

# Employment Assistance

## EVIDENCE BRIEF

Employment assistance involves a combination of job search assistance, job placement, and vocational training: at least some of which occurs outside of prison. There is some evidence that employment assistance prevents crime.

### OVERVIEW

- Employment assistance includes financial payments, wage subsidies, job search assistance, provision of temporary wage-paying jobs, and various kinds of education and/or vocational training.
- This evidence brief focuses on programmes where support is provided in the community to ex-offenders or those at risk of offending; prison-based employment programmes are the subject of another evidence brief.
- There is some New Zealand-based evidence that employment assistance can help reduce rates of offending. The international evidence that employment assistance can reduce reoffending is mixed.
- There is international evidence that employment assistance works better for older subjects (more than 27 years).
- There is also some international evidence that employment assistance is more effective at reducing recidivism for prisoners who enrol in their programme shortly (within 3 months) after release from prison.
- There is some international evidence that employment assistance works better for high-risk offenders.

### EVIDENCE BRIEF SUMMARY

Evidence rating:	Fair
Unit cost:	Unknown
Effect size (number needed to treat):	For every 44-47 participants one less would reoffend in average
Current spend:	\$190m on evaluated programmes (Ministry of Social Development)
Unmet demand:	Unknown

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## DOES EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE REDUCE CRIME?

### International evidence

There are three relevant reviews of international randomised trials, dating from 2005<sup>i</sup>, 2016<sup>ii</sup>, and 2017<sup>iii</sup>, all of which include job placement, job training, and vocational education/training programmes with at least some component occurring after release from prison.

The first review<sup>iv</sup> is a meta-analysis utilising eight studies. The authors do not find a significant reduction in recidivism. However, when one sample (consisting of participants less than 27 years old) was excluded, a statistically significant reduction in recidivism was found.

The second review<sup>v</sup> is more recent. Out of the six programmes in this review that recorded information on recidivism and crime, four programmes reported a statistically significant decrease in recidivism (at least, for some subgroup of the participants), and two programmes reported no significant effect. Because of the diversity of these programmes, and the small number of programmes under review, the authors believe it is not appropriate to average these results to achieve a final percentage of crime reduction.

Finally, the meta-analysis conducted in 2017<sup>vi</sup> found that nearly all analysed studies produced results that favoured the use of post-release employment assistance compared to no assistance. However, the results were unclear as to whether the employment assistance reduces long-term rearrests for offenders.

There is also a meta-analysis<sup>vii</sup> and one systematic review<sup>viii</sup> from the 2000s that did show a reduction in recidivism. However, these reviews admitted studies which did not use randomised trials<sup>ix</sup>.

Likewise, there have been individual studies, not included in the meta-analyses above, in Australia<sup>x</sup>, London<sup>xi</sup> and the United States<sup>xii</sup>, and some of these studies showed a decrease in recidivism rates. Because of their methodology (they were not randomised trials), these studies should be seen as less convincing evidence of a causal relationship between employment assistance and crime.

In summary, there are randomised trials which show that employment assistance gives statistically significant reductions in recidivism, and trials which do not show a statistically significant reduction. A meta-analysis exists which does not give a significant result, but neither does it show a negative impact (increased recidivism).

### New Zealand evidence

Research has been conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) into the effects of employment assistance on employment, income, justice, and education outcomes<sup>xiii</sup>.

Their study includes a variety of programmes that have been funded from 2000/2001 to 2014/2015, but access to data on offending rates is only available from 2009.

The subjects of these studies were not necessarily offenders, but a wide range of people, including the unemployed, people facing redundancy, unwaged people, and beneficiaries.

Most of the employment assistance programmes are given an effectiveness rating to summarise the programme's effect on "Justice" outcomes: this was a combined rating using information about offending, whether the participant served any corrections time, and whether they served any prison time. All the studies with information on "Justice" outcomes were non-randomised propensity-score matching studies.

The employment assistance programmes included case management, information services, job placement, job search, and vocational/training services. Out of the 55 programmes with information on “Justice” outcomes, 25 were given the highest rating “effective”, nine were given a “promising” rating, 17 were rated “ineffectual”, and four were rated “likely ineffective”.

Two recent programmes with promising results include ‘Supporting Offenders into Employment’ (SOIE) and ‘This Way for Work’. Both initiatives began in 2016. The SOIE pilot assists individuals into employment by helping with the typical barriers encountered upon release. Help includes identifying educational and training opportunities that are important for employment and ongoing support once the individual is employed. When the pilot was assessed in September 2018, 51.8% of the clients assisted by SOIE had gained employment<sup>xiv</sup>. ‘This Way for Work’, a very similar initiative to identify suitable work placements and support the individual into full-time sustainable employment, also proved highly successful<sup>xv</sup>. By December 2018 almost 30 permanent Offender Recruitment Consultants had assisted over 2,000 offenders into employment.

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## WHEN IS EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE MOST EFFECTIVE?

There are several encouraging findings for subgroups of participants. Moreover, these findings are based on randomised trials, which are the most convincing type of individual study.

### Age of participants

There is some international evidence that outcomes are more positive for older members (over 27)<sup>xvi</sup>.

The first evidence for this comes from the National Supported Work Demonstration Project. This was an experimental employment programme using random assignment conducted in nine US cities.

Analysis of data from this project shows that, among older offenders, the participants of the employment assistance programme had arrest rates about eight percentage points lower than the control group one year after release. The differences increased to 11 percentage points after three years.

Additional evidence of improved outcomes for older participants comes from the Employment Services for Ex-Offenders (ESEO) programme in Boston, Chicago, and San Diego. This project reported reductions in recidivism for ex-offenders over the age of 27 in San Diego and Chicago, and reductions in recidivism for ex-offenders over the age of 36 in Boston<sup>xvii</sup>.

### Time of enrolment after release

There is some international evidence that employment assistance has a greater impact on those who undertake such programmes soon after release from prison. This evidence comes from the Center for Employment Opportunities (CEO) programme, a large-scale randomised trial in New York.

In general, the CEO programme found reduced recidivism rates for programme participants. However, the impact on recidivism is larger among participants who enrolled in the program shortly after release<sup>xviii</sup>. There were no statistically significant impacts on recidivism among those who entered the study more than three months after their release from prison.

### High-risk offenders

There is some international evidence that programmes are most effective for high-risk ex-offenders. Offenders who took part in the New

York-based CEO program were given a risk index determined by age, number of prior convictions, gender, race/ethnicity and time since release. High-risk ex-offenders who took part in the program were less likely to be re-arrested, had fewer re-arrests, and were less likely to be reconvicted of crimes than high-risk ex-offenders who did not take part in the programme<sup>xix</sup>.

## In New Zealand

It is unknown whether ages of participants, time of enrolment after release, or risk level of offenders were correlated with programme success in New Zealand, so it is not possible to compare with the above international results.

It has been noticed that in New Zealand there is a dearth in female-specific employment assistance programmes. Females tend to face different challenges upon reintegration and need different support to overcome the gendered barriers. These barriers include a more limited employment history and less educational achievement than male prisoners. More research needs to be done to determine the differences between male and female employment experiences and how best to adapt interventions.<sup>xx</sup>

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## WHAT OTHER BENEFITS DOES EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE HAVE?

### Employment and earnings

Unsurprisingly (since jobs were specifically provided to ex-offenders rather than sought out in a market), transitional job programmes were shown to lead to a large increase in employment for ex-offenders in two recent international randomised studies<sup>xxi</sup>. However, neither of these recent international studies led to long-term consistent increase in employment at non-

programme jobs. Likewise, these studies did not show any statistically significant increase in earnings for participants in the trial<sup>xxii</sup>.

In New Zealand, the MSD research<sup>xxiii</sup> records information on employment outcomes for participants in employment assistance programmes.

To compare with the international studies above, it is necessary to focus on job placement programmes. In the case of such programmes, all 10 were rated as effective in increasing time in employment. However, this might be because these programmes are about placing participants in jobs, by definition. It is unclear whether any of these programmes lead to long-term, consistent increase in employment for non-programme jobs.

The MSD research<sup>xxiv</sup> also includes an overall “effectiveness rating” for the programmes under review, which is an amalgamation of information on earnings, employment, and independence of welfare. Out of the 55 programmes which contained information on recidivism, 15 were given a “promising” or “effective” rating (the two highest ratings on a scale of five).

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## CURRENT INVESTMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

### Ministry of Social Development Investment

The MSD estimates that, in the 2014/2015 financial year, a total of \$462 million was spent on employment interventions<sup>xxv</sup>. Of these programmes the ministry was able to evaluate the effectiveness of \$190 million of programme expenditure, which includes the programmes mentioned above in this report.

In the 2015/2016 report the Ministry calculated the Welfare Return on Investment (WRoI)

measure. This is a comparison of the cost of delivering employment assistance interventions with the savings achieved through a reduction in welfare liability. Three of the seven employment programmes had produced benefit savings equal to their costs within the first three years. None of the programmes have reached their predicted WRoI as last observed in the 2016 report.

## EVIDENCE RATING

Each Evidence Brief provides an evidence rating between Harmful and Strong.

Harmful	Robust evidence that intervention increases crime
Poor	Robust evidence that intervention tends to have no effect
Inconclusive	Conflicting evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Fair	Some evidence that intervention can reduce crime
Promising	Robust international <i>or</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime
Strong	Robust international <i>and</i> local evidence that intervention tends to reduce crime

According to the standard criteria for all Evidence Briefs<sup>1</sup>, the appropriate evidence rating for employment assistance is **Fair**.

This rating reflects that the international research is conflicting, while there is some local evidence that employment assistance delivers reductions in recidivism in New Zealand.

As per the standard definitions of evidence strength outlined in our methodology, the interpretation of this evidence rating is that:

- Some evidence that investment can reduce crime.
- Uncertain whether investment will generate return even if implemented well.
- May be unproven in New Zealand or be subject to conflicting research.
- May benefit from trial approaches with a research and development focus.
- Robust evaluation needed to confirm investment is delivering a positive return and to aid in detail service design.

<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/](http://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/)

Ongoing evaluations should be considered, and a successful experimental study in New Zealand would raise the evidence rating to Promising or Strong.

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## FIND OUT MORE

### Go to the website

[www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/](http://www.justice.govt.nz/justice-sector/what-works-to-reduce-crime/)

### Email

[whatworks@justice.govt.nz](mailto:whatworks@justice.govt.nz)

## Recommended reading

Newton, D., Day, A., Giles, M., Wodak, J. Graffam, J. & Baldry, E. (2016). The impact of vocational education and training programs on recidivism: a systematic review of current experimental evidence. *International journal of offender therapy and comparative criminology*.

Vishe, C. A., Winterfield, L., & Coggeshall, M. B. (2005). Ex-offender employment programs and recidivism: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*, 1(3), 295-316.

Bloom, D. (2006). Employment-Focused Programs for Ex-Prisoners: What Have We Learned, What Are We Learning, and Where Should We Go from Here?. *MDRC*. Retrieved from <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/transitional-jobs>

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- <sup>i</sup> Visher et al (2005)
  - <sup>ii</sup> Newton et al (2016)
  - <sup>iii</sup> Rush (2017)
  - <sup>iv</sup> Visher et al (2005)
  - <sup>v</sup> Newton et al (2016)
  - <sup>vi</sup> Rush (2017)
  - <sup>vii</sup> Aos et al (2006), and Wilson et al (2000)
  - <sup>viii</sup> Bouffard (2000), section “Community Employment”
  - <sup>ix</sup> See discussion in Bloom (2006), footnote 20.
  - <sup>x</sup> Graffam et al (2014)
  - <sup>xi</sup> Sarno et al (2000)
  - <sup>xii</sup> Saylor et al (1997) and Turner et al (1996).
  - <sup>xiii</sup> De Boer et al (2016)

## Citations

- <sup>xiv</sup> Lishman (2018)
- <sup>xv</sup> Morrison et al (2018)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Uggen (2000)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Bierens et al (2011)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Redcross et al (2012) Chapter 3
- <sup>xix</sup> Zweig et al (2011)
- <sup>xx</sup> Morrison et al (2018)
- <sup>xxi</sup> Valentine et al (2015)
- <sup>xxii</sup> Newton et al (2016)
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ministry of Social Development (2016).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Ministry of Social Development (2016).
- <sup>xxv</sup> de Boer et al (2016)

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## SUMMARY OF EFFECT SIZES FROM META-ANALYSES

Meta-analysis	Treatment type/population	Outcome measure	Reported average effect size	Number of estimates meta-analysis based on	Percentage point reduction in offending (assuming 50% untreated recidivism)	Number needed to treat (assuming 50% untreated recidivism)
Visher et al (2005)	Ex-offenders	Reoffending	d=0.03 (NS)	10	.01	74
Visher et al (2005)	Ex-offenders (<27 group excluded)	Reoffending	d=0.05*	10	.02	44
Aos et al (2006)	Ex-offenders	Reoffending	d=0.047*	16	.02	47
Rush (2017)	Ex-Offenders	Reoffending	d=0.06*	36	.03	37

\* Statistically significant at a 95% threshold

OR=Odds ratio

d=Cohen's d or variant (standardised mean difference)

NS: Not significant