

Returns to Custody and Successful Releases: Comparison of Findings from Two Qualitative Studies of Federal Releases

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Why we did this study

The purpose of this study was to combine the findings of two qualitative studies regarding Canadian federal offenders on conditional release to explore their experiences and perceptions with respect to what contributed to their success or failure while on community release. Individual narratives of release experiences collected in qualitative studies can serve to improve risk prediction and better support institutional and parole release programs designed to help reintegrate offenders.

What we did

The combined study includes a sample of $N=64$ Canadian federal offenders whose community supervision was revoked and returned to custody within the previous six months and a second sample of $N=48$ offenders successful on community releases for a period of six months or more. The recruitment period for both samples was January to October 2018. Each study had its own interview protocol, which combined semi-structured questions on known risk or protective factors with open-ended questions to probe offenders' experiences and perceptions about each factor. Non-proportional quota sampling was used to ensure adequate representation of men, women and Indigenous people, and a broad regional representation.

What we found

Overall, the comparison of results from both studies validate previous quantitative and qualitative findings, including the use of instruments that combine risk and protective factors to predict the likelihood of revocation. Higher levels of overall criminogenic needs and, in particular, substance abuse needs, employment and emotional needs, and a lack of social support upon release, increased the risk of revocation. Those who were successful on release, particularly those with lower levels of need at intake, reported that involvement in institutional programs fostered acceptance of responsibility for one's criminal behaviour and adoption of prosocial attitudes toward desistance and avoidance of substance misuse.

Social support, particularly family support, was critical for a successful transition into the community, especially with respect to housing, employment, transportation, programs, recreational and emotional support – at least until individuals had time to build their own support systems.

Family, peer, and community support were identified as meaningful in the favourable release outcomes of women who had successful releases, while the risk of revocation was highest for women with substance use problems who lacked social support. For Indigenous men and women, substance use problems and lacking family and cultural or community supports were linked to revocation.

What it means

The findings highlight the critical relevance of social support, particularly that of family, for the successful release of offenders into the community. To convert revocations into successful releases, offenders may need assistance in building positive social support systems, particularly where none existed. Continuing efforts are also needed to support offenders in planning for release, finding employment, addressing mental health concerns, and assisting those with substance use problems.

For more information

Brown, G. P., Greco, C., Barker, J., McMillan, K., Tiersma, G., Wardrop, K., & Stewart L. A. (2023). *Returns to Custody and Successful Releases: Comparison of Findings from Two Qualitative Studies of Federal Releases* (Research Report R-454). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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