Prison Industry and Desistance from Crime: An Australian Programme

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Prison industries represent an important component of service delivery for correctional administrations around the world and yet there have been few attempts to articulate the specific role that they play in prisoner reintegration. This article describes the operation of an Australian prison industry programme. It identifies key programme characteristics that are thought to be associated with success before applying a desistance framework to understand the mechanisms by which change occurs and identify possible areas for improving efficacy. It is concluded that significant opportunities exist to enhance reintegration outcomes in this type of programme.

Key words: desistance; employment; Indigenous; prison; rehabilitation; reintegration.

Introduction

The term ‘prison industry’ is commonly used to refer to workshops and other facilities within prisons that provide work opportunities, and sometimes traineeships, for adult prisoners. Some prison industries produce products and services that are available to purchasers in the community, whilst others provide services to prisons and the prison system. They augment the wide range of educational and vocational training opportunities that are available to prisoners¹ and represent a significant area of activity in prisons in the Western world.

Engaging prisoners in industry programmes, both commercial and service, serves a number of different functions. Importantly, for the purposes of this study, these programmes aim to improve the employability of prisoners and, by doing so, improve their chances of not returning to

custody after release. Indeed, the primary aim of this study is to consider the specific contribution that prison industries can make to the successful reintegration of prisoners into society. However, it is also clear that industry programmes play an important role in maintaining the safety and security of institutions, as well as making a significant contribution to operating costs. In the United States, for example, the vision of the Department of Justice’s Federal Prison Industries (FPI) is to protect society, reduce crime, aid in the security of the nation’s prisons and decrease the taxpayer burden by assisting inmates with developing vital skills necessary for successful re-entry into society. It is further noted that prison industry aims to ‘reduce undesirable inmate idleness by providing a full-time work programme for inmate populations’, as well as providing ‘opportunities for inmates who want to take an active role in their

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rehabilitation' (Office of the Inspector General, 2016, p. 9). Similar objectives apply in Australian jurisdictions. In New South Wales, for example, Corrective Service Industries (CSI) provides programmes that aim to contribute to 'the employability training and attitudinal development of inmates to enhance their opportunity to gain and retain post-release employment so as to facilitate their successful return to the community', as well as supporting 'effective correctional centre management' and providing 'the opportunity for inmates to contribute to the self-sufficiency of the correctional system and to provide reparation to the community' (Department of Corrective Services, NSW (DCS), 2014, p. 1). However, difficulties inevitably arise in ensuring the integrity (and ultimately effectiveness) of any attempt to achieve multiple goals within the same prison industry programme, and in this article it is argued that rehabilitation objectives are more likely to be met when programmes are designed and delivered in the context of an underlying prisoner reintegration logic.

It is important to note from the outset that there is limited evidence to support the idea that participation in prison industry programmes is associated with securing meaningful employment post-release. Although the challenges faced by ex-prisoners in finding work have been well documented – Metcalf, Anderson, and Rolfe (2001), for example, estimate that offenders in the United Kingdom are rejected for about half of all job vacancies, with the refusal rate rising to 90% for those with serious convictions – a recent analysis of interviews with 50 Australian parolees (mostly male ex-prisoners) by Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014) reported that participation in any type of paid out-of-cell activity rarely led to post-release work. In fact only 4 of the 50 ex-prisoners and offenders they interviewed found work in an industry similar to that in which they had worked or trained when in prison. In addition, whilst it is commonly assumed that ex-

prisoners who find employment will be less likely to reoffend than those who do not (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2014; Phipps, Korinek, Aos, & Lieb, 1999), the evidence to support claims that participation in prison-based vocational education and training and/or employment programmes leads directly to reductions in subsequent offending is far from robust (Newton et al., *in press*; Visher, Winterfield, & Coggeshall, 2005). A recent evaluation, however, of the United States Prison Industry Enhancement Certificate Program (which provides minimum and medium security state prisoner volunteers with private sector jobs) has been rated by the National Institute of Justice as an example of a 'promising' programme. This was based on data from one study by Smith, Bechtel, Patrick, Smith, and Wilson-Gentry (2006), which reported that significantly fewer programme participants were rearrested during the follow-up period than those who attended traditional industries, and 'other than work' groups and were more likely to find employment after release. A more recent study of 1330 statistically similar groups of offenders in Washington Department of Corrections prisons found that those who did find work were significantly less likely to commit a new offence and more likely to have a legal source of income after release (Lutze, Drapela, & Schaefer, 2015). Studies such as these provide support for the idea that voluntary enrolment in programmes can lead to positive outcomes (Bushway & Apel, 2012), but also raise important questions about the logic that underpins programme delivery (e.g. why do programmes appear to be less effective when prisoners are mandated to attend, how important is the type of work available, and who do these programmes benefit the most?), as well as the extent to which programme activities might be specifically designed to promote desistance from crime. This raises broader questions about how any attitudinal and behavioural change that might occur following participation in a prison industry programme interfaces with those social and

systemic factors (such as housing, geography, availability of employment, and discrimination) that potentially influence successful reintegration. In this article a descriptive case study methodology is used to inform the development of a framework for understanding more about those programme characteristics that are potentially associated with personal change in this area, identifying those factors that may enable or constrain desistance from crime.

Approach

An Australian prison industry programme was identified by the relevant state/territory correctional service as the ‘flagship’ programme that highlighted aspects of practice which were deemed particularly effective and/or innovative. This particular programme was administered by the local correctional service, although other agencies also had a role to play in its delivery.

Detailed documentation about the service delivery model, funding, eligibility criteria and policies and practices – along with currently available outcome data – was provided to the research team prior to a site visit, and interviews with key programme and managerial staff were conducted, although prisoners were not interviewed. Participants were asked to describe the history of the programme and its key features, and comment on what they saw as major areas of strength, as well as the level of success that the programme has had in securing meaningful employment and preventing reoffending in ex-prisoner participants. They were also asked to identify those factors that constrain programme delivery and describe how they would like to see the programme develop in the future. Answers to questions for additional information and/or clarification were solicited following the interviews and site visit. Notes and audio recordings of the interviews were subsequently reviewed independently by two researchers to identify key programme features themes. The aim, here, rather than to

employ a qualitative research methodology to understand the themes inherent in the stakeholder perceptions of the programme, was to begin to understand the mechanisms by which this particular programme was regarded as successful (as with many similar programmes, there are no empirical data to judge this). This was used to develop a discussion about the broader reintegrative potential of this type of service. As such, the purpose of this study is simply to present some ideas about how prison industry programmes might be positioned within the broader rehabilitation goals of correctional services in Australia.

The Programme

Description

The programme commenced in 2011 as an externally funded and managed initiative (subcontracted to an external provider) to help prisoners acquire building and construction skills. When this initial funding ended (in 2013), management was taken over by Corrective Services. The programme was managed by a full-time position funded by the department, although a mentor position to provide one-to-one support twice weekly was still funded externally.

The target group was Aboriginal male prisoners who have a low security classification, are not on opioid substitution therapy, have a minimum of three months to serve, and are considered to be motivated to work and learn new skills that can help to improve opportunities for gaining and retaining employment after release (it should be noted that the ideas discussed below do not relate to those offenders who either avoid incarceration or serve sentences that are insufficiently long to allow participation in a programme of this type).

At its inception, the rationale was that having Aboriginal people build houses for Aboriginal communities would ‘give pride back to the community’, with the longer-term

aim that participants could transition into building and construction work – including the maintenance of buildings that they themselves had constructed – after their release. Places were available for a maximum of 20 prisoners at any one time, who would attend the programme for between 3 and 12 months (occasionally longer). Suitable inmates were identified statewide through an initial interview conducted early in their sentence by education staff and at classification meetings. The referral process was continuous, occurring throughout the year as vacancies occur.

Participants received training and support from a designated mentor and teachers, in classroom settings, on the job and individually, along with overseers who had full responsibility for the customer service and technical sides of the business unit, including the budget, financial targets, and production targets.

The original aim was to build modular, transportable houses for Aboriginal families in rural and remote locations where on-the-ground construction is either difficult or expensive. During the build, prisoners were trained in all aspects of residential construction, achieving assessed competencies in occupational health and safety, asbestos removal, forklift driving, scaffolding and rigging, asbestos certification, wet seal/waterproofing, and basic literacy. Those with 12 or more months left to serve on their sentence were enrolled in traineeships leading to a formal qualification, which was previously Certificate II in Building and Construction but at the time of writing has been raised to Certificate III in Building Construction and/or Carpentry, as a lower level certificate is no longer considered competitive for job entry.

Upon completion of the in-prison component of the programme, participants receive 6 months post-release support to obtain and maintain employment. This role is carried out by the full-time manager of the programme, assisted by Aboriginal community service officers and in partnership with community corrections officers.

Key Elements of the Model

Programme staff asserted that finding a way to manage the tensions that inevitably arise between providing training and maintaining a productive business environment and ensuring the continuity of work was key to successful operation. The following were identified as key elements of the model of practice that has been developed:

Intensive Mentoring and Support

This is provided throughout the on-the-job training, education and post-release employment components of the programme. Mentoring in the workplace is thought to speed up skill acquisition, as the production supervisors (who were responsible for managing work teams of up to 40 prisoners) were too busy to provide individual mentoring, despite most prisoners commencing the programme with little to no work experience. The externally funded mentor (also from the Aboriginal community) provided support in the classroom setting as well as during the post-release stage. The mentor maintained regular contact with all participants after release, linking them with local employment agencies and employers. This was considered vital to obtaining and maintaining employment.

Programme Flexibility

For those participants who were in the programme for shorter time periods, the focus was on general job-finding skills in the building industry, including building a résumé, how to look for a job, how to apply for a job, and how to interview for a job. The focus for those spending a year or more in the programme was on completing traineeships at Certificate II or III levels, with general job-finding skills dealt with towards the completion of the programme. Intensive literacy and numeracy support was usually required for inmates in both groups, with a flexibility in focus identified as important to the successful management of the programme.

Wages

These provide motivation for prisoners both to enter the programme (which may involve being relocated from a prison that is in closer proximity to family) and to remain in the programme. The base wage (A\$26 per week, with a maximum wage of A\$110 per week) is attractive by prison standards, though it was not uncommon for inmates to complain that they were underpaid. Voluntary paid overtime was also available.

Preferred Learning Styles and Work Preferences

It was presumed that Aboriginal prisoners prefer 'hands on' work in outdoor locations and that both the type of work (construction) and location (workshop) would be attractive to potential participants.

Pathways to Post-Release Employment

The connection between the type of work undertaken in the programme and employment opportunities in industries such as building and construction (where having a criminal record is less of an obstacle to gaining a relatively well-paid job, and where entry-levels skills are low) was identified as another key element. Getting a job after release is the primary goal from the start of the programme, and so developing connections with potential employers has been an ongoing area of activity. Programme staff are able to draw on existing relationships with a range of companies that supply the prison to identify new opportunities for employment post-release.

Developing Self-worth

The original goal of the programme was for Aboriginal prisoners to work on projects (e.g. housing construction) that contribute to tangible outcomes that benefit Aboriginal communities. This was considered a significant motivator for some participants.

Contractual Continuity

This was seen as critical to both long-term planning (e.g. ordering building supplies in advance with consequent economies of scale) and keeping the programme participants productively occupied. Interviewees noted that no houses had been built for the past 13 months and current participants were receiving their training through the construction of steel-based modular prison cells for local correctional centres. Whilst there was an expectation that tenders for new housing contracts would soon be called, this was uncertain and there is no guarantee that the programme will win these.

Programme Outcomes

The definition of programme 'success' relates largely to programme completion, as well as securing post-release employment that lasts for longer than 6 months. Data on programme outcomes to date were also provided prior to the interviews with programme staff. Between April 2013 and October 2015, 99 prisoners attended the programme. Of these, 53 had been released, 20 were yet to be released, and 26 had withdrawn from the programme prior to release (mainly for disciplinary or family reasons). Of the 53 released, 27 had gained employment, 2 had enrolled in education, 2 were offered work but did not attend, 2 were unable to work, 1 relocated and was unable to be followed up, and 12 refused to engage with the programme post-release. As of October 2015, 11 of the 53 had been subsequently reincarcerated. These data are somewhat limited in scope, prohibiting the conclusions that can be drawn about effectiveness. For example, it is not known how many of those who found work were employed prior to incarceration, how many of those who were reincarcerated were employed at the time of the new offence, or how many had also completed offence-focused behaviour change programmes. The lack of data from a comparison group who did not receive a prison industry programme

(or attended an alternative programme) makes it impossible to attribute any changes to programme completion or to reject the hypothesis that post-programme success is attributable to pre-existing characteristics of the sample.

Discussion

This study shows that correctional staff have clear ideas about a range of factors that influence the outcome of industry programmes in Australian prisons. These include the importance of *intensive mentoring and support*, which also serves to ameliorate some of the identified tension between training and production components, and *wages*, which although below award level were above prison standards and provide both an incentive to participate and a somewhat realistic expectation of post-release wages. Accounting for the *preferred learning styles and work preferences* of prisoners was also identified as being important, as was the use of existing *referral pathways to post-release employment* to provide some additional stability over time.

There are also aspects of this programme that highlight threats to the integrity of delivery. The *flexibility* that is described above, for example, may divert attention and resources from the essential business of the programme (i.e. training) into job-finding activities that could be provided by other agencies. Similarly, the *development of self-worth* and *contractual continuity* are both potentially compromised by the lack of prefabricated housing work and its consequent replacement with prison cell construction. This also removed what was considered to be an important cultural element from the programme.

This particular programme is also relatively modest in scale. With a maximum of 20 participants at any one time, it is – by any account – a boutique programme. Given that there are approximately 4000 Aboriginal inmates in custody at any one time in this jurisdiction alone, it cannot by itself be

expected to significantly impact on the high rate of Aboriginal incarceration. The high level of post-release support offered state-wide also suggests that the programme could not be easily expanded unless large additional contracts were secured. Finally, it is noted that participants often had needs in other areas that directly influenced their chances of success post-release. There were limited opportunities to address these needs (e.g. alcohol and other drug use) in a programme that required full-time participation, and there were limited services available to address other social and systemic factors, such as the limited availability of housing in the community or how to manage discrimination and disability.

The selection of participants is another important consideration, with entry into the programme not currently related to the assessed level of risk of offending post-release. Given the substantial body of evidence suggesting that intervening with those at higher levels of risk consistently leads to better rehabilitation outcomes (Andrews & Bonta, 2010), it would seem advisable to adopt this as an inclusion criterion. There was also no formal consideration of the need for employment training in the assessment process. Although almost all participants were considered to have high levels of general need in this area, it was not possible to identify specific skill shortages or assess which needs had been met after completing the programme. This also relates to difficulties in making any considered assessment of programme outcomes. There is, for example, currently no way to establish whether or not it is only those who are motivated to work who are at lower risk of reoffending, or if those who have pre-existing skill sets are offered places in the programme or perform better than the rest. Such prisoners could be said to be already on the path to desistance, with positive outcomes arising as a result of these pre-existing characteristics.

There is also scope to improve the data collection relating to programme objectives

and outcomes. At a basic level this should involve clarification of what it means to have 'completed' the programme and the different levels of 'success' that are possible. At the site visit this was defined as 'getting a job and still being in the job after 6 months', but this was not stated clearly in programme documentation or systematically recorded. Data collection should be expanded to include work history prior to incarceration (e.g. were participants employed at time of arrest?), time spent in the programme, education enrolments and completions prior to and during the programme including traineeships, other programmes addressing criminogenic needs started and completed, and more detailed employment outcomes. Associated with this is a lack of information on programme costs. If success relative to cost is to be established then comparative data on costings for different types of programme are required. In addition, recording some basic desistance indicators (see below) and shorter-term, lower-level 'micro-gains' as well as outcomes that relate directly to primary programme objectives would provide an empirical basis for developing targeted programme activities.

The main objective of this study, however, is to consider the reintegration potential of this type of prison industry programme. A number of different theoretical frameworks are useful for explaining how employment might assist successful reintegration back into the community after a period of imprisonment. For example, stable employment is considered to be one of the most important ingredients of social capital for people in Western societies, as well as one of the most cited correlates of desistance from crime (Farrall, 2004). Social capital has been variously referred to as the development of connections between people, social ties, trust, and engagement in civil society (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995), with most definitions emphasising the value of non-criminal social networks. The related

concept of social inclusion also suggests that the more a person is linked into the fabric of society via such activities as having a job, the less likely he or she is to feel alienated from society and, as a consequence, to commit offences. General strain theories of crime (Agnew, 1997; Agnew & White, 1992) have been used to conceptualise the broad relationship between employment and offending in a way that recognises the influence of both social capital and social inclusion.² Employment has also been noted as a major 'routine activity' for most adults (Bushway & Apel, 2012) and it has been proposed that prison work and training can create a 'work ethic' which helps offenders overcome the institutionalising effects of imprisonment (Petersilia, 2003). However, it is the theories that seek to understand the *process of desistance* from offending (Maruna, 2001; Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004; McNeill, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007) that are particularly relevant to any understanding of how such programmes can assist offender reintegration. Building on the work of Bushway and Apel (2012), which describes the completion of training as a 'desistance signal', and – more recently – of Cherney and Fitzgerald (2016), which talks about prison employment as a potential 'turning point' in a prisoner's life, the present analysis of this particular case study can be used to reflect on how prison industry programmes might actively promote desistance from crime. In conceptualising this process, the distinction between three levels of desistance – primary, secondary, and tertiary – may prove useful. This distinguishes between those aspects of desistance which focus on behaviour that is embedded within pathways to crime, pro-social identity formation, and the offender's place in the community. It is acknowledged that that these conceptualisations of desistance are individualised and do not explicitly address the structural and social problems that provide the context for reoffending. Clearly, for example, the

opportunities that are available in the community are an important determinant of post-release employment success. It is also noted that this case study, as well as most of the literature in this area, is focused on male offenders and ex-offenders.

Primary Desistance

At the level of primary desistance, behaviour is the target: that is, the act of staying away from crime. Targeting primary desistance involves moving the offender along the road to an offence-free period by promoting an increased awareness of offence-related needs, attitudes, and behaviour. It also involves identifying and exploring those strengths that an offender already possesses that may assist in remaining crime-free. Employment training activities may facilitate reflection on those aspects of lived experience that contribute to offending, such as poverty, low self-esteem and self-efficacy, and fractured family relationships, allowing prisoners to identify future pathways that are pro-social in nature. The focus on those positive aspects of the self which are perhaps underdeveloped (but nevertheless present) may further enable the prisoner to acknowledge alternative possibilities and identify opportunities for choice and empowerment. Thus prison industry can challenge participants' attitudes and beliefs, broaden their awareness of behavioural options, allow them to practise alternative behavioural possibilities, develop confidence to employ their strengths, and allow them to practise the skills that are needed for behavioural change. This was clearly communicated by the programme staff and managers who participated in this case study.

Secondary Desistance

At the level of secondary desistance, activities can be designed that specifically provide opportunities for offenders to see themselves in pro-social ways that are less compatible with a criminal lifestyle, such as being a

'builder' (in the context of this case study) rather than an offender (Giordano et al., 2014). Such changes are thought to lead to the development of agency and generativity (Maruna, 2001), and practice provides opportunities for successful enactment. In addition, being a member of a work group and collaborating in the creation of a product provides opportunities for the establishment of new identities. Identification as a 'builder' rather than a 'prisoner' brings expectations for positive cooperation with peers and increased demands for responsibility, reliability, and commitment.

Tertiary Desistance

The third level of desistance, as described by McNeill (2006), targets the interaction between the offender and his or her community. Intervening at this level involves providing opportunities for the prisoner to engage with the community in ways that are positive, supportive, and reciprocal. The aim of any intervention at this level is for the ex-offender to feel a sense of belonging to his or her community, and for the community to develop acceptance (Maruna, 2001). Employment programmes – such as the one described in this study – that include community work opportunities provide a significant opportunity for desistance at this level. Cherney and Fitzgerald (2014) have, for example, noted how offenders can take a 'sense of pride' in their work, and how employment is seen as important if they are to address the 'stigma' of having been in prison and fulfil particular pro-social roles, along with the responsibilities attached to such roles. Some participants in Cherney and Fitzgerald's interviews further relayed how becoming a father and the corresponding social expectation of being an effective provider for the family had made work more salient for them. As Fox (2014) suggests, this sense of belonging and experience of community integration may be an important antecedent to desistance and not just an outcome.

Conclusion

Although prison industry programmes can vary considerably in terms of the activities that are involved, as well as their size, target group, duration, selection process, training components, and data collection processes, they are all premised on the assumption that participation will have a significantly positive impact on reintegration post-release. As Cherney and Fitzgerald's (2016) work clearly illustrates, work can have many different meanings and purposes for prisoners (including enrolment for financial gain through the receipt of wages or simply to relieve the boredom of incarceration), and so it cannot be assumed that desisting from crime is a goal that all participants aim to achieve. Nonetheless, this paper illustrates some of the features that can potentially underpin reintegration successes whilst also highlighting how a broader theory of desistance from crime might be applied to guide programme activity in ways that optimise opportunities for learning that assist reintegration.

This analysis, it is hoped, will be of interest to those who are responsible for the delivery of a range of similar programmes. For example, a critical aspect of the programme under examination is the effort made to ensure that prisoner training and work experiences reflected (as far as was possible and practicable within the prison environment) the rigours and expectations of a community workplace. This case study also highlights that the processes by which this prison industry programme actively promoted a post-release lifestyle that does not involve offending are not well articulated. As is likely to be the case with most programmes of this type, prison industries appear to be largely based on presumed 'common sense', without reference to any empirical or theoretical frameworks that place the work within a broader context of offender rehabilitation and reintegration. This, it is suggested, is likely to be important to the further development of these programmes. Thus, whilst this case study

highlights a number of aspects of 'good practice' (and it is clearly one of the better developed programmes), additional opportunities for promoting the reintegrative potential of participation can be identified. These may include, for example, activities that promote primary desistance such as those which strengthen the motivation to lead a crime-free lifestyle. This might involve providing formal activities to reflect on offending behaviour and promote hope and self-efficacy to pursue pro-social goals. The divide between skills training and the psychological change required to desist from crime appears to be too wide. At the level of secondary desistance, activities might be designed that specifically provide opportunities to put these goals into practice as skills are acquired, such as through the formal provision of leadership opportunities that rely on taking responsibility for the work of others. Tertiary desistance involves becoming accepted by the community and underscores the importance of engaging in work post-release or, in circumstances when this is not possible, contributing in other ways. Of note at the tertiary level is that much more work is needed to understand the circumstances into which a large number of Indigenous ex-prisoners are released, and the ways in which 'meaningful contribution' might be defined.

The main conclusion of this study is that prison industry programmes should be designed and delivered from a well-considered theoretical base, with a reintegration programme logic that can be empirically tested. This, of course, requires the systematic collection of sufficient appropriate data to judge, and possibly promote, the efficacy of such programmes. This study, of course, represents only preliminary thinking about these issues; however, whilst 'common sense' and laudable intentions may continue to produce isolated success stories, this type of analysis is helpful in arriving at a solid understanding of 'what works' in terms of the basic conditions for reintegrative success.

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Notes

1. In Australia, for example, data collected for the Report on Government Services (Australian Government, Report on Government Services, 2015) reveal that 32.7% of all eligible prisoners in 2013/14 received some form of education and/or vocational training, and that 26.2% of all prisoners attended one or more certificated vocational training course with classroom-based or on-the-job components.
2. It is acknowledged that social capital and social cohesion are largely Western constructs that have not been well researched or understood in relation to indigenous peoples and communities. Hunter (2010), for example, suggests that the structure of indigenous social networks is fundamental to social capital for Indigenous Australians and that uncritical application of Western social capital conceptualisations and expectations may be detrimental, so caution must be taken in applying these understandings of desistance – especially in relation to building employment-related networks – to this particular case study.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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