

Evaluation of the Work Ready Release Ready Program

Background

Work Ready, Release Ready (WRRR) is a flagship initiative developed under the Reducing Reoffending: 10% by 2020 (10by20) Strategy. The WRRR program aims to reduce reoffending by engaging prisoners in tailored education and training programs and connecting them with an employment services provider (Workskil) for individualised pre- and post-release support. Overall, the program is designed to improve prisoner outcomes by providing them with the opportunity to gain sustainable employment and subsequently reduce their risk of reoffending. The program is highly flexible and can include assistance with areas ranging from job interview training and helping clients obtain licenses to assistance with clothing for work, transport, and even helping to access services such as drug treatment programs and other allied health services. The program is voluntary and encourages participants to have ownership over their education and employment plans. An additional aim of the program is to improve DCS engagement with local businesses and increase awareness of prisoners' abilities across the business sector.

The WRRR program includes three distinct phases:

- 1) **Work Ready** (In Custody). This phase involves the identification of skills and employment goals, the development of a training plan, work in Prison Industries and/or work towards a vocational qualification.
- 2) **Release Ready** (Pre-Release). In this phase participants develop a resume, role-play job interviews, apply for jobs and plan for their release.
- 3) **Employment** (Post-Release). This phase involves transition support, employment preparation and post-employment support for a 12-month period, with the option to extend approved participants for an additional six months.

The program commenced in March 2018 and has been implemented at six institutions across South Australia including Mabilong Prison, Cadell Training Centre, Port Augusta Prison, Yatala Labour Prison, Adelaide Women's Prison and the Adelaide Pre-release Centre.

Method

The WRRR program was evaluated by the Department for Correctional Services with the aim of determining:

- how the program is operating.
- the extent to which program participants have gained employment during the 12-month Employment phase, and the type and length of employment placements.
- the extent to which Employment phase participants have returned to DCS custody, and the nature of any returns, since their index release from custody.
- The economic value of the WRRR program.

Data on participation and employment outcomes was supplied by Workskil and covered the period from commencement of the initiative in 2018 to June 2022. Returns to custody were examined for WRRR participants that had engaged in the Employment phase and had a minimum 2-year follow-up time in the community. Returns to custody included re-imprisonment for a breach of an order or a conviction for a new offence.

We estimated the impact on reoffending by comparing participants with a group of prisoners that were released over the same period but who did not engage in the WRRR program. Case control matching was used to generate a comparison group with a similar likelihood of reoffending (based on demographic and offence characteristics) and enable any observed differences in outcomes associated with program involvement.

Key Findings

Participation and employment outcomes

- As at 30 June 2022, there were 1,399 inductions onto the WRRR program, involving 1,235 unique individuals. Most participants were male (85%) and just under one-third (30%) were Aboriginal.
- Overall, 61.6% of exited participants had commenced the Employment phase. Of Employment phase participants released in the evaluation period (519), 61% were placed in employment at least once in the reporting period. (This compares with an estimated 50% for the comparator group.)
- Males were more likely than females to be placed in employment (64% compared with 47%) and a slightly lower proportion of Aboriginal participants were placed in employment compared with non-Aboriginal participants (58% compared with 63%).
- Half of employment placements were in the Construction industry, followed by Manufacturing (12%) and Transport, Postal and Warehousing (8%).
- Around one-in-six employment phase participants also engaged in education placements. These mainly involved gaining work-related licenses such as a white card, forklift license and asbestos removal license. Other accredited education and training courses included Traffic Management, First Aid, and Certificate II level TAFE courses. Four-fifths of those who received an education placement also found employment during the period.

Reoffending outcomes

- Of the 341 WRRR Employment phase participants included in the matched reoffending analysis, 34% returned to custody for a new offence in the follow-up period, compared with 40% of comparators. There was no difference between groups in the rate of return to custody for a breach only (20% for WRRR and 21% for comparison group). While the WRRR program was associated with an overall reduction in re-imprisonment (54% for WRRR compared with 61% of comparators), the difference between groups did not reach statistical significance (χ^2 (1, N=682) =3.753, p=.053).

	WRRR participants		Matched comparators	
	No.	%	No.	%
Return for new offence	115	34%	136	40%
Return for breach/es only	69	20%	73	21%
<i>Any return to custody</i>	<i>184</i>	<i>54%</i>	<i>209</i>	<i>61%</i>

- Female WRRR participants recorded a lower rate of reoffending than female comparators (15% compared with 22%) but a higher rate of breaches (26% compared with 22%).

- Male WRRR participants also showed a lower rate of reoffending than their male comparators (37% compared with 43%) and recorded a slightly lower breach rate (19% compared with 22%). This resulted in a significantly lower rate of return to custody overall ($\chi^2 (1, N=590) = 4.068, p < .05$).
- Aboriginal WRRR participants' recorded a lower rate of reoffending than Aboriginal comparators (48% compared with 55%), as well as a lower rate of breaches only (17% compared with 20%).
- Employment in the follow-up period was associated with a significantly lower reoffending rate.
- Over three-quarters (78%) of those who participated in employment did not reoffend in the 2-year follow up period ($\chi^2 (1, N=341) = 21.824, p < .01$). Put another way, of those that reoffended, 65% did not record an employment placement in the follow-up period. Analysis of the relationship between recidivism and time spent in employment showed a statistically significant relationship ($r = -.17, N = 179; p < .05$). This indicates that individuals who spent longer in employment were less likely to reoffend in the period.

	Not employed		Employed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
WRRR Non-recidivist	87	54%	139	78%	226	66%
WRRR Recidivist	75	46%	40	22%	115	34%
WRRR - No return to custody	50	31%	107	60%	157	46%
WRRR - Any return to custody	112	69%	72	40%	184	54%
Total	162	100.0%	179	100.0%	341	100%

Economic outcomes

- We used the matched sample of WRRR Employment phase participants and their comparators to estimate the economic value of the program. Costs included the delivery of the program, re-imprisonment costs, and police, court and victim costs associated with reoffending. Benefits included those related to gaining employment and improved quality of life for those that did not reoffend.
- The combined costs translated to a cost of \$42,761 per WRRR participant, compared with \$38,302 for the comparison group.
- The net benefits for WRRR were higher than their comparators at \$38,623 per person compared with \$26,897 (with a net benefit of \$11,726 per person). These included increased participant earnings, reduced welfare costs and reduced imprisonment costs.
- When the costs and benefits were combined, this translated to a positive cost-benefit ratio of 2.76.

Limitations of the study

Due to the nature of the study, employment placement rates for individuals that disengaged from WRRR on release cannot be known. Similarly, the employment rate for those in the comparison group was an estimate only, extrapolated from a qualitative analysis of case notes on a random sample of comparators. Therefore, employment benefit calculations for the comparison group are not as robust as they are for the WRRR group.

Secondly, case control matching was used to generate a similar cohort of releasees for comparison with Employment phase participants. While a range of variables related to program allocation and reoffending were

used to match the groups it is possible that unobserved confounds may not have been accounted for. This includes factors such as motivation to gain employment and also protective factors such as pro-social supports that may influence employment opportunities upon release. Data related to prison-based employment were used in the matching process to attempt to control for this; however, the requirement that WRRR participants have an employment need in itself indicates they are inherently different from those not accepted on to the program.

Thirdly, analysis of the outcomes of the WRRR program were focused on those who reached the Employment phase. It cannot be assumed that the findings extend to all WRRR participants.

Conclusion

Overall, there is evidence that the WRRR program is achieving its objectives of increasing employment and reducing reoffending for those that successfully engage in the post-release phase. WRRR participants showed better recidivism outcomes compared with a matched comparison group over a 2-year follow up period, with the greatest effect observed for those that did find employment.

The WRRR program has also been shown to be cost-effective. Furthermore, the cost-benefit analysis was only able to include benefits that could be measured and quantified, which is likely to underestimate the true value of the program. For example, the ability to include other intangible and long-term social benefits that flow from individuals breaking the cycle of crime and transitioning to employment is likely to further add to the value generated by the WRRR program.