

Interventions to improve prosocial occupational participation for people released from prison: A systematic review

Key findings

Effectiveness

- People released from prison who received an intervention were more likely to start work than those in comparator conditions.
- People released from prison who received an intervention worked for greater amounts of time in follow up periods than those in comparator conditions.
- Interventions do not show an effect for achieving sustained/stable employment.

Content

- Interventions may be more likely to be effective when they are personalised, focused on the occupational participation area they intend to change, and include occupational participation (e.g., supported work/parenting).

Evidence gaps

- Randomised controlled trials of interventions to improve employment for people released from prison (12/15) had multiple different measures of employment.
- All the studies focused on employment were conducted in the USA.
- There is a lack of evidence for interventions to improve other occupational participation areas.
- We had at least some concerns about bias in all but three of the 47 different outcomes used.
- No studies mentioned occupational therapy.
- There were limited details about how an intervention was theorised to result in change.

Project aims

To establish the effectiveness of interventions to improve prosocial occupational participation for people released from prison.

To inform service commissioners and providers' decisions about interventions they consider providing.

To enable occupational therapists and other practitioners to deliver, or refer to, interventions supported by evidence that are likely to be effective and not cause harm.

Identify gaps in the evidence to inform future research.

Background

People who have been in prison experience high levels of mental and physical ill health, substance use problems¹ and challenges participating in occupation that continue when released to the community^{2,3}. Given this wide range of needs, occupational therapists work with people who have been in prison in a range of contexts.

Occupational participation is integral to health⁴ and thus, through interventions to optimise it, occupational therapists make a vital contribution to improving health and facilitating desistance from offending. Occupational therapists must deliver or refer people to interventions that are likely to work to improve occupational participation, and that don't cause harm.

Identifying interventions with evidence of effectiveness for improving occupational participation released from prison places practitioners and commissioners in a better position to provide those interventions.

Methodology

We conducted a systematic review to identify papers with adult participants aged 18+ who had been in prison; where an intervention was tested against any comparator in a randomised controlled trial (RCT); and a participation outcome was measured following release from prison. Papers included in the review were appraised for bias. We conducted meta-analyses where we could meaningfully combine studies (3+ studies with comparable outcomes) using random effects models for all comparisons. We explored sources of heterogeneity from interventions, their setting, and their population, and we conducted sensitivity analysis to examine the impact of studies with a high risk of bias or which relied on unvalidated self-report ratings. Further, we conducted a four-stage narrative synthesis to examine the intervention characteristics, components, and theories, and how these related to study outcomes.

Recommendations

Practice recommendations

- Interventions focused on gaining *and sustaining* employment should be available to people who have been in prison.
- Interventions to improve employment and other areas of occupational participation may be optimised by including personalisation, focusing on the area of occupational participation they intend to change, and incorporating occupational participation.
- Consideration should be given to ensuring the community justice workforce have skills to design and deliver personalised interventions focused on occupational participation.

Policy recommendations

- Interventions to improve employment (and wider areas of occupational participation) for people who have been in prison must be adequately funded to operate sustainably and resourced with an appropriately skilled workforce.
- Workforce strategies in justice, health and social services should include recruitment and retention of practitioners with skills in design and delivery of personalised interventions focused on occupational participation.

Research recommendations

- Effective interventions need to be established for facilitating *sustained* employment and for achieving other occupational participation outcomes.
- RCTs measuring employment need to use consistent and meaningful measures, e.g., employment rate/status at regular intervals over at least one year
- RCTs should clearly report intervention content and the theory by which they are hypothesized to work, so that future syntheses can identify the most important intervention components.

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Publications

- Connell C, Birken M, Carver H, Brown T, Greenhalgh J. Effectiveness of interventions to improve employment for people released from prison: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *under review*.
- Connell C, Birken M, Carver H, Greenhalgh J. Interventions to improve participation for people released from prison: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *under review*.

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