriate for, and addresses the needs of, Indigenous offenders, and to understand the effect of the program on recidivism
- include an analysis of program cost-effectiveness.

Generally speaking, barriers to providing effective employment programs for Indigenous offenders and ex-prisoners are the opposite of the facilitators above. Additional barriers include:

- short-term or inadequate funding arrangements
- lack of coordination between agencies and/or lack of integrated services
- poor uptake of, and retention in, appropriate programs
- reduced availability of appropriate programs/services in rural and remote areas
- lack of up-to-date research and of evaluation of promising programs.

Conclusion

Unemployment is strongly related to offending and incarceration, in Australia and internationally. Indigenous Australians have significantly higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than non-Indigenous Australians. Offending and incarceration rates are also higher for Indigenous Australians. Complex social and cultural factors contribute to Indigenous offending behaviour. They also create significant barriers to successful post-release reintegration and contribute to the employment disadvantage of Indigenous offenders.

This resource sheet demonstrates that there are a few standout regional and urban employment programs that effectively support employment of Indigenous offenders. The most successful programs demonstrate that sustained, intensive intervention improves employment outcomes for this group. Moreover, they have shown the value of a comprehensive and personalised case-management approach.



There is a recognised shortfall in culturally specific programs for Indigenous offenders (refer Howells et al. 2004). We cannot assume that mainstream employment programs developed for the general population or for the general offender population are appropriate for all Indigenous offenders. To be fully effective, mainstream employment programs need to be adapted to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and practices, and legitimised by using Indigenous facilitators and elders to provide them (refer Willis & Moore 2008).

There is a need for more Indigenous-specific employment programs for Indigenous prisoners, especially those serving shorter sentences, and for the engagement of Indigenous staff delivering those services. It is also clear that there is a need to work with employers to promote the employment of ex-prisoners and align recruitment/ placement procedures with local labour market needs, individual readiness, and available support.

The following five broad strategies to improve employment outcomes for Indigenous ex-prisoners are supported by the evidence base:

- incorporate culturally relevant and appropriate methods of service delivery, and involve Indigenous community members and elders in the design and delivery of the program
- improve availability of employment programs for Indigenous prisoners serving short custodial sentences
- strengthen family and community connections to the employment service and encourage active agency in the reintegration process locally
- develop social enterprises as a basis of employment opportunities
- develop an open system integrated local support network for Indigenous ex-prisoners that is operated on the basis of a personalised case-management model.

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Terminology

Indigenous: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Indigenous are used interchangeably to refer to Australian Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Closing the Gap Clearinghouse uses the term 'Indigenous Australians' to refer to Australia's first people.

Ex-prisoner, ex-offender and offender: Variation in the use of 'ex-prisoner', 'ex-offender', and offender' result from variations in referents (subjects of particular pieces of research and particular program focus). For example, DEEWR does not report JSA outcomes for ex-prisoners specifically, but rather for all offenders irrespective of whether they served a custodial sentence.

Employment outcome: Refers to a job seeker being placed into employment and achieving either 13 or 26 weeks of continuous employment.

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