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Research Publication

Evaluation of vocational training in custody

**Offenders' experiences of training and
pathways to post-release employment**

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Corrective Services NSW

Evaluation of vocational training in custody: Offenders' experiences of training and pathways to post-release employment

Background Offenders often lack marketable job skills and have a history of unstable employment. As a response, correctional institutions provide vocational training to offenders in custody in order to assist them in gaining employment after release, with the aim of facilitating their reintegration into the community and ultimately reducing recidivism.

Aims The current study aimed to explore offenders' experiences of participation in vocational training programs in custody and post-release outcomes such as employment. In particular, this study examined motivators for participation in selected vocational training courses; participants' feedback on training; experiences of searching for employment after release into the community; perceptions of how vocational training assists offenders to obtain employment; and attainment of additional education or training when in the community.

Method Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 parolees who had completed selected vocational training programs in custody. Additional interviews were also undertaken with 15 supervising Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) and 3 Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute (AEVTI) and Corrective Services Industry (CSI) staff members who were responsible for co-ordinating the training courses.

Results Parolees reported the potential for improvement in their post-release employment prospects as the main motivator to complete vocational training programs in custody. The majority of parolees in the study reported working in industries that corresponded to the qualification obtained in custody. Parolees described employment to be of fundamental importance to their reintegration, providing not only a way to support themselves and their families but also in assisting them to live a more positive crime-free lifestyle. CCOs highlighted the role of vocational training in assisting parolees to compete with others in the job market and in improving participants' confidence when searching for employment. However, CCOs also highlighted the need for institutional training to match parolees' employment prospects on release. Identified barriers to employment following release into the community included drug and alcohol abuse, criminal history, attitude, poor employment skills and lack of transport.

Conclusion Employment was perceived by participants to be a critical component of successful reintegration for ex-prisoners who are motivated to work. Vocational training was reported to be associated with greater employment opportunities and better general prospects of transition back into the community.

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Introduction

Over the 2014–15 financial year, 48 percent of offenders released from Corrective Services NSW (CSNSW) correctional centres returned to prison within two years (Productivity Commission, 2016), a phenomenon recognised as the 'revolving door' (Pew Center, 2011). The majority of those reconvicted do so shortly after release (Payne, 2007). Given the high number of former prisoners that return to custody, there is a need to improve the process of reintegration into the community.

It has been proposed that, amongst ex-prisoners, finding stable employment is one of the best predictors of post-release success (Visher, Winterfield & Coggeshall, 2005). High quality employment not only allows an individual to support oneself and others without resorting to crime, but also affects their pro-social relationships, attachment to a conventional lifestyle, use of free time, self-worth and plans for the future (McCreary & McCreary, 1975; Visher et al., 2005). McCreary and McCreary (1975) noted that over time, continued high quality and stable employment increases feelings of competence, usefulness and satisfaction, and allows offenders an opportunity to develop and articulate a new identity. This was illustrated by Uggen (1999) who found that having a good quality job with adequate wages and better working conditions reduced the likelihood of economic and non-economic criminal behaviour amongst released high-risk offenders. Conversely, low quality transitional employment with inadequate hours and pay and no viable career progression provides individuals with little incentive to avoid criminal activity (Uggen, 1999).

The proposed relationship between employment and offending aligns with the standard economic theory of crime (Becker, 1968; Cook, 1980) which proposes that prospective criminals choose to offend based on the rewards of the activity compared with the potential costs. For someone who has relatively good lawful options of employment, the perceived cost of arrest and punishment is high. However, for someone whose employment prospects are poor due to lack of experience and education or a serious criminal record, the high recidivism rate is unsurprising given their meagre licit options (Cook, Kang, Braga, Ludwig, & O'Brien, 2015). Based on this analysis, it may be expected that interventions that are successful in improving employment outcomes will reduce the appeal of crime for some released prisoners and consequently reduce recidivism (Cook, 1975).

The importance of employment for released prisoners is also consistent with the growing literature on desistance from offending. Desistance is largely influenced by theories of social control and in particular how social control changes over an individual's life course (Laub & Sampson, 2003). This theory highlights the significance of social bonds – such as entering into marriage, parenthood or obtaining employment – in deterring offending and aiding the process of sustained desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Barriers to entering employment

Offenders generally report that finding a job after release is important to them and that being employed would help them stay out of prison (La Vigne & Lawrence, 2002). However, ex-prisoners can experience significant social, economic and personal challenges in gaining and maintaining employment.

Offenders, in general, have lower levels of literacy and numeracy, inadequate work experience or job-related skills, and experience more mental health and substance abuse issues than those in the broader community (Baldry et al., 2003; Visher, Debus-Sherrill & Yahner, 2011). In addition, they face other structural barriers, such as employer attitudes to applicants with a criminal record, absence of job contacts due to segregated social networks, financial problems that impact on interview attendance, unstable housing, purchase of appropriate clothing and equipment, and difficulties transitioning from benefits to employment (Webster et al., 2001). Employers may also expect offenders to lack 'soft' employment skills, have conflict with workers and be unreliable in the handling of payments and goods (Bushway, Stoll & Weiman, 2007).

Vocational training in custody

Correctional institutions are aware of offenders' relative lack of marketable skills and history of unstable work experience and have attempted to remedy this by providing training and work experience through correctional industries. The goal of correctional industries is to provide offenders with a means to develop a positive work ethic whilst learning valuable vocational skills and gaining practical work experience. These activities aim to assist offenders in obtaining employment after release from prison, with the view that doing so will improve their re-entry into the community and ultimately reduce recidivism.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between vocational education, vocational training and/or work release programs delivered in custody and reoffending outcomes, with generally positive results (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; MacKenzie, 2006; Seiter & Kadela 2003). For example, in their meta-analysis of 58 studies examining the effectiveness of institutional education, Davis et al. (2013) estimated a 13 percentage point reduction in recidivism for those who participate in correctional education programs compared to those who do not. A recent study in Western Australia further indicated that the more vocational training classes completed by prisoners, the less likely they were to be re-incarcerated and the less likely they were to increase the seriousness of their offending after release (Giles, 2016). Similarly, research examining vocational education and training (VET) in two Australian states found that increased VET participation was associated with reduced person, drug and property crime, with effect sizes larger for mature offenders (26-44 years) compared with younger offenders (16-25 years) (Jha & Polidano, 2016). In contrast, research has found little evidence to suggest that the risk of reoffending can be reduced by provision of general employment readiness programs or transitional temporary employment to former prisoners who have recently been released into the community (Cook et al., 2015; Farabee, Zhang & Wright 2014).

Vocational training and post-release employment

Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014) reported that among a sample of Queensland Corrective Services parolees who had ultimately been reimprisoned, 80 percent reported that they had worked and received some type of formal certification when previously in custody. However, only 10 percent of these offenders secured work in an industry similar to that which they had trained in. For some prisoners, engaging in work or study while in custody was associated with more short-term instrumental motivations, providing a means of 'passing the time' or earning a 'little extra cash'.

Other studies have indicated more substantial associations between vocational training in custody and post-release employment outcomes. Gorta & Panaretos (1990) reported that 31 percent of a sample of NSW parolees said educational courses undertaken in custody helped directly to obtain community employment. Furthermore, nearly three-quarters of these parolees reported that these courses had the potential to help them find employment even if they hadn't obtained any at the time of the interview (73%). Parolees also reported the institutional courses were beneficial in teaching them work skills and improving their self-esteem and confidence (Gorta & Panaretos, 1990).

Similarly, a recent study by Nolan & Power (2014) found high levels of congruence between vocational training and certification achieved in custody and industry of employment after release. Congruence was particularly high in the 'trades' certification, with 58 percent of prisoners having both a certificate and job in this area (Nolan & Power, 2014).

Richmond (2014) conducted interviews with parolees from four Pennsylvania correctional industries programs regarding their perception of correctional industries, its impact on their behaviour and whether the training and skills were transferable. The author concluded that correctional industries improves one's sense of self and offers structure, responsibility and routine. However, the parolees noted that the relevance of the training depended on the type of industry and training provided, and the applicability to employment opportunities in the community. Findings suggest that training or qualifications valued by the labour market, or where an offender learns a particular occupational skill necessary to retain a job, increases the likelihood of ex-prisoners finding employment (Finn & Willoughby, 1996; Romig, 1978).

The current study

In NSW, Corrective Services Industry (CSI) manages commercial operations within CSNSW correctional centres in addition to delivering work opportunities and services that aim to improve offenders' prospects for post-release employment. In 2014–15, 76 percent of the eligible inmate population were employed within 33 correctional centres (Productivity Commission, 2016). This, combined with access to vocational education and training, is designed to increase inmates' capacity to work effectively within CSI and develop greater employment experience to enhance their prospects of successful return to the community. In 2014–15, 22 percent of prisoners were participating in vocational education and training in CSNSW correctional centres (Productivity Commission, 2016).

The current study is the first in a series of three that aims to evaluate the processes and outcomes associated with vocational training programs delivered in CSNSW correctional centres. The objective of this study is to investigate the experiences of offenders, Community Corrections case managers and other stakeholders, of vocational training and employment after release from custody. The second study (Lindeman, Howard, & Neto, manuscript in preparation) examines quantitative associations between participation in vocational training programs, post-release employment outcomes, and recidivism. The third study in this evaluation intends to assess the intervention effect of vocational training on reoffending relative to equivalent non-treated offender samples.

In particular, the identified aims of the current study were to:

- Identify what had motivated offenders to participate in selected vocational training courses while in custody.

- Obtain participants' feedback on the courses undertaken in custody.
- Examine participants' experiences searching for employment post release.
- Explore whether or not the vocational training courses were perceived to assist participants to obtain employment.
- Determine whether participants undertook additional education post-release.

Method

Sample and design

Much of the existing research has focused primarily on quantitative data on re-offending and employment to measure outcomes for offenders who participate in vocational training. The current study uses an in-depth qualitative interview design to allow for analysis of more comprehensive data on motivators for undertaking vocational training and its benefits and challenges.

Offender sample

The offender sample in this study consisted of 22 male and 2 female parolees who had completed one of 12 identified vocational training courses in CSNSW correctional centres between April 2013 and April 2015 and who had been released to parole between January and August 2015. The 12 vocational training courses included in this study were:

- Backhoe/Front End Loader
- Skidsteer
- Forklift
- Slewing Crane up to 20 tonne
- Rigging/Dogman Licence
- Engineering
- Civil Construction
- Asbestos Removal
- Heavy Vehicle Licences
- Stop-go-Traffic Control
- Traineeship 103- TAFE Construction Certificate II
- Traineeship OP103 TAFE Engineering Certificate II.

The sample of parolees was identified through Adult Education and Vocational Training Institute (AEVTI) and Corrective Services Industries (CSI) records. Supporting data on demographic and criminogenic characteristics of the study sample were extracted from the CSNSW Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS) database.

A total of 86 parolees were identified to meet the above inclusion criteria for participation in this study. Parolees were invited to participate in interviews through their Community Corrections Officer (CCO). Seventeen of the identified parolees had returned to custody prior to being invited to participate in the study. Of the remaining sample 24 parolees gave informed consent to participate, resulting in a response rate of 29%. Characteristics of the offender study sample are given in Table 1.

Community Corrections Officer (CCO) sample

All CCOs who were supervising parolees who agreed to participate in the study were also invited to participate in the study. A total of 15 CCOs were then interviewed by the researcher, resulting in an effective response rate of 68% of the 22 CCOs contacted. CCOs averaged 45 years of age and had 11 years of experience working in Community Corrections.

AEVTI/CSI sample

Interviews were also conducted with three key CSI and AEVTI staff members responsible for coordinating the delivery of the selected training courses. The CSI and AEVTI staff sample consisted of 3 staff members. A 'purposive sampling' strategy was employed based on staff experience and knowledge of the training courses delivered.

Data collection

A semi-structured discussion guide was used when interviewing the sample of parolees (see Appendix A). The guide outlined a range of open-ended questions that explored three primary themes of discussion:

- Parolee experiences of vocational training in custody
- Employment outcomes post-release including perceived quality
- Engagement in vocational training and education post-release

A semi-structured discussion guide was also used for interviews with CCOs and with AEVTI and CSI staff members. The interviews focused on staff perceptions of the impact of vocational training in custody on parolees, the utility of these courses for parolees following release, industries where parolees typically find employment in the community, referral pathways and frequently encountered barriers parolees face leaving custody and searching for employment.

Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded with the respondent's permission and signed consent and later transcribed verbatim. All data were subjected to analysis using the statistical package NVivo Version 11. Similar to many large administrative datasets, missing values were observed for a number of variables obtained from OIMS and individual case files. All analyses were calculated with missing data omitted. Qualitative data was coded using a grounded theory approach, whereby key themes were identified and refined by successive reading and coding of the responses (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Results

Sample characteristics

The characteristics of the parolee study sample are displayed in Table 1. The majority of parolees who took part in the study were male (92%), of non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural background (76%), aged between 25-34 years (32%), unmarried (68%), educated below year 10 (68%) and had completed a previous prison sentence (81%). Nearly half of interviewees were rated as medium risk as measured by the LSI-R (48%), with the vast majority of the remaining parolees being rated at even lower risk (total 88% medium or under).

Table 1 - Characteristics of the parolee study sample

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Demographic characteristics		
Age		
18-24	4	17%
25-34	8	33%
35-44	6	25%
45+	7	29%
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	6	24%
Male gender	22	92%
Married	8	32%
Education below Year 10	17	68%
Frequently unemployed (<i>LSI-R item 12</i>)	5	20%
Unemployed at remand to custody	8	32%
Offending characteristics		
Previous prison sentence	16	81%
LSI-R risk category		
Low	3	12%
Medium-low	7	28%
Medium	12	48%
Medium-high	2	8%
High	0	0%
Missing	1	4%

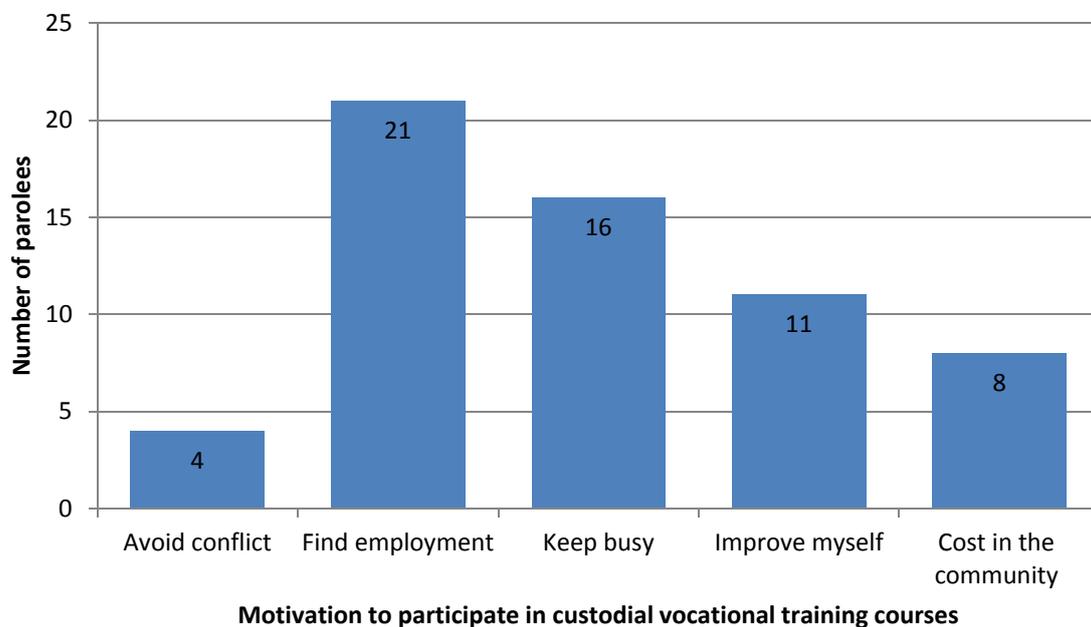
Experiences of vocational training in custody

Motivation to participate in vocational training

Overwhelmingly, the primary motivation for enrolling and completing selected vocational courses was to find employment once released (Figure 1). Almost 9 out of 10 participants mentioned this as a reason for completing the selected courses (87%, n=21).

'I thought that if I go and get every possible certificate I can get, then my opportunity to get employment is going to be greatly increased, and yeah that was basically the intention behind it all, to get out and back into the community doing something'. Parolee

Figure 1 – Parolees' motivation to participate in vocational training



In addition to increasing their employability, participants frequently mentioned that they completed the course to keep busy (67%, n=16) or wanted to use their time constructively to improve themselves (46%, n=11).

'I think it was something to better myself, I think there was a time in my life where I was a bit lost, I didn't know what to do, so those courses kind of you know kept me occupied, like away from the other scene, you know just being distracted, get myself away and try to focus on myself more you know. Something I could take on once me time was done, just have a better purpose in life, so yeah I think that's the reason why'. Parolee

A number of participants also stated that vocational training was an opportunity they would not have been able to afford had they been required to pay for it in the community (33%,

n=8). A smaller number identified undertaking the course to avoid conflict or trouble, by being removed from the prison environment and to be allowed to be somewhere where everyone is equally motivated (17%, n=4).

'When you are sitting around doing nothing all day a lot of their minds, just by nature, turns to some form of criminal activity, even in gaol, and that sort of was, you know, a bit disheartening because you're in this constant state of awareness 'am I going to get belted today or something?' Parolee

AEVTI and CSI instructors who coordinated these courses also stated the primary motivator for prisoners to undertake the courses was to obtain employment. This could be done either through acquiring new skills for entry into a new industry or extending the skills they already had. In addition, they noted that prisoners may be qualified in another industry but, because of their offending, employment in that field was no longer feasible. Like the parolees, staff noted that prisoners were very motivated to enrol in the courses and often promoted the courses as a means of using their time in custody to do something productive.

Impact of vocational training

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that their attitudes or behaviours had changed as a result of participating in a course (70%, n=14). The improvement they most commonly identified was a boost in their self-confidence, a feeling of accomplishment and greater optimism for the future. Many parolees proudly listed the numerous courses they had completed whilst in custody.

'It made me feel more confident, made me feel more optimistic for the future so in some ways, yeah, you could say that. Yeah, you made me feel more optimistic, more confident, I felt better equipped for when I get out.' Parolee

Participants also frequently mentioned attitudinal or behavioural changes they had noticed in their peers as a result of participating in vocational training.

'You get that sense of achievement at the end of it and there's that hope that you know you've, and I saw in the guys that are not as skilled as myself, you know that 'I've got this ticket now, you know I can get a job when I get out' and that was the attitude that you know people had who did the courses.' Parolee

Vocational course trainers identified similar improvements in confidence as well as identifying a shift in the focus of participants to a more future-oriented perspective as a result of participating in the courses.

Additionally, the participants' motivation, capabilities and opportunity to use the obtained qualifications, either in custody or in the community, is carefully examined by the course educators to ensure prisoners can successfully complete the courses and the vocational training is matched to prisoners' future plans. This is most apparent in the heavy vehicle drivers program which is not only more intensive but also has a higher cost attached to the certification.

Perceived quality of programs and trainers

Parolees were very positive regarding the training provided by the TAFE instructors and the AEVTI/CSI staff. Participants described the trainers as professional, very helpful, good communicators and overall "great". Participants felt that the trainers took their time to ensure participants understood the course. They were also positive about the CSNSW staff who facilitated the courses and provided them with assistance to successfully complete the courses.

'The people running the program, they put in a lot of help too...great the whole lot, they helped you, from the officers to the actual guy doing the training.' Parolee

For some parolees, participation in the courses improved the relationship between CSNSW staff and prisoners.

'When you are in there you get a bit of a hatred for all the security... and when you sit down in classroom and they're actually trying to help you it makes you look a bit differently at them and yeah you become more friendly with them I suppose and like every single person in our class becomes friends with the officer that looked after us.' Parolee

Participants also remarked on the trainers not judging them for what they had been imprisoned for. They noted that trainers who had instructed courses with other prisoners had an understanding of where they were coming from and tailored the courses to the learning pace of the participants. Participants also noted that one benefit of the course was that trainers treated them like normal people and allowed them to have a sense of normality, if only whilst they were on the course.

The heavy vehicle driving program was very highly regarded. Participants frequently mentioned the bonus of being outside the gaol whilst they were training in the truck. Participants commented on the stark comparison from being inside a correctional centre for a number of years to being out on the open road in a truck.

A small number of participants on the heavy vehicle driving program commented that the course felt rushed with a lot of training and testing condensed into a relatively short period of time. After successfully passing the theoretical component, the course went for three days and comprised two days of driving, half a day as a refresher and the remainder of the day undertaking the test. Participants indicated that even one more day of practice driving the truck would have been beneficial.

Parolees' use of training in custody

One-third of parolees had the opportunity to directly use the skills they had acquired from vocational training whilst they were still in custody. Offenders used their training in custody either through the work release program, or being employed in custody in a role that utilised skills learned in the course. Participants who obtained a forklift license were most likely to use the certification while in custody. For practical reasons, some training courses, such as the heavy vehicle driving program, were unlikely to be used by prisoners while they are still in custody.

'I actually became the forklift driver for the store when I was in Cessnock which was where I got my forklift licence and they also gave me a job at Muswellbrook driving a forklift on the farm basically managed to get my section earlier and get outside the walls because I had a licence and they needed me'. Parolee

Course availability

Nearly three-quarters of respondents felt there was enough choice in courses available (73%). Several participants even highlighted a range of courses that were available at their correctional centre but were not run due to lack of interest and motivation from offenders.

Factors that impacted on course availability for different offenders differed between correctional centres, and included:

- The set range of courses provided locally;
- The courses being unavailable at certain sections of the gaol based on classification;
- Offenders' sentence being too short to undertake training,
- Long waiting lists; and
- Difficulty obtaining training in areas that were unrelated to prison jobs.

The process of reintegration

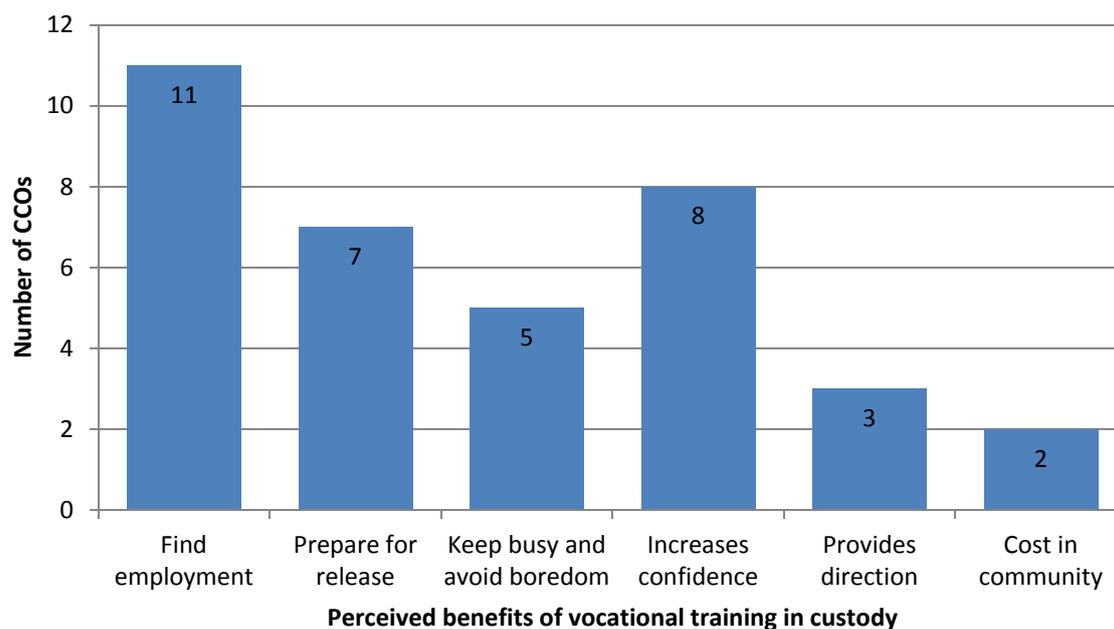
Impact of courses post-release

During interviews with the CCOs, staff members identified a range of benefits they had observed in parolees who had completed vocational training in custody. These included improved employment prospects; greater preparedness for release and greater motivation to look for work; improved confidence and self-esteem; gaining new skills to help them compete with other job seekers in the community; and opportunity to complete a course they may be unable to afford in the community.

As illustrated in Figure 2, improving the chance of finding employment was most frequently mentioned as one of the benefits of vocational training in custody, with nearly three-quarters of respondents identifying it as a benefit (73%, n=11). Other factors, such as increased confidence were also commonly mentioned (53%, n=8), as well as greater preparedness for release (47%, n=7) and keeping busy and avoiding boredom whilst in custody (33%, n=5).

Although the constructs 'find employment' and 'prepare for release' are likely interrelated, these benefits were differentiated by CCOs. To illustrate, preparing for release can be broader than seeking employment, and may include increasing their interaction with individuals outside of custody in readiness for release.

Figure 2 – Perceived benefits of vocational training



Furthermore, CCOs noted that parolees are often unskilled and have poor employment histories, so vocational training allows them to include some courses to make their resume look 'healthier' and indicate to employment agencies that they are committed to looking for work. Therefore, employment agencies may be more receptive to them as they have already demonstrated they have achieved something whilst in custody.

Also by completing the course and obtaining the ticket, it may broaden the types of positions they could apply for. CCOs also explained that parolees do not necessarily have to mention that it had been obtained in a custodial setting, so it can be used as a tool to explain large gaps in paid employment on their resume.

Supervisors in some locations mentioned that there was high unemployment in the local job market, explaining that any training completed in custody can assist parolees to compete with other job seekers in the community who do not have the handicap of a criminal record.

Vocational training and post-release employment

Parolees' perspective: At the time of interview, more than half of parolees who were employed in the community expressed beliefs that the courses had helped them to find employment following release from custody (57%). Participants frequently mentioned they felt more confident applying for certain positions, particularly those in forklift driving or heavy vehicle driving, whenever the opportunity was available.

'If you were in there and you had nothing and this would be the best way if you wanted to make a clean start you could come with a forklift licence, everyone needs a forklift drivers and that. If you come out and you have that ticket you can go and work at like anywhere, any factory, and that

could be the difference between having to go out and rob someone and going out and making your own way. It's an excellent idea'. Parolee

A number of parolees who were not utilising their certification at the time commented that they still considered it useful for the future, and believed it would benefit them at some stage.

Two participants within the sample noted it was difficult to obtain local work that matched the certification achieved as a result of vocational training. Both of these participants were completing parole in rural locations. Several interviewees discussed the possible reluctance of prisoners to participate in certain training courses provided in custody, or to refer to their certification, in the event that it could be linked to their history of placement in custody.

'I heard one guy say when I was down at Silverwater they'll see that and they'll ask you if you've been in gaol and then you think well if that's the case it might not be worth mentioning at all and if that's the case what's the point of me even doing the course...' Parolee

AEVTI / CSI perspective: Staff from CSI noted that to ensure vocational training complements employment opportunities, placement of courses should be aligned with the location of the correctional centre of delivery or the likely region of release for inmates, where possible.

For example, before the traffic control program and the heavy vehicle driving program were introduced in CSNSW correctional centres, research was conducted with industry groups, transport union and community groups to determine the likelihood that this training would lead to community employment. The heavy vehicle driving program was selected as there was a large demand for qualified drivers in Australia and it was deemed to be an area of skills shortage. There are also relatively few restrictions on former offenders gaining employment in this area. Traffic control programs had similar advantages, with no restrictions relating to previous offences. Furthermore, both programs enabled offenders to work at a variety of locations across NSW, with both males and females being able to obtain such employment.

These programs were focused not 'just on training for the sake of training' but developed with the aim of assisting prisoners to better position themselves once they were released. CSNSW staff endeavoured to link institutional courses to other qualifications and/or work experience participants had obtained to improve their likelihood of employment post-release.

CCOs' perspective: Although three-fifths of CCOs believed that vocational training completed in custody assisted parolees to find employment in the community (60%), the remaining CCOs were unsure whether the training courses completed in custody could be directly linked to employment once participants were released. This was especially the case for qualifications related to jobs that were relatively scarce in the community, for example textile manufacturing qualifications. Additionally, in rural locations CCOs identified the general lack of employment available and noted that training certification may not be targeted to the rural job market.

Parolees' job readiness

The majority of parolees in the study sample considered themselves to have been very ready to work when they left prison, (71%, n=17), and reported that they looked for work while they were still in custody or straight after they were released. Some had already arranged work before they left and started working shortly after release from custody. Two of the participants were on work release while in custody and they continued their employment following release.

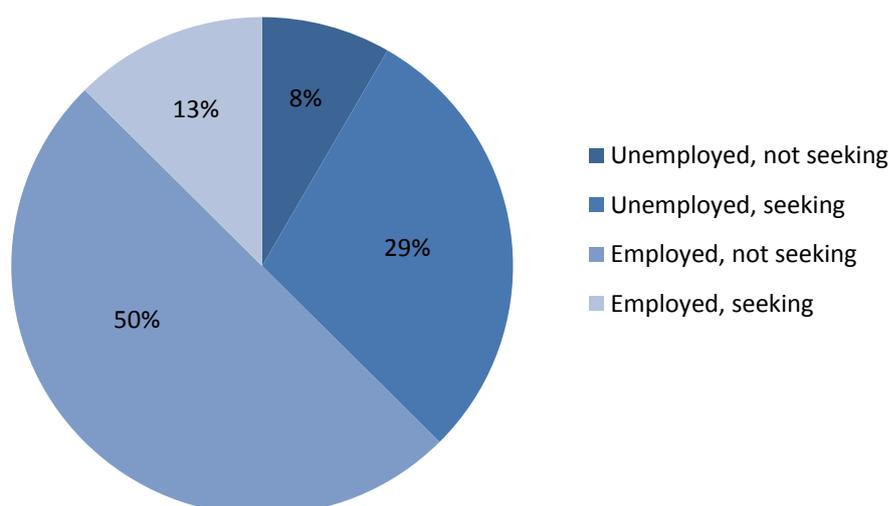
'Yeah unbelievably, so much and I said I'd already been working for two years before my release as well so it was pretty much, even on the day I was getting released it was, I didn't even take the day off work.' Parolee

Those who were not prepared to start working immediately after release generally had caregiving responsibilities, parole conditions restricting interstate work or were addressing mental health or housing issues.

Parolees' employment status

Nearly two thirds of the parolee sample were employed at the time of the interview (63%, n=15). The majority of these were employed and not seeking alternative employment (50%, n=12). Nearly one-third of parolees, however, were employed but looking for alternative employment (29%, n=7) (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Reported employment status of parolees



The majority of participants who were employed had obtained a job in the construction, transport or warehouse industries (87%, n=13). Table 2 outlines the types of jobs participants had at the time of interview.

Table 2 - Types of jobs held by parolees at the time of interview

Employment	Frequency	Percent
Construction	7	29%
Warehouse	3	13%
Panel beater	1	4%
Council worker	1	4%
Truck driver	3	13%
Unemployed	9	37%
Total	24	100%

Participants generally reported that they were very satisfied with their jobs, with the majority of them (80%) giving it the highest rating on a scale between 1 (very dissatisfied with their job) to 5 (very satisfied with their job). None of the participants rated their job below a three out of five. Positive relationships at work, especially those with co-workers and supervisors, were highly regarded by parolees.

'The work's good...and we've got a good team and that's the whole winning purpose of finding a good job because you are surrounded by good employees, good environment and everyone's got the right mind-set. Your day doesn't seem to be like work'. Parolee

All but one of the participants who were currently employed at the time of interview were working full time. The majority of parolees considered their employment stable and permanent. The remaining participant who was casually employed expressed hopes to obtain permanent employment after they had completed a trial period.

'I actually might be going on full time soon because I'm still casual at the moment but at my work it's very hard to get full time but I've been asked to train other people at the moment so I've gone pretty good. I've come pretty far in the six months that I've been there so hopefully soon I will get some recognition for it'. Parolee

Industries employing parolees

The interviewed CCOs overwhelmingly identified building and construction as the industry where most parolees find employment. All but one CCO identified this industry as where most offenders who completed vocational training in custody are employed (93%, n=14), with warehouses and factories the next most frequently mentioned (33%, n=5). CCOs commented that parolees were generally casually employed in unskilled labouring positions and frequently paid cash-in-hand.

Labouring positions in the construction industry were also attractive to parolees as they rarely required criminal history checks as a prerequisite for employment. CCOs noted that those who secure full time stable employment generally had a history of employment and often returned to what they were doing before custody, as they have contacts in the industry.

In addition, supervisors noted that in some cases parolees do not utilise the specialised vocational training they had obtained in custody, and instead gravitate towards construction-type positions such as unskilled labouring or demolition because they are readily available and pay cash-in-hand.

CCOs highlighted their concern with parolees working cash-in-hand, which may leave them worse off in the long run. CCOs noted that such jobs may be popular with some parolees, as they allow parolees to claim Centrelink payments on top of work income. This is problematic, CCOs argued, firstly because it is illegal, but also because parolees are not insured if they are injured at work. Moreover, earning their income in this way means that financial institutions are unable to verify their income if they apply for a loan. CCOs noted that this could also be an issue if parolees claim Centrelink payments whilst also working cash-in-hand.

Pathways to employment

Overwhelmingly, when searching for employment, parolees relied on word of mouth through friends, family or people they had worked with prior to custody (67%, n=16). One quarter of the sample noted they were using the internet to search for employment (25%, n=6); whilst one in ten returned to their previous job (13%, n= 3), checked the newspaper (123%, n=3) or used a labour hire company (8%, n=2).

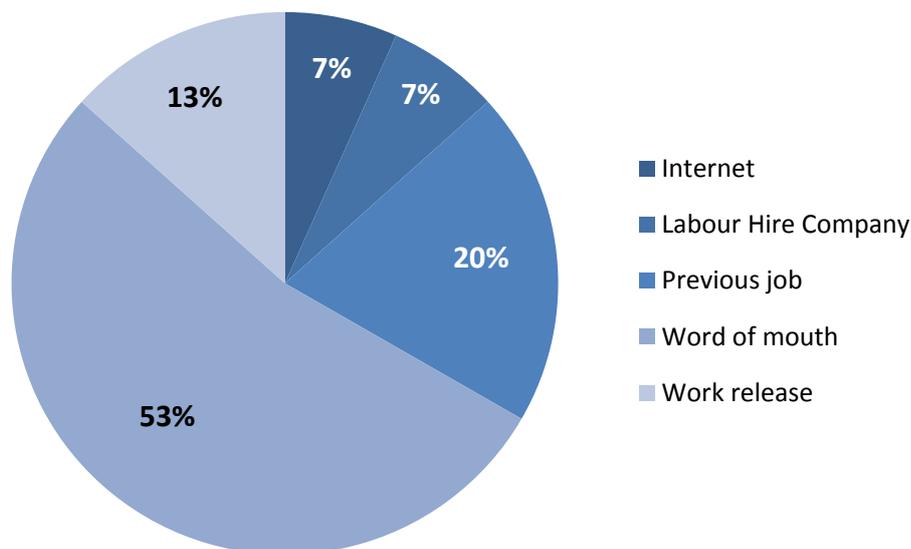
'It was basically lined up before I got out through a friend of mine... I didn't really have too much trouble getting some work as soon as I needed it so it was something that I was a little bit worried about before getting out was how long was it going to take me to find a job and start getting money again? But yeah it worked out reasonably well'. Parolee

As outlined in Figure 4, the majority of those who ultimately managed to secure employment attributed their success to the assistance of friends, family (word of mouth) or through connecting with previous work colleagues (53%).

Approximately one third (29%, n = 7) of the participant sample noted that they were registered with a Job Network Provider (JNP) through Centrelink. However, none of the participants managed to secure work through this source, and participants in general were sceptical of the assistance the JNPs were able to provide.

'I just asked, I looked, I went to job networks but I've never really had any luck with them in the past, just asking friends, word of mouth and I was lucky enough that one of my friends that I haven't spoken to in a while yeah she was, she's the boss at my work'. Parolee

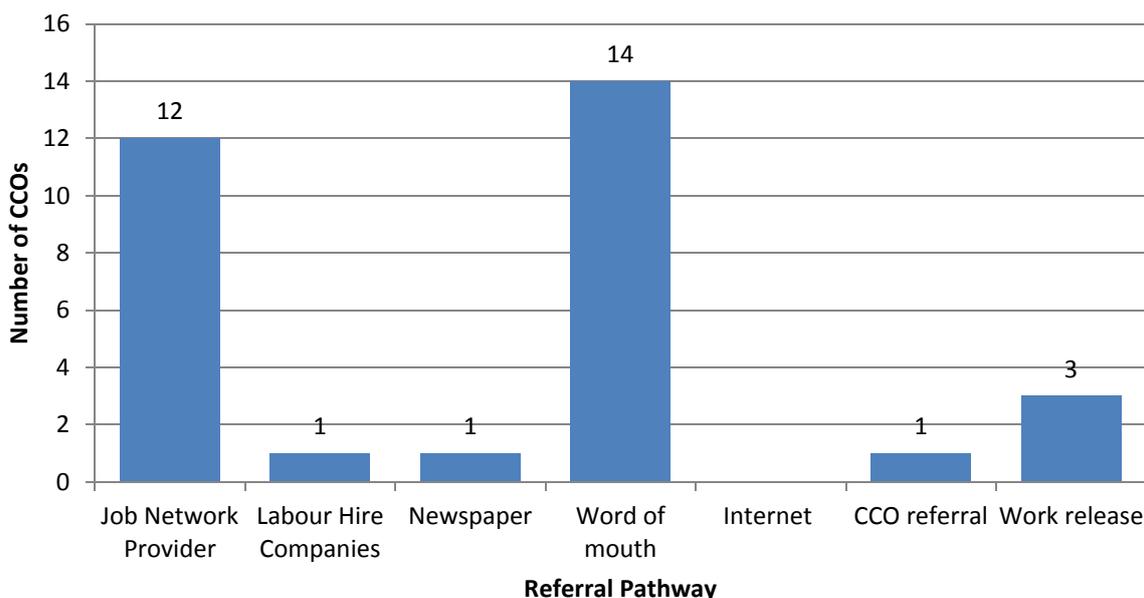
Figure 4 - Method by which employment was secured



Referral pathways

CCOs' referral pathways for parolees to find jobs were similar to the job search methods identified by parolees within the sample, with the majority identifying JNPs and word of mouth to be the most common supports they referred to. The majority of CCOs identified word of mouth (93%, n=14) and JNPs (80%, n=12) as the primary pathways for job seeking. Referral pathways identified by the CCOs have been illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5 – Identified employment referral pathways for parolees



Although CCOs noted that most parolees are connected to a JNP through Centrelink, with only a few exceptions, CCOs were also sceptical of the assistance provided to parolees and the likelihood of this assistance translating into viable work. Their sentiments were not dissimilar to comments parolees made regarding the effectiveness of JNPs in helping them to secure employment.

'I don't think I have ever had somebody that has got a job through a Job Network Provider'. CCO

'Centrelink just gives them a card 'here you go mate' and then they just get on the train, the unemployment train and off they go'. CCO

Nevertheless, CCOs made reference to the potential impact that parolees' motivation, as well as their expectations, have upon their perception of the JNPs and what they get out of this relationship.

'Again their expectation of what job service providers can do is probably a bit higher than what they can actually do and it just depends on their attitude that they bring in, their sort of consistency with seeking work and accepting work that's available, following through with interviews and contacts later on'. CCO

The CCOs who made positive comments regarding JNPs emphasised the collaborative relationship they had with local providers. They explained that this played a positive role in identifying barriers the parolee may be facing and providing a more integrated response.

'They are really quite supportive of them so we get consent to speak to them about the offenders issues and what might be barriers to stop them getting employment and then through our liaison with that service they are a bit more aware of ok these are the things that we're, like corrective services, are picking up as issues for them and preventing them maybe from getting employment and then they take that on board...'. CCO

Some CCOs who did not report this level of collaboration recognised the benefit a closer relationship between CSNSW and JNPs.

'I wonder if there is an opportunity for Corrective Services whether on local level or wider sector to do that more of a fluid communication with job network providers because we tend to use the same handful and whether there is an opportunity to build up, perhaps you know doing a presentation there or they do a presentation with us and building up more of a relationship.'. CCO

According to parolees and CCOs, some ex-prisoners may be classified in a manner that allows them a period where they are exempt from job seeking and reporting to their JNP after their release from custody. Some interviewees identified this as an issue for prisoners who were motivated to find work as it limited the job seeking services available to them in the initial period after release.

'When I got out...Centrelink told me to chill out for 3 months. That's how they roll because I got out of gaol. They said I'm a streamlined something

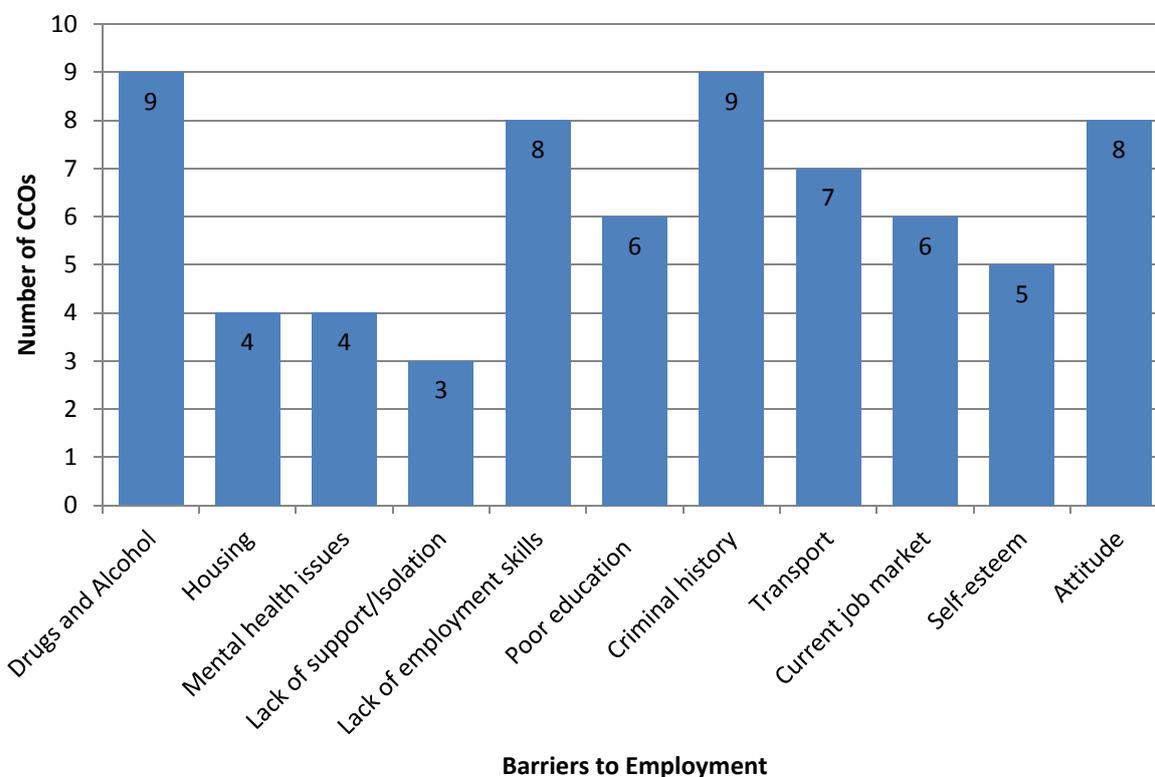
because I just got out of gaol so I don't have to hand in a form or nothing. I don't even have to report my earnings for three months. I went 'what? That's crazy' and then I went to Job Network and they said they were closing down so just chill out for three months. I went 'what?' I don't know because I just got out. I don't know what's going on now because before it was like 'get a job, get a job' now they want me to kick back. I can't do that. I got bills I need to pay for. It's not me. I need to get a job'. Parolee

Barriers to employment

CCOs identified a broad range of barriers that parolees may face when looking for employment. The barriers most commonly identified were drug and alcohol abuse (60%, n=9), criminal history (60%, n=9), attitude (53%, n=8), poor employment skills (53%, n=8) and lack of transport (47%, n=7).

The most frequently reported barriers to employment identified by CCOs are illustrated in Figure 6. A number of these primary barriers will also be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

Figure 6 – Identified barriers to employment faced by parolees.



Poor literacy and numeracy

CCOs identified difficulties with poor literacy and numeracy skills as a significant barrier to obtaining employment amongst supervised prisoners (40%, n=6).

'I think you've also got to look at people's education. First and foremost, whether they're...struggling with an intellectual disability, or the fact that...a lot of them didn't finish school at all, or even get to sometimes year 7 or 8, so just their basic literacy and numeracy skills are also going to really impact on them'. CCO

Some parolees not only identified a personal need to improve their literacy and numeracy but also the low levels of general education amongst the prison population. When asked what courses should be more readily available, basic education was frequently identified amongst this cohort both by CCOs and parolees themselves.

'No, only the education because there are a lot of blokes in gaol that don't have an education like I went, year 9. A lot of them didn't even get that far and I believe there should be more reading and writing and stuff, just the basic stuff, maths, that sort of stuff. They need to get the people to do it you know. I think like I said that before, that's the problem they couldn't get the staff'. Parolee

Computer literacy was also identified as an area that a significant number of parolees struggled with. Their lack of computer skills created unique barriers to job seeking, given many of the jobs advertised were online and the application process requires the ability to access websites, type up resumes, attach documents and complete online testing. CCOs identified parolees' feelings of shame and embarrassment as obstacles to their seeking help to address the poor literacy and gaps in IT knowledge.

'This is what a few of them have said to me. They struggle with even using their phone and if they've been in custody for many years or they've had an upbringing where they've had no access to anything like that, it's overwhelming and the fear of failure, or the fear of even saying that they don't know how to do that'. CCO

Lack of employment history

CCOs also discussed the difficulties parolees faced seeking employment when they lacked any history of employment or work-related skills to include on a resume. Additionally, parolees were often reported to struggle with basic job-seeking tools, such as an up-to-date resume and references, which can make successfully landing a job difficult.

'They don't come out with up-to-date resumes, none of them have references, you know so they're the things that, no matter how many courses you do, if you don't cover those bases they are never going to get a job because they can't compete with the next person'. CCO

One third of the parolees in the study sample identified lack of skills/education or experience as having either a slight (25%, n=4) or a large impact (13%, n=2) whilst they were searching

for a job. Two parolees also identified lack of skills/education or experience as being a barrier for those seeking employment amongst other parolees.

Attitude of parolees

CCOs expressed beliefs that parolees' motivation to seek work, or attitude while at work, can have a significant impact on their job seeking efforts and on their capacity to maintain employment. They noted that those parolees who had poor motivation to seek work, or who encountered issues in the workplace and lacked the problem solving capabilities to address these conflicts, had difficulties obtaining and sustaining employment.

'I guess it comes down to whether they want to work, and for those that do want to work, any support you give them is great because they will go ahead and find their own work and that's fine. It's the ones that don't particularly want to work and want to go back into their lifestyles that they had before and that's going to keep going for infinitum I guess'. CCO

Parolees were less likely to identify attitude as affecting their ability to seek work compared to CCOs; however, as previously mentioned, a large majority of the parolees in this sample were highly motivated to seek work straight away.

Absence of transport

Every CCO located outside the Sydney metropolitan area identified lack of public transport in their area, coupled with parolees not having a driver's licence, as significant barriers to parolees obtaining employment. The lack of personal private transport meant parolees were often reliant on family members or friends to provide lifts to and from work.

A significant proportion of the parolees in the study sample identified transport as having either a slight (31%, n=5) or a large impact (18%, n=3) on their efforts in searching for a job. Parolees frequently identified the importance of having a driver's licence not only for getting to and from work, but also as a requirement for many of the jobs advertised.

Lack of employment opportunities

More than half of parolees identified lack of available jobs as having an impact on their ability to obtain employment. Approximately one third of parolees identified it as either having a slight impact (n=5) or as having a large impact (n=4) on their ability to find employment.

'Probably finding something that is suitable or even available up here will be the challenging thing because of the isolation...' Parolee

CCOs noted it can be difficult for parolees to obtain work in other states because of the restrictions CSNSW places on parolees seeking work outside of NSW. Parolees also highlighted difficulties obtaining approval to work interstate given parole conditions that preclude them from travelling across state borders. This was a specific concern for CCOs at Community Corrections offices located close to state borders. Parolees can obtain travel permits for work; however, these need to go through multiple levels of approval. To obtain approval, parolees need a letter from their employer outlining the hours and days required and the job location site. This can be challenging if interviews and work locations are determined at short notice, as it takes at least two weeks to complete the paperwork and

obtain the approval required. Additionally, this can be an ongoing onus as the parolee may be approved for three months and then need to re-apply once this period has lapsed.

Parole conditions, including restrictions around obtaining work over the border, were considered to have either a slight impact (43%, n= 7) or a large impact on seeking employment (18%, n=3). Alternatively, one third of parolees did not perceive parole conditions to have an impact on their search for employment (37%, n=6).

It was noted that all those CCOs who identified lack of jobs as a barrier to parolees seeking employment were located in rural areas.

Disclosure of criminal record

Amongst CCOs, having a criminal record was considered to be a substantial barrier to obtaining employment and, along with drug and alcohol problems, was the most commonly mentioned barrier that parolees encounter. More than half of the CCOs identified criminal history as a barrier to parolees seeking employment (60%, n=9).

CCOs frequently mentioned that it was up to the parolee to decide whether or not to disclose his/her criminal record, but they recommended that parolees be honest and upfront regarding their criminal history to avoid it becoming an issue later or having to worry about hiding it from their employer.

Interestingly, parolees within the sample were less likely to express beliefs that their criminal record affected their ability to find employment. Approximately two-thirds indicated criminal record had no impact on their ability to find employment (62%, n=10). The remaining one third (31, n=5) thought it had a slight impact and only 6.3 percent of parolees considered it to have a large impact.

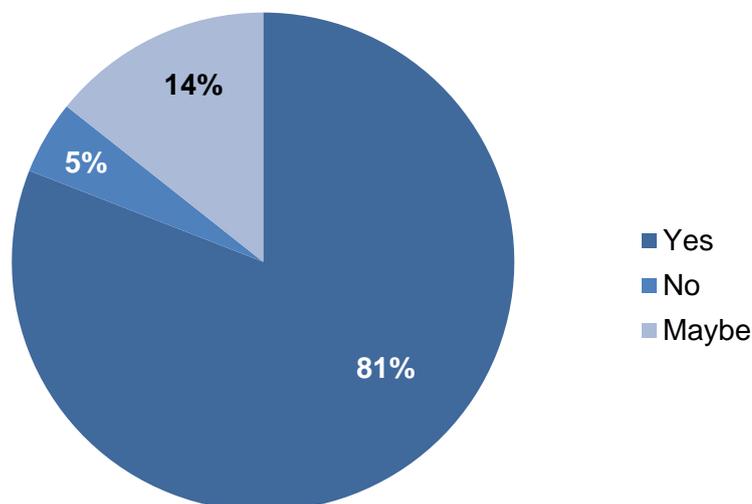
Overwhelmingly, parolees indicated that their employer was aware of their criminal history or if they were looking for work they would disclose their criminal history to a potential employer (81%). Only one parolee stated they would not disclose their criminal history and 14 percent were unsure whether they would disclose or not (Figure 7).

'Yeah they haven't judged me for where I've been. They believe in second chances, which is good. It makes things a lot easier... Yeah I went through everything and they believe I've changed and I believe I have and yeah I guess time has passed'. Parolee

Those who were unsure about disclosing their criminal history or did not think they would raise their criminal history highlighted the challenges involved in explaining the period they were in custody.

'It's quite embarrassing, I think for me. It's not something that I would advertise so I would say that I have either been traveling or studying for the time where I've been in gaol just to explain that time... I think it's a very mental thing so I think yeah definitely, I definitely wouldn't disclose that information, no'. Parolee

Figure 7 – Parolees' reported disclosure of criminal history to prospective employers



Engagement in post-release education

Two thirds of participants in the study sample reported that they are considering future education or vocational training at the time of interview. Courses that were considered included continuing an apprenticeship; stock trading courses; business management; test and tag; heavy rigid truck licences; butchery; plant operator's ticket; yellow card and High School Certificate. Foreseen barriers raised by parolees included family and work commitments and the need to focus on actual earning rather than additional education.

CCOs were also supportive of prisoners engaging in post-release education and training; however, many noted that furthering their education was a low priority for parolees immediately after release and therefore many did not undertake additional education in the community shortly after release.

One course that CSNSW has developed in partnership with NSW TAFE is the Pathways to Employment, Education and Training (PEET) program. This program enables medium to high risk offenders with educational and/or vocational deficits to access a nine-week course co-facilitated by a TAFE teacher and a CCO following release from custody. This program aims to motivate offenders to engage with vocational education and employment pathways.

Nearly two thirds of CCOs noted that PEET was available at their Community Corrections office (66%, n=10). Offices that were not operating the PEET program frequently noted that it had previously been offered but not for a number of years. The majority of CCOs considered the PEET program to be helpful in assisting parolees develop a resume, prepare

for a job interview, build confidence, identify and strengthen employment skills, present information on available TAFE courses and pathways, and provide tips on communicating with prospective employers. Parolees could participate on a range of short courses as part of PEET, including: small engines, welding, photography, cooking, hospitality, barista, RCG, RSA and boat building. CCOs did highlight the challenge of encouraging and maintaining attendance in the PEET program and the high attrition rate for this group.

Assistance overcoming barriers

CCOs discussed various forms of assistance they provide to parolees to help them overcome barriers to employment. CCOs reported that they assisted parolees to navigate their interactions with JNPs: helping them to transfer to JNPs located closer to home, ensuring they are categorised as the most appropriate stream, identifying JNPs with greater experience assisting parolees to find employment and playing a mediator role between parolees and JNPs reporting requirements.

'That's one of the biggest things that we do is try to play a little bit of a mediator role in between long term unemployed or parolees and what their requirements are with Centrelink so their financial stability remains stable so that they can then concentrate on looking for work'. CCO

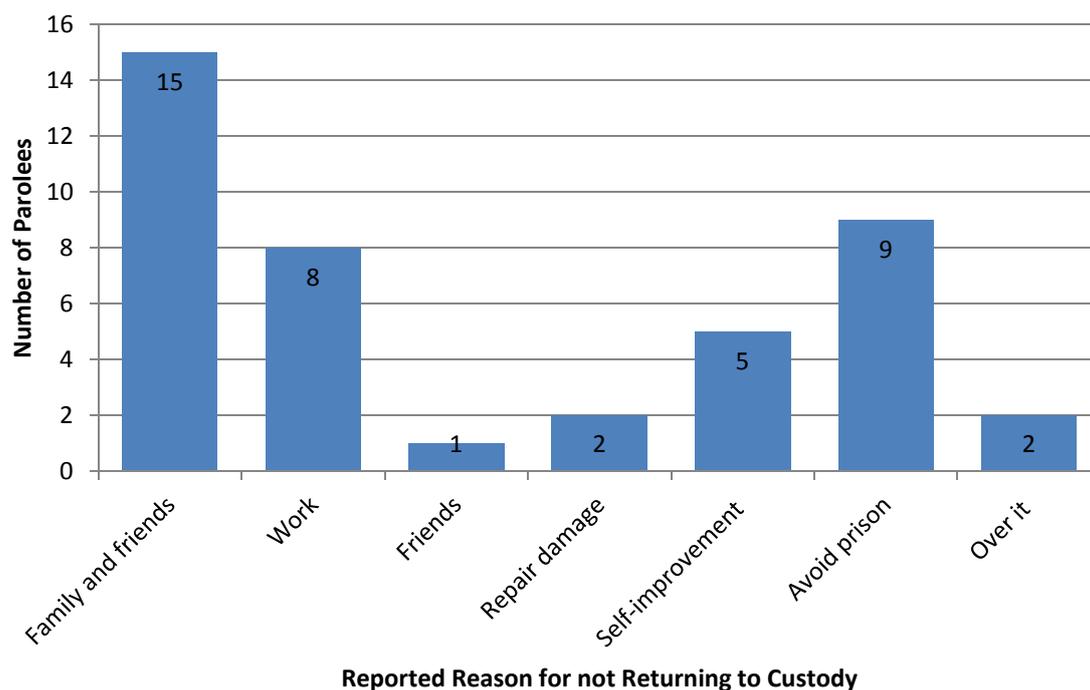
Additional support reported by CCOs included informing parolees of upcoming job expos, assisting them with their résumés, researching appropriate programs and TAFE courses in their community, encouraging them to seek volunteer work and providing general encouragement and motivational support.

AEVTI and CSI staff also discussed support provided to prisoners before they leave custody, such as assisting with job application letters, resumes or researching the types of employment available in the areas they are looking to return home to; however, it was noted that job seeking classes could be more consistently offered across centres especially to those who require greater assistance translating the qualifications and training received in custody to post-release employment.

Parolees' plans for the future

When parolees were asked about their reasons for staying out of prison and completing parole successfully, they commonly mentioned family, and more specifically their partners and children, as an extremely strong motivator. Parolees also mentioned the importance of work and re-establishing themselves financially, and avoiding reoffending as they did not want to return to gaol given how unpleasant they found the experience. Frequencies of each of the responses given by parolees are given in Figure 8.

Figure 8 – Parolees' reported reasons for not wanting to return to custody



Importance of family

Family was the most frequently mentioned reason for staying out of prison according to participants, with nearly two thirds of the sample (62%, n=15) describing this as a motivating factor. Parolees focused upon their need to re-establish and repair their relationships with their children, partners and broader family which had been damaged by their imprisonment.

'Other than that I'm probably going to be keeping a low profile, after being in gaol for two years I'm keen to sort of fix up the relationship with all my children... Now after spending all this time away I'm sort of trying to fix the damage that's been done by being away...obviously to stay out of prison and win back the trust and honour of my wife who lost a lot of trust in me whilst I was away'. Parolee

Importance of avoiding custody

Parolees also frequently reported avoiding reimprisonment as a motivation for not reoffending. More than one third of participants commented on how strongly they would never want to return to custody (37.5%, n=9).

'Nobody wants to go back to prison. I've got too much to lose you know and it's not excuse but I was just a bit younger you know I was stupid. I've done some bad things and yeah I don't want to go back'. Parolee

Parolees also frequently mentioned how they perceived being incarcerated as a waste of their time and their need to move beyond that stage of their life in a more positive direction.

Importance of employment in future planning

One third of parolees identified work and financial security as important motivators to stay out of prison and complete parole successfully (33%, n=8). For many parolees, employment was considered to be a fundamental part of their plan for the future, not just to meet their basic needs of supporting themselves and others but also as a means to travel, acquire property and do something meaningful with their time.

'Oh it is important right to eat, to have a roof under your head, it's important to have a job. I don't think you can't, you can go without it unless you want to do something shifty or outside the law. It's not worth it in the long run, so I think having a job is the most important thing to survive. I don't think anyone can survive without having a job permanently'. Parolee

Parolees identified the importance of a job in enabling them to support their family and provide security for their children.

'...but you've got to be working and you need something for the future, especially me I've got a daughter so I need security for my daughter so it's important that I keep working but yeah I'm going to stay at the council if I get the full time position there'. Parolee

'I'm determined to get my kids back but I want a job, a full time job so I can yeah, buy things because I'm only on Newstart and I can't afford to buy the things they need and so that's why a job is really important to me. Getting my kids back and looking after my old mum that's sick'. Parolee

Furthermore, parolees highlighted the importance of having a job that they found satisfying and would provide an improved 'quality of life'.

'A job's essential, you got to work, you've got to earn an income, you've got to be self-actualised and actually the fact that you are working and you are doing something because some people can live like that where they're not working but for myself it's the key to just being able to survive but also to have some sort of quality of life. So I just keep working at the moment and I'll just keep doing this for now and see what else happens'. Parolee

Some parolees also highlighted the positive impact working full time had upon their likelihood of reoffending. Respondents frequently mentioned their time and energy was taken up with working and left little time for anything else.

'Well I work all day and I can't be bothered to do anything else so I just go to bed'. Parolee

'[work affected me] in a good way. It stopped me from going out so much and doing that crap'. Parolee

CCOs tended to support the perspectives of offenders, highlighting the importance of a job not just as a means of survival but as a way for parolees to structure their day, to engage in more pro-social activities and to improve their self-identity.

'It gives them that positive reinforcement, that structure and it gets rid of the boredom which for a lot of our guys creates that you know period where they go out and do things that they shouldn't or go out with people they shouldn't, so yeah it does provide them that structure...When I do pre-release home visits for guys that are coming out they'll go 'can you help them with employment?' and then I think that's such an important thing for everyone like, even for you and I working is part of who we are'.
CCO

Discussion

The aim of the current study was to examine the motivations that had led offenders to undertake vocational training programs in custody and the impact of such training on their time in custody, post-release employment and other outcomes. Overall, this study highlighted a number of important findings, which will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Experiences of vocational training programs

According to interviewees, including parolees in addition to CSNSW staff, the primary motivation for offenders to undertake vocational training in custody was to obtain employment following their release into the community. In addition, participants frequently made reference to completing courses to keep themselves busy or to use their time constructively. These findings are in accordance with those from previous research (Richmond, 2014).

Overwhelmingly, parolees recommended the identified vocational training courses be continued, with both parolees and trainers providing very positive reports about the courses. As a result of their participation, parolees reported improvements in self-confidence, feelings of accomplishment, greater optimism for the future, the opportunity to feel like a 'normal person' again, and an improvement in their relationship with CSNSW staff who assisted with the training. Previous studies have reported similar personal development gains associated with vocational training (Gorta & Panaretos, 1990; Richmond, 2014).

The heavy vehicle driving program was particularly well regarded by parolees, with many obtaining employment as a result of completion of the certification. Furthermore, parolees were happy to have access to a course that they often felt they would be unable to afford in the community. The main improvement to the course recommended by parolees was to increase the length of the course slightly, especially the practical component. A parolee also suggested expanding the heavy vehicle driving program to include medium rigid and light rigid licenses.

Accessibility to courses was reported to vary between correctional centres. Some prisoners identified long waiting lists, a narrow course selection and difficulty undertaking courses.

Other prisoners highlighted a wide variety of courses available but a lack of motivation among inmates to take advantage of training opportunities. Difficulties were also identified in completing courses when prisoners had been moved to other sections of the correctional centre or another correctional centre entirely. Several parolees mentioned they were unable to complete courses they had started after being transferred to a location where the course was not available.

Other courses identified as beneficial by parolees and CCOs included:

- Traffic control courses;
- Computer literacy courses;
- Motivational courses;
- General education courses;
- Employment readiness and job seeking skills courses;
- Mentoring-type schemes for those who are socially isolated; and
- Living skills courses.

Post-release implications of vocational training

More than half of the interviewed parolees who were employed in the community felt that participation in the identified vocational training courses helped them find employment after leaving prison (57%). This response rate is higher than previously reported (Gorta & Panaretos, 1990). The forklift certification, stop and go traffic course and the heavy vehicle driving program were most frequently utilised in job seeking efforts. A substantial number of the parolees who were not directly using the training in their current employment indicated that they thought they would use the certification in the future or felt more confident having it as a backup.

Several interviewees noted that some parolees might be reluctant to utilise their qualifications due to the possibility of identifying themselves as having been in custody. This finding has also been reported by Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014), who noted that prison work and training were often perceived as negated by the stigma of having a criminal record. Furthermore, respondents in the Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014) study reported they were unwilling to openly discuss their custodial training or education with a possible employer and were dissuaded by recruiters from doing so as it would signal to employers that they had spent time in prison. Nevertheless, this was not a substantial issue amongst the sample of parolees in this study as the training obtained through the selected courses was provided directly by TAFE and could not be linked back to AEVTI or custody.

CCOs were also positive about the benefits of institutional vocational training, both in occupying prisoners in productive activities and in increasing their ability to compete with other candidates upon release. Nevertheless, they highlighted the need for courses to be tailored to the job market to which the prisoner will return, as well as a greater link between the courses they completed and available industries and jobs in the local community. This challenge of connecting training obtained in custody with post-release employment was frequently reported particularly by CCOs who supervised parolees in non-metropolitan

locations, often due to the dearth of relevant and appropriate jobs available for them in such areas.

This finding is similar to that reported by Richmond (2014) and Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014), who both found that prisoners' confidence in obtaining work was dependent on the transferability of the skills they had gained in custody to the job market in the community. Furthermore, reviews of 'what works' in relation to interventions targeting employment, education and training of offenders have emphasised the need for a closer link between the training and education offered in correctional centres and job opportunities and skills shortages in the community to ensure the transferability of the skills and training (Flynn, 2004; Learning and Skills Council, 2002).

CCOs identified the work release program as a means to provide a smoother transition from custody to community. Parolees who participated in work release were very positive about the experience, the skills they acquired, and the assistance it provided them to have a job immediately upon release. Within the study sample, two parolees had undertaken work release as part of their custodial sentence, and both had continued their employment following release from custody.

Pathways to employment

For many parolees in the study, family, friends, and previous work colleagues played an instrumental role in obtaining work after release. This finding is consistent with recent research that indicates social networks play a key role in assisting parolees to find work, and that those who do find employment through these networks have greater success after release (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2014; Sampson & Laub 1993). It is feasible that this pathway to employment means that employers are already aware of the parolee's criminal history and close associates could vouch for the parolee's past work experience and character (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2014; Lin, 2001). This may explain the relatively minor perceived negative impact of a criminal record on job seeking activities reported by this cohort.

Both CCOs and parolees expressed concern about the role of JNPs in assisting employment opportunities after release. One issue highlighted is the time gap between release from prison and the provision of assistance to obtain work. Paradoxically, although the majority of ex-prisoners are categorised by Centrelink as Stream 4, which is considered to be the 'most severe level of disadvantage' and are recommended for the highest level of integrated support, this classification allows for a period of several months where they are not required to seek employment and generally do not have access to services (Job Seeker Classification Instrument, 2017). CCOs identified the first months post-release as being critical for integrating ex-prisoners back into the community and obtaining employment, and expressed beliefs that this period would be particularly challenging without corresponding job recruitment support. It is noted that no parolee in the current study secured employment through a JNP and of those still seeking employment, none expected this pathway to prove fruitful.

There has been little research conducted to examine how effective JNPs are in assisting ex-offenders to find work, with Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014) being notable in this area. They found that parolees had mixed experience with these providers. Participants in this study

identified that some providers adopted an ad-hoc approach to securing employment, with limited thought given to what strategies would enhance their likelihood of securing work. Other providers, however, were more strategic, and targeted employers they knew had previously provided employment to ex-offenders.

Although parolees were not optimistic about the effectiveness of JNPs in assisting them to obtain employment, they continued to engage with them to ensure they continued to receive government income support payments. If they disengage from these providers their income support payments may be stopped until they re-establish contact. CCOs identified the difficulty in playing a 'mediating role' between Centrelink, JNPs and the parolees they were supervising to ensure payments continued and the parolee could be financially supported.

CCOs with more positive views of the work of JNPs indicated a more collaborative relationship with the service. They also commonly mentioned the benefit this kind of relationship provided in addressing barriers and assisting the parolee to access additional training and employment services. CCOs indicated that improved communication, interagency networking and a focus on building better relationships between CSNSW and Centrelink would be of benefit in assisting this cohort with their employment needs.

Barriers to employment

CCOs highlighted a range of barriers that parolees face securing employment after they leave custody. The barriers most frequently identified were: criminal history, drugs and alcohol problems, lack of employment skills, transportation issues and a poor attitude to job seeking. Such barriers were not dissimilar to findings of previous research (Baldry et al., 2003; Pager, 2007; Visher et al., 2011; Webster et al., 2001). In addition, some individual risk factors that inhibit employment prospects, such as addiction, mental health issues and low levels of education, also increase a prisoner's risk of reoffending in the first instance (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2014).

Both CCOs and parolees identified the lack of a driver's licence as a significant barrier to obtaining employment post-release, especially in rural locations where public transport can be limited. Participants from both groups discussed the benefits of assisting prisoners to obtain a driver's licence. AEVTI staff also noted that licences were an important initial certification so that prisoners could undertake training courses in custody (white card, forklift and traffic management were examples provided). Previous research has also identified transportation needs at reintegration as an important factor in employment outcomes (Baer et al., 2006).

Parolees and CCOs differed in their perception of the impact of a criminal record on efforts to obtain employment. Consistent with the literature, CCOs emphasised the negative impact of a criminal record on parolees' job seeking efforts (Graffam et al., 2008; Pager, 2003; 2007). Conversely, parolees did not tend to report criminal record as affecting their prospect of obtaining employment. Nearly two-thirds of parolees reported that having a criminal record does not have any impact on their ability to obtain employment (63%). Moreover, the vast majority of respondents reported that they would disclose their criminal record to a future employer (81%), indicating a greater readiness to disclose it compared to findings of previous research (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2014).

Evaluation of employment

Similar to existing research (Uggen, 1999), parolees indicated that having employment was fundamental to achieving their future goals but also emphasised the importance of having a good quality job. Of those employed, all but one were employed in full time positions they considered stable, and generally rated their employment positively. Their affirmative response to employment was reflected in their positive job satisfaction ratings, with the vast majority of respondents rating their work the highest possible rating ('I like my job a lot'). These positions were more stable than those identified by CCOs and in existing research (Baer et al., 2006).

Relationships with co-workers and supervisors were highly regarded by interviewees, with parolees frequently noting this was an important aspect of their job. This is reflective of broader research which identified 'quality of workplace interpersonal relationships' as one of the four key factors related to quality of work (Handel, 2005; Power & Nolan, 2014).

The majority of participants who were employed had obtained a job in the construction, transport or warehouse industries. These matched the industries CCOs mentioned as being more likely to hire parolees.

Nevertheless, parolees in the study tended to obtain employment that required greater skill attainment than that commonly observed by CCOs in other cases. CCOs noted that parolees that they were aware of were generally casually employed in unskilled labouring positions and frequently paid cash-in-hand. Labouring positions in the construction industry were also attractive to parolees as they rarely required criminal history checks as a prerequisite for obtaining employment. Previous research has also identified that offenders' employment is typically concentrated in temporary, unskilled and low-paid jobs where criminal history is less likely to be requested or to be an important selection criterion (Power & Nolan, 2014).

Plans for the future

Similar to the previous findings, parolees in this study frequently associated specific 'turning points' such as getting married or becoming a parent with the desire to be employed and avoid reoffending (Cherney and Fitzgerald, 2014; Laub & Sampson, 2003). However, structural variables such as employment or becoming a parent do not result in positive changes unless offenders are open to change (Schinkel, 2015). Giordano et al. (2002) note that, 'At the point of change, this new lifestyle will necessarily be "at a distance" or a "faint possibility". Therefore, the individual's subjective stance is especially important during the early stages of the change process. Yet, Giordano et al. (2002) also recognised that some individuals will live in such deprived circumstances that even those who are most motivated and determined may not be able to make desired changes. They argue that for such changes to occur, not only does an offender need to be ready for change, but there must be a catalyst for change or environmental stimulus that they refer to as 'hooks for change'. These 'hooks' enable the individual to construct a satisfying replacement self and one that is seen as incompatible with continued criminal behaviour.

Parolees in the current sample expressed strong motivation to avoid returning to custody, frequently citing their partners, children or parents as their greatest motivators to desist from offending. These findings are consistent with previous qualitative research that found that the social support supplied by family members is a factor that motivates offenders to adopt

roles that are more consistent with a conventional, and crime free, lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Those without partners or dependents often mentioned the importance of working and obtaining financial stability as a driving motivator to not reoffending and/or returning to prison.

For all parolees, finding and maintaining work was considered to be a fundamental requirement to achieve their plans for the future and an improved quality of life. Many had set employment goals whilst incarcerated that they were actively working towards, indicating parallels with research that identified employment as a consequence rather than a cause of desistance (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014; Aaltonen, 2015). In addition, for many parolees, having a job was interconnected with their sense of identity and could help them to move beyond their past and construct a new identity, a 'replacement self', that is incompatible with continued criminal activity (Giordano et al., 2002).

Study limitations

Some limitations of the current study are noted. Although the number of female parolees in the study was proportional to the gender distribution of NSW prisoners, the actual number of female parolees interviewed was low. The type of vocational training courses examined in the study, primarily construction and warehouse related courses, also impacted on the gender distribution of the study sample. This resulted in fewer interviews with female compared with male parolees. Therefore, it is possible that results were biased toward the perspective of male parolees on vocational training in custody.

In addition, it is noted that only parolees who did not return to custody were interviewed. Although a small number of parolees who had returned to custody were interviewed, the numbers were too low to enable inclusion within this study. This is likely to have resulted in bias against parolees who were less successful in their reintegration back into the community.

Conclusions

Overall the results of this study emphasise the perceived importance of vocational training courses for prisoners whilst in custody and following release into the community. CCOs were also very positive about the ability of the courses in assisting parolees to compete with others in the job market and in improving their confidence when searching for work. However, CCOs also highlighted the importance of ensuring institutional training and jobs undertaken in custody were relevant to their employment prospects on release. Both parolees and CCOs noted that building and construction and warehouse industries were viable options for ex-prisoners to find work. Given that the vocational training courses examined in this study were primarily oriented towards skills in similar industries, and there were readily available positions within these industries, the link between training undertaken in custody and post-release employment is likely to be enhanced.

Employment was considered to be of fundamental importance by the study cohort, providing former prisoners not only with a means to support themselves and their dependents, but also as a means to support their reintegration and plan for a more positive, crime-free lifestyle. Therefore, employment may be a mechanism whereby the desistance process is maintained and strengthened (Maruna, 2001); nevertheless, for this to occur, parolees must be ready to

commit to a crime-free lifestyle. Employment may provide parolees with an opportunity to construct and communicate a new self-identity that further enhances the desistance process. Finally, vocational training completed in custody may offer ex-prisoners benefits beyond the prison gates, providing them with greater opportunities to obtain employment and a more successful reintegration back into the community for those who are motivated to do so.

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Appendix A

Parolee interview questions

Guiding interview questions

Experiences of the vocational training

1. What vocational training and education courses did you complete in custody?
2. Why did you choose to undertake these courses? What was the motivation for completing / doing this at the time?
3. Was there enough choice of vocational training courses offered? Were you able to complete the courses before your release?
4. What things did you learn in the training course?
5. Did you have a chance to use these new skills whilst in custody?
6. Did you feel that your attitudes or behaviours changed as a result of participating in the training course? (prompt: improvements in self-esteem/confidence, feelings of competency, offences in custody, drug uses etc)
7. Which vocational training course did you like most? Which did you like least? Why?
8. **How would you rate your experience undertaking the forklift course from zero being extremely unsatisfied to ten being extremely satisfied?
9. Did you participate in the Work Readiness Program? If so, what were your experiences with the program? Did it help you secure a job when you left custody? How so?

Initial re-entry into the community

10. When you left prison how ready did you feel to look for a job?
11. How did you find looking for a job after you left prison?
12. What industries/types of jobs did you search for when you left prison? Why?
13. In your experience what industries/ types of jobs do people usually get when they leave prison?

Employment experience

14. What type of work and/or education were you doing before entering prison?

What sort of work are you doing?

15. How did you look for a job when you were released?
 - Did you have any help from Corrective Services/an organisation/job service provider? How did they help?
 - Did you have any help from friends and/or family? How did they help?
16. How long have you had this job?
17. Do you feel that completing the training courses in custody helped you to find a job when you left prison? How so? Which ones were most helpful?
18. What helped prepare you the most for a job when you left prison (i.e. education, vocational training, CSI work assignment)?
19. What skills or abilities that you learned in prison do you use in your current job?

20. Does your employer know about your offending history?
 - Did your history affect your ability to get a job?
21. What do you like about your job?
22. What do you dislike about your job?
23. Does your job help you avoid re-offending?
 - If yes, how does it do that?
 - Would another job help you more?
24. Do you work full time or part-time?
 - Do you work the number of hours you would like to work?
25. How stable or secure is your job?
26. Are you satisfied with how much you are paid? (prompt: are you able to support family/dependants, meet debts)
27. Do you find your job interesting?
 - Do you help other people? Do you feel like you are doing important work?
28. Does your job make you feel good about yourself? (sense of achievement, personal satisfaction)
29. Does your job provide the opportunity to develop skills and abilities/learn new things?
 - Do you use the skills and qualifications that you have obtained in custody?
30. Is your job stressful?
 - If yes, how so?
 - What is the workload like?
 - Is your job physically difficult? Dangerous?
31. Does your job affect your physical health?
 - If so, in what way?
32. How does your job affect your life outside work?
33. Can you tell me about your relationship with your manager or supervisor?
 - Is your boss strict?
 - Does he or she recognize when you have done a good job?
 - Are you treated fairly if something goes wrong?
34. Can you tell me about your relationships with your co-workers?
 - Do you work well as a team?
 - Have the people you work with ever been in trouble with the law?
 - Are you friends with any of the people you work with outside work?
35. Overall, thinking about everything including the pay, the type of work you do, the people you work with - do you like your job?
 - 1- I dislike my job a lot, 2 - I dislike my job a little, 3 - I do not like nor dislike my job, 4- I like my job a little and 5- I like my job a lot

Vocational training outcomes post-release

36. Have you undertaken additional vocational training or education after leaving custody?
37. If so, was this training/education similar to what was undertaken in custody?
38. If not, are you looking to undertake further education or vocational training in the future? Why or why not?

Concluding questions

39. What were the hardest things looking for a job?

40. Did you experience any of the following issues whilst searching for a job? If so, how much of an impact did they have? (1- no impact, 2- a slight impact, 3- a large impact)
 - Lack of skills / education
 - Lack of available jobs
 - Insufficient hours/pay
 - Substance abuse and other physical/mental health problems
 - Parole conditions – reporting, restrictions on what work you could apply for
 - Travel or transportation (do you have a licence, own a car).
 - Childcare responsibilities
 - Attitudes employers have towards ex-prisoners
 - Having all necessary documents (drivers licence/tax details/Medicare etc.)
41. Name one thing that AEVTI or CSI could have done to help you find a job?
42. What are your plans for the future? How important is having a job to achieve these goals?
43. Given the time you have spent in prison or on parole, what are the reasons to stay out of prison / complete parole successfully?

Community Corrections Officer interview questions

Guiding interview questions

1. How long have you worked as a Community Corrections officer?
2. What benefits does vocational training undertaken in custody offer offenders?
3. Do training courses completed in prison assist offenders to find employment when they leave custody? If yes, how so?
4. Are certain training courses more attractive to employers than others?
5. Are there any vocational training courses that should be offered in custody but currently aren't? Are there training courses that are currently offered which aren't as useful in the current job market?
6. What benefit is the pre-release report in providing information on vocational training and courses completed in custody? Is there differences in what is provided?
7. Has this training assisted x in obtaining employment?
8. What jobs/industries are available to inmates leaving custody?
9. Would the positions parolees usually obtain be considered stable/unstable, full/time part time, permanent/casual, quality employment?
10. How do inmates secure jobs? Prompt: family and friend networks, job service providers
11. What difficulties do you face in assisting an offender to find employment?
12. What barriers to employment exist for inmates leaving custody? Do these differ depending on how long offenders have been in the community?
13. What assistance is provided to overcome these barriers?
14. Is the Pathways to Employment, Education and Training (PEET) program operating in your Community Offender Service office?
 - If so, how many supervised offenders undertake the PEET program in your office?

- Which offenders typically undertake the PEET program? (Prompt: those who have completed training/education in prison or those who have a more limited history of education/training?)

CSI and AEVTI staff interview questions

Guiding interview questions

1. What experience have you had with the heavy vehicle drivers program and stop go traffic controller training course?
 - When did these courses start? Where are they located?
 - How many inmates participate in these courses?
2. What do you find most satisfying about coordinating these courses?
3. What are the reasons inmates want to complete vocational training? What benefits does vocational training offer offenders?
4. What changes in behaviours, attitudes and aptitudes for learning (demeanour) have you noticed in inmates as the course progresses? (prompt: improvements in self-esteem/confidence, feelings of competency, offences in custody, drug uses etc.)
5. What are the barriers to attracting, engaging and retaining inmates in the vocational training courses?
6. Are there any vocational training courses that should be offered in custody but currently aren't?
7. How do you assist offenders find employment after release?
8. What feedback do you receive post-release from inmates on the training courses? Prompt- assistance in finding employment/settling back into the community?
9. What jobs/industries are available to inmates leaving custody?
10. What barriers to employment exist for inmates leaving custody?
11. What are your thoughts on the Work Readiness Program?
12. Do you feel that the Work Readiness Program is helpful for offenders in obtaining employment? What are the best components? What could be improved?



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