



Research Publication

Empirical review of the
Pathways to Employment (P2E)
pilot for women in prison

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1 Executive Summary

1.1 Background and methods

Pathways to Employment (P2E) is a joint case management initiative that supports women in improving their work readiness while in prison and finding and maintaining employment following release into the community. It was developed and initially implemented as a pilot project as a collaboration between Corrective Services NSW and the Apprenticeships Support Australia (ASA) arm of Business Australia. The pilot was implemented between October 2020 and March 2022 and was available to women housed in correctional centres across NSW.

Key P2E case management activities included delivery of three individually tailored sessions to participants in prison, which aimed to identify career goals and develop plans and skills for achieving those goals after release. Once released, participants were provided with ongoing mentoring and support in accessing employment opportunities over the following 6 months. P2E sessions and contacts were carried out by dedicated Reintegration Case Managers (RCMs).

This study aimed to conduct a review of the implementation, activities and outcomes of the P2E pilot, to inform best practice for the initiative and derive broader insights about women's reintegration needs and their support in finding post-release employment. To achieve this, the study adopted a multimodal research design with three components.

First, a file audit was conducted to examine quantitative indicators relating to the procedures and outcomes of the initiative, with a focus on program completion and employment outcomes. Second, three in-depth case studies were conducted to explore the experiences of participants and dynamics of P2E delivery associated with success or failure in completing the initiative and finding employment. Third, interviews were conducted with RCMs and Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) who had supervised P2E participants while on parole in the community.

1.2 Key findings

In total, 17 women enrolled in P2E over the pilot timeframe. All participants were identified as meeting eligibility criteria for the initiative. Most participants had prior histories of criminal justice convictions and imprisonment, and commonly exhibited needs relating to mental health and substance use difficulties. Most women had at least one child. On average, participants had relatively strong core skill proficiency and were assessed as having low employment-related support needs.

Participant throughput data showed that five women (29.4%) completed P2E. Equal numbers of participants who withdrew from the initiative did so while remaining in custody and following their release into the community. Data on reasons for withdrawal were not systematically available although there were indications that withdrawals were associated with loss of contact and dissatisfaction with levels of RCM support and opportunities for employment in the community. In addition, four participants returned to custody over the follow-period, and each of these had previously withdrawn from the initiative.

Four participants secured employment during their time in P2E. All of these participants were recorded as completing the initiative, corresponding to an employment achievement rate of 80% among those who completed. On average it took approximately 11 weeks for these participants to secure employment, and in each case employment was then maintained for the remainder of their time in P2E.

Case studies highlighted the complex needs of women who were participating in P2E, and the impacts of factors such as substance use, parenthood, and relationship dynamics on gaining and retaining employment. Identified

challenges to achieving related goals in the context of P2E included unstable accommodation arrangements following release from custody, declining participant motivation and disengagement from RCMs, balancing employment with childcare and other competing priorities, and return to custody in the immediate post-release transitional period. Notably, one participant remained unemployed although completed valuable upskilling opportunities while in P2E, which was identified as a positive alternative outcome of the initiative.

Interviews with CCOs and RCMs consistently identified the multiple benefits of employment for women exiting prison. Interviewees gave insights as to how P2E can add value to existing methods of helping women find employment, including by contributing to holistic case management through provision of specialist employment-related knowledge and supports, and by preparing participants and establishing rapport prior to their release into the community. Relatedly, the continuity of care model of P2E was identified as a key facilitator of implementation of the initiative.

Other facilitators to P2E implementation raised during interviews included opportunities for collaboration between CCOs and RCMs in case management, flexibility in structuring and delivering sessions, and the relatively selective eligibility criteria applied to the pilot cohort. Identified barriers included limited opportunities for employment in the community, which may have partly been attributable to concurrent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as resource accessibility and suitability issues, particularly in the correctional centre context.

1.3 Conclusions

The findings derived from this review of the P2E pilot gave promising indications that the initiative is aligned with best practice principles of reintegration service delivery, and has potential to add value to existing post-release case management processes and achieve employment outcomes among sufficiently motivated participants who remain engaged. In doing so, our review also gives broader insights about women's reintegration needs and their support in finding employment once in the community. Some avenues for continued improvement were identified, particularly in relation to resourcing within the prison environment and employment opportunities, and participant attrition was commonly observed as a key challenge to and outcome of implementation. Further development of the P2E model in these and other areas would be beneficial as part of continuation or expansion of the initiative in the future.

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2 Introduction

Over the past ten years, Australia's prison population has increased by nearly 50% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). While women typically comprise a far smaller percentage of the total prison population than men, at around 7.0 - 8.4% of all people in prison, the increase over the last decade has disproportionately favoured women. The majority of female inmates have been previously imprisoned (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021) and therefore have a history of cycles of incarceration and return to the community. These figures highlight the ascending trajectory of women to be released from prison and the need to implement service models that adequately support their reintegration needs.

It is well established that women's pathways into offending are different from men's (Brennan et al., 2012; Daly, 1992; Green et al., 2016; Kilroy, 2016; McClellan et al., 1997; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014). Gender responsive research has shown that female offenders are more likely to have experienced trauma (including maltreatment and victimisation; e.g., Flynn, 2013; Gobeil et al., 2016), poor psychological outcomes and mental illness (for reviews see Green et al., 2016; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014), and the misuse of drugs or alcohol as a maladaptive coping mechanism (e.g., McClellan et al., 1997). These experiences lead many women to be marginalised economically (Khalid & Khan, 2013; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014), and enter the criminal justice system for non-violent crimes such as property and drug offences (Bloom et al., 1994; Henriques & Manatu-Rupert, 2001; Steffensmeier & Allan, 1996). Indeed, illicit drug offences continue to be the leading most serious offence for women in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020) as well as overseas (e.g., United States Sentencing Commission, 2022). Accordingly, there is a need for gender-specific reintegration efforts to facilitate women's reentry into the community.

Employment has been identified as a positive factor in successful reintegration (Coyle, 2009) and is one of the key mechanisms for desistance (Sampson & Laub 1993; Skardhamar & Telle, 2012; Uggen, 1999; 2000). Results of past research have indicated that many women offenders have employment-related needs at intake and upon release into the community (Lobo & Howard, 2021; Motiuk & Blanchette, 2000). History of unemployment or underemployment also contributes to further economic marginalisation and the likelihood of committing offences for the survival of women and their families (Henriques & Manatu-Rupert, 2001; Huebner et al., 2010; Richie, 2001). Conversely, Opsal (2012) provides evidence that reentering women view employment as the central way they will meet their expenses on the outside and, additionally, use their working selves as a way to craft an image of a changed self. There are indications that achieving related post-release outcomes may pose particular challenges for women, however. For example, Mallik-Kane and Visher (2008) found that women are less likely to become employed after release from prison than men, and that over time this disparity grows considerably; in fact, after ten months following release into the community, one third of women were found to be employed in comparison to over half of men in the study.

2.1 Pathways to Employment

The Corrective Services Industries (CSI) branch of Corrective Services NSW has developed the Pathways to Employment initiative (P2E) to aid women's work readiness, employability upon release, and in turn, general reintegration into the community. Through collaborative arrangements with external agencies, this initiative provides joint case management that supports women in improving their work readiness while they are in prison, as well as finding and maintaining employment following release. P2E was initially implemented as a pilot project in collaboration with the Apprenticeships Support Australia (ASA) arm of Business Australia. The pilot was available to eligible inmates at participating women's correctional centres.

Case management was coordinated by CSI staff, with support from ASA, and included delivery of three individually tailored sessions to participants in prison, which aim to identify career goals and develop plans and

skills for achieving those goals after release. Once released, participants were provided with ongoing mentoring and support in accessing employment opportunities over the following six months. All session delivery and contact with participants while in prison and after release was carried out by specialist P2E staff known as Reintegration Case Managers (RCMs).

2.2 The current study

The aim of this study is to conduct a review of the implementation and performance of the P2E pilot, to derive insights about best practice for further rollout of the initiative as well as principles of supporting women to find post-release employment more broadly. To achieve this aim, the evaluation will address the following questions:

1. What are the barriers and facilitators to implementing P2E?
2. Does P2E add value to existing methods of helping newly released women find employment in the community? In what ways?
3. What are the employment outcomes of pilot participants?
4. What factors are associated with success or failure in achieving goals of finding and maintaining post-release employment?

3 Methods

The duration of the P2E pilot was 17 months, in total. Participant enrolment spanned 8 months, from October 2020 to June 2021. To observe participant outcomes, the subsequent 9 months served as a follow-up period for participants to be released into the community and for RCMs to provide ongoing employment-related mentoring and support. Over this period a total of $n = 17$ women were recruited and participated in the P2E pilot. Data collation and other methods used in this study were oriented towards assessing P2E activities and outcomes over this operational timeframe.

The data for the current evaluation was collected and analysed in three phases: 1) file audit, 2) in-depth case studies and 3) semi-structured interviews. The following sections describe those methods.

3.1 File audit

A file audit was conducted to examine quantitative indicators relating to the procedural elements and outcomes of the initiative. Two sources of data were used: 1) the P2E participant tracker, which is a spreadsheet consisting of participant characteristics (e.g., date of birth, security classification) and key case management activities (e.g., date of P2E enrolment, sessions completed), maintained by the P2E RCMs, and 2) archival data extracted from the Corrective Services NSW's Offender Integrated Management System (OIMS).

Given the limitations imposed by the sample size, quantitative data will be largely reported as descriptive statistics representing the aggregate distribution of indicators across participants. Table 1 defines parameters of interest related to P2E activities and outcomes.

Table 1. Data parameters and definitions

Parameter	Definition
Enrolled in P2E	Enrolled by the end of June 2021.
Withdrawn	Participant actively withdrew from the pilot, or the RCM lost contact with the participant.
Complete	Was in contact and engaged with RCM for 6 months post-release regardless of employment status, or secured employment and subsequently ceased active support with RCM.
Employed	Secured ongoing paid employment with assistance from P2E RCM or referred external provider during 6-month post-release.

3.2 Participant case studies

Three in-depth case studies were conducted to examine dynamics associated with P2E, case management and employment outcomes after release. While the same data sources were used as the file audit (i.e., the P2E participant tracker and OIMS archival data), emphasis was placed on the case notes of three participants who showed evidence of success or failure that reflects key facilitators and barriers for P2E. They are:

1. The participant completed the P2E program and successfully gained employment;
2. The participant completed the P2E program but did not secure employment within 6 months post-release;
3. The participant withdrew from the study, did not secure employment, and returned to custody.

3.3 Interviews

There were two main informant groups interviewed as part of the evaluation: 1) the P2E RCMs, and 2) Community Corrections Officers (CCOs) who had supervised P2E participants while on parole.

Given the small P2E project team it was feasible to recruit all RCMs employed during the pilot (n = 3). RCM interviews focused on informants' perceptions of barriers and facilitators to delivering P2E, as well as broader challenges and opportunities associated with finding women employment after release from prison. We also sought insight on the development and operations of the project from the ASA Partnerships manager, as well as the CSI P2E project manager, who concurrently served as an RCM during the pilot¹. We therefore conducted five P2E staff interviews, in total.

We also interviewed three CCOs. To obtain a diverse range of perspectives, we recruited CCOs who were most familiar with P2E from their interaction with their parolee and were from different regions and offices within NSW. CCO familiarity with P2E was determined by examining OIMS case notes. For these informants, interviews focused on exploring their experiences of finding employment for female parolees under their usual supervision processes, and how this compared to women who are engaged in P2E.

All semi-structured interviews were conducted online between February and March 2022 via the business communication platform Microsoft Teams. The average duration of each interview ranged between 45 minutes and 2 hours. All respondents provided voluntary informed consent prior to commencing the interview, which included permission to record the interview for transcription and data analysis purposes.

Interview transcriptions were thematically analysed using QSR NVivo. A general coding framework, consisting of several parent nodes, were first devised, based on the research and interview questions. Using an explorative approach, open coding was then conducted to create child nodes and refined definitions of codes.

¹ Given the limited number of P2E interview informants, staff perspectives will not be distinguished by role to prevent identification of the informant.

4 Findings - File Audit

The findings of the evaluation will be presented in three parts. The first, a descriptive analysis of the file audit, which will then be followed by the three in-depth case studies. The third and final section of the results will present a summary of the main findings from the RCM and CCO interviews.

The file audit provides a descriptive analysis of participant characteristics, as well as P2E delivery and employment outcomes.

4.1 General participant profile

In total, there were 17 female participants who enrolled in the P2E pilot ($M^{\text{age}} = 32.9$, range = 22-46, $SD = 6.7$). Of those, 12 participants were serving their sentence at Dillwynia Correctional Centre, four from Emu Plains Correctional Centre and one from Wellington Correctional Centre. All participants met the compulsory eligibility criteria, including an earliest possible release date of one to three months post registration, at least 6 months' parole, stable housing post-release, no serious or public interest offences, and basic literacy and numeracy.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for all P2E participants. Most participants (88.2%) had a previous conviction as an adult, with close to half (47.1%) resulting in a period of incarceration. In the past, over three quarters (76.5%) of all participants had breached a community-based order or parole. Of current convictions, the three equally common most serious offences included: 1) breach of a community-based order or parole (17.7%), 2) dealing or trafficking commercial quantities of illicit drugs (17.7%), and 3) obtaining benefit by deception (17.7%). All participants had been in custody as a juvenile and more than half (64.7%) of participants had committed an offence in custody ($M = 3.41$; range 1-24; $SD = 5.97$)². At last classification, nearly all participants (94.1%) were rated as minimum security³.

Most participants (88.2%) had at least one child, the majority of whom (80%) were under 18 years of age and living with their parent prior to their incarceration. Only one quarter of participants (26.7%) anticipated having custody of their children post-release.

In terms of prior employment and education, the majority of participants (81.3%) had a history of frequent unemployment, and just over a third had been previously fired (35.3%). A substantial proportion of participants (70.6%), however, had maintained at least 12 months of continuous employment⁴. As part of Corrective Services NSW custodial case management, officers assessed the level of employment-related support that participants may require to gain post-release employment; over half (58.8%) were rated as requiring either no support or a low level of support, approximately one quarter (23.5%) required a moderate level of support, and few (17.7%) were deemed to require a very high level of support. While the majority (82.4%) of participants had completed year 10 at high school, relatively few (23.5%) had completed year 12. When assessed in custody, the average

² Types of offences in custody can include abusive behaviour (e.g., intimidation), fighting or assault, disruption of good order (e.g., failure to comply with correctional centre routine), stealing, property damage, failure to attend muster, alcohol and drug charges (including refusal to submit to drug testing), possession of mobile phone/camera.

³ For female inmates, a category 1 or 2 classification indicates minimum security, and category 3 is medium security.

⁴ Continuous employment over whole lifetime and may be across multiple employers, including while in custody.

reading proficiency of participants was 3.5 ($SD = 0.80$) out of 5, and numeracy 3.1 ($SD = 0.75$) out of 5 (where 1 indicates a low level of performance, and 5 indicates a high level of performance).⁵

Table 2. P2E participant characteristics

Characteristic	n/N	%
Previous conviction	15/17	88.24
Previous incarceration	8/17	47.06
Further charges during community order or parole	13/17	76.47
Juvenile incarceration	17/17	100.00
Offences in custody	11/17	64.71
Most serious offence		
<i>Breach of community-based order or parole</i>	3/17	17.65
<i>Deal or traffic in illicit drugs – commercial quantity</i>	3/17	17.65
<i>Obtain benefit by deception</i>	3/17	17.65
<i>Aggravated robbery</i>	2/17	11.76
<i>Common assault</i>	2/17	11.76
<i>Theft from retail premises</i>	2/17	11.76
<i>Property damage by fire or explosion</i>	1/17	5.88
<i>Serious assault resulting in injury</i>	1/17	5.88
Security classification		
<i>Category 1</i>	1/17	5.88
<i>Category 2</i>	15/17	88.24
<i>Category 3</i>	1/17	5.88
Children		
<i>Parent of at least one child</i>	12/15	88.24
<i>Custody post-release</i>	4/15	26.67
Employment		
<i>History of frequent unemployment</i>	13/16	81.25
<i>Maintained 12 months of continuous employment</i>	12/17	70.59
<i>Ever fired</i>	6/17	35.29
Anticipated level of employment support post-release		
<i>No support / Low</i>	10/17	58.82
<i>Moderate</i>	4/17	23.53
<i>Very high</i>	3/17	17.65
Completed education		
<i>Year 10</i>	14/17	82.35
<i>Year 12</i>	4/17	23.53
Substance abuse		
<i>History of substance abuse</i>	16/17	94.12
<i>Drugs and alcohol</i>	6/16	37.50
<i>Drugs only</i>	9/16	56.25
<i>Alcohol only</i>	1/16	6.25
<i>Substance abuse contributed to criminal activity</i>	10/16	62.50
Mental health		
<i>Ever sought treatment or medication</i>	14/17	82.35
<i>Currently seeking treatment</i>	10/17	58.82
<i>Severe interference</i>	1/17	5.88
<i>Moderate interference</i>	15/17	88.24

⁵ Inmates who are on remand or sentenced to ≥ 6 months periodically complete a computer-based skills assessment that measures their numeracy and literacy performance. Scores range from 1 (low level performance) to 5 (high level performance), and each level of performance considers four performance variables: 1) the degree of support required to complete the task, 2) familiarity with assessment topics, as well as the complexity of the 3) task and 4) text. For a full description, see Australian Core Skills Framework (2012).

Nearly all (94.1%) participants reported experiencing substance abuse problems (alcohol *and* other drugs = 37.5%; drugs only = 56.3%; alcohol only = 6.3%). Of those, 62.5% reported that their addiction had contributed to their offence history. A large proportion (82.4%) of participants had previously been treated or medicated for a mental health issue, and 58.8% of those were currently seeking mental health treatment. One participant reportedly had active psychosis that severely interfered with their day-to-day activities, and 88.2% of participants were assessed as experiencing a mild level of anxiety or depression that may moderately interfere with their ability to respond to occupational, social or psychological stressors.

4.2 P2E delivery and employment outcomes

Completion outcomes for the 17 participants who enrolled in the P2E pilot are reported in Table 3. In total, 5 (29.4%) participants completed the program. All of these participants attended each of the three sessions in custody. Most (80.0%; $n = 4/5$) engaged with their RCM within one week post-release, whereas the remaining participant engaged with their RCM in the second week of their release ($M = 7$ days; range = 1 – 11 days; $SD = 3.9$ days).

A large proportion of participants (70.6%; $n = 12/17$) withdrew from the program. These participants were equally distributed across participants who withdrew while still in custody (50.0%; $n = 6/12$) and those who withdrew once in the community (50.0%; $n = 6/12$). According to the P2E participant tracker, all participants who withdrew while in custody attended the first session ($n = 6/6$), whereas two thirds attended the second session ($n = 4/6$) and none attended the third session ($n = 0/6$). Participants who withdrew in the community completed all in-custody sessions; however, only 50% of these participants engaged with their RCM within one week post-release ($M = 7$ days; range = 0 – 36 days; $SD = 11$ days).

Reasons for withdrawal were not recorded for all participants. The P2E participant tracker and OIMS case notes indicate that prevalent withdrawal reasons included loss of contact and unhappiness with levels of RCM support and employment opportunities. The outcome of return to custody during the participation period was also recorded as relating to and interacting with participant withdrawals, and was examined further using OIMS administrative data.

Among all participants in the pilot sample, one third (33.3%; $n = 4/17$) were found to have returned to custody. Revocation of parole occurred within 9 weeks of release on average ($M = 62.4$ days; range = 8 – 128 days; $SD = 52.0$ days). Of those returning participants, the majority had withdrawn from P2E while still in custody (75.0%; $n = 3/4$). The remaining participant had withdrawn from P2E post-release. Participant tracker data indicated that this participant had a substantially longer duration between release and first contact with RCM (36 days) compared to other participants.

With respect to employment outcomes, 80% ($n = 4/5$) of completed participants secured employment. On average, it took approximately 11 weeks for these participants to secure employment ($M = 78.4$ days; range = 44 – 124 days; $SD = 40.4$ days). All participants who were able to secure employment then maintained that employment for the remainder of their time in the program. Among participants who withdrew from the program, none (0.0%; $0/12$) were recorded as securing employment prior to their withdrawal.

Table 3. Participant completion outcomes and rates of retention at each stage

Stage	Group					
	Withdrew (n = 12)		Completed (n = 5)		Total (n = 17)	
	n/N	%	n/N	%	n/N	%
Custody component						
<i>Session 1</i>	12/12	100.00	5/5	100.00	17/17	100.00
<i>Session 2</i>	10/12	83.33	5/5	100.00	15/17	88.24
<i>Session 3</i>	6/12	50.00	5/5	100.00	11/17	64.71
Community Component						
<i>Engaged with RCM</i>	4/12	33.33	5/5	100.00	9/17	52.94
<i>Completed</i>	0/12	0.00	5/5	100.00	5/17	29.41

5 Findings - Case Studies

In this section, three case studies will be described to provide further insight regarding both personal and program characteristics that may impact employment outcomes. The case studies will cover three scenarios: 1) the participant completed P2E and successfully secured employment, 2) the participant completed P2E but did not secure employment, and 3) the participant returned to custody. All names have been changed for anonymity purposes.

5.1 Scenario 1: Completed P2E, with employment

5.1.1 Background

Emily is a 31-year-old Australian woman who was sentenced to approximately 1.5 years, with a non-parole period of 7 months, for a number of shoplifting offences. She has a criminal history dating back 20 years, consisting mainly of similar non-violent offences, including shoplifting and possession of a stolen motor vehicle.

According to case notes, Emily's motivation to commit crime is associated with experiencing substantial financial difficulties in sustaining her chronic substance use. At the time of the offence, she used 400 milligrams of heroin per day, costing approximately \$200. She was reliant on Centrelink payments as she had been dismissed from her employment due to her unreliability arising from her addiction. Over the years, despite engaging in numerous treatment programs, including residential rehabilitation and pharmacotherapy, she has struggled to maintain abstinence. In 2021, she overdosed while in custody.

Emily's drug use commenced as a young teen, where she primarily used gamma hydroxybutyrate (more commonly known as GHB). She has also used heroin for approximately 10 years due to circumstances in her intimate relationship and what her mother describes as "becoming involved in the wrong crowd".

Prior to custody, Emily had stable accommodation with a close family member, and was welcome to reside at the same property post-release if she remained abstinent from drugs. In terms of Emily's education, she completed year 11 at high school, holds a diploma of health and fitness, and has qualified for several licences, including a C class, medium rigid and forklift licence. She also completed a Work Health and Safety course while incarcerated and a short TAFE course in General Education. Emily has minimal previous work experience; however, it is documented that she worked for approximately 2 years as a labourer and forklift driver. Emily does not have any children.

During her most recent period of incarceration leading up to P2E registration, Emily remained mostly unemployed, however this appears largely due to limited work available. Prior to release, Emily recognised that having valid identification was critical for her successful transition back into the community and applied for a free birth certificate, Medicare card and Centrelink benefit.

5.1.2 P2E participation, parole, and outcomes

Emily was invited to participate in P2E and was registered 46 days before release. During that time, Emily's RCM held three sessions with her while in custody, the first two face-to-face, the third via audio-visual link (AVL) due to COVID restrictions affecting centre access. Four days before Emily's release, her RCM contacted her CCO to set up an appointment to assist Emily upon release. Regular contact between the RCM and Emily ensued, often via SMS and phone calls, when needed. As documented via case notes, Emily's CCO was also aware of her participation and progress in P2E via regular check-ins with her RCM. Throughout the duration of Emily's participation in P2E she retained the same RCM.

Shortly after release, P2E connected Emily to a job agency for an interview; however, she was unsuccessful. She remained motivated to secure employment (listed as her primary goal post-release), and independently applied for jobs using the knowledge she acquired during her in-custody sessions and mock interview that she participated in with her RCM during her time in the community. Within 6 weeks of release, Emily secured full-time employment as a forklift driver.

Following the securing of employment, intermittent contact continued via SMS, to track Emily's wellbeing and progress. At last point of contact, 11 weeks post-release, Emily maintained her full-time employment.

During Emily's parole, she removed herself from anti-social associates. She described that the COVID-19 restrictions aided her reintegration as she was "able to focus on herself and not get caught up in the outside world". Emily also regularly engaged with a psychologist and participated in an outpatient treatment and support services program for her opioid dependence, which included buprenorphine injections (i.e., buvidal).

Emily's parole supervision was suspended approximately 2 months following release and records show no further incidents in the 12 months post-release.

5.2 Scenario 2: Completed P2E, no employment

5.2.1 Background

Grace is a 29-year-old Australian woman who was sentenced, for the first time as an adult, to approximately 3 years (with a non-parole period of one year) for a significant number of shoplifting offences and disposal of stolen property. Grace reports that financial hardship and drug use contributed to her arrest. During her teenage years, Grace experimented recreationally with crystal methamphetamine (i.e., ice), marijuana and methylenedioxymethamphetamine (i.e., ecstasy); however, in recent years her use became chronic at the dissolution of her long-term intimate relationship, a relationship that was defined by physical and emotional violence. At the same time, the symptoms of Grace's previously diagnosed anxiety and depression escalated in severity, which she attempted to alleviate by supplementing her prescribed treatment with illicit substances. While in custody, Grace was also diagnosed with bipolar disorder.

In her early twenties, Grace gave birth to her daughter, who she was the full-time carer of prior to being remanded in custody. She described her caretaking responsibilities as limiting her employment history. Grace was frequently unemployed, did not receive child support, and was solely reliant on financial assistance from Centrelink. While in custody, she did not anticipate that she would have full-time custody of her daughter post-release and was unsure of her future accommodation plans. At the time of her arrest, she had been residing with a member of her immediate family but has since recognised that the arrangement was unsuitable given her proximity to their illicit substance use.

Grace attained her year 10 school certificate and a Certificate II in General Education; she also holds a C class licence.

5.2.2 P2E participation, parole, and outcomes

Grace was invited to register for P2E in early June 2021, 61 days prior to her release. She successfully completed all three in-custody sessions, including assigned homework tasks. Sessions 1 and 2 were conducted face-to-face, while Session 3 was via AVL due to Grace's imminent release and COVID-19 restrictions to centre access. It was also noted that Session 2 was completed in two parts on separate days, to suit the learning needs of the participant. The first point of contact in the community occurred the day following release by means of Grace calling the RCM to provide her contact details.

Upon release, Grace did not have stable housing. She resumed living with her daughter and the father of her child, the man with whom she had previously ended a long-term relationship due to its abusive nature. Her

motivation to live with her ex-partner was out of necessity and potential opportunity to assume possession of the property during his anticipated return to custody. However, due to arising arguments within the first week post-release, the housing arrangement was short lived. Fortunately, the Community Restorative Centre, a community organisation dedicated to supporting people affected by the criminal justice system, aided with longer term stable accommodation for Grace and her daughter such that she could resume her full-time child caring responsibilities.

While in the community, Grace's P2E case management was supported by two RCMs. The first, who Grace was most familiar with, delivered her in-custody sessions and subsequently supported her in the community via weekly SMS or phone calls during the first 2 months post-release. The content of these interactions and Grace's level of engagement is largely unclear. Grace shared with her supervising CCO that since the change in RCM, there had been limited contact. Case notes show that the second case manager arranged monthly check-ins with Grace via phone. During their first interaction, Grace informed the new RCM that she wanted to spend her time focusing on her daughter and not on employment.

Despite a lack of employment, P2E provided Grace with upskilling opportunities. Grace successfully enrolled in a 3-week traffic control course, to be followed by employment on completion. Grace ultimately decided not to attend the course due to a lack of convenient transport and needing to care for her daughter before and after school. At that time, she believed she would be in a better position to resume her work objectives in the new year.

The last community session occurred 6 months post-release. At this time Grace stated that she wanted to seek employment; however, as this coincided with the end of her 6 month follow up period, no further support was provided.

Recent case notes reveal that Grace has completed over 12 months of parole successfully, without incident, and has remained abstinent from drugs. Consequently, she is being considered for suspension of supervision. She continues to have stable accommodation and cares for her daughter; however, is still looking for employment.

5.3 Scenario 3: Withdrew from P2E, returned to custody

5.3.1 Background

Sophie is a 30-year-old Australian woman, whose total sentence period was approximately 2.5 years, with a non-parole period of 1 year and 4 months. She had committed numerous offences including multiple counts of drug possession, aggravated break and enter, armed with intent to commit an indictable offence and behaving dishonestly for financial gain. Sophie has frequented custody throughout her adulthood.

Sophie's motivation to commit crime was to fund her ongoing drug use. Her childhood was characterised by family violence, and a parent's battle with drug addiction and subsequent death. From a young teen, Sophie began using crystal methamphetamine (i.e., ice) to cope with the grief associated with the death of a parent and continued to self-medicate to deal with ongoing trauma including the death of remaining parent and grandparents as well as her experiences being involved in an intimate relationship with domestic violence. She reports that the drug allowed her to "block her emotions". While in custody, Sophie was diagnosed with bipolar disorder but was yet to engage in treatment.

Sophie completed her year 10 school certificate, and has also held several admin-associated employment opportunities spanning approximately 12 months each. Case notes also show that she has been consistently unemployed in the community since the end of 2015, but has held several roles in custody (e.g., assisting contractors in the processing and delivery of buy-ups) and is reported to be a productive worker.

Sophie has a supportive sister and uncle who have also experienced drug abuse and time in custody. Sophie also has two young children, both in custody of their respective fathers' families, the youngest of whom she was separated from at birth.

5.3.2 P2E participation, parole, and outcomes

Sophie was invited to register for P2E 89 days prior to release. Throughout her participation, she had minimal engagement with her RCM. While in custody, Sophie completed two of the three sessions face-to-face in P2E sessions conducted by two RCMs, but she did not complete her set homework. During an assessment and planning meeting with the parole office prior to release, Sophie reported that she planned to contact her P2E RCM within her first week of release. Case notes upon release, however, show that during her first Community Corrections interview session, Sophie informed her CCO that she was due to see her RCM in two weeks.

Upon release, Sophie did not have stable accommodation. She reported to her supervising CCO that her living arrangements with a member of her extended family were not conducive. She felt she had no support, shared a bedroom, and was lacking access to most necessities (e.g., no cutlery, plates, or food). Given the circumstances, Sophie felt despondent and reverted to her old ways, leading to her revocation of parole. She reportedly felt disappointed in herself, and believed she had more support in custody than in the community.

Sophie was on parole for only 7 days before returning to custody without bail. Her new charges included suspicion of stolen property and receipt and disposal of stolen property.

Since then, Sophie identified that her lack of safe housing was her biggest risk in reoffending, and she acknowledged that she required additional reintegration support in the community. Three months following her arrest, Sophie was subsequently released on parole to Guthrie House, which is a community-based drug and alcohol support service for women transitioning from the criminal justice system. During her time there, she consistently returned negative drug tests and completed her supervision without incident. There was no further contact between Sophie and her RCM; however, final case notes written by her supervising CCO report that she secured employment via an alternative support service and continues to remain out of custody.

6 Findings - Interviews

The interview data will be presented in two parts: the first will examine P2E RCMs, including insights from the project manager and partnerships manager; the second will examine the perspectives of CCOs who supervised the parole of P2E participants.

6.1 RCM perspectives

6.1.1 Perception of program and role as a reintegration case manager

There was a clear consensus among RCMs regarding the general purpose of P2E: to develop women's work readiness while in custody and to support their employment-related needs post-release. It was reported that the unique contribution of P2E, in comparison to other employment support services, is that RCMs begin to develop their relationship with participants *before* they are released into the community. Given their proximity to the participant, some RCMs found it beneficial to also provide a degree of non-employment related support. For instance, during community check-ins, RCMs may also query a participant's general well-being. This act further established their rapport, enhanced the likelihood of maintaining contact post-release, and served as pro-social support for the participant.

"It's to bridge the gap from custody to community... Having one case manager that builds that trust and rapport pre-release, and then continues that engagement into the community. And that's the unique approach to P2E..."

6.1.2 Target population and program eligibility

RCMs commented on the general profile of women in prison, including the participant sample, and how the eligibility and suitability criteria impacted recruitment. It was commonly reported that women in custody had experienced significant trauma, including domestic violence, as well as poor mental health and substance abuse problems. These factors were associated as precursors to low self-esteem and confidence, and a fear of failure.

Given the profile of the target demographic, the eligibility criteria were described as a "major barrier" to recruitment. Therefore, the criteria intermittently changed over time, and there was some leniency with its application.

"Truth is, we had to be pretty ruthless and find the best candidates. So, if they did have housing issues, if they did have mental health or drug issues, we would try really hard to not put them in the program. But the reality is, there are not too many women in custody that don't have either a drug or alcohol or mental health problem. You'd be hard pressed to find any."

At one stage, those with substance abuse problems were not eligible for the program; however, one RCM found that an inmate's demeanour and motivation to seek employment was a better indicator of future program completion and securement of employment.

"Well, two of them didn't even fit the program criteria. They had bad charges and had been constantly in and out of gaol, but they wanted to find a job. They really put in the hard yards. I remember one of them, I was challenged on why I had her in the program because she had a dirty urine [i.e., positive drug test] the week before. But during the program, she was the first one there, her homework was done, she had great case notes, she was on time. And she found a job when she left."

Upon entering the criminal justice system many women did not have stable housing, thus guaranteeing post-release accommodation was another difficult eligibility criterion to apply.

“I started off wanting stable housing to be an eligibility criterion, and it was initially. But I was met with a lot of resistance through the project working group... and I guess they opened my eyes to the reality [that few women had stable housing post-release], and it made me realise I needed to rethink that.”

Despite the leniency for some criteria such as drug use, RCMs recognised that employment is only one important component of successful reintegration into the community. Thus, in some instances RCMs explored whether a potential participant could be eligible by the time of release if they were already seeking assistance for the criteria they did not meet, or whether assistance via referrals could be made.

“The big challenge is having all the reintegration pieces of the puzzle fitting together... We had a few good examples of women that were very employable, they just needed somewhere to live. So that’s when we started to look at if we can work with other providers, if we can work with the SAPOs to ensure that they’ve had a referral to the CRC [i.e., Community Restorative Centre] or to Women’s Justice Network, who could assist them with housing. If we could see that they’ve got help with housing... then it was worth putting them on the program.”

6.1.3 Program content and delivery

In custody

Typically, RCMs delivered three work-readiness sessions per participant, as well as an initial registration session. Potential participants met with an RCM for the registration session where the purpose of the program was explained, followed by the creation of a participant profile that comprised employment related information (e.g., whether they hold a driver’s licence, qualifications, education, and work experience acquired externally and in custody), as well as their ability to use technology. The participant also provided consent for the RCM to exchange information about the participant to an employer or job provider.

Sessions were designed to be delivered in-person at the participating correctional centres. However, due to the escalation of COVID-19, RCMs’ access to enter the facilities was sometimes restricted. Although RCMs did not view remote delivery as an impediment to general session discussion, more practical limitations were evident. RCMs became reliant on SAPOs to print and distribute paperwork and activity worksheets to the participant prior to their session, which was an additional task in their demanding workload. The amenities to conduct a remote session were also under demand, not only for the delivery of programs and services, but was also the chief means by which all inmates could remotely attend court, confer with their legal representative as well as participate in online family and friend social visits.

“You’ve got to book it, so we were competing with visits. There was one centre where we could not put a woman on the program because she was going to get released in three weeks, and all of the AVL bookings were booked up for three weeks. But again, that’s a COVID thing, because it was the timing where all of the families wanted to book all of the sessions.”

Overall, RCMs described the general purpose of the in-custody sessions as to identify participants’ strengths, weaknesses, interests, and career goals as well as to compose a resumé and develop interview skills. When asked about which content women engaged with most, there were two main topics identified. Namely, the ice breaker activity where the participant was able to tell their RCM about themselves from their own perspective,

including the circumstances surrounding why they were in custody, and their motivation for employment. Getting to know the participant in this way was reported to strengthen the RCM-participant relationship:

“...and it gives them a sense of okay, this guy [i.e., the RCM] is for real, he’s not just ticking boxes off, he’s actually going into my personal life and why I want to find a job.”

The other activity that participants engaged with most were those that aimed to identify the participant’s strengths and weaknesses. Despite many women finding it difficult to recognise their own strengths, with some encouragement and discussion they identified personal qualities that were transferrable into employable skills, thus bolstering women’s confidence.

While there was agreement in terms of purpose and content, RCMs noted that there were some limitations to the materials that were used. Firstly, the activities had been designed to be completed electronically; however, for security reasons RCMs were unable to take electronic devices into the prisons. Therefore, those materials were adapted into paper and pen activities, which may not have translated comparatively. For instance, one activity included a quiz, which in its original electronic form helps the user identify their employable skills and recommends careers best suited to that skillset. However, as a paper-based version, no instruction was provided to match the types of careers to the skillset. So, while the user could reflect globally on their selections, there were no recommendations for associated career paths. RCMs also reported that activities worked best when they facilitated conversation, rather than asking the participant questions that only involved closed responses (e.g., yes/no), a likely artefact of the original self-assessment design. Finally, some RCMs described that the original activities were designed for school-leavers, and therefore not the intended target demographic. This meant that some activities were not appropriately phrased for women in custody and did not take into consideration that there may be some limitations to the types of careers or avenues to employment to those who do not have a criminal history.

Another consideration that was raised by RCMs was differences in styles of delivery, and in turn, development of rapport with participants. For instance, some RCMs placed great emphasis on tailoring sessions and “read[ing] the cues” of the participant, as opposed to their observations of other RCMs who took a standardised “cookie cutter” approach. RCMs expressed views that being adaptable in delivery, such as increasing the number of sessions if deemed necessary, enabled a greater interpersonal bond and exchange of information, such that sessions became therapeutic in nature. Alternatively, it was viewed that employing a standardised delivery method limited the potential job prospects available.

“I ended up running six [sessions] because I found [with] three, they’re still getting to know me as a case manager. If I go in there and I only see them for 1 hour, or these days with COVID ... doing it by AVL now or via Webex ... we lost that personal touch. So, they don’t know me and if I’m talking about things, like ... what’s stopping them from finding a job, what was their triggers, what was their background, what was their goals and ambitions, and what’s stopping them from getting goals and ambitions...? They’re not going to tell me that in the first session, if not the second session.”

In the community

Among interviewees, the perceived purpose of the community component of P2E was to maintain the RCM-participant relationship and service continuity post-release.

“It’s one of the most crucial points of the program because you’re re-linking in now that they’re in community. It’s then up to them voluntarily to be still wanting to be part of the program. They’re not in a custodial setting any further, and it’s about maintaining that rapport, which is the biggest thing.”

Once participants had been released, RCMs aimed to contact the participant as soon as possible, preferably within the first 2 weeks of release. Initial contact was arranged in co-operation with the participant's CCO. That could be in the form of the RCM attending the first supervision session in person, via telephone, or for the CCO to pass on the RCM's contact details to the participant. Due to COVID-19, however, most sessions were over the phone. This was not a setback, however, as it was reported that phone sessions were beneficial for the RCM and the participant as they eliminated travel time, which could be particularly problematic when the participant did not reside within proximity to metropolitan Sydney.

Following the initial meeting, participants were allocated one check-in per month for a period of 6 months, regardless of whether employment was secured during that time. As the check-ins were unstructured, in practice, most RCMs reported that their frequency was more so dependent on the individual needs of the participant.

"I did weekly catchups with them at the beginning of the week and end of the week. Beginning of the week we'd set goals... and end of the week we'd see how they went. I got asked a few times about my extra contact and ... [potential] over-servicing [of] the offender. I said "well, who have they got to contact outside when they're released?". They've got Community Corrections which will contact them, what, every couple of weeks? It's not much... No one is recruiting during COVID, so they were isolated."

RCM duties post-release largely consisted of aiding participants with job applications, Working with Children Checks, references, mock interviews, general interview preparation (e.g., suitability of outfit, troubleshooting technology and appropriateness of backdrop for online interviews), as well as assistance with further education (e.g., information and admission to TAFE courses, first aid courses) and general emotional support. Therefore, a single check-in during a 1-month period was more likely to occur when participants had fewer needs, such as once they were engaged in employment.

6.1.4 Logistical barriers to employment and alternative outcomes

There were several commonly reported barriers to post-release employment. One example includes the location in which the participant resided in NSW. The further outside of metropolitan Sydney (i.e., Greater Sydney and Regional NSW) there were reportedly fewer employment-related services and available jobs. Travelling from these locations was also cumbersome given the limited public transport network, and associated time to travel such distance.

Another factor that impeded employment arose with women who resumed their parental responsibilities upon release. RCMs reported that it was challenging for many women to balance competing priorities such as childcare, family time and employment. In turn, some women choose to spend their time reconnecting with their children.

"They found [that] once they rekindled with their family, they weren't ready to find work yet. [One participant] was great in the program but just when she saw her daughter and she was able to get custody of her daughter and stuff like that, she wanted more time that way."

In addition to attaining employment, there were alternative beneficial outcomes for women who participated in P2E. RCMs reported, for example, that many participants joined the program with low self-worth and a poor self-perception due to their past experiences (e.g., family relinquishing their support and disparaging them once entering prison, a lack of autonomy from being in a controlling relationship). However, this mindset had improved through participating in P2E. Participants purportedly felt "special" for being selected amongst other inmates to participate in the program, and their confidence grew by means of in-custody activities and acquiring tangible opportunities post-release.

“I think probably the biggest thing was the feedback we were getting was that we gave them the confidence and the self-belief that they could get a job. That it was worth the effort to try. Because had they not participated in P2E, they probably wouldn’t have even bothered trying to get a job, because their mindset was that no one’s going to employ me, because I’m an ex-offender.”

Participants also acquired valuable skills, knowledge, and materials to prepare them for reintegration into the community and the workplace. One RCM commented that they routinely aid individuals outside of P2E with resume and cover letter development, and that even those with an established work history can find it a daunting task, let alone for those with minimal prior work experience and time in custody. All RCMs viewed that having these materials prepared during the participant’s time in custody advanced their employment journey as they could commence their job search immediately upon release. Participants also acquired skills in using technology, such as the use of online job search engines and submission of job applications, had a greater understanding of how to communicate with potential employers (e.g., appropriate language use, attire, disclosure of criminal history), and expectations surrounding the interview and hiring process. Some RCMs also reported teaching their participants life skills such as navigating public transport and using a mobile phone.

“Giving women agency. I think that’s what P2E did, even maybe just a little bit. Helping them believe in themselves, reminding them that they’ve got transferable skills. You don’t have to have a big, long, fancy resume to get a job. If you’ve got those valuable, transferable soft skills, like communication and teamwork then you are employable.”

Further education and training were also supported by RCMs in the community. The purpose was twofold: 1) to upskill participants who had chosen to not pursue employment or had yet to find employment (including as a result of disruptions to the Australian labour market during COVID-19); and 2) to prevent the participant from being idle, which was likely to lead to a resumption of criminogenic behaviour. RCMs reported that the main avenue to seek further education was TAFE NSW. At the same time as the pilot, TAFE NSW introduced a suite of online short courses that were subsidised for eligible individuals by the NSW Government.

“They’re free short courses that could be undertaken, some within two weeks, some within six weeks. And we would encourage them that anything that provides a further skill on [their] resume is a fantastic asset...”

6.2 CCO perspectives

6.2.1 Current landscape: Female parolees and employment

CCOs reported that approximately 20% or less of their caseloads typically comprised of female parolees. Among that cohort, despite a high unemployment rate, relatively few parolees had employment-related needs. The juxtaposition between unemployment rate and employment needs was related to factors such as childcare responsibilities or prioritising regaining custody of their children, dynamics of their relationships with intimate partners, or lack of previous employment and opting to apply for government financial support. Age, past trauma, a decline in mental health, antisocial associates, and drug dependence, was also described as prevalent amongst female parolees and contributed to the likelihood that an offender would seek employment post-release.

“It comes down to the individual, it depends how driven they are, it depends how their mental health is at that time. Because a lot of people, even you and I, we’re high functioning, but if you take your worst day of the year, and somebody tells you to go and write a resume and apply to all these places, that’s a hard thing to do.”

Despite a low level of reported need, all CCOs viewed employment as beneficial for parolees. Like the interviewed P2E RCMs, all CCOs believed employment can facilitate reintegration back into the community, as a protective factor:

“Having employment gives them an opportunity to stand on their own two feet and have that sense of achievement. So having employment, having that steady income, knowing what they have to do each day, that routine, it’s a protective factor. It lessens offending. It lessens engagement with pro-criminal associates. Instead of them hanging out in the park or whatever and using drugs, they could be working and gaining all those skills. It’s a different environment.”

Of those who did seek employment-related support, the most sought-after areas included assistance to write resumes as well as where to look for employment and how to complete job applications. This was due to the few parolees who had a resume upon release, as well as the high incidence of poor literacy skills. The most reported non-employment-related areas of support included unstable housing, a lack of pro-social support (i.e., friends or family), as well as motivation and access to external intervention (e.g., mental health, drugs and alcohol).

Overall, employment was perceived as a protective factor, and therefore to the benefit of the parolee and their future risk of reoffending. The main benefits of employment were described as providing the parolee with a sense of purpose, accountability, structure, and financial gain, which could inhibit the likelihood of anti-social associations and returning to criminal activities as well as serve as a motivator for pro-social behaviour change.

6.2.2 Knowledge, involvement, and perception of P2E

In general, the interviewed CCOs had minimal knowledge and exposure to P2E. While they understood that the general premise of the program was to provide employment-related support, the specifics of that support were not clear, and one CCO was not aware that there was also a component of P2E that occurred in custody. All CCOs believed that Community Corrections in general needed more information about the program as well as the ability to provide input regarding the operational process. This was, however, reportedly common for pilot projects.

“I think that if this program was going to expand, if the program was going to come, male and female, into more offices, whether there’s a consultation, throwing ideas around session with Community Corrections. This might sound a bit blunt, but a lot of the time when things come from, I guess, programs or new policy, or anything that comes from those kind of units, they’re not actually on the ground floor where we are. They’re not actually in the everyday operation. They’re not seeing what we see. They’re not dealing with what we deal with. Say, for example, a new policy gets put in, but that’s just coming from that department that actually aren’t working on the floor. So I think that if something was to happen, there should be some kind of consultation with the people that work in the offices to get their thoughts and opinions, or what incentives or initiatives or something that can be put on board.”

The interviewed CCOs each supervised only one P2E participant during the pilot, and they were the only CCOs in their office to be involved in the program at the time. Their introduction to P2E was initially via email, which they received from an RCM shortly before the parolee had been released and met the RCM during the parolee’s and CCO’s first meeting post-release (either in person or via online video meeting). Besides this initial interaction, all other communications between the RCM and CCO were unstructured and organic. If needed, either party could reach out, typically via email, to seek intelligence about the parolee/participant.

Overall, CCOs were happy with the involvement and interaction they had with RCMs when dealing with the employment-related needs of their parolees and saw benefits in the program for themselves.

“So, he came in with my parolee and actually sat in on her first interview. He was really great, it was like a learning process for us both, because he was like, if I sit in on the first interview, he’ll understand what we do on our end.”

CCOs also incidentally acquired feedback from their parolee regarding the program. One parolee reported that they were disheartened with the program due to the lack of employment post-release. The parolee believed they had been promised employment, and was very motivated to participate, but due to COVID-19, there were significant setbacks to this progressing. Due to the significant wait time, the parolee did not have anything constructive to dedicate their time to and in turn returned to old habits including drug use, pro-criminal relationships, and anti-social associates. Similarly, by 6 weeks post-release, another CCO’s parolee reported frustration concerning the timeliness of acquiring employment in co-operation with P2E, and instead secured independent employment. While they spoke highly of their RCM, and were grateful to participate in the program, they were disheartened that the expectations set in custody did not eventuate in employment post-release. The final CCO reported that their parolee found the RCM as a great source of support.

6.2.3 P2E compared to standard practice

Typically, employment-related needs are a secondary concern for CCOs in comparison to the myriad of parolees’ other needs and competing priorities such as delivery of behaviour change interventions in sessions⁶ and referrals to housing, mental health and drug and alcohol support networks. Under standard practice, the extent of employment-related support offered by CCOs may include an explanation of the benefit a parolee seeking employment agency services, followed by a referral. After this initial dialogue, further employment-related discussion is rare.

“To be honest with you, I think, in terms of employment, that’s probably on the back-burner compared to predominant needs in terms of alcohol and drugs or offence-related things. Obviously, like I said, it was a protective factor, but I think that’s probably across the board that employment would be not a high-risk factor that needs to be addressed.”

One CCO reported that in general, parolees do not feel like they receive adequate support from the job agencies they are referred to, while another CCO reported that none of their parolees (male or female) had previously secured employment from their services. CCOs indicated three possible non-parolee related factors that may negatively impact offenders’ experiences with securing employment post-release. Firstly, CCOs are not well versed in offender employment-related services. For instance, one CCO was unable to recall where they had referred offenders to in the past, while the others cited non-specialised services, such as MAX employment and Centrelink. Secondly, given they are referred to non-specialised services, service delivery may not be provided by those with offender-specific expertise or knowledge (e.g., including providing advice on criminal record disclosure and job suitability). Moreover, such services are not tailored to parolees. One CCO reported that parolees easily become disengaged with external job agencies due to the minimal contact and the number of staff interacting with the parolee (i.e., more than one). Finally, for women in particular, job suitability was raised as an issue. While seemingly innocuous, certain jobs may not be suitable for an offender based on previous personal experiences. For instance, women may feel intimidated by entering a male-oriented workplace (e.g.,

⁶ A primary supervision priority was delivery of the Practice Guide for Intervention, a series of cognitive behavioural therapy-based exercises that CCOs undertake with supervisees to address their criminogenic needs. For more information see Thaler et al., 2019; Cassidy et al., 2023)

warehousing) and this was likely exacerbated for those who had experienced psychological trauma due to past male-oriented family or intimate partner violence.

Each CCO reported that P2E adds value to standard case management practices. For instance, P2E was described as a source of support in general, as well as specifically to alleviate the pressure of navigating employment needs and services. Some CCOs described feeling like they needed to retain expert levels of knowledge regarding the range of support services and networks, despite it not being feasible, under standard supervision conditions. For instance, a parolee may require a referral to a psychologist; however, given their financial constraints, may require one that accepts the Medicare Benefit Schedule (i.e., bulk billing). While the CCO could spend a significant amount of time researching the availability of bulk billing psychologists, referring the parolee to see their general practitioner, who is more likely to have a greater breadth of knowledge in this area is likely more time efficient. Overall, having a parolee enrolled in P2E was seen as providing access to a greater range of expertise and resources in employment matters via their RCM.

“One of the biggest things we focus on is having support, wherever that comes from. It doesn’t necessarily matter where the support comes from, it’s all about stacking on support, and you can take a lot of the pressure off them if they have somebody whose role is to specifically help them find employment.”

7 Discussion

The aim of the current evaluation was to conduct a review of the implementation and performance of the Pathways to Employment pilot, in order to derive insights about the initiative and best practice for its continuation or expansion. More broadly, we also sought to provide up to date observations about the challenges and opportunities associated with women seeking employment after release from prison. The discussion will touch upon these aims, with the following sections addressing outcomes of P2E, how the initiative adds value to existing methods of post-release case management, barriers and facilitators to implementation, and reflections on general principles relating to women's reintegration needs and support in helping them find employment after release.

7.1 Program outcomes

Our study focused on two primary indicators of outcome for P2E participants, including program completion and employment. In reference to program completion, we found that a relatively low number of participants (5 / 17, or 29.4%) attended all sessions in custody and maintained post-release contact for the intended duration. Participant motivation and engagement appeared to be a primary factor, with half of women who did not complete withdrawing while still in custody and others failing to maintain contact after release. Change in participants' motivation may be an inherent consequence of their changing circumstances and priorities for employment; in this case, an implication is that there may be benefit in highlighting other benefits of the initiative such as improved prospects for future employment and other reintegration outcomes. Other cases of non-completion were associated with difficulties finding employment opportunities in the community. In this regard we recognise that implementation of the P2E pilot was concurrent to and significantly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including effects on the job market. Interestingly, program completion appeared to be associated with the promptness of contact with participants post-release, which is consistent with throughcare principles and the importance of intensive support around the transitional release period (e.g. Council of Australian Governments, 2016).

Quantitative indicators suggested that program completion was closely related to participants' likelihood of becoming employed. Four participants were recorded as securing and maintaining employment during the follow-up period; all of whom had completed the program. We note that the remaining participant who completed P2E was recorded as developing important employment-related skills during her time on the program, which may have contributed to employment at a later date. From the available data it is not clear whether the high employment success rate among women who completed P2E reflects causal effects of the program, or alternatively the relationship between personal motivation or opportunities for employment and likelihood of remaining in the program. In any event, the results give promising indications that P2E was largely successful in assisting sufficiently motivated and engaged participants to secure and maintain employment following release into the community.

7.2 The added value of P2E

It was beyond the scope of this study to statistically assess whether P2E achieved better employment-related outcomes for participants after release into the community, relative to existing methods such as those associated with standard parole supervision practices. However, interviews with CCOs and other key staff provided a number of qualitative insights into ways that P2E may add value to participants' case management and employment outcomes.

The prevalence of employment-related needs among women exiting prison is high (e.g., Lobo & Howard, 2021), and interviewees consistently highlighted the various benefits of post-release employment and related skill

development to address those needs. However, CCOs noted that employment is often not identified as a high priority of parole case management. This is likely to reflect the priorities of women in many cases, but is also a function of the multiple objectives and priorities involved in parole supervision. Indeed, prior research has indicated that CCOs view social welfare functions as less critical to their role when compared to rehabilitative behaviour change and compliance-oriented functions (Tran et al., 2019). In this regard, P2E was viewed as complementary to standard supervision and contributing to more holistic case management for women by providing specialist support for employment matters.

The added value of specialist support was emphasised in interviews with CCOs and RCMs, who noted that supervising officers often did not have the workload capacity or extensive knowledge of local services and industries to address many supervisees' employment-related needs. Consequently, P2E was identified to alleviate pressures on supervising officers associated with navigating relevant community services and supports. The benefits of this support, including for the individual participant as well as broader knowledge-sharing and network-building across staff and agencies, have the potential to increase over time as P2E activities and advocacy becomes more established in local communities. Such benefits extend to the likelihood of finding participants suitable employment as well as opportunities for training and upskilling, which were identified in the review as a positive alternate outcome of engagement in the pilot.

Available data also indicated that P2E has the potential to add value to existing avenues as a result of the nature of support provided. In line with the objectives of the initiative, P2E allows for participants' employment-related needs to be explored and prepared for prior to release, with lead on effects for the suitability and integration of case management decisions once the participant enters the community. The continuity of care model, in addition to the relative independence of RCMs from other Corrective Services NSW roles and functions, were also identified as contributing to enhanced rapport relative to some other case management arrangements. Engagement in services and programs after release into the community has been identified as a substantial barrier to reintegration initiatives (e.g., Berghuis, 2018; Angell et al., 2014), highlighting the importance of processes and relationships that seek to optimise participant motivation.

7.3 Barriers and facilitators to implementation

The findings from this review indicated that P2E is well designed to support women in addressing employment-related needs. As previously mentioned, a major structural facilitator relates to service delivery that extends from within prison to the post-release environment – optimally with the same case manager – which is aligned with the throughcare principle of reintegration best practice (e.g. Coalition of Australian Governments, 2016; Kendall et al., 2018; Sotiri, 2016). A related consideration is that the initial days and weeks following release from prison are often a period of particular vulnerability and risk (Borzycki et al., 2003; Fox, 2014; James, 2014) which may be ameliorated by prior establishment and timely delivery of supports. Another identified facilitator relating to the design of the pilot involved opportunities for ongoing communication between RCMs and CCOs towards a collaborative case management process. However, interviews indicated that CCO awareness of and input into P2E activities was variable, and there may be benefit in greater accessibility to and communication of information about the initiative to support its continuation or expansion in the future.

During interviews, RCMs also described opportunities for flexibility in structuring and delivering sessions, particularly following the participant's release into the community, as a facilitator to implementation. Tailored delivery was identified as appropriate to the varying intensity of participants' needs and as having a positive impact on rapport; conversely, some instances of withdrawal appeared to be associated with dissatisfaction about the level of support provided to the individual. A more ambiguous facilitator raised during interviews was the highly selected sample of women who participated in the pilot, who tended to have good foundational skills, relatively low employment-related support needs, and high motivation. It is possible that such factors are inevitable preconditions for suitability for the program; for example, unstable housing was commonly identified

as a significant barrier to participants' success in the initiative after release. However, it should be noted that interpretation of P2E operations and outcomes during the pilot is contextualised by the characteristics of the participants involved, and it is not possible to make conclusions about the extent to which the initiative would generalise to people in prison more broadly. As noted during interviews with key staff, restrictive eligibility criteria may also have implications for successful recruitment and flows of participants in the initiative.

Identified barriers to implementation included limited opportunities for employment in the community, which had instrumental impacts on achieving the objectives of P2E as well as adversely affecting participant satisfaction and motivation to remain in the initiative (as with many reintegration support initiatives, poor participant engagement and attrition may also be considered a critical barrier to implementation of P2E). This may indicate benefits in further network building with industrial partners in local communities, particularly in regional areas; however, it is not possible to isolate implementation factors from the concurrent effects of COVID-19 on job markets. Interviewees further identified barriers relating to operationalisation of the pilot in prison contexts, including the availability of space for sessions, and access to online material and other resources. Other barriers involved the suitability of session materials to the particular characteristics and needs of women in prison. These factors may be an artefact of the relatively discrete scope of the P2E pilot, although would benefit from additional investment and tailoring of resources to support ongoing implementation of the initiative.

7.4 Women's reintegration and employment

While acknowledging the highly selected nature of the pilot participant group, the findings from this review give broader insights about women's reintegration needs and supporting them in finding post-release employment. Consistent with other literature about women in prison (e.g., Flynn, 2013; Gobeil et al., 2016; Kilroy, 2016; Lobo & Howard, 2021; Stathopoulos & Quadara, 2014), P2E participants were identified as having a range of complex and co-occurring needs, including those related to substance use, mental health, dysfunctional relationships and experiences of domestic violence, financial difficulties, and unstable accommodation. These factors contribute to instability in the community which extend to prospects for gaining and retaining employment, both historically and in the context of P2E. Similarly, there were indications that participants' trajectories of education and employment were disrupted by histories of criminal history involvement and imprisonment from an early age. A large proportion of women who engaged in the pilot were also mothers, contributing gendered challenges associated with provision of care and navigation of child custody matters.

The findings of this review indicate that processes of supporting women to find post-release employment concord with principles of reintegration more broadly (e.g., Berghuis, 2018; Jonson & Cullen, 2015; Kendall et al., 2018; Sotiri, 2016; Sotiri & Russell, 2018). Continuity of care is an important feature in order to help women prepare for their release, have immediate plans and supports during the critical days and weeks after release, and develop a positive working relationship that promotes engagement over time. Optimally post-release support occurs over a sustained period - albeit tailored to meet the needs of the individual - and under normalising conditions that are situated within the participant's local community context and adopt some separation from criminal justice bodies. The results gave various indications in support of the 'housing first' principle (e.g. Sotiri & Russell, 2018), in that stable accommodation appeared to act as a precondition for engagement in P2E for many participants. There was also evidence for the benefits of holistic case management, whereby support to achieve employment-related goals may be facilitated by concurrent engagement in programs and services to support other needs such as substance use and mental health difficulties.

Findings from the review emphasised the potential benefits of post-release employment, as a form of prosocial occupation, to achieve financial stability, and to promote self-esteem and agency. At the same time, it was recognised that prospects for achieving employment-related goals were time- and situation-specific, and were often balanced against competing priorities, particularly those relating to childcare and family time. In this regard, services such as P2E may be conceptualised by their aims to enhance capabilities and options for

employment among sufficiently motivated individuals, and it may not necessarily be considered a failure of the initiative if this does not immediately translate to stable employment as the participant's circumstances and priorities change. Similar observations can be made about a participant's withdrawal from P2E; however, it is also noted that disengagement was often associated with other signs of deteriorating functioning in the community, in which case there may be benefits in responding with alternative forms of support.

7.5 Conclusion

Women in prison constitute a growing and vulnerable group within the criminal justice system who experience a range of reintegration needs, including but not limited to employment. This study reviewed the activities and outcomes associated with pilot implementation of P2E for women in correctional centres across NSW. The findings derived from our multimodal methodology gave promising initial indications that P2E is aligned with best practice principles of reintegration service delivery, and has potential to add value to existing post-release case management processes and achieve employment outcomes among motivated participants who remain engaged in the initiative. In doing so, our review also gives broader insights about women's reintegration needs and their support in finding employment once in the community. Some avenues for continued improvement of the initiative were identified, particularly in relation to resourcing within the prison environment and limited employment opportunities, and participant attrition was commonly observed as a key challenge and outcome to implementation. Further evidence-based development of the P2E model in these and other areas would be beneficial as part of continuation or expansion of the initiative in the future, to help achieve aims of supporting the employment-related needs of people in prison.

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