Improving post-release employment outcomes for people leaving prison: Results from a national survey of employment services

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<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<td>ACT</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
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<td>CES</td>
<td>Commonwealth Employment Service</td>
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<td>DES</td>
<td>Disability Employment Services</td>
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<td>DES-ESS</td>
<td>DES Employment Support Service</td>
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<td>DES Disability Management Service</td>
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<td>ESA</td>
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<td>JSCI</td>
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Executive summary

Engaging in meaningful work can reduce ex-prisoners re-offending yet few prisoners in Australia or internationally gain employment after they are released. This report presents a summary of the findings from an online national survey sent to employment agencies around Australia that are most likely to provide services and supports for prisoners/offenders and ex-prisoners/ex-offenders. These agencies comprise 136 Disability Employment Services providers, 44 jobactive service providers and 57 Group Training providers. A response rate of 39% was achieved, capturing qualitative and quantitative data on the models, practices, performance and outcomes of vocational education and employment services assisting prisoners/offenders and ex-prisoners/ex-offenders.

The survey findings identified the following four core issues:

- Individual issues – Ex-prisoners are frequently characterised by multiple and complex needs.
- Practice issues – Service providers recognised the complexity and multiplicity of ex-prisoner needs and yet most used the same employment servicing approach with ex-prisoners as with non-offender jobseekers. They were not incentivised to offer anything different.
- Social issues – The societal stigma attached to ex-prisoners and the associated fear and mistrust of them by employers and the wider society remain a significant barrier to employment.
- Systems issues – The employment service funding model prioritises speed over quality of placement. A flawed needs assessment process results in inadequate resourcing of services supporting the most disadvantaged of jobseekers. The performance framework guidelines for employment services imposes unfunded and burdensome administrative compliance obligations.

What conclusions can be drawn?

The current employment services system and funding model are not meeting the needs of ex-prisoners or the providers trying to meet these needs. Instead, an integrated system of supports that respond to the complex needs of this population is required. Such a system would bring together employment, housing, disability services, drug and alcohol treatment, mental and general health care, education and vocational training, and generic social services. It could be implemented in a unified effort to support the lifestyle change that is necessary for desistance and successful return to communities. Reintegration of ex-prisoners into society is a ‘whole of government’ issue rather than simply an employment services, corrective services or criminal justice issue. Further research is required to determine exactly what an integrated, ‘whole of government’ system should look like.
1. Introduction

Within Australia, the adult prison population increased by 7% from 33,789 at 30 June 2014 to 36,134 at 30 June 2015 and by a further 8% to 38,845 at 30 June 2016. In 2015, the national imprisonment rate was 196 prisoners per 100,000 adult population, a 5% increase from 186 prisoners per 100,000 adult population in 2014 and in 2016 had risen to 208 per 100,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2015; 2016). These are substantial increases. Recidivism rates vary across jurisdictions, ranging between approximately 36% and almost 57.5% (Sentencing Advisory Council of Victoria, 2016). The monetary cost of imprisonment was $2.6 billion for the year 2015 (Productivity Commission, 2015), a 6% increase from the previous year. For 2016–17, the Victorian Ombudsman (2015) estimates the adult prison population in Australia to be 43,000 prisoners at an estimated annual cost of $3.5 billion (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015). The rates of remand and time in remand have escalated with more than a quarter of prisoners at any one time being held in remand (ABS, 2016). Median sentence length is approximately three years (ABS, 2016), but more than half of all prisoners (sentenced and remand) spending less than 12 months in prison (Cunneen et al., 2013).

Beyond the often indelible ‘mark’ that conviction and incarceration leave on an offender, there are personal and social disadvantages common to ex-prisoners/ex-offenders. Two-thirds have completed Year 10 or less. Only 16% have completed Year 12. One-third have at least one chronic health condition. Estimates of disability range between 50%+ and 90%. Two-thirds have been drug users in the year prior to conviction. Two in five have a history of overuse of alcohol (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). One half of Victorian prisoners come from just 6% of the state’s postcodes which include the state’s most disadvantaged suburbs (Vinson, Rawsthorne, Beavis & Ericson, 2015). In New South Wales (NSW), the concentration of prisoners and ex-prisoners is even more starkly drawn with just three highly disadvantaged towns and suburbs with high unemployment rates accounting for a quarter of a sample (2,731) of prisoners, two-thirds of whom have disability and complex support needs (Baldry et al., 2015). A similar situation is likely to be the case in other Australian jurisdictions.

In addition to poor socio-economic backgrounds, many prisoners/offenders have intellectual disabilities or brain injuries. Intellectual disability is 5–10 times more prevalent among prisoners than among the population at large (variably reported as 10–25% or more of prisoners/offenders) (Baldry, Clarence, Dowse & Trollor, 2013). Traumatic Brain Injury is high. US studies indicate Traumatic Brain Injury and Acquired Brain Injury in 50% of non-violent and 75% of death row prisoners. Some studies suggest the prevalence of these brain injuries is as high as 90% (Shiroma, Ferguson & Pickelsimer, 2012). A NSW study found 82% of prisoners with a history of Traumatic Brain Injury, 65% involving loss of consciousness (Schofield et al., 2009). Acquired
Brain Injury requiring assistance in at least one of the ‘activities of daily living’ (Collin et al., 1988) is estimated to affect approximately 25% of prisoners.

Many international studies report that mental illness / psychiatric disability is high among prisoners (Maden et al., 1994; Brink et al., 2001; Brinded et al., 2001; Tye et al., 2005 cited in Butler et al., 2006). In their systematic review of serious mental disorders in prisoners, Fazel and Danesh (2002, cited in Butler et al., 2006) concluded that, compared with the broader community, prisoners were more likely to have a psychotic illness, major depression or a personality disorder. Butler et al. (2006; Table 2) undertook a survey of psychiatric morbidity in prisoners in New South Wales prisons. They compared this with national community data, reporting that prisoners (n=916) were more likely than the general community (n=8,168) to have psychoses (odds ratio [OR] = 11.8), post-traumatic stress disorder (OR=10.2), substance use (OR=11.4) and personality disorder (OR=8.6). Some experts have suggested that prisons are the ‘asylums’ of the 21st century (Baldry, 2014).

Breaking a cycle of re-offending is very difficult. This is evidenced by the high level of recidivism in all Australian jurisdictions (Victorian Ombudsman, 2015). The cycle of re-offending is typically associated with the disadvantages we have described with most ex-prisoners facing many, complex, and intersecting problems. Employment, health, finances, housing, substance use, family and social network, all impact each other. Instability or loss in one typically leads to de-stabilising of others, creating a multitude of unresolved issues, resulting in breaching of orders or relapse and re-offence (Cunneen, 2013).

In addition to these various conditions of significant disadvantage and disability, post-release employment has many challenges in its own right. Employment post-release is highly desired by most ex-prisoners, but is often extremely hard to find and keep. Research indicates unemployment is related to re-offending and re-conviction (Baldry, McDonnell, Maplestone & Peeters, 2003; Busch et al., 2009; Graffam, Shinkfield & Hardcastle, 2008; Iorizzo, 2012; Kubrin, Squires & Stewart, 2007; Rawnsley, 2003; Webster, Heddermann, Turnbull & May, 2001). Approximately two-thirds of re-incarcerated people are unemployed at the time of being breached or committing an offence. Numerous identified barriers to employment may affect people who are in corrections systems (Graffam et al., 2008; Graffam, Shinkfield, Mihailides, & Lavelle, 2005; Webster et al., 2001). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are incarcerated at 14 times their proportion in the total population (ABS, 2016), as well as people from other ethnic minority groups, have poorer work histories and the added discrimination of racism (Cunneen et al., 2013).

In summary, there are many barriers to employment for ex-prisoners/ex-offenders including:

- lack of work skills such as time management and working with others
- educational disadvantage/low literacy levels/lack of education qualifications
- unfavourable employer attitudes (resistance related to convictions and incarceration)
- lack of work opportunities in local neighbourhoods/communities
- lack of job contacts because of segregated social networks
- lack of stable housing
- financial difficulties affecting interviews/job readiness
- problems making the transition from benefits to employment
- behavioural problems
- lack of job skills such as trade qualifications
- low self-esteem, confidence and motivation
- nil or negligible work experience/history
- difficulty adjusting to the routine of work
- parole and rehabilitation requirements.

There is widespread recognition that employment is a key feature of re-entry and reintegration success post release. In Australia, some employment services for ex-prisoners and ex-offenders are provided through a range of service agencies but these are not necessarily coordinated with correctional services departments or other community-based post-release services thereby providing variable services for this group. Given our purpose here, it is important to understand how employment services support is funded and administered within Australia. The following section provides an historical overview of Australia’s evolving employment service system and the changes that have taken place over the past 20 years.
2. The Australian employment services system

Australia’s federal government has had oversight of the nation’s employment services for over 70 years. The Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) was established in 1946 (see Parliament of Australia, n.d.¹) following the passing, by the national parliament, of the Re-establishment and Employment Act 1945. This Act was intended to aid the employment of returned servicemen and women after World War II (see http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/cth/num_act/raea194511o1945366/). Several pieces of federal legislation involving the CES, its successor the Job Network, and the welfare payments agency have since been enacted – Social Services Act 1947, Commonwealth Employment Service Act 1978, Employment, Education and Training Act 1988, Employment and Workplace Relations Amendment Act 2009, and Human Services (Centrelink) Act 1997.

Australia’s employment services system was relatively stable until the latter end of the 20th century, when a period of extensive change took place. The CES and its related agencies and labour market programs were phased out during 1997–1998. Employment assistance services were instead delivered through various for-profit and community-based providers. The (then) new contract-based employment assistance service was called the Job Network. This entailed purchaser-provider contracts determined by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (O’Neill, 1999). Key functions performed by the CES and Department of Social Security networks (and others) were integrated into a single national network of offices via a new agency (Centrelink). Orchestrating the delivery of assistance to jobseekers, including the testing of applicants to determine their 'capacity to benefit' from any assistance, was the role of Centrelink officials. The Job Screening Classification Instrument (JSCI) was used to determine capacity to benefit (Le and Miller, 1999). This assessment provided a quick points-ranking of the client according to certain criteria, for example, English language skills, history of drug abuse, criminal record, and disability. Suitable jobseekers were then referred on to a Job Network provider for employment assistance. If jobseekers did not meet the JSCI criteria - that is, did not satisfy Centrelink officials that they met the 'capacity to benefit' test - then they were referred to alternative schemes such as the Community Support Program or Disability Support Pension (for a comprehensive background, see O’Neill, 1999).

An array of departmental name changes and the transference of responsibility for employment services from one federal government department to another over the years complicates the history of Australia’s employment service system. Federal departments with oversight for the


*Job Network* was introduced in May 1998, marking the beginning of a fully privatised but highly regulated employment service sector (O’Sullivan, Considine & Lewis, 2009). *Job Network* services were initially structured into three program streams (Fowkes, 2011):

- Job Matching (Flex 1) – a basic service for short term unemployed people and employers which included listing vacancies, preparing resumes, screening and referrals to jobs;
- Job Search Training (Flex 2) – for people unemployed three - six months; two weeks of intensive job search training followed by a period of assisted job search;
- Intensive Assistance (Flex 3) – individualised assistance determined by the provider for highly disadvantaged and people with one year or more of unemployment. Ex-prisoners and ex-offenders were included in this stream.

*Job Network* operated from 1998 to June 2009. Contracts between the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations and, later the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, were drawn up with employment service providers over four contract periods: Contract 1, 1998-2000; Contract 2, 2000-2003; Contract 3, 2003-2006; and Contract 3 Extension, 2006-2009. Each new contract included variations from the preceding one (DEEWR, 2003; Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2002; Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, 2001). Quarterly ‘star ratings’ affected funding allocations and continuity of service contracts. On 30 June 2003, the last of what had been 165 CES offices closed, which meant that Australia’s employment service provision was totally privatised and contracted to for-profit and not-for-profit organisations (Kirk, 2003).

A review of *Job Network* in 2007 called for changes to be made to ensure its capacity to meet the needs of all job seekers, including those who are highly disadvantaged. The review found that the performance-linked payment structure of the *Job Network* had resulted in ‘perverse incentives’ (Thomas, 2007, para. 2) with many service providers giving difficult-to-place job seekers little or no employment assistance, and instead focusing their efforts on easier-to-place jobseekers, producing
a financial reward. Employment placements under *Job Network* for highly disadvantaged jobseekers such as ex-offenders were very limited. There were significant administrative and compliance demands placed upon *Job Network* providers which reduced the time employment service agency staff had to provide assistance to jobseekers. Furthermore, Thomas (2007) found that the increased government monitoring and regulation of *Job Network* providers negatively impacted the ability of employment services agencies to deliver flexible and individually tailored support necessary to improve the employment outcomes of difficult-to-place job seekers. There was a call for the reassessment of the work-first focus of the employment assistance system.

Instead, a life-first approach to employment assistance for disadvantaged job seekers was recommended, one that addressed non-employment-related barriers alongside the provision of employment assistance, for the *Job Network* to achieve better and more sustainable employment outcomes (Thomas, 2007).

In July 2009 the federal government replaced the *Job Network* with *Job Services Australia* (JSA). The JSA contracts were formally known as the JSA Deed 2009–2012 and JSA Deed 2012–2015. As with *Job Network*, throughout the JSA period (ending 30 June 2015), there were adjustments to contract conditions and funding allocations, and the number of providers varied, averaging approximately 85–90 agencies/services operating from approximately 1,900 locations within 116 Employment Service Areas (ESAs) (Department of Employment, n.d.a; Department of Employment, n.d.b). The services provided by JSA differed according to the level of disadvantage, circumstance or Centrelink allowance category of the jobseeker. Differing levels of funding were provided for each service 'stream' (level of jobseeker support needed). JSA service “streams” were:

- **Stream 1 (Limited):** included assistance creating an online resumé for the purpose of applying for jobs through an online job search website and automatic matching of jobseeker knowledge, skills and experience to available jobs.
- **Stream 1:** included intensive activities, where jobseekers participated in activities to develop their skills in resume development, application writing, cold canvassing, goal setting, career planning, interview techniques, job search and work experience.
- **Streams 2 & 3:** for jobseekers experiencing moderate and significant disadvantage (respectively). Jobseekers entered into an Employment Pathway Plan which included activities and assistance aimed at improving employability. The focus was on addressing the vocational and non-vocational needs of each jobseeker.
- **Stream 4:** for jobseekers assessed as having the most severe levels of disadvantage and affected by mental ill-health, disability, homelessness, abuse, drug/alcohol abuse, etc. JSA providers worked with the jobseeker to address the most pressing issues/barriers first. The aim was to achieve employment with a recognition of the often-protracted time taken. Ex-prisoners
and ex-offenders were allocated to this stream although usually under specialist contracts (Australian National Audit Office, 2014).

In addition to the support they provided in each stream, agencies funded under JSA also provided work experience to unemployed jobseekers after 12 months of continuing unemployment. In the work experience phase, jobseekers who were eligible were required to participate in a work experience activity on an annual basis. Work experience activities included Work for the Dole, Green Corp, volunteer work, part time work, part time study, unpaid work experience, participation in Government programs or non-vocational activities.

However, the JSA system was criticised for remaining highly “complex, over-engineered and under-resourced” (Australian Council of Social Service, 2012, p.5) with the most highly disadvantaged jobseekers still not receiving the support they needed. On 1 July 2015, JSA was replaced with jobactive, the current Australian Government employment services program. This program is scheduled to operate until 2020. At the outset, 44 service providers were contracted, approximately one-half of the number of JSA providers. There are four program types or options in the overall jobactive program (DoE 2016):

- **jobactive** employment services in which providers assist jobseekers to find and keep a job and to ensure employer business needs are met
- **Work for the Dole** Coordinators in which providers assist sourcing Work for the Dole placements and projects with not-for-profit organisations;
- New Enterprise Incentive Scheme, which supports jobseekers to start up and operate viable small businesses with training, mentoring and income support, and
- Harvest Labour Services, in which providers assist jobseekers into this scheme to support the harvest requirements of growers.

In the current jobactive program, there are no ‘specialist contracts’ for supporting ex-prisoners/offenders, and there are reports of those jobseekers being inaccurately classified as Stream A (low support need) in the new classification system (Ollerton & Giles, 2016). Less funding is available to contracted employment service providers to support ‘low need’ jobseekers. Given that previous government employment service programs have each had variations to contracts over the ‘lifetime’ of the programs, adjustments may well be made to jobactive prior to its scheduled end date of 2020.
3. Disability Employment Services

The Disability Services Act (1986) specifically refers to federal funding for ‘open employment services’ for people living with disabilities. Like *jobactive*, Disability Employment Services (DES) has undergone a range of changes since the one-stop-shop days of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). These include changes to federal government departmental responsibility, funding models, compliance accountability requirements, program names and program delivery models. Since 2013, DES has been located within the Department of Social Services, providing two types of services: DES Employment Support Service (DES-ESS) and DES Disability Management Service (DES-DMS). DES-ESS is for people with permanent disability and with an assessed need for longer term, regular, ongoing support in the workplace, while DES-DMS is for people with a disability, an illness or an injury not deemed to be permanent, who need help from an employment service but are not expected to need long term support in the workplace (see https://www.employment.gov.au/disability-employment-services).

DES and its predecessors were established primarily to assist people with disabilities who were in receipt of income support, such as the Disability Support Pension, to access employment in the open labour market rather than in supported employment, historically known as sheltered workshops. Initially places in all of the disability employment assistance programs were capped resulting, not unexpectedly, in the demand for disability employment service places exceeding the supply. Similar to *Job Network*, a broad range of employment-related support services were available, such as workplace modifications on-the-job training and post-placement support, work trials and employment subsidies (Australian Government 2016).

Ex-prisoners/ex-offenders with a disability may be eligible for the Disability Support Pension and/or DES support depending on their level of need as determined by the JSCI assessment (Le & Miller, 1999) used in the eligibility appraisal process by Centrelink (Department of Employment, n.d.c). However, the JSCI assessment process is itself controversial. The JSCI consists of a list of questions aimed at providing a non-diagnostic review of vocational and non-vocational barriers, including a person’s disabilities, injuries and health conditions. It determines work capacity and identifies participation requirements and level of assistance for jobseekers with disability as well as the level of funding attached to each jobseeker. JSCI assessments are frequently brief, conducted over the telephone and do not ask probing questions or deviate from the set list to clarify answers received. It is claimed that due to poor JSCI assessment practices, many jobseekers, such as ex-offenders and those with mental health problems, do not receive adequate funding for employment assistance and are not referred to the most appropriate employment assistance program (Ollerton, 2013).
It should be noted that identifying as an ex-offender during the registration process with an employment service provider is voluntary. Therefore, a DES provider is not necessarily aware that the registering jobseeker has been in prison or has particular support needs associated with having a criminal record. While the figures and information in this report indicate substantial use by ex-prisoners/ex-offenders, the level of access ex-prisoners/offenders have to employment support services remains unclear.

The DES performance framework was designed to facilitate a comparative performance model. Like jobactive, it uses a Star Ratings System that measures the relative performance of DES providers in delivering services contributing to the objectives of the DES program. These Star Ratings are the only measure of the relative success of providers in achieving outcomes for DES job seekers. The key performance indicators are efficiency which is measured by average time to placement (shorter time being better) and effectiveness measured by proportion of clients placed (higher proportion being better). The Star Ratings System does not take into account more nuanced outcomes often valued by people with disability and their support providers, such as type of industry, level of employment, number of hours worked, and the degree to which wages result in greater financial independence and self-sufficiency or other benefits. Other outcomes not addressed by the Star Ratings System performance indicators are underemployment and the underutilization of the skills and potential of many employees with disability, and failure to incorporate or reward person-centredness and self-determination especially for persons with higher support needs. These shortcomings in performance indicators and the flow-on effects to the quarterly published provider rankings have resulted in a loss of committed and skilled employment services staff and an overemphasis on contractual compliance (Riches & MacDonald, 2016).

3.1 Summary

The most pronounced features of the employment sector since privatisation, both for ‘mainstream’ and disability employment services, have been change, lack of continuity, and uncertainty. The frequency and extent of change has been significant and substantial, and it remains a feature of the current federally-funded employment services system. To a large extent, this system has not, and does not currently, accommodate broader employment-related support needs of ex-prisoners through a unique needs classification or specialist contracts as per Job Network Flex 3 or JSA Stream 4.

Employment is recognised as a key component to breaking the cycle of offending behaviour and re-incarceration. However, the constantly-changing federally-funded employment services system is challenging because typically ex-prisoners need stability and order, having come from the highly regimented, routinized prison environment. As discussed above, many ex-prisoners also need post-release assistance with a range of basic needs including housing, mental and general health, drug and alcohol treatment and employment. The multiplicity, complexity, comprehensiveness and
longevity of ex-prisoner post-release employment assistance needs strongly suggests the need for a life-first rather than work-first approach (Thomas, 2007), delivered via a specialised system, or component of the system.

To date, there have been no published evaluations of any non-corrections employment services which focus on support for ex-prisoners and/or ex-offenders. At least two such Australian evaluations have been published pertinent to corrections-based programs (Callan and Gardner, 2005; Graffam et al., 2005), and there are numerous publications on international corrections-based employment support programs. However, corrections-based programs are not the focus of this report. One additional relevant piece of work is the *Prison to Work* report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2016). Although focused exclusively on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ex-offender employment, eight of the nine key findings are pertinent to non-Indigenous offenders as well. These findings include:

- Improve assessment of prisoners' needs at reception (start of imprisonment) including using data sources other than self-report
- Time in prison should be used to better set up clear pathways to employment
- Improve support for female prisoners
- Lack of timely engagement from employment and welfare services
- Need for increased information sharing and coordination among support (housing, health and mental health services, employment services and other) providers
- Insufficient transitional support and through-care
- Insufficient stable accommodation and transitional housing
- Data gaps and patchy evidence of what works.

Each of these has been cited by other researchers and several have been identified in this national survey report.

The following section outlines the research method used to collect information from employment services providers around Australia.
4. Method

The national survey of employment services component of the Future Beyond the Wall research project gathered information from employment services around Australia to build a picture of current employment services and supports for prisoners, offenders, ex-prisoners and ex-offenders. This was done via an online based survey distributed to employment service providers. Answers to the questions in the survey were collated and analysed using SPSS statistical software.

4.1 Participating organisations

A questionnaire regarding employment services for offenders/ex-offenders was prepared. Invitations to fill in the questionnaire were sent to 136 Disability Employment Services (DES), all 44 jobactive providers, and 57 Group Training providers in Australia or 150 unique providers with potential for providing services to ex-offender clients. Some providers offer both DES and jobactive services and some providers have no known ex-offenders among their clients. The total number of organisations that responded was 59, which is a response rate of 39%. More detail on participating organisations is provided below in the Employment Service Providers section.

4.2 Instrument

The questionnaire provided to prospective participants contained questions about the organisation, its clients, and the current employment services system. The questionnaire was designed to capture quantitative and qualitative information about current employment service provision for offenders/ex-offenders/ex-prisoners across each Australian jurisdiction.

Questions pertaining to the organisation were focused on location, number of staff, number of clients, number of office locations, annual revenue service model(s), type(s) of program offered, and partnering and collaboration arrangements. There were also questions pertaining only to offender / ex-offender clients. Participants were instructed to complete the section of the questionnaire seeking details of client support in reference only to clients with ex-offender status from 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2015. Questions pertaining to their clients, in addition to the number of offender/ ex-offender clients supported, included recognised barriers to employment that refer to personal characteristics and conditions and recognised barriers to employment that refer to community or employer characteristics and conditions. The questions on the current employment system regarding employment services for offenders/ex-offenders included identification of conditions that have impacted their business, identification of conditions that have impacted their ability to support ex-offenders specifically, and description of potential improvements that might be made.
The draft survey instrument was piloted in early 2016 with chief and partner investigators in this project. This resulted in streamlining of questions and response choices. The finalized survey was then distributed to employment service agencies (N=150). The survey closed in June 2016 (n=59).

4.3 Procedure

The target population for the survey was organisations that are involved in the delivery of employment related services across each Australian state/territory. Organisations were recruited via a desktop search of publicly available information on all government, non-government and private employment service organisations operating in each jurisdiction. In addition, the survey was promoted via employment services peak bodies including the National Employment Services Association, Jobs Australia and Disability Employment Australia. Contact details for one senior person in each organisation were sourced via the Internet or by phone. Given a potential conflict of interest, the three employment service agencies that are partner investigators in this research project, were not contacted to complete the survey.

Initial contact with the contact person at each organisation was made via email. An Information Sheet describing the project was included with the email to each contact person. The email contained a link to the survey via the online survey tool ‘Survey Monkey’ (see https://www.surveymonkey.com/). The survey remained open for six weeks in total. Four weeks after the survey was opened, a follow up email was sent with thanks to those who had already completed the survey and request to others to complete the survey in the two weeks remaining prior to the survey closure date.

4.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data provided in the questionnaire responses were analysed to determine: 1) the key barriers, challenges, and concerns for employment service providers; 2) factors impacting the employment of ex-prisoners; and 3) the range of models and approaches used by employment service providers working with ex-prisoners across Australia.

The quantitative data provided from questionnaire responses were collated and examined according to: 1) the number of offender/ex-offender/ex-prisoner clients in each employment service; 2) the number of offender/ex-offender/ex-prisoner clients in each employment service who have a) a mental &/or cognitive impairment, and b) who are Indigenous. Many organisations did not provide a response to all questions and, therefore, most question response-sets had missing responses.
5. Findings

The findings section presents participant responses in terms of i) the employment service providers themselves; ii) the models of service used by these service providers; iii) the issues raised; and iv) the shortcomings identified.

5.1 Employment service providers: locations

The respondents who provided details of their employment services organisations represented 17 organisations in New South Wales (NSW), 11 in Queensland, 10 in Western Australia, nine in South Australia, eight in Victoria, four in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), one in Tasmania, and one in the Northern Territory. Twenty-five organisations had offices in multiple areas including metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas. Twelve organisations were in regional areas only. Two organisations were in metropolitan areas only. One organisation had offices in rural areas only. Eleven organisations had offices in more than one state/territory.

Among respondents who reported that their organisation had known ex-offender clients in the 2014/15 financial year, and reported the name of their organisation (N=25), eight organisations had offices in Western Australia, seven had offices in Queensland, six had offices in NSW, six had offices in South Australia, two had offices in the ACT, and two had offices in Victoria. Five organisations had offices in more than one state. Most of the multi-jurisdiction organisations (N=15) had offices in a combination of metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas. Seven of these organisations serviced regional areas only, two serviced metropolitan areas only, and one organisation serviced rural areas only. Among those organisations that reported more than 100 ex-offender clients in the 2014/15 financial year (N=6), four had offices in Western Australia, one had offices in NSW, and one had offices in NSW and Queensland. Two organisations serviced regional areas only, two organisations serviced metropolitan areas only, one organisation serviced rural areas only, and one serviced a combination of metropolitan, regional, and rural areas.

There was a huge variation in the number of office locations from which the employment service providers operated. The range was between 1 and 65 (Median=6, SD=15.259) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Office Locations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Offices</th>
<th>Number of Organisations</th>
<th>Percentage of Organisations</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of Organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4–6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7–12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 and above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The largest provider in terms of number of office locations had 65 offices across states/territories. This is consistent with the differences in size related to number of staff and number of jobseekers.

5.2 Employment service providers: staffing

Fifty-three service provider organisations provided staffing numbers. Staff numbers ranged from 6 to 600 staff (Median=75, SD=143.70). Total number of managerial staff varied between 1 and 100 (Median=8, SD=17.94). Total number of employment services direct staff ranged between 0 and 350 (Median=25, SD=73.82). We have characterised these variations by using a typology of micro, small, medium, and large. Table 2 shows the distribution in terms of the typology. An attempt has been made to create group sizes that are approximately the same to facilitate additional analyses at a later date.

Table 2. Total Number of Staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Staff</th>
<th>Number of Organisations</th>
<th>Percentage of Organisations</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of Organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23–74</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–200</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201 and above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3 Number of clients/jobseekers

The total number of jobseekers assisted by participating employment service provider organisations (N=47) varied widely, ranging between 23 and 83,000 (Median=400, SD=12,908.13). In Table 3, organisations have been sorted into four groups based on total number of registered jobseekers. Again, an attempt has been made to sort into relatively even-sized groups for the purpose of further analyses by size.

Table 3. Total Number of Jobseekers/Clients Assisted in 2014/15 Financial Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Jobseekers</th>
<th>Number of Organisations</th>
<th>Percentage of Organisations</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of Organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23–200</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201–400</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>401–1,800</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>76.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,801–83,000</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.4 Number of ex-offender jobseeker clients

Participants were also asked to report the total number of jobseekers/clients with known ex-offender status who had commenced with their organisation during the 2014/15 financial year. Given that disclosing criminal history is a voluntary part of the employment assistance registration...
A Future Beyond the Wall: Improving Post-release Employment Outcomes for People Leaving Prison

Improving post-release employment outcomes for people leaving prison: Results from a national survey of employment services

The number of ex-offender jobseeker clients ranged between 0 and 1,403 (Median=14, SD=282.30). Note that there is some ambiguity about the '0' responses. Respondents may have answered '0' when they either do not provide services to this group or do provide services but had no clients identifying as ex-offenders in the 2014/15 financial year. Twenty-seven respondents had missing responses due to not answering this question or giving answers such as 'unknown', 'figures not available' or 'statistics not collected'.

Participating organisations were also asked what percentage of their total jobseekers/clients commencing in the 2014/15 financial year were ex-offenders; 28 of 59 (47%) responded to this question with responses ranging from 0–100% (Median=5, SD=30.48) as shown in Table 5. Involvement with ex-offenders varies, but it is also obvious that the number and percentage of total jobseekers/clients with known ex-offender status is largely unknown by many providers due to program eligibility rules, non-disclosure, and other factors.

### Table 4. Number of Ex-offender Jobseeker Clients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Ex-offenders</th>
<th>Number of Organisations</th>
<th>Percentage of Organisations</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of Organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>69.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–100</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101–150</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>300</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>600–655</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>97.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,400+</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.5 Annual Revenue

Nineteen service provider organisations provided revenue information. The reported revenue for the 2014/15 financial year ranged between $0.8m and $60m (Median=$8m, SD=13.14). The distribution of organisations in terms of annual revenue was similar, as expected, to the distribution
in terms of staff numbers. Table 6 shows that the majority of organisations that provided information are multi-million dollar per year businesses.

Table 6. Organisation Revenue 2014/15 Financial Year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revenue ($m)</th>
<th>Number of Organisations</th>
<th>Percentage of Organisations</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage of Organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.8 to 4.5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>21.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 to 15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>73.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 to 60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.6 About the models of servicing

In addition to size of their employment service provider organisations, participants were asked which service model type best described their delivery. A total of 49 of the 59 organisations (83%) provided a response to this question and a range of models were identified. Some providers identified more than one model operating within their organisation. However, Table 7 only lists one model for each of the 49 agencies who responded to this question.

Table 7. Provider Employment Service Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service model</th>
<th>Percentage (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment-specific case management</td>
<td>18 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holistic case management (clients have a broad range of issues)</td>
<td>21 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated case management such as Individual Support Packages</td>
<td>5 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-sufficiency case management</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Service providers utilising the employment-specific case management service model (n=18) provided only employment assistance and employment-related services specific to a contract (generally a contract with jobactive). This included preparatory activities such as résumé construction, job application writing, and interview preparation; direct employment assistance such as job finding, matching and placement; and a degree of post-placement support.

Some service providers offered a broad range of support services aimed at addressing all issues impacting the client. This holistic case management was mostly offered by not-for-profit organisations (n=21) rather than specific employment service providers. They provided employment services as one arm of a broader approach. These providers may have had a federal government jobactive contract or state/territory funding to provide a range of services. A less common variant of this model involved the use of collaborative referrals to provide holistic support through a partnering arrangement.
Employment service providers utilising an integrated case management model (n=5) provided a specific set of support services pertinent to a variety of disability support needs. These were individualised according to need within the specified set of services. Within the disability field, Individual Support Packages comprised funds allocated to a person to meet their disability-related support needs. The funds may be used to buy a range of disability-related supports chosen by the person to assist them to achieve their goals. The funding may complement existing informal support arrangements from family and friends and/or generally available community services. This was one form of integrated case management that may be available to ex-prisoners.

The self-sufficiency case management model offered by one provider was like the holistic case management model, in that it addressed a broad range of supports, but it was also ‘developmental’ in nature. From a baseline assessment of ‘level of self-sufficiency’ across several life domains, support was provided to assist the client in moving from ‘surviving’ at the lowest possible point through to ‘thriving’ which was meant to indicate a healthy level of self-sufficiency. When applied by employment service providers, employment occupies the primary focus among the various domains. This model was not widely utilised possibly because it was more resource intensive in the short term. However, in the long run this model may lead to greater self-reliance and less resource dependence.

Responses by four participants could not be classified in terms of the aforementioned four models of employment service provision. Instead these responses indicated a combination of models or similar models for other target groups like clients with mental illness.

5.7 Ex-offender-specific approaches/models

In addition to being asked which employment service model was used, providers were asked whether they had an approach to providing employment services to ex-offenders that was the same or different to the one used for non-offender jobseekers. Again, 49 of 59 providers (83%) responded. Most (78% of participants) reported using the same approach as they applied to non-offenders, and 11 (22%) reported a different approach for ex-offender jobseekers. Respondents in both groups provided ex-offender-specific features of their approach. Two respondents reported a belief that some employment services providers mistakenly targeted employers who were unlikely to be accepting of an employee with a criminal record. This was seen as a waste of the time and energy for both the providers and the ex-offenders. Overall, participants reported a variety of different approaches to providing employment services to ex-offenders including tailored programs and individualised assistance.

Six respondents reported that their organisation provided individualised support with programs and services tailored to meet the needs of ex-offenders. These agencies tended to have a greater focus on individual pathways when providing employment services to ex-offenders. Different
strategies would be involved in job searching and post placement support. It was noted that consideration was given to the criminal record, in particular offence type, when referring someone to activities or employment to ensure that the position is suitable and attainable for them. In addition, providing employment services to ex-offenders often involved working around clients’ correctional obligations, “If an ex-offender has other obligations such as a community corrections order, then we work around that”. Others reported that when working with any client, their approach was always individualised irrespective of whether the client was an ex-offender, “Each client is approached on an individual basis regardless of their barriers including ex-offenders”.

Some participants (n=5) reported that, compared with their work with clients without a criminal history, working with ex-offenders often involved a greater focus on broader barriers, such as those likely to impact their ability to find and maintain employment. As one respondent stated, “The nature of the barriers [an ex-offender] jobseeker has is usually linked to what led to them having a criminal record. e.g. ODD, ADHD, drug and alcohol, mental health, so a higher concentration and multiplicity is usually found in this group”. Respondents reported that, when possible, they assisted their ex-offender clients to address these broader issues as part of the path to becoming ‘work-ready’, and that some clients were open to addressing these barriers whilst others were resistant. In cases of resistance to address the broader issues, providers reported adopting an ‘employment only’ focus. Respondents also reported addressing barriers that may cause ex-offenders to breach their release conditions. As some programs are funded by corrective services departments, providers not only focus on employment outcomes, but also work on their re-integration back into the community and addressing barriers that may have them breach any release conditions.

Another five respondents reported that, compared to clients without a criminal history, ex-offenders often received a higher level of support, “There is an increased focus on counselling support and vocational support which is dependent upon their length of unemployment”. Respondents reported that the need for increased support would typically be identified early. Increased employment support for ex-offenders would also be provided in the form of more intensive workshop-based support and access to employment or other funded employment support services.

One respondent reported that their organisation maintained a database of suitable employers to ensure that ex-offenders are matched only with those employers likely to be more accepting of employees with a criminal record.

These approaches to supporting ex-offenders and ex-prisoners presume that the employment service provider can identify their clients in this way. As already mentioned, this is not always the case. Hence the individualised, broader or more intensive support that might be possible is not

2 Oppositional Defiance Disorder
3 Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
made available thereby compromising the opportunities available to an ex-offender/ex-prisoner and jeopardising their successful re-integration into the community.

5.8 Ex-offender programs offered by providers

Although many of the support programs provided by participating organisations were not specific to ex-prisoners/offenders, the variety and extent of many employment and disability programs and services are quite broad. These services include employment and/or disability services; social, community, and psychological/mental health services; education and training courses; pre-release support; youth services; and services specific to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clients. As previously noted, ex-offenders/ex-prisoners have substantial involvement in Disability Employment Services (DES) and 46% of participating service providers (27 of 59) reported delivery of disability services to ex-offenders.

Three agencies reported that their organisation did not have any programs or services specifically targeting ex-offenders. However, their ex-offender clients could access any of their general services. In those organisations, whilst services are not specifically intended for ex-offenders, client caseloads in various programs included some people who may have been incarcerated. Services typically included were disability employment, homelessness, strengthening families, foster care, building family opportunity, personal helpers and mentors, community hubs, mental health, complex needs, supported independent living, alcohol and other drugs, domestic violence, youth programs, flexible learning options, apprenticeship and traineeship programs, entitlements training, a local jobs program, Vocational Training and Employment Centres program and Aboriginal programs.

The following sub-sections summarise the types of programs and support services that most participants reported as available to their ex-offender/ex-prisoner clients.

5.8.1 Employment and/or disability services programs

The majority of respondents (n=33) provided employment-related services to ex-offenders as part of their primary business as an employment service provider. Most provided these services as part of jobactive or DES. These providers typically reported on other services outside of conventional jobactive or DES service delivery. Many respondents also provided transition to work services for ex-offenders such as Transition to Work for those who were eligible. Provision of a full range of support services from pre- to post-placement into employment was also commonly provided to ex-offenders. Vocational assistance was provided by some services to help ex-offenders identify and plan their career path.

Several respondents reported that their employment service offered support to ex-offenders returning to work following an injury. This included providing pre-employment assessments,
functional assessments, and employment assistance. Other employment related services included work trials for ex-offenders, *Work for the Dole*, local job programs, as well as the *Remote Jobs and Communities Program*, a program that facilitates jobs, participation and community-development services in 60 remote regions across Australia.

A large number of respondents (n=27) provided services to ex-offender clients classified as having a disability with one agency reporting that their organisation was a DES provider specialising in mental health. These DES providers had roles as DES Employment Support Service (DES-ESS) or DES Disability Management Service (DES-DMS).

Other services provided to ex-offenders with a classified disability included the provision of the *Employment Enablement Package*, a NSW government strategy designed to assist people with an intellectual disability to find employment by supporting them to develop their skills, confidence and qualifications. Other disability-related services provided to ex-offenders included supported independent living, respite services, and employment opportunities provided as part of *Australian Disability Enterprises* which provide meaningful employment for people with a significant disability who would not otherwise be able to work. One respondent reported that their organisation also offered *Life Skills Training*, a program providing a wide range of in home, centre based and community based services to people with a disability.

### 5.8.2 Social, community and psychological/mental health services programs

Many organisations (n=26) provided or referred ex-offenders to general counselling, relationship counselling, and/or financial counselling. Organisations also provided or referred ex-offender clients to family support services such as the *Strengthening Families Program (SFP)*, a parenting and family strengthening program for high-risk and other families, and the *Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY)* program, a two-year home-based parenting and early childhood enrichment program empowering parents and carers to be their child’s first teacher. Community programs designed to assist ex-offenders to re-integrate into the community were also common.

Services to assist ex-offenders with mental health issues were common. Several organisations provided in-house alcohol and substance use programs or referred their clients to local services that could assist with these issues. This included drug and alcohol counselling services as well as the *Sober[ing] Up Shelter*, a service providing overnight care for people intoxicated from alcohol and other drugs. Among other mental health services for ex-offenders, respondents reported anger management programs as well as the *Personal Helpers and Mentors Service (PHaMS)*, a service assisting people aged 16 years and over whose lives are severely affected by mental illness to overcome their social isolation and increase their community connections.
Referrals to external services and programs addressing interpersonal and/or intimate partner violence were reported by some organisations. This included services such as Communicare Breathing Space, a residential domestic and family violence men’s behaviour change program located in Perth. Similarly, some respondents reported referrals to programs and services able to provide accommodation and housing support and tenancy advice.

Other social support programs or services provided to ex-offenders, whether in-house or externally, included emergency relief, foster care, occasional child care, interpreting and translation services, as well as Building Family Opportunities (BFO), a program assisting individuals and their families to break the cycle of long-term and intergenerational joblessness.

### 5.8.3 Education and training courses and programs

Fifteen respondents reported that their organisation offered in-house training and education courses to ex-offenders or referred their ex-offender clients to organisations that provided this training. These courses included vocational training and further education as well as strategic job search training and support. Other organisations provided ex-offenders with language, literacy and numeracy training as part of their role as a registered training organisation. In some cases, this included the Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) program, which provides language, literacy and numeracy training to eligible jobseekers. Training in manual handling and occupational health and safety is provided or sourced as are Certificate II, III and IV courses in business, sport, fitness and aged care. Some agencies also facilitate or deliver apprenticeship and traineeship programs.

### 5.8.4 Pre-release programs

Ten respondents reported that their organisation delivered pre-release programs especially for their ex-prisoner clients. These programs included work release programs designed to assist prisoners in making the transition back into the community by linking them with employers prior to their release, as well as the Transport Options Program, a program that provides transport to prisoners from remote locations who have difficulty returning to their homes after being released from prisons or work camps. Another pre-release program, Pathways2Employment which was funded by Queensland Corrective Services, was an employment support service that worked with sentenced prisoners up to six months before release to help them find and maintain suitable employment post-release, offering continuity of support from custody to community. It supported offenders to become work-ready and to gain and maintain employment after their release. Since July 2016 it has been recast as a more comprehensive but voluntary support program. Importantly, offenders must commence their participation in the program prior to their release from prison.
5.8.5 Programs for specific sub-groups

Many participants reported that their agencies provided programs and services (or access to programs and services provided by other organisations) for ex-offender sub-groups including youth and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Some respondents (n=7) reported that their organisation either provided young ex-offenders with in-house targeted youth services or youth programs or referred young ex-offenders to external youth programs. These included programs such as Communicare Academy, a program that offered an alternative style of education for young people who had become disengaged from mainstream schooling, as well as the Transition to Work program, which provided intensive, pre-employment support to young people aged 15–21. One respondent reported that disengaged young people (including young ex-offenders) at their service also engaged in the KAPOW – Kids and the Power of Work program. This program supported young people to undertake accredited training, work experience placements as well as personal development programs.

Six organisations offered services or programs specifically designed for their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander clients. Most of these programs specifically related to employment such as the Aboriginal Employment Pathway Program which was mentioned by several respondents. Other programs included the Vocational Training and Employment Centres program assisting jobseekers with an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background to find sustainable employment by matching an individual’s skills and abilities with guaranteed jobs. Social services such as the 7 Mile Rehabilitation Centre, a 13-week residential rehabilitation program assisting people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background to stop drinking alcohol were also mentioned by respondents.

Some agencies also reported that their organisation worked with other services and community groups specifically supporting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Service and local elders’ groups. Organisations also worked in collaboration with disability-specific services. These included Ability Links NSW, a service supporting people with a disability to overcome barriers and make connections with their local community, as well as National Disability Services specialist employment trials.

Generally, many of the participant employment services providers reported that they collaborated with other agencies either in a close partnership or by way of referrals. For example, some respondents reported that they linked with other agencies in either the pre-release or post-release period to provide services to prisoners/ex-prisoners. Both respondents reported that their organisation worked in close partnership with prisons, youth detention centres and youth correctional services in their local area. They specifically worked in collaboration with youth worker staff and education centre staff within these facilities. Connections with TAFE and other registered
training organisations and local businesses were also made with the purpose of supporting ex-offender clients.

Four in five participating organisations (n=48) reported working with relevant community organisations including health and mental health services, community-based social services, criminal justice and other departments and agencies, and education and training course providers. Four respondents reported that their organisation often worked with government agencies - Department of Human Services including Centrelink, Department of Transport, Department of Child Protection, Department of Housing, and Department of Social Services including Personal Helpers and Mentors Service (PHaMs).

Many agencies had informal working relationships with other organisations mainly referring clients and/or sharing information and resources. Some agencies had formal agreements. Respondents (n=16) reported that they frequently shared referrals and information with local health and mental health services to support their clients whose mental ill-health created barriers to employment. These services included community services such as headspace, forensic mental health services, local hospitals, as well as private GPs and psychologists. Relationships with drug and alcohol services were common with respondents reporting that their clients were often referred to drug and alcohol rehabilitation or anger management programs as part of their parole.

Employment service agencies also teamed with community-based services to provide support for clients’ non-employment needs including debt counselling, domestic violence and out-reach (for example, men’s sheds, see http://mensshed.org/). They also connected with other services from agencies such as Red Cross, The Salvation Army, Centacare (see http://www.centacarewa.com.au/), and Life Without Barriers (see http://www.lwb.org.au/), community justice agencies such as state/territory departments of corrections, parole boards and juvenile justice teams, and neighbourhood centres. Some agencies referred their ex-offender clients to community-based services specifically designed to support their reintegration back into the community. This included the Offenders Aid and Rehabilitation Services of SA (OARS), a community-based organisation that provides an array of services to prisoners, offenders and their families. One respondent reported that they would refer their ex-offender clients to local re-entry providers if they relocated to another region of their state or territory.

Some organisations (n=10) reported working with other employment services when providing services to their clients, sharing referrals with other local employment services and working in collaboration with local employers and providers of apprenticeships. This included jobactive or DES providers. One provider reported working closely with vocational training and medical staff to provide employment in a supported environment.
5.9 Barriers to ex-prisoner employment

In addition to being asked the number of ex-prisoner clients/jobseekers that their organisation supported and the type of support they provided, agencies were asked to identify any barriers to employment that refer to personal characteristics and conditions and any recognised barriers to employment that refer to community or employer characteristics and conditions. Participants could list up to five different barriers. Subsequently a total of 180 non-unique barriers were given. Some referred to community and employer attitudes. Others identified characteristics, conditions, and behaviours of the individual. Some respondents referred to conditions in the broader community and economy. Only barriers identified by more than one respondent are included in the following discussion.

Some respondents (n=44) reported that community perceptions and, more specifically, employer perceptions of ex-offenders were a major barrier to ex-offenders finding employment. The ‘societal stigma’ of being an ex-offender was seen to be a significant barrier to them finding employment. This was particularly the case in rural and regional areas where employers and other members of the community tended to be more aware of a local resident’s past. Service providers reported community prejudice against ex-offenders, employer perceptions based on past behaviour and stereotypes, and negative labels from the community that reduced opportunities and reinforced the labels. They also reported that ex-offenders were not perceived as being as job or work capable compared with employees without a criminal history and that ex-offenders were overtly and covertly discriminated against by potential employers and employment services agencies. It was suggested that discrimination from employers and sometimes employment consultants was overt, but often it was neither explicit nor deliberate.

Respondents reported that in the eyes of some employers as well as the general community, having been to prison did not necessarily mean that an ex-offender had been rehabilitated. Several respondents expressed the view that even though ex-offenders had done their time, they continued to be negatively judged by the community. These negative labels were perceived to reduce ex-prisoner jobseeker’s opportunities which in turn re-enforced the labels.

Another barrier frequently reported by employment service providers was that potential employers often had major reservations about their personal safety or the security of their business which limited options for the employment of ex-offenders. For example, some respondents stated that ex-offenders might be unreliable and could re-offend at a cost to their business. These concerns were believed to be more salient for ex-offenders with specific types of criminal history. Several respondents suggested that fraud and theft related crimes were a major deterrent to employment and that sexual and violent crimes were viewed especially negatively. Respondents also believed that many employers did not want to be associated with an ex-criminal and were afraid that employing an ex-offender might be detrimental to the reputation of their businesses.
Lack of a work history or gaps in their work history was reported by some agencies (n=18) as a major barrier to ex-prisoners finding employment. Prior incarceration with noticeable gaps in work history or no recent referees often presented a problem, particularly if ex-prisoners had not participated in a pre-release employment program. Respondents also reported that many ex-offenders had a general lack of work experience which made it difficult to find work, or, if they started work, was impacting their ability to adjust to a new work environment. Ex-prisoners were often described as not ‘work ready’ and unable to adjust to going back into a work environment. The fact that ex-offenders have criminal records that can be revealed through police checks or ‘working with children’ checks was reported by some respondents (n=8) as a major barrier to finding employment. A police record and the prejudice it brings (dependent on the offence), an increased focus by employers on conducting a police/criminal history check, the necessity of passing criminal history checks in many cases, and the restriction on employment options associated with such checks, were all given as examples of the impact of criminal history checks. Ex-offenders not knowing how and when to disclose their criminal history was also seen as a barrier.

In addition to barriers related to community and employer prejudices and perceptions and issues related to poor work histories, the personal characteristics of ex-offenders were also considered barriers to finding employment. There was a perception that ex-offenders often held negative beliefs and perceptions about themselves, had low self-esteem, or believed that others would judge them negatively. Respondents cited the self-limiting belief of ex-offenders, disbelief in themselves, poor self-esteem and low expectations of self and others, and a presumption by the ex-offender jobseeker that employers would not hire them.

Agencies also reported that the intelligence, attitudes and interpersonal skills of ex-offenders often presented a barrier to their success in finding employment, citing low ‘emotional intelligence’, low level measured intelligence, limited ‘soft skills’ and sociability, poor attitudes and social skills, and inability to engage with others. Other specific behaviours which were seen to make ex-offenders less than desirable employees included inappropriate language and/or behaviours. Respondents also questioned ex-offenders’ lack of motivation to find work and their poor work ethics. According to some respondents, ex-offenders were often unwilling to engage in unpaid work experience to build up their skill set and increase their employability.

Lack of education and/or training was seen by some employment service providers (n=16) as a significant barrier to ex-offenders being able to find and remain in employment. Poor literacy and numeracy were noted as problems including low literacy level, low level or lack of numeracy skills, low level education and low reading and writing skills. Others stated that a more general lack of education and qualifications made it difficult for ex-offenders to be competitive in the employment market, stating that a significant percentage of ex-offenders had low levels of education (often below Year 10), lacked qualifications, and had spent most of their adult lives in prison. Some
agencies (n=8) reported that the job skills possessed by ex-offenders, particularly when they had been learned and honed in at prison, were sometimes outdated and/or not relevant to contemporary needs of employers in the community. Some agencies (n=7) reported that ex-offenders often lacked ‘soft skills’ such as communication skills, self-discipline, and the ability to deal with the everyday challenges of the world outside of prison. This deficiency was seen to present a significant barrier to ex-offenders obtaining and maintaining employment.

Other barriers to ex-offender/ex-prisoner employment raised by employment service providers related to lack of stable housing (n=11), mental health issues (n=9), lack of family or social support (n=8), lack of finances and the state of the local economy. Accommodation issues were a barrier to ex-offenders finding and maintaining employment. A lack of secure housing was seen to be an issue at the time of release. Housing affordability, destabilisation of the ex-offender’s home life, lack of stable accommodation upon release and for some time afterward with frequent address changes, were all cited as examples. Mental health issues, particularly when combined with drug and alcohol abuse were reported by some agencies as significant barriers to the success of ex-offenders finding employment. Underlying mental ill-health including Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and anger/rage, concerns about the ex-offender’s capacity to manage anger and substance use, and addictive behaviours were all cited as contributing to the complex issue of mental health, treatment and employment.

Some respondents described ex-offenders as often lacking familial and social support when re-entering the community after prison. They perceived this to be a barrier to success in finding employment and stated that this also increased the likelihood of re-offending. Examples included lack of positive peer group and family support, appropriate support measures, and social support networks as well as absence of meaningful relationships.

Five service providers cited lack of financial support when re-entering the community as a barrier to ex-offenders’ reintegration. Several specific constraints on ex-offenders’ ability to obtain employment were identified including insufficient funds to establish living arrangements until a first pay check, insufficient financial assistance when released, personal resources equalling poverty conditions, and a general lack of finances. It was observed that clients lacked money to purchase clothes, equipment that would improve employment prospects. The risk of re-offence also increased when financial support such as the Disability Support Pension was withdrawn when an offender entered prison. Practical barriers to employment were reported by some agencies (n=4), for example, lack of either a driver’s licence or identification as well as a lack of transport.

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4 Income support for unemployed workers is significantly less money than the Disability Support Pension. Hence the ex-offender exits prison on an even lower income than before their incarceration.
Five respondents stated that high rates of unemployment in their region presented a significant barrier to ex-offenders finding employment. High unemployment rates, an economic downturn, minimal local job opportunities, and a trend toward a casualised workforce were all seen as barriers to ex-offenders/ex-prisoners obtaining secure employment. One stated that, "a casualised workforce means erratic incomes which poses risk to financial security".

Two respondents stated that the risk of re-offence was a barrier to ex-offenders obtaining employment. This was seen as more likely when ex-offenders were released into the same communities (housing and people) where they committed their original offence and where they were more likely to succumb to peer-pressure.

Ex-offenders’ release conditions were described by some service providers (n=4) to be quite restrictive, negatively impacting on their ability to find employment as well as the type of work they could do. For some ex-offenders employment would need to be flexible enough to fit around compliance restrictions, including parole, probation or community service conditions. Slow intervention/response time from parole boards when liaising with potential employers was specifically identified.

5.10 The employment service system and changes

As noted in the Introduction, the Australian federal employment services system has undergone changes since the disestablishment of the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). Over the past two decades these changes have seen the establishment then disestablishment of the Job Network and Job Services Australia, and most recently the introduction of jobactive in July 2015. Each of these programs has operated with contract conditions, reporting requirements, and performance expectations that have differed. Both earlier programs had modifications made after they had been operating for some time. To date this has been the case with jobactive. Business ‘adjustments’ are periodically made as well, with additions and reductions/losses of contract. In short, the employment services sector has been a challenging and evolving environment within which to conduct business for the past twenty years. At the time of writing, there are no data on performance of jobactive as a program. In addition, DES has also been subject to fluctuation in the operating environment in terms of which government department had oversight of the system, funding models used (for example block grant funding or case-based/fee for service funding) and the same periodic changes in conditions and reporting requirements. Reports of service providers here are therefore very important indicators of whether these programs are ‘fit for purpose’.

Employment service providers were asked to comment on whether and how changes to the employment services system (jobactive) have impacted their organisation; whether the changes have impacted their ability to deliver services; and what improvements could be made to the
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A large and varied number of responses were given as evidenced in the responses below.

When asked whether changes to the system associated with introduction of the jobactive program had impacted their overall ability to deliver a quality and viable service to any unemployed workers seeking employment, 48 agencies (83%) responded. Of these, 23 (48%) reported a variety of impacts, and 25 (52%) reported no impact at all. In terms of changes to the system that affected the delivery of quality services to ex-prisoners seeking employment, there were also 48 responses (83%); 13 (22%) reporting an impact and 35 (59%) reporting no impact.

A significant number of issues were identified by the service providers who reported an impact of employment services system changes on their organisation. Nine themes were evident in the responses including emphasis on speed rather than quality of outcome; unsupportive and unresponsive employment services system; increased administrative burden; increased restrictions and compliance impacting preferred mode of practice; reduced funding; flawed assessment processes; lack of a targeted program for ex-offenders; increased competition between providers; and risk minimisation.

Some agencies reported that changes to the employment services system had resulted in priority being placed on the speed of outcomes as opposed to the quality of outcomes. They stated that preparing clients to become work-ready and preparing them to be able to maintain their employment were undervalued in the system, and that the pressure to rapidly place clients into employment at times does not give sufficient opportunities to address these barriers and prepare the clients, especially ex-prisoners, for a successful placement. The emphasis on the speed of outcome in the current (jobactive) system has meant that sometimes clients were matched with unsuitable jobs because the speed to placement requirement encouraged poor job matching and poor jobseeker preparation.

These respondents were frustrated by a system that they felt provided disincentives to their work with clients, such as ex-offenders, who required additional supports to achieve their employment goals. They reported that the current employment services system forced providers to practice ways that may contravene what they believe is preferable. Some believed that clients requiring specialised support, such as clients with a disability and/or ex-offenders, should sit outside of the star ratings system because of the complexity of dealing with these clients. They also commented that the length of time a jobseeker is helped by an employment service provider worked against the provider in the performance framework. For example, provider performance is only measured by finding clients jobs rather than equipping them for long term workforce participation.

Descriptions of the employment services system as ‘broken’ or unresponsive and as an additional barrier to ex-offenders finding employment were used by six agencies. Specifically, respondents
reported lack of support and resources for ex-offenders accessing the system, a lack of responsiveness to their needs from within the system, as well as a lack of collaboration between services to deliver the best outcomes for ex-offender clients. A need for holistic resources that accommodate all an ex-offender’s transition needs and provided appropriate supports was cited. General frustration was expressed regarding a non-responsive and non-siloed system, providers being unable to respond with sufficient impact or timeliness and also regarding governments and service providers not planning and working together. One specific shortcoming was a lack of support from DES as an estimated 30–40% of young people assessed in youth detention qualified for DES but were not identified as such by Centrelink.

Several agencies reported that changes to the employment services system had affected the amount of reporting and general administration they were required to undertake as part of their compliance obligations. They stated that this administrative burden had taken staff away from what they should be doing – namely, supporting people into and at work. Respondents also found the increased administration to be stressful and highly complex and largely unfunded. Another six respondents reported that the changes to the employment services system had resulted in compliance obligations which were excessive and restrictions which impacted their ability to practice in their preferred way. They stated that the current system prevented them from delivering a targeted and holistic service to their clients, stifling creativity in sourcing employment opportunities as well as adding an additional resource burden to organisations. They commented that permissible outcomes have become increasingly restricted reducing jobseeker choice, and that increasing compliance and ‘red tape’ burden lessened the ability to work in both a holistic and innovative fashion.

Lack of funding was reported by some participants as a direct result of changes to the employment services system. This has had many negative effects on the employment service providers – their service, their staff and their clients. For example, staffing levels in some organisations have been reduced to the detriment of service quality. In addition, one agency claimed that the price structure has remained the same for over 10 years with no CPI-indexed increases. The financial drivers of the DES-ESS program were reported as forcing reductions in service levels to all participants over the past five years. A reported ‘constant’ stream of requirements and requests to participate in research, evaluation, training, expos, and audits were also identified as diverting funding from what agencies saw as ‘core’ business. Moreover, two respondents stated that the changes to the employment services system had introduced competition between providers which these agencies saw as a negative outcome. A few agencies reported that the time and effort required to prepare ex-offenders for employment was no longer sufficiently compensated. Limited education and training resources especially for non-accredited training was reported by two agencies. Pre-release programs, shown in the published literature to be beneficial to ex-prisoner re-integration, were no longer viewed favourably due to expected re-location of ex-prisoners after their release from
Improving post-release employment outcomes for ex-offenders and ex-prisoners.

Flawed assessment processes were highlighted by a few agencies who reported that jobseekers were often misclassified leading to some incorrect or low levels of support, unrealistic employment benchmarks and less than positive outcomes. This reflects the experience of ex-offenders who were inaccurately assessed as Stream A (low need) jobseekers despite having significant barriers to employment associated with their criminal histories and concurs with previous industry research (Ollerton, 2013). In addition, some respondents argued that there needed to be more scope for providers to up-skill and prepare ex-offenders for the workplace through provision of other services.

Two respondents reported that the lack of a specific program to target and support the needs of ex-offenders was a barrier. It was noted that under the previous (Job Services Australia) contract, there was an ex-offender-specific program that was not limited by contractual geographic boundaries. These respondents also commented that they would like to see such a program provide ex-offenders with an assigned mentor who would guide and assist prisoners to re-integrate into the community.

Finally, changes to the employment services system have resulted in what two respondents report as a system that is generally risk averse and therefore detrimental to ex-offenders (considered high risk and difficult to place) accessing the system. These agencies observed that the ‘quick outcomes’ focus of the current system had led to ex-offenders as a client group being generally not well-serviced by providers and a greater effort of reintegration support services had been required to facilitate and maintain engagement.

5.11 Improving employment outcomes for ex-offenders

The survey sought suggestions for changes to the current employment services system that might improve the employability of ex-offenders and responses were provided by 38 of 59 respondents (64%). As we have reported earlier in this report, there have been several significant changes to the employment services system. A significant amount of “disillusionment” among employment service provider staff working with ex-offenders was reported by respondents who also stated that this disillusionment had resulted in a “huge loss of experienced people in the industry. This statement concurs with the literature (Riches & MacDonald, 2016). Nevertheless, despite reported disillusionment, respondents provided a number of suggestions for improving the system. These have been organised within the following main themes: change(s) to the classification of ex-offenders; providing employer incentives; increasing pre-release employment programs and collaboration with prisons; increasing opportunities for training; increasing funding for working with ex-offenders.
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Ten respondents reported that ex-offenders are frequently misclassified within the employment services system. They reported that ex-offenders often enter the employment services system under the “Stream A” classification. This was basically a ‘self-service’ classification which provided no funding to providers for services to address employment-related barriers and/or provide the client with further training. It also puts services under significant pressure to secure employment within a restricted timeframe. Their view was that an ex-offender should automatically come into the system at a higher stream (B or C), as it is a given that their criminal record will pose barriers to gaining employment. If they commenced as a Stream A jobseeker, then a provider was prevented from securing an outcome for getting that jobseeker into work in the first 91 days of their registration period.

Respondents also reported that a different classification for ex-offenders would allow services to work in a broader way with this group and would most likely reduce recidivism. They expressed the view that the first 1–2 months was critical to establish routines and training opportunities and to prepare the jobseeker for the workplace. If left without active support for three months and provided with only limited support, they viewed the chance of re-offending to be significantly increased.

Some agencies claimed that having ‘ex-offender’ status should mean that the client was automatically placed into a stream for jobseekers with higher support needs. These respondents would also like to see ‘ex-offender’ status be given a higher weighting in the jobseeker screening instrument, citing the current practice of ex-offenders being released as a Stream A client, as already noted, which gives no consideration to the impact a prison sentence has on one’s ability to gain employment. It was suggested that in the case of jobseekers who had committed serious crimes, an automatic Stream C weighting should be applied as a significant number of employers and industries were not suitable employment options for these potential workers hence their opportunities for sustainable employment were diminished. Respondents suggested that ratings in the jobseeker screening instrument should be like that for Indigenous clients and that ‘level of ex-offender disadvantage’ in the labour market did not appear to be recognised in Department of Human Services’ assessments.

These respondents claimed that assessments should be conducted prior to a client’s release from prison to streamline and accelerate the assessment process and ensure that ex-offenders were linked in with the most appropriate services. Related to this was the observation that historically, information is not transferred between agencies. This referred to information about prisoners who had a disability which is not conveyed to Corrective Services Departments or, more likely, was
diagnosed within the prison system but not subsequently shared with Centrelink or the jobactive provider. At release, such ex-prisoners were typically referred to a mainstream jobactive provider. Once the provider realised that the client had a disability (for example, a mental illness or acquired brain injury) evidence must be obtained and then a referral made to a DES. The point was that this process could be simplified and shortened with a pre-release assessment, information sharing and diagnosis, as well as appropriate referral to a DES.

Some respondents suggested the creation of a special classification for ex-offenders that considered the additional barriers they faced as well as the restrictions imposed by their correctional orders. It was observed that release conditions were, in some cases, very strict and were likely to be breached by the job search activities that jobseekers were required to perform to receive their Centrelink payment.

Another way of improving employment outcomes for ex-offenders is for governments to incentivise employers. Nine agencies reported that the introduction of incentives or bonuses to encourage employers to employ ex-offenders would be a positive step. Several respondents expressed the view that wage subsidies specifically linked to the employment of ex-offenders would be helpful in encouraging employers to employ ex-offenders.

Alternatively, or additionally, expanding the availability of pre-release employment programs in prisons could provide better labour market engagement for ex-prisoners. Some respondents suggested this, stating that collaborations between employment service providers and local prisons to develop and implement pre-release programs. They argued that linking prospective clients with providers prior to release would allow a smoother transition and that better funded pre-release programs would reduce time to employment post-release. These agencies supported early access by the employment service provider to the prisoner prior to release so that their engagement began early, allowing the prisoner to begin planning life around employment. Instances in which Centrelink had not scheduled an appointment for a released prisoner with their prospective employment service provider for several weeks after release, were reported.

The need for increased planning and partnerships to better support employment services to provide services to ex-offenders was reported by two respondents who referred to innovative joint State and Federal Government programs. Government-funded marketing campaigns promoting the benefits of providing ex-offenders with employment opportunities, similar to the older worker and youth employment marketing campaigns, was suggested, echoing Singapore’s Yellow Ribbon program (Scherrer et al. 2014) and the US’s Second Chance program (for example see http://www.memphistn.gov/scp/ninesteps.html), both of which aim to engage the broader community in acceptance and reintegration of ex-prisoners.
Some respondents claimed that when employment services engaged in pre-release interactions with prisoners the employment outcomes for these individuals were better. They reported that typically prisoners were released straight back to the region in which they committed their offences and into the same social and family groups, and argued that, without support, there was a higher probability that the ex-offender jobseeker would revert to behaviours that lead to re-offending. Where services had been able to engage prior to an individual’s release, and they had been released into an area that the provider was contracted to service, there was greater employment success. In relation to pre-release engagement, some argued for incentives to engage with local prisons and that prisoners could be offered a three-month voluntary opportunity to engage with employment services prior to their release.

One respondent cited the federal government’s Providing Disability Employment Services to Pre-Release Prisoners Guidelines which specified that one of the eligibility criteria for these services was for the pre-release prisoner to be ‘job ready’ and that this was determined by the state or territory corrective services department. The respondent argued that this criterion needed clarification, and that the determination as to whether an individual met this criterion should be made with the additional input from the contracted employment service provider or a representative.

Six respondents expressed the view that there should be more funding and greater availability of training programs preparing ex-offenders for the workforce. There was a strong desire to have more funding committed to preparing ex-offenders to become “workforce ready”. Specific reference was made to the need for funding for non-accredited programs such as work readiness programs, with a return to a quarantined fund for providing work-ready training to prospective candidates. Respondents also suggested increased funding be directed into accredited training for ex-offenders such as apprenticeships and traineeships.

Increased funding for other sorts of training such as ‘soft-skills’ training including resilience training, anger management, conflict resolution, and enhancement of emotional intelligence, was also seen as important. Respondents supported their view with the assertion that many ex-offenders had weak conflict resolution skills and/or emotional intelligence and lacked personal insight into how their actions and reactions may impact others and how beneficial it could be to learn coping strategies.

These respondents would also like to see ex-offenders supported to work on their practical life skills such as financial management and contract literacy. They cited cases such as ex-offenders who had spent a considerable period incarcerated having limited current experience of everyday costs and needing budgeting skills due to simply being “rusty”. They suggested that ex-offenders could also benefit from basic contract literacy (e.g. phone contracts) and that they had limited understanding of the full cost of such contracts.
Several agencies reported that additional funding to employment service agencies for working with ex-offenders was one way that service provision could improve outcomes for ex-offenders. This extra funding would acknowledge the additional time and effort required to prepare ex-offenders for the workforce and to support them in the early stages of their employment.

Providing employment services to ex-offenders within the current employment services system was described by a few respondents as too restrictive. They suggested that the responsibility for overseeing compliance should sit outside the employment services sector, as they believed that this responsibility negatively impacted their ability to work effectively with ex-offenders. They suggested that compliance checking be done by an external agent to avoid a perception of employment service providers having contradictory roles of both 'policing' jobseekers as well as assisting them. Such a perception could create problematic relationships for employment service providers trying to assist jobseekers.

These respondents also reported that, given the amount of time and support that ex-offenders often require, a different way of measuring outcomes was needed with removal of a restriction on person-directed service delivery (that is, removal of expected time to placement, eligible outcome restrictions, region-based contract boundaries, and location of the program outside of the star rating system). They expressed the view that ex-offenders should be given greater autonomy to make decisions concerning their own employment, and they also stated that there should be fewer mandatory obligations for this group.

Some respondents described the Work for the Dole program as unsuitable for ex-offender clients. Ex-offenders entering this program without pre-program intervention were perceived to have an increased risk of re-offending, describing Work for the Dole as difficult for them to maintain without strategic pre-intervention activity. One stated, "Work for the Dole for all jobseekers can do more damage to the jobseeker, the provider’s reputation and the trust in the employment system".

A major stumbling block for streamlining employment services to ex-offenders is knowing that they have a criminal history. Disclosure of ex-offender status is voluntary. Two respondents would like to see this disclosure become mandatory in the interests of both clients and the staff with whom they work. Reasons included improvement of information and understanding of those clients as well as increased staff safety.

Finally, in relation to initiatives that could improve employment outcomes for ex-offenders, two respondents proposed that reducing complexity would improve the system. They described the current employment services system as too complex and unresponsive, and argued that this negatively impacted ex-offenders employment outcomes.
5.12 Summary

In summary, the survey findings can be succinctly categorised into four core areas that intersect and impact the employment service provision of ex-prisoners and their ability to access employment post-release. Focusing the findings lens upon the individual then gradually extending the panoramic gaze to broader concerns the following four core issues concerned:

**The individual ex-prisoner** – this population group is frequently characterised by multiple and complex needs. Their high level of disadvantage calls for greater resources and a higher level of individualised service provision than jobseekers with less complex needs in order to achieve successful employment outcomes.

**Practice issues** – Employment service providers recognised the complexity and multiplicity of ex-prisoner employment and other needs and yet most (78% of respondents) used the same employment servicing approach with ex-prisoners as with non-offender jobseekers.

**Social issues** – The societal stigma attached to ex-prisoners and the associated fear and mistrust of them by employers and the wider society remain a significant barrier to employment. It is likely that negative attitudes towards ex-prisoners are also present in some employment service providers, affecting service provision.

**System issues** – An employment service funding model that prioritises speed over quality of placement, relies on an inaccurate needs assessment process which results in inadequate resources to support the most disadvantaged of jobseekers, and which demands burdensome compliance obligations are all significant barriers to facilitating the employment for ex-prisoners. The constant changes to the employment servicing system has also resulted in disillusionment of employment service staff and a loss of their expertise and knowledge as they leave the sector.

However, in the face of difficult issues related to the employment servicing of ex-prisoners, the respondents provided a range of practical suggestions for improving the system and employment outcomes for ex-prisoners. Many of these suggestions echo what has already been highlighted in reviews of previous employment programs and gone unheeded. However, of primary concern was the need for changes to the employment services system to recognise and more adequately respond to the significant disadvantage experienced by ex-prisoners. This included improving the identification of ex-offenders and improving the needs assessment process. In recognition of the barriers faced by ex-prisoners, respondents called for greater weighting to be applied to ex-prisoners with funding to provide adequate and much needed training and support.

Early intervention pre-release was suggested and would require changes to the employment servicing model to be flexible enough to enable employment and support services to work collaboratively together and with prisons and remand centres. A flexible program model that
accommodated integrated client servicing was also recommended. Cooperation between corrective services departments and employment services was also required so that parole conditions did not compromise employment opportunities.

Overcoming the barrier of negative community attitudes towards ex-prisoners is a difficult problem but may be achieved by government funded marketing campaigns aimed at de-demonising ex-prisoners and improving community attitudes towards them, such as those operating in other countries. Specific employment subsidies linked to the employment of ex-prisoners may also enhance employment options for this client group.
6. Discussion

A fairly large number of employment service providers participated in the survey, which had a reasonable response rate (39%). The size of organisations varied considerably from micro to quite large as measured by several variables (number of staff, number of jobseekers, number of office locations, annual revenue). Participants were mainly funded by the Department of Employment and Department of Social Services, though some not-for-profits were funded otherwise. Service models varied as well. Responses indicate a great variety in practices. Attempts to accommodate the various, complex, but very important needs of ex-prisoner jobseekers are apparent in the responses throughout the text. Disability Employment Services (DES) involvement and other disability support provision were reported to be frequent. Most prominent services provided were employment services, disability supports, social and community services, and mental health and general health care. In short, the flexibility of service providers in attempting to help meet the broader needs of ex-prisoner jobseekers and workers was apparent.

The results also provide evidence that some participants had a very good understanding of employment barriers experienced by ex-prisoners seeking work and seeking to reintegrate within their community post-release. The comments made by participants were well-aligned with literature on those barriers (Dwyer, 2013). On the other hand, there was little recognition of client assets that could assist with success. The Good Lives Model (Ward & Fortune, 2014; Ward, 2002a; Ward, 2002b) and work by others on social capital-building (Berg & Huebner, 2011; Borzycki & Baldry, 2003) have drawn attention to the role of ex-prisoner assets in successful reinteg ration. Participants in this survey, however, did not comment at all on assets. This is consistent with a finding by Graffam, Shinkfield and Hardcastle (2008), which found that employment consultants rated their own ability to place ex-prisoners into employment above the employability attributes of ex-prisoners. However, as participants were not directly asked to identify ex-prisoner assets a lack of data in this regard may simply reflect respondents dealing directly with the set questions and not deviating.

Some participants did demonstrate implicit and explicit evidence of recognition of the complexity and multiplicity of broader life issues experienced by ex-prisoners. Moreover, their way of describing those issues was well-aligned with the characteristics of an ecological model as described in a model presented below; in service provider terms, the issues were implicit to the person and their immediate circumstance, rather than a broader context.

With respect to the recent employment services system, more than half reported no impact on their organisation. This may be in part related to the sector being in a virtually constant state of flux since privatisation was introduced. Having said this, almost half did report some dissatisfaction with the current system. This may be partly due to change often being perceived somewhat negatively.
In any case, criticisms of the current system included speed being a priority over quality in the achievement of outcomes, unresponsiveness, increased administration, increased restrictions on services offered, flawed assessments, lack of target programs, risk avoidance, and classification errors. The (then) current employment services system was described as less accommodating of ex-prisoners than previous systems. There were several references to observed room for improvement in *jobactive*. It is important to note that the new program is in its first year, and that historically, adjustments are made as a program unfolds. This was true to varying degrees with *Job Network* and *Job Services Australia*.

So, to summarise, participants recognised the complexity and multiplicity of ex-prisoner employment assistance (and other) needs. DES involvement provides further evidence of that complexity and multiplicity. High usage of DES is indicated in the survey, and disability within the prison population supports this. The real need is for an integrated system of support that brings together employment, housing, disability services, drug and alcohol treatment, mental and general health care, education, vocational training, and generic social services in a unified effort to support the lifestyle change that is necessary for desistance and successful reintegration. This really is a ‘whole of government’ issue, not just an Employment Services, Corrections or Criminal Justice issue. One way to provide this flexible and individualised model is to provide local support ‘hubs’ funded by combined sources from the full set of relevant government departments are needed. Most disadvantaged communities would benefit generally from the existence of such a local hub.

Designing a local support ‘hub’ for success will require consideration of several issues. Of course, it should comprise planned, integrated networked services designed to meet wide-ranging, complex reintegration needs of ex-prisoners, offenders, and other disadvantaged people. It must be adequately resourced beyond ‘pilot project’ status. It should be operated on a strong case management model. Services should be designed specifically to suit people with corrections system experience with support and input from the local community to ensure more general relevance and usefulness. Services should be culturally sensitive and appropriate to consumers (ex-prisoners with varied backgrounds and a diverse broader community), and there should be provision for long-term support. Employment assistance should be tailored to locally available job opportunities, individual readiness, and availability of resources for support. Also, funding should provide scope for both process and outcome evaluation and analysis of program cost-effectiveness. The Corston Report (*Corston*, 2007) in the UK, recommended community justice centres (or hubs) for disadvantaged justice involved women, along the same lines as we are recommending. Dozens of such centres were established over the ensuing eight years with many having favourable evaluations (*Annison* et al., 2015). Although these centres are women centred, similar principles in regard to an holistic, integrated, person centred and community based approach would be applicable for criminal justice involved males and young people.
Most persons in or exiting prison experience multiple or cumulative disadvantage (Dannefer, 2003) that is, they experience a combination of conditions that together intensify their difficulties. Examination of the pathways most people take into prison reveal the compounding effects of unmet disability and trauma needs as well as social disadvantage over a person’s childhood and early adulthood, thereby creating an amalgam of disadvantage greater than the sum of its parts (Baldry & Dowse, 2013). This pathway analysis shows juvenile detention and adult prison to be contributors to this compounded disadvantage locking people into a vicious cycle of disadvantage, re-offending and imprisonment in which being managed in the criminal justice system is normalised (Baldry, 2014). This is a profoundly disturbing reality for those caught in this cycle but also for the society from which this group of persons is excluded.

The ultimate objective must surely be reintegration within one’s community as a healthy, contributing member. Reintegration models have a focus on ‘people in context’; whole people and the environment within which they live and strive to succeed. Employment or at least positively contributing to the community, is an integral part of the reintegration puzzle. Analysis of the comments of respondents to the survey reported here conveyed the need to consider the multiple social and community contexts, needs and systems in addressing each ex-offender client’s employment needs. Just addressing what might be perceived as character flaws and skill deficits continues the vicious cycle.
7. Conclusion

The last 20 years has been a time of constant and significant change for the employment service sector as it moved from the government run monopoly model of the Commonwealth Employment Service to a completely privatised model. Over that time there have been numerous iterations of both the mainstream employment services program and the disability employment services program. The literature has shown that Australian prison populations are on the rise with many more ex-prisoners entering the labour force each year. We also know that a criminal record disadvantages such jobseekers, who are frequently already highly disadvantaged people due to lack of housing, finance and social capital; disability, mental and general health issues; substance addictions; and lack of education, employability skills and work experience. Employment success for ex-prisoners is low and recidivism is high. A review of the Job Network program (Thomas, 2007) has also demonstrated that the work-first approach to employment servicing (which is still used in 2017) actively disadvantages the most disadvantaged of jobseekers. It called for a life-first, holistic approach to employment servicing to address the complexity and multiplicity of jobseeker needs.

What we have found in the survey of employment service providers is that one core issue was the complexity and multiplicity of ex-prisoner employment assistance (and other) needs; and that because of the broad and complex nature of jobseeker needs, the historical and current systems have not been well-suited to provide them support.

Employment service practices were the second core issue found to be barriers to employment outcomes for ex-prisoners, for a variety of reasons. One significant reason was an inability of the standard generic practice to adequately respond to the complexity and multiplicity of ex-prisoner needs. Standard practice did not include an integrated approach to client servicing.

The third significant issue to emerge from the survey concerned the prevailing stigma associated with ex-offenders. This was not only revealed by agencies in their comments about discriminatory social attitudes and employer mistrust of ex-offender jobseekers but was also evident in what was missing from participant responses. A complete lack of comment on ex-prisoner assets may indicate employment practitioners generally have low expectations of ex-prisoner employability.

The last but certainly not least core issue concerned an employment service system, variously described as broken, underfunded, overly complex, unresponsive, restrictive and flawed. The program model and employment service funding model prioritise speed over quality of placement and has been shown to actively disadvantage difficult to place jobseekers, such as those with a criminal record. It is a system that does not adequately meet the challenge of supporting ex-prisoners back into work.
The prevalence of various disabling conditions among the prisoner population has seen a high proportion of ex-prisoners utilising the disability employment services system. It is also clear from results of the survey that, although employment is obviously very important to successful reintegration for many ex-prisoners, it is not the only or even necessarily the most important factor in successful reintegration.

We recommend that an integrated system of services providing flexible, responsive and individualised supports to ex-offenders and ex-prisoners be implemented. Such a system would bring together employment, housing, disability services, drug and alcohol treatment, mental and general health care, education, vocational training, and generic social services in a unified effort to support the lifestyle change that is necessary for desistance and successful reintegration. Importantly, reintegration of ex-prisoners into society is a ‘whole of government’ issue rather than simply an Employment Services, Corrections or Criminal Justice issue. Further research into local hubs and other ways to manage resources and provide appropriate and timely services within a whole of government model is now essential.
8. References


Appendix A  Background to the Service Audit and Mapping Project

This component of the Future Beyond the Walls project has also involved conduct of a service audit and construction of national ‘maps’ of government and non-government vocational education and employment service provision for prisoners pre- and post-release in all Australian states/territories. The audit has included two snapshot time points (mid-2013 and mid-2015). This was done to capture the variation in concentration and distribution as well as the ongoing fluidity within the sector.

Every year increasing numbers of prisoners are released from custody either from a sentence or from remand. Although there is no flow count (i.e. the number of prisoners released over a year rather than a census count which is a static count on 30th June each year), this is the number of most interest to providers of employment service for ex-prisoners. The flow is estimated to be around double the census figure so in 2016 when the Australian prison population was 38,845 (ABS, 2016) the numbers released over the year can be estimated to be around 77,700. Approximately two-thirds of these released prisoners were unemployed before being incarcerated and were expected to be unemployed after release.

The Employment Services Audit and Maps

Method

This national audit and mapping of employment services project was intended to include information on all non-Corrections vocational education and training (VET) services and employment services with specialist contracts operating within each state and territory on June 30, 2013 and June 30, 2015. State and territory TAFE offices were contacted for cooperation in providing information on all providers. Through this process, it was determined that VET providers do not record offender status and, as a result, there is no reliable information on what is available for ex-prisoners.

With respect to employment service provision, the Department of Employment (formerly DEEWR) was approached to provide a list of all Job Services Australia (JSA) providers (for mid-2013 and mid-2015). Because no standard quarterly report was produced for the final quarter of JSA, there is no publicly available information relevant to the 2015 audit date. As a result, we have described the contract conditions and have constructed a map of jobactive employment services for mid-2015, when jobactive commenced. In addition, because there is some specialist offender focus within Disability Employment Services (DES), an audit and mapping of DES was conducted.
Early in 2016, we began the process of capturing data pertinent to the two points in time. To make the scale of this part of the project manageable, we limited inclusion of VET and employment service providers to those which had provided services to at least 100 ‘offenders’ (to use the Department of Employment term) during Quarter 2 of 2013 and Quarter 2 of 2015 respectively.

Information which was sought from the state and territory TAFE offices, Department of Employment and other relevant bodies included:

- name of the organisation and location of its office(s);
- conditions of the organisation’s contract (for employment service providers, information such as % of business within that Employment Service Area/region; special conditions; whether they had a ‘specialist offender’ contract);
- performance indicators for the reference quarter (for employment services, star ratings, number of offender clients with a disability or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background).

The necessity to exclude VET providers became evident through this process, as did the opportunity/necessity to include DES. The data available to us did not include performance ratings. In constructing the ‘maps’, the intention has been to be ‘information rich’, showing not only ‘where’ the services were located, but precisely ‘which’ services were in each location, and ‘who’ were the clients being served. Accompanying the ‘maps’, we have provided descriptions of the employment services system at the time point of the audit. For each time point, there is a description of ‘mainstream’ employment services (JSA or jobactive) and DES as well.

**Results of the Mapping Exercise**

**1 July 2013: Job Services Australia and Disability Employment Services**

*Job Services Australia*
At our first ‘time point’, 1 July 2013, there were 85 JSA providers across Australia, operating from 1,685 outlets/locations. The system was organised in terms of 116 Employment Service Areas (ESAs). The distribution of providers and outlets/locations by state and territory was:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT/Queanbeyan) = 5 providers and 16 outlets
- New South Wales (NSW) = 30 providers and 570 outlets
- Northern Territory = 7 providers and 11 outlets
- Queensland = 21 providers and 349 outlets
- South Australia = 21 providers and 145 outlets
- Tasmania = 7 providers and 76 outlets
- Victoria = 35 providers and 416 outlets
Western Australia = 12 providers and 102 outlets (Department of Employment, n.d.a).

The total provider number exceeds 85 because several employment service providers were operating in more than one state and/or territory. Any eligible ‘offender’ could utilise a JSA provider for employment assistance within the bounds of the JSA contract. However, there were also ‘specialist’ JSA contracts awarded to certain service providers covering a variety of different target groups including ‘offenders’.

Specialist offender contracts were awarded to three providers operating from 11 locations. Four contracts were located in the ACT/Queanbeyan ESA, two in the Hunter-NSW ESA, four in the Nepean-NSW ESA, and one in the Yarra-Victoria ESA. The map is restricted to only the provider locations with specialist offender contracts.

Disability Employment Services
At our first ‘time point’, 1 July 2013, there were 145 DES across Australia, operating 2,291 outlets/locations. The system was organised in terms of 116 ESAs consistent with the JSA program. The distribution of providers and outlets/locations by state and territory was:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT/Queanbeyan) = 7 providers and 17 outlets
- NSW = 54 providers and 714 outlets
- Northern Territory = 6 providers and 10 outlets
- Queensland = 40 providers and 508 outlets
- South Australia = 27 providers and 238 outlets
- Tasmania = 10 providers and 67 outlets
- Victoria = 45 providers and 569 outlets
- Western Australia = 26 providers and 168 outlets (Department of Employment, n.d.d).

The total provider number exceeds the system-wide number of contracted providers because several DES providers were operating in more than one state and/or territory. Any “offender” eligible for disability support could utilise a DES provider for employment assistance within the bounds of the DES contract. However, there were also ‘specialist’ contracts awarded to certain service providers covering a variety of different target groups including “offenders”.

Specialist offender contracts were awarded to one DES provider. Contracts were for delivery from 15 outlets/locations: 7 in Gippsland-Victoria. ESA, and 8 in Latrobe Valley-Victoria ESA. The map is restricted to only the provider locations with specialist offender contracts.

Maps for 1 July 2013
By clicking on the links below, the reader is taken to the maps. To explore the maps, after considering the distribution around Australia, simply click on any of the locations of interest.
Information specific to that location will appear on the screen. Information includes: organisation name; classification; ESA; outlet location; and any specialisations associated with that location.

JSA 2013: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_aVHCfrb7CP_7OENz1aPkvsdHuU&usp=sharing
DES 2013: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1SwCyWNZmO91piByzpxEERWncqs4&usp=sharing

1 July 2015: jobactive and Disability Employment Services

jobactive
At our second ‘time point’, 1 July 2015, there were 44 jobactive providers across Australia, operating 1,719 outlets/locations. The system was organised in terms of 51 regions. The distribution of providers and outlets/locations by state and territory was:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT/Queanbeyan) = 4 providers and 34 outlets
- NSW = 24 providers and 550 outlets
- Northern Territory = 3 providers and 11 outlets
- Queensland = 13 providers and 378 outlets
- South Australia = 9 providers and 139 outlets
- Tasmania = 6 providers and 76 outlets
- Victoria = 21 providers and 422 outlets
- Western Australia = 9 providers and 109 outlets (Department of Employment, n.d.a).

As with the JSA program, the total provider number exceeds 44 because several employment service providers were operating in more than one state and/or territory. It is still the case that any eligible “offender” can utilise a contracted employment service provider for employment assistance within the bounds of the jobactive contract. In addition to the smaller number of contracted providers and outlets/locations, there are no specialist contracts for offenders in the jobactive program so no map was created for jobactive services. The jobactive program is scheduled to operate until 2020. It is important to keep in mind that from the time that the employment services system was privatised, each of the government programs has undergone adjustments and modifications over its ‘lifespan’. This may well prove to be the case with the jobactive program as well. Because there were no data available for the commencing date of the jobactive program and no specialist contracts, no map could be produced for the jobactive program on July 1, 2015.

Disability Employment Services
At our second ‘time point’, 1 July 2015, there were 133 DES across Australia, operating 2,132 outlets/locations. The system was organised in terms of 116 ESAs consistent with the JSA program. The distribution of providers and outlets/locations by state and territory was:

- Australian Capital Territory (ACT/Queanbeyan) = 7 providers and 17 outlets
NSW = 50 providers and 653 outlets
Northern Territory = 5 providers and 8 outlets
Queensland = 37 providers and 506 outlets
South Australia = 27 providers and 219 outlets
Tasmania = 10 providers and 83 outlets
Victoria = 42 providers and 505 outlets
Western Australia = 22 providers and 141 outlets (Department of Employment, n.d.d).

The total provider number exceeds the system-wide number of contracted providers because several DES providers were operating in more than one state and/or territory. Any ‘offender’ eligible for disability support could utilise a DES provider for employment assistance within the bounds of the DES contract. However, there were also ‘specialist’ contracts awarded to certain service providers covering a variety of different target groups including ‘offenders’.

Specialist offender contracts were awarded to two DES providers. One was contracted to deliver from seven outlets/locations across Gippsland and the Latrobe Valley, Victoria. The other was contracted to deliver from one outlet/location in Mackay, Queensland. The map is restricted to only the provider locations with specialist offender contracts.

Map for 1 July 2015
As for the first ‘time point’, by ‘clicking’ on the links below, the reader is taken to the map. To explore the map, after considering the distribution around Australia, simply ‘click’ on any of the locations of interest. Information specific to that location will appear on the screen. Information includes: organisation name; classification; ESA; outlet location; and any specialisations associated with that location.

DES 2015: https://drive.google.com/open?id=1lrbYdSpQ0d6cwZQnzeKGCcPN1vdI&usp=sharing

Discussion
What we can see by comparing the two descriptions of our ‘points in time’ and the two sets of maps is that there were significant and substantial differences between 2013 and 2015. The most obvious change was the end of Job Services Australia and the introduction of jobactive. As described in the national survey report above, that change has entailed:

- a shift from ESAs to regions as geographical areas
- a substantial reduction in the number of contracted providers
- a small reduction in the number of outlets/locations from which service is provide
- a change in the composition of ‘programs within the program’
• a change in terminology for classifying jobseekers by level of support need, and
• the elimination of specialist contracts.

These changes are consistent with what has been a very dynamic ‘system’ from the outset of privatisation. Is this dynamism adaptive in terms of there being a highly volatile labour market in Australia requiring frequent system modification? One would have to say, “No, not really.” Is it a system in search of ‘the right mix’? Maybe. Is it a system subject to the whims of successive elected governments looking to put a ‘signature’ on governmental programs? (Change for the sake of change?) That too is a possible explanation.

What can be said is that the employment service system historically, as well as in reference to our two ‘points in time’, has been non-specific to needs of ‘offenders’. Since privatisation, for much of the time, there has been either no formal consideration of their employment assistance needs or minimal acknowledgement which has been expressed in terms of expected classifications and a small number of specialist contracts. The systemic inattention to the needs of ‘offenders’ (ex-prisoners and those serving community orders) is in counterpoint to the typically complex, multiple, dynamic support needs of this cohort of jobseekers. If this comprehensiveness of need is ignored by the Australian Government-funded employment services program, we should expect ‘offenders’ to struggle accessing and availing themselves of the system. In addition to the lack of specific attention/inclusion, ex-prisoners also need stability and predictability of conditions in any program.

In short, and in summary, at least from the onset of privatisation, the Australian employment services system has been, and continues to be, very dynamic in terms of its structure, conditions governing contracts, and its size in terms of contracted providers (as well as the distribution of outlets/locations). That system has taken little account formally of the comprehensive and complex support needs of ‘offenders’. The ‘maps’ themselves indicate how sparsely populated the system is in terms of specialist attention to ‘offenders’.