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Staying strong on the outside: improving the post-release experience of Indigenous young adults

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Robyn Gilbert and Anna Wilson
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Introduction

The rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand continues to be unacceptably high. Indigenous people are more likely to return to prison than are non-Indigenous people. How can young Indigenous adults be assisted to make a successful transition from prison to the community? What public services and community supports have been shown to contribute to a successful transition?

This research brief draws on international research to identify current understandings of good practice in prisoner reentry generally. It also considers research from Canada, New Zealand and Australia that addresses issues particular to Indigenous prisoner reentry. However, given the diversity of culture among Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islands people, Indigenous Canadians and Maori, we do not assume that findings regarding one group will automatically apply to another group.

Unfortunately, while there is some activity in Australia and New Zealand regarding the reintegration of Indigenous offenders, there is little published work discussing specific programs (for an exception, see Antsiss 2003).

No work has been identified that specifically addresses Indigenous young adult prisoner reentry, and there is very little that focuses on prisoners aged between 18 and 25. However this age group is of particular interest because of the mismatch between the way young adults are treated by the criminal justice system and the realities of their mental and emotional development. In Queensland, people aged 17 and over are processed in adult courts, while in all other Australian jurisdictions and New Zealand, people 18 and over are processed in adult courts and may be sent to adult prisons. However, recent discoveries revealed by MRI scans show that while physical development is normally complete by 18 years, brain development and cognitive capacities continue to develop until the age of about 25 years. This discovery may help to explain a well-known, but not

well understood phenomenon: the peak in criminal offending between the ages of about 17 and 23, which appears to be constant across countries and cultures. According to Ruben Gur, Director of the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, "The evidence now is strong that the brain does not cease to mature until the early 20s in those relevant parts that govern impulsivity, judgment, planning for the future, foresight of consequences, and other characteristics that make people morally culpable" (American Bar Association 2004).

Young adults are also at a key stage of transition in their lives. They may have recently left the family home or state care and must take responsibility for their own physical and social needs for the first time. They may have recently left school and have attempted to enter a job market that is not welcoming to the low skilled. Young people lacking strong family support, with substance abuse problems, intellectual deficits or mental health problems are likely to be unable to meet these challenges, and drift into a life of social exclusion and crime. Imprisoning vulnerable young

adults can worsen their social exclusion by distancing them from social supports, stigmatising them, eliminating access to education, training, work experience and substance abuse treatments and giving them more experienced criminal role models (see Barrow Cadbury Commission 2005).

After defining some key terms, this paper looks at internationally accepted understandings of “what works” in offender rehabilitation, and considers how these ideas can translate to the situation of Indigenous young adult offenders. Finally, it reports on research into good practice in reentry programs.

Definitions

Reentry is sometimes used to refer to the moment that a person is released from prison, but more commonly it refers to the process of moving from prison to community living. *Transition* also refers to the process of moving into the community. Services provided immediately before and after the time of release are known as *transitional services*, while *post-release interventions* are provided after release. Some programs provide *continuity of care* or *throughcare*. Both of these terms refer to the provision of consistent services during and after imprisonment, with the aim of rehabilitation (Borzycki 2005).

A successful transition would, ideally, see the former prisoner in satisfactory housing, engaged in useful activity (such as employment or family duties), free of substance abuse problems and forming supportive relationships. However the difficulties of measuring these aspects of transition and the disturbingly high level of return to prison for Indigenous people has led most researchers to

define a successful transition as avoiding reimprisonment (Willis & Moore 2008). Other terms used to describe a successful transition are *reintegration* and *resettlement*. These terms refer to the goal of productive community membership, but may not be apt when the person has not been integrated or settled in a community prior to imprisonment, where the community is not willing to take the person back, or where the community is so dysfunctional that integration is not desirable.

Who is the Indigenous young adult offender?

The Australian Bureau of Statistics census of the Australian prisoner population on 30 June 2007 (ABS 2008b) found that Indigenous people were 2.2% of the Australian population, but 24% of the total prisoner population. On an age-standardised basis, Indigenous people are 13 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous people (ABS 2008b). Indigenous prisoners are more likely to be young adults, with 26.7% aged between 18 and 24 compared with 17.2% of non-Indigenous prisoners. Of these Indigenous young adult prisoners, 92.7% were male and 7.3% were female. The highest numbers of Indigenous prisoners are in New South Wales (2139), Western Australia (1552) and Queensland (1495), while the highest proportions of Indigenous prisoners are in Northern Territory (83% of all adult prisoners are Indigenous) and Western Australia (41%).

Indigenous prisoners are more likely to have been previously imprisoned as adults: on 30 June 2007 73% of Indigenous prisoners and 49% of non-Indigenous prisoners had been

previously imprisoned (ABS 2008b). Payne’s study of Australian Indigenous detainees and prisoners found that young and/or Indigenous offenders are more likely to escalate from property offending to regular offending than other offenders (Payne 2006). Indigenous sentenced prisoners are also more likely to be imprisoned for an act intended to cause injury or unlawful entry with intent, with 42% convicted of these types of offences compared with 22% of non-Indigenous sentenced prisoners (ABS 2008b). About the same proportion of Indigenous prisoners are on remand (22.4% in 2007) as the proportion of the total prison population (23.2%; ABS 2008a). An Indigenous prisoner is likely to be serving a shorter sentence than a non-Indigenous prisoner: the median sentence length for Indigenous prisoners on 30 June 2007 was 24 months, compared to 42 months for non-Indigenous prisoners (ABS 2008b).

The New Zealand 2003 Prison Census revealed that 45% of male prisoners and 51% of female prisoners were Maori (NZ Department of Corrections 2003), while Maori make up only 12.5% of the New Zealand population aged 15 and over. The Maori prisoners were more likely to be young adults, with 20.8% of males and 20.9% of females aged 20-24 compared with 16.5% of non-Maori males and 14.9% of non-Maori females. Maori are more likely to be reimprisoned (55%) within two years of release from prison than are NZ Europeans (45%) and Pacific offenders (36%) (Nadesu 2008). Maori prisoners are more likely to be imprisoned for violent offences, with 59% imprisoned for a violent crime compared with 36% of the prison population (NZ Department of Corrections 2004).

“What works” in offender rehabilitation

A consensus now exists that the most effective offender rehabilitation takes the form of cognitive skills training. Such programs are based on the theory that “offending behaviour ... is linked to inadequate thinking skills, such as interpersonal problem solving, moral reasoning, cognitive style, self-control and perspective taking” (Ross & Fabiano, 1985; cited in Howells et al. 2004). The effectiveness of programming based on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) has been demonstrated by a number of meta-evaluations. A recent meta-analysis of 58 studies evaluating CBT treatment for criminal offenders (Lipsey et al. 2007) confirmed that it is one of the most promising treatments. Most of the studies were of US and Canadian programs, but five were from the UK and one from New Zealand. The studies used different ways of measuring recidivism: rearrest, reconviction and reincarceration. On average, individuals in the CBT treatment group had a twelve month recidivism rate of .30, compared to .40 in the control group a 25% reduction in recidivism. The most effective programs produced recidivism rates of around .19, a 50% decrease from the average.

Research has also been conducted into the optimum ways of delivering programs for offenders. Howells and Day (1999) have provided a useful summary of factors generally considered to contribute to the success of a rehabilitation program:

- the program should target criminogenic needs, that is, the psychological factors directly related to criminal offending

- programs need to be intense (>100 hours) and delivered according to program design by trained staff
- programs should be targeted at those with a higher risk of offending, as identified by risk assessment tools
- styles of treatment should be matched with client learning styles.

What works for Indigenous offenders?

There has not been any evaluation of CBT when used with Indigenous offenders. Some commentators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, have questioned the applicability of the “what works” principles, and particularly the focus on criminogenic needs and CBT. Yavu-Kama-Harathunian, an Aboriginal therapist with experience in working with Aboriginal prisoners, argues that cognitive and behavioural methods are foreign, and do not encompass Aboriginal people’s wisdom and knowledge (Yavu-Kama-Harathunian 2002). However she does consider that they have “some part to play in understanding Aboriginal treatment needs” (p 10). Andrew Day, who has worked as a clinical psychologist in Australian prisons, cautions against the assumption that “what works” literature derived from US and Canadian studies will be relevant in Australia and New Zealand. In particular, “psychological interventions, such as those delivered within a cognitive-behavioural framework tend to emphasize individual factors and de-emphasize contextual or cultural factors” (Day 2003: 4). Similarly, Australian stakeholders interviewed for the Willis & Moore report (2008) expressed doubt as to whether cognitive behavioural programs

requiring active participation and self-disclosure as well as introspection and self-awareness, were suitable for violent male Indigenous offenders. They suggested that programs that address community, culture and the collectivist nature of Indigenous society might be more effective. On the other hand, in the same report, 18 of 27 Indigenous offenders interviewed about their participation in anger management programs (which are cognitive skills based) found them to be very useful in reducing their anger and use of violence (Willis & Moore: 75). The Kimberley Aboriginal Reference Group report (2006) endorses CBT and cognitive skills training, used within Aboriginal cultural meaning systems.

The “what works” approach advocates the concentration of resources on criminogenic needs – that is, those thinking and behaviour deficits that are likely to lead to further criminal behaviour. Needs that are not directly linked to crime – such as depression or illiteracy – will not be prioritised for resources if reducing recidivism becomes the predominant goal. However the more ambitious goal of assisting young Indigenous offenders to reach their full potential will require a more holistic approach.

Holistic and culturally appropriate programming

Research has repeatedly highlighted the fact that many Indigenous prisoners have experienced multiple disadvantages, which may include abuse and neglect as children, separation from parents, inadequate housing and health care and sexual assault. There are also the less

quantifiable challenges of dispossession, colonisation, loss of culture and the stolen generation, and associated anger and grief. Substance abuse and mental health problems are both a result of disadvantage (RCIADIC 1991) and a further challenge. Many workers have reported that holistic healing programs are an appropriate response to this multifaceted disadvantage. Unless non-criminogenic needs, such as grief, depression, spiritual healing, loss of culture and educational deficits are addressed, it may be impossible to address needs directly related to criminal offending, such as cognitive deficits and drug or alcohol abuse. For example, Willis and Moore (2008) report that the lower life expectancy of Australian Indigenous people means that Indigenous prisoners must deal with the loss of loved ones more frequently and at a younger age than other prisoners. Some Indigenous prisoners were said to be too affected by grief to participate in rehabilitation programs. A holistic program that is responsive to its participants would be able to address the grief suffered by individuals rather than focussing on more obviously criminogenic needs.

A number of workers have reported that Indigenous people tend not to participate in mainstream programs, or are more likely to drop out than other participants (Jones et al. 2002, Day 2003, Howells et al. 2004). In Willis & Moore's 2008 report on the reintegration of Indigenous prisoners, they interviewed 34 prisoners and 44 stakeholders about the programs in which the prisoners had participated. Both the prisoners and the key respondents indicated that the lack of Indigenous specific programs and services was a major barrier to Indigenous participation and

successful reintegration. It was suggested that Indigenous specific programs should include more cultural content and the facilitator should have more understanding about the criminogenic needs of Indigenous people. Howells add that Indigenous people, who may have English as a second or third language, find the jargon used in mainstream groups alienating (Howells et al. 2004). Some Aboriginal men object to the use of female facilitators when men's business is being discussed (Willis & Moore 2008).

How then can culturally appropriate programming be provided to Indigenous people? One approach is to adapt existing programs, and New Zealand corrective services agencies appear to have had some success here. The Te Piriti Special Treatment Unit for child sex offenders is an adaptation of a mainstream CBT program known as Kia Marama. The Te Piriti program combines tikanga Maori (practices based on Maori world view) with CBT. An evaluation (Nathan, Wilson & Hillman 2003) studied 201 men who participated in the Te Piriti program, 68 of whom were Maori. The 201 men had a significantly lower reconviction rate (5.7%) than a matched control group (21%). Maori men in the Te Piriti program had a lower conviction rate (4.4%) than Maori men in the Kia Marama program (13.6%), suggesting that Maori men benefited from the tikanga Maori focus in the Te Piriti program.

An alternative view calls for programs targeting Indigenous offenders to not only include Indigenous content, but to be devised and delivered by Indigenous people. Yavu-Kama-Harthunian has argued that Australian Aboriginal clients' needs "cannot be accommodated within an

adaptation of a programme from another indigenous culture, or programmes from another country". She points to a number of programs in Western Australia that were partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and incorporated an Aboriginal cultural world view. In particular, she notes that reparation, empathy and reconciliation have particular cultural significance for Aboriginal people (Yavu-Kama-Harthunian 2002).

The Forensic and Applied Psychology Research Group of the University of South Australia conducted a literature review on the management of Indigenous prisoners, and concluded that both adapted programs and culturally specific programs are required (FAPRG 2002). This report also noted three good practice principles in corrections from the perspective of international human rights standards: equality before the law, recognition of cultural identity and the right to self-determination (Jonas 1999 cited in FAPRG 2002). Jones (2001) reports that these three principles have become widely accepted by Indigenous groups, along with a fourth: Indigenous empowerment.

Strength based interventions

Researchers and practitioners in prisoner reintegration have called for strength based approaches (see for example Jones et al. 2002, Maruna & Le Bel 2003). Such an approach begins by identifying achievements, ability and potential rather than focussing on deficits. An example is the Good Lives Model proposed by New Zealand researcher Tony Ward. He suggests that individuals commit crimes

because they lack the capacity to achieve their goals through legal means. Work with offenders should focus on improving their capacities to achieve their goals in socially acceptable ways. Criminogenic needs, such as substance abuse or the use of violence, are treated as obstacles in the way of achieving positive goals. Ward suggests that this approach respects the cultural needs of Indigenous offenders by respecting their past selves and their goals, while searching for new means to reach those goals (Ward 2004).

Transition and post-release needs

On release from prison, Indigenous young adults face many practical challenges around accommodation, finances, meeting social needs and dealing with addictions. Wilson (2008) reviews international and Australian literature on reentry and reports that the four most important factors contributing to successful reentry are accommodation, education and employment, treatment programs, and social networks.

Accommodation

Accommodation is the most immediate problem facing the offender post-release. Baldry's review of international and Australian research identified homelessness as a significant risk factor for reoffending (Baldry et al. 2003). Baldry's 2006 study of 194 prisoners in New South Wales and Victoria (16% of whom were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander) found that 18% were homeless prior to imprisonment and 21% were homeless post-release. Half the Indigenous participants still out of prison at 9 months were homeless (Baldry et al. 2006).

However there is evidence that community based support services can contribute to better outcomes. Victoria's *Bridging the Gap* program is an intensive support program for offenders with drug or alcohol problems. The 2003 evaluation found that housing for ex-prisoners was the biggest challenge for the service providers, in the context of a general shortage of rental accommodation. Despite this, "very few participants became homeless for any significant period while engaged with the program" (Melbourne Criminology Research and Evaluation Unit 2003).

Victoria has also piloted a scheme to reduce homelessness and reoffending and improve the transition experience of people exiting prison, known as *Transitional Housing Management – Corrections Housing Pathways Initiative*. People who are at high risk of homelessness upon leaving prison were provided with transitional public housing or assistance in obtaining housing, as well as support services. The evaluation (while based on preliminary data) found that the initiative showed promise of achieving its goals of reducing homelessness and reoffending. The evaluation also noted the considerable efforts made to adhere to contemporary good practice principles such as risk assessment, responsiveness to needs of clients, program integrity and the targeting of criminogenic needs. The program was holistic in that it addressed client needs beyond housing, including drug and alcohol issues, health, living skills, budgeting and general counselling (Bartholomew et al. 2004).

Education and training

Early school leaving is strongly associated with imprisonment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In Willis & Moore's sample of 8938 violent male prisoners in Australia, only 10% of the non-Indigenous prisoners and 6% of the Indigenous prisoners had completed Year 12 (Willis & Moore 2008). In New Zealand, 51% of prisoners have no educational qualifications (NZ Department of Corrections 2005; data specific to Maori prisoners was not available).

Most prisons offer some education and training programs, but the evaluations that are available are equivocal. Seiter and Kadela's 2003 review of US and Canadian reentry education programs was only able to identify two with rigorous evaluations. They found that the programs increased test scores but did not decrease recidivism (Seiter & Kadela 2003). On the other hand, the *Three-state recidivism study* (Steurer, Smith & Tracy 2001) looked at 3000 offenders released in Maryland, Minnesota and Ohio, and found that participants in education programs had significantly lower recidivism and higher earnings than non-participants. Similarly, Callan and Gardener's 2005 study of 6021 offenders released from Queensland prisons found significantly lower recidivism rates (Callan & Gardner 2005). Neither the three-state nor the Queensland study used random assignment, and differences between the motivation of the participants and the non-participants cannot be ruled out. Despite this qualification, it is likely that providing education opportunities to motivated participants will improve their prospects of successful reintegration. The Queensland study found that Indigenous prisoners were less likely to

participate in education and programs than non-Indigenous prisoners and suggested that throughcare, one-on-one tutoring, and the involvement of Aboriginal case workers and elders would improve access.

Most literature regarding prison based education programs points to the difficulties in implementing these programs. It can be difficult to attract skilled staff, prisoners are frequently moved as their security classification changes, and administrative and security requirements take priority over educational needs.

Employment

Unemployment is closely connected with criminal offending: the Australian *National Prison Census 2001* revealed that 57% of first time prisoners and 67% of prisoners with prior imprisonment were unemployed at the time of arrest (Borzycki 2005). The unemployment rate of Indigenous young adults in the 2001 census was 27%, compared with 13% for non-Indigenous young adults (ABS 2004). The Maori youth unemployment rate in 2005 was 18%. In addition to the education deficits mentioned above, Indigenous young adults leaving prison may be facing a lack of employment opportunities in their communities, the stigma of imprisonment and racism on the part of employers.

A 2007 review of international studies on employment interventions for offenders found only seven good quality studies. In six of the interventions offenders in the treatment group were significantly more likely to be employed than those in comparison groups (Hurry et al. 2006). However the studies that distinguished between older and

younger offenders found that the interventions were less effective for younger offenders.

Borzycki's 2005 report reviews international research into successful post-release employment programs, and notes some of the common features of these programs:

- networking with the labour market
- adapting recruitment and placement procedures to meet the markets needs
- incentives to employers
- timely information about job opportunities to offenders
- vocational training relevant to the job market
- work release opportunities for suitable offenders
- providing job retention skills
- helping offenders appropriately disclose criminal history
- long term follow-up support for offenders.

Treatment programs

Indigenous prisoners are much more likely than other prisoners to report that their offending is associated with alcohol use (Putt, Payne & Milner 2005). At this stage it is not possible to be definitive about the efficacy of prison based alcohol and drug treatment programs. Willis and Moore (2008) reported that research into the effectiveness of substance abuse interventions with offenders has shown mixed results. In the US, MacKenzie (1997) refers to a "growing body of research" that indicates that substance abuse treatment can reduce substance use and recidivism. He reported on five evaluations of prison-based programs that indicated that graduates of the programs had lower recidivism rates. However the programs had large attrition rates so it is possible that those who completed the programs

were more highly motivated and would have desisted regardless.

Most drug and alcohol treatment programs use cognitive/behavioural methods, and tend to focus on the individual. The concerns raised earlier about cognitive behavioural approaches and Indigenous people may be relevant here. Stakeholders interviewed for Willis and Moore (2008) thought maintenance/follow up programs were important. They also proposed that post-release substance abuse programs should incorporate families and communities, suggesting that substance abuse was a community wide problem that would not be successfully addressed on an individual basis.

Social networks

Social networks are integral to successful prisoner reentry. Ex-prisoners, like the rest of the community, often rely on family and friends for accommodation and employment. Also like the rest of the community, ex-prisoners have social needs for companionship, a feeling of belonging and a need to contribute to a community. Wilson (2008) interviewed 24 stakeholders from prisons, community corrections and community agencies in Western Australia, many of whom reported that the loneliness and social isolation of ex-prisoners made their reintegration much more difficult. In a Canadian survey, 68 Canadian Aboriginal offenders who had successfully reintegrated were asked about the factors that helped them succeed. The respondents identified family members (82%), friends (72%) and Elders (71%) as important (Heckbert & Turkington 2002).

Prisoners' social networks come under considerable strain because of the fact of imprisonment itself, the time limitations imposed on prison visits, the locations of prisons and the movement of prisoners to prisons distant from their communities. There is some empirical evidence that social support is crucial to success in reintegration. A US study of 7000 inmates released from Florida prisons found that any visits and more frequent visits were associated with a lower likelihood of recidivism over two years (Solomon et al. 2006).

Post-release programs in both the UK and the US have begun to place significant weight on helping ex-prisoners maintain relationships with family and (non-offending) friends. In the UK, the sixth of the seven pathways identified in the *Reducing Re-offending National Action Plan* is "children and families of offenders". The Plan identifies prison visitors' centres and the availability of extended visits for children as important for maintaining relationships, and encourages the provision of relationship and parenting skills training to prisoners. In the US, service providers are working to overcome the barriers to visits and phone calls (Solomon et al. 2006).

Principles of good practice

Ross (2005) has usefully summarised some current understandings of good practice in reentry programs. He points to the following five principles:

- programs should begin before the prisoner is released and continue into the post-release period, that is, *throughcare*
- the causes of offending, such as drug dependence, need to be addressed

- simultaneously with practical welfare needs, such as housing and income support
- programs specific to ex-prisoners may be needed immediately after release but the goal should be to move offenders to mainstream support services
- where offenders have experienced "a long pathway of social deprivation, stunted life options and emotional and physical abuse", it should be expected that reintegration will take a long time
- offenders must be active participants in their own rehabilitation, and not be treated as the passive recipients of services.

These principles are derived from the experience and observation of practitioners but have not yet been supported by experimental research.

Throughcare

Researchers and practitioners agree that services aimed at reintegration should be provided from the beginning of the sentence and continue post-release until the person is confidently reintegrated into the community (Willis & Moore 2008, Borzycki & Baldry 2003). In particular, cognitive behavioural programs such as anger management or substance abuse programs require reinforcement in real world settings.

Throughcare programs require interagency cooperation and are therefore not easy to implement. The participants in an AIC roundtable acknowledged these difficulties and suggested that interagency coordination could be achieved by appointing a lead agency, establishing interagency information management systems and adequate

resourcing of services. They also produced a model of throughcare delivery to ex-prisoners (Borzycki & Baldry 2003), incorporating the following features:

- "floating care", that is, integrated and tailored services, a single case manager and a lead agency brokering appropriate services
- allocating resources by identifying risk and need
- consulting clients about their needs
- evidence based programs with ongoing evaluation
- addressing staff needs such as recruitment, retention and training
- long term planning with guaranteed funds.

Evaluation

Evaluation of rehabilitation and transitional programs can take several forms, including process evaluation and outcome evaluation. Process evaluation examines whether the program was conducted as intended, and can help identify obstacles to successful implementation. Outcome evaluation examines whether the program achieved its goals, which may include reduced recidivism, offender reintegration and community safety. It appears that rehabilitation and post-release programs in Australia and New Zealand are making good use of good practice principles developed in the US, Canada and the UK. However, program evaluation is necessary to reveal whether there are particular obstacles to implementation in Australia or New Zealand (for example, in remote communities), and whether desired outcomes are achieved.

Researchers continue to point out the lack of published evaluations of programs in Australia and New Zealand. In

2005 Borzycki identified 185 interventions for prisoners returning to the community in Australia and New Zealand, but was able to obtain only seven reports of evaluation processes. She noted that programs focusing on traditional welfare needs, such as housing and employment, were less likely to be evaluated, while the more recently developed programs, such as cognitive skills or social networks, were more likely to have been evaluated. Similarly, Howells and colleagues' 2004 review of offender rehabilitation programs in Australia was able to access only limited information about the efficacy of those programs, and the authors reported that offenders who had completed programs were not followed up.

Researchers have acknowledged that "gold standard" evaluation (incorporating random allocation of eligible offenders to treatment and non-treatment) is expensive, often impractical due to the number of eligible offenders at any one site and potentially unethical (as it requires the denial of treatment to willing and eligible offenders). There are also difficulties in evaluating holistic multimodal programs (those using different forms of treatment, for example individual counselling and group work), as it is not always clear how to attribute success or failure. Despite these difficulties, the need for evaluation of Indigenous specific programs is particularly urgent, as it is not yet known if mainstream models of good practice will produce good results with this particular population.

Conclusion

This review of research has found a considerable amount of literature on good practice in prisoner reentry, a small but

useful body of work on the reintegration of Indigenous offenders and a very scant literature on young adult offenders. Research on young adult offenders is valuable because these people are at a decisive period in their development. The high rates of unemployment and regular illicit drug use produce an increased risk of criminal activity. On the other hand, young adults may begin forming stable relationships and entering employment, which are both protective factors.

The review has revealed that there is some confidence that intensive programs addressing cognitive skills, drug and alcohol issues, and other criminogenic needs, accompanied by transitional and post-release support with housing, education, employment and social needs, can produce significant reductions in reoffending and improved reintegration. However it is not yet known whether this approach will be effective for all cultural groups. It may be that mainstream programs will need significant modification to take into account the cultural needs of participants. Or it may be that the best results will be achieved by community-based design and development of programs that are holistic and place the community, rather than the individual, at the centre of the framework. The authors are aware that programs of both types – modified western style programs, and programs designed and implemented by Indigenous people – are being implemented in Australia and New Zealand. It is to be hoped that when evaluations (including long term follow-up of participants) of these programs are available, there will be some confidence about "what works" for the reintegration of young Indigenous adult offenders.

Note

This research brief is one component of a broader project for the National Justice CEOs on successful reintegration of Indigenous young adults. In addition to the research brief the project includes an Indigenous Justice Forum (February 2009) and a report on good practice examples.

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