

## Chapter 3 Recruitment and engagement issues

This chapter considers the recruitment of participants into *Bridging the Gap*, and some of the factors that appear to be important in determining which prisoners accepted the offer of a place on *Bridging the Gap*. Some of the policy and program design implications for the program are also discussed. While the *Bridging the Gap* program was formally established in January 2001, the first few months were taken up with the recruitment of staff, arranging access to prisons and the development of program operational policy and documentation. The first participants did not enter the program until April 2001. *Bridging the Gap* continues to take in new participants at the time of writing, but the analyses in this report cover only those prisoners who had entered the program by the end of September 2002.

### 3.1 Prison release flows

One of the fundamental questions that must be answered about any program is whether it reached its intended target group. In the case of *Bridging the Gap*, the prisoners who were assessed for and participated in the program were drawn from a much larger number of prison releasees. In order to understand how the *Bridging the Gap* screening and engagement process worked, it is necessary to understand the nature of this larger flow of prison releasees.

In the 18-month period between April 2001 and September 2002 there were 6,034 sentenced prisoners received into Victorian prisons (ABS, 2003). While no statistics on the number of discharges from prison are available, one can be confident that roughly the same number of prisoners was released over the same period. Not all of these releasees were potential participants in *Bridging the Gap*. A primary constraint was that a prisoner had to be serving a

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sentence of at least nine weeks in order to appear on the PIMS lists that were the primary basis for screening and recruitment. Prisoners serving short sentences account for only a small proportion of those in custody on any day, however they contribute disproportionately to the total flow through the system. Another reason that prisoners did not appear on the PIMS lists was if they were released to parole with less than nine weeks notice of their release date. However, some prisoners in this category were recruited by the *Bridging the Gap* agencies. Prisoners convicted of sex offences were not eligible for assessment, nor were those who had completed their sentence but still had active remand warrants or other unresolved legal matters.

In aggregate, the PIMS lists for the 18 months contained records for 3,607 prisoners, or 60% of all those who were discharged over this period. Two further eligibility requirements applied to these prisoners. The first was that a prisoner had to have drug or alcohol issues, and the second was that he or she had to be at least medium and preferably high risk. Over 80% of those on the PIMS lists had reported some level of drug or alcohol abuse, and of them, approximately 40% had a calculated risk score of 5 or more (Table 3.1). Thus, only around 20% of all those released from prison were ultimately eligible to be screened for participation in *Bridging the Gap*, and the numbers of prisoners screened and offered program places needs to be understood in the context of this eligible population.

<b>Group</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>% of all discharges</b>
All discharges	6,000 (est.)	100%
Prisoners with a fixed discharge date, serving sentence greater than 9 weeks and not convicted of a sex offence (i.e. PIMS list eligible)	3,607	60%
PIMS list eligible with drug or alcohol issues	2,975	50%
PIMS list eligible with drug or alcohol issues and with a risk score of 5 or more	1,228	21%

**Table 3.1 Prison releasees potentially eligible for *Bridging the Gap*: April 2001 to September 2002**

In fact, some prisoners who were rated as low or medium risk were screened and offered places on *Bridging the Gap*. This was most commonly the case where workers judged that the prisoner was genuinely at high risk of re-offending after release.

### 3.2 Screening assessments

In the 18 months from the commencement of *Bridging the Gap* to September 2002, the five agencies screened nearly 700 prisoners for eligibility (Table 3.2). This total includes only those who went through the formal screening process, and represents over half of all releasees who were potentially eligible. The number of screening assessments reports understates the true extent of screening, especially of those who were unsuitable or uninterested in *Bridging the Gap*. All agencies reported that their recruitment processes involved informal as well as formal screening. This was particularly true of the recruitment of Indo-Chinese prisoners by SEADS, where program recruitment was carried out at group meetings of prisoners.

Period	Agency					Total <sup>2</sup>
	ACSO	Brosnan	MCM	VACRO	SEADS	
Jan to Mar 2001		2	6			8
Apr to Jun 2001	62	44	47	41	10	205
Jul to Sep 2001	44	22	22	28	19	135
Oct to Dec 2001	26	9	14	7	10	66
Jan to Mar 2002	30	21	19	18	15	103
Apr to Jun 2002	16	16	12	58	18	120
Jul to Sep 2002	10	8	6	16	8	48
Total	188	122	126	168	80	684

**Table 3.2** Number of prisoners screened by agency and period

<sup>2</sup> There were a further six prisoners who were reported by agencies as having been assessed, but for whom no assessment record could be located.

The number of screening assessments was highest in the three months immediately after the program commenced (April to June 2001), when virtually all eligible releasees were screened. As program places were filled and workers began to spend more time in post-release support activities, the number of screening assessments that were conducted fell in the second half of 2001, before stabilising at around 35 to 40 per month in the first half of 2002. The low number of assessments conducted in the final quarter (July to September 2002) was partly the result of uncertainty about the continued funding of the program.

In general, assessments were done mainly at those prisons that release substantial numbers of prisoners (Table 3.3). The largest numbers of assessments were done at Fulham, Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Barwon, Port Phillip, Loddon and Tarrengower prisons.

<b>Prison location</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
No location specified	40	5.8%
Aradale Womens	1	.1%
Ararat	11	1.6%
Barwon	63	9.2%
Beechworth	30	4.4%
Bendigo	27	3.9%
Dhurringile	36	5.3%
Dame Phyllis Frost Centre	68	9.9%
Fulham	191	27.9%
Langi Kal Kal	5	0.7%
Loddon	55	8.0%
Melbourne Assessment	21	3.1%
Port Phillip	57	8.3%
Tarrengower	52	7.6%
Won Wron	27	3.9%
Total	684	100.0%

**Table 3.3 Screening assessments by prison locations: April 2001 to September 2002**

### 3.3 Outcomes of screening assessments

Slightly less than half of all prisoners who were assessed (46.5%) were found to be suitable and accepted the offer of a place on the program (Table 3.4)<sup>3</sup>. There was a trend for the “hit rate” on assessments to increase over time. In the July to September 2001 period only 47 prisoners were recruited out of 135 screened (that is, a hit rate of 35%), but in the same period in the following year two-thirds of all screening assessments (32 out of 48) resulted in a recruitment. This was probably the result of program workers becoming more efficient in their informal screening, as well as the increasing acceptance of *Bridging the Gap* amongst potential participants.

Assessment outcome	Frequency	Percent
Suitable, offered a place & accepted	319	46.6%
Suitable, awaiting release date or parole decision	4	.6%
Suitable, await prisoner decision	9	1.3%
Refused	132	19.3%
Unsuitable	169	24.7%
Referred to another <i>Bridging the Gap</i> agency	16	2.3%
Referred to another support agency	16	2.3%
Other outcome	16	2.3%
Total	684	100.0%

**Table 3.4 Outcomes of initial assessments: April 2001 to September 2002**

<sup>3</sup> A further 35 prisoners entered the program after screening. They included some who were awaiting a parole decision, release or a final decision by the prisoner, as well as some prisoners who initially refused a place. However, as these additional participants were offset by 23 prisoners who left the program after screening and before release, they are not included in this analysis.

A further 20% of those screened were offered a place but refused it, usually because they did not believe that they needed post-release support, or did not wish to participate in the release preparation component of the program. Around one quarter (24.6%) of all prisoners assessed were found to be unsuitable for the program, most commonly because they already had arrangements for post-release support or because they intended to move to a country location where they could not be serviced by the *Bridging the Gap* agencies. Other reasons for being found unsuitable for the program were that the prisoner did not have any significant drug or alcohol issues, or had other needs (usually psychiatric treatment or intellectual disability support needs) that could not effectively be met through the *Bridging the Gap* program.

Finally, approximately 10% of those assessed had not yet made a final decision about participation in the program, were awaiting a parole decision, were referred to some other support agency, or had some other outcome.

Recruitment period	Agency					Total
	ACSO	Brosnan Centre	Melbourne City Mission	VACRO	SEADS	
Jan to Mar 2001		1	4			5
Apr to Jun 2001	28	22	17	18	9	94
Jul to Sep 2001	15	9	2	13	8	47
Oct to Dec 2001	12	4	7	5	9	37
Jan to Mar 2002	12	4	10	8	12	46
Apr to Jun 2002	8	16	5	11	18	58
Jul to Sep 2002	4	8	5	9	6	32
Agency total	79	64	50	64	62	319

**Table 3.5** Number of prisoners recruited by agency and period

Recruitments showed much the same variation over time as did assessments, with a high rate of recruitment in the first three months of the program, declining towards the end of 2001, and with a minimum in the third quarter of 2002. Some of the differences between agencies

in the rate of assessments conducted were not apparent in the rate recruitments. In particular, the relatively low number of formal screening assessments conducted by SEADS translated into a recruitment rate that was comparable with most other agencies.

### 3.4 Recruitment patterns across sex, age and risk groups

The pattern of assessment outcomes for women prisoners was significantly different from those of male prisoners (Table 3.6). Women were slightly less likely to be found suitable and to accept a *Bridging the Gap* place (42% of female assessment versus 48% of male assessments), were much less likely to refuse a place that was offered (13% vs. 21%), and were much more likely to be found unsuitable for the program (39% vs. 21%). The most commonly given reason for finding women unsuitable for the program was that they already had adequate post-release support. Women make up only about 6% of all prisoners and just less than 10% of releasees, but nearly 20% of all assessments were of women prisoners. The relatively higher proportion of all women releasees who were assessed compared with men probably explains the differences in outcome patterns.

Assessment outcome	Sex			
		Females	Males	Total
Suitable, offered a place & accepted	No.	56	263	319
	%	41.5%	47.9%	46.6%
Suitable, awaiting release date or parole decision	No.	1	3	4
	%	.7%	.5%	.6%
Suitable, offered a place, await prisoner decision	No.	1	8	9
	%	.7%	1.5%	1.3%
Refused	No.	18	114	132
	%	13.3%	20.8%	19.3%
Unsuitable	No.	53	116	169
	%	39.2%	21.1%	24.7%
All other outcomes	No.	6	42	48
	%	4.4%	7.6%	7.0%
Total recruited	No.	135	549	684
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3.6 Outcomes of initial assessments by sex of prisoner: April 2001 to September 2002**

Young prisoners who were assessed to be more likely to be offered a *Bridging the Gap* place than older prisoners (Table 3.7). Over half of those the youngest age group (under 22 years) were found suitable and accepted a place compared with only about a third of those in the oldest age group (over 35 years). Young prisoners were also more likely to refuse the offer of a place, but were much less likely to be found unsuitable.

Assessment outcome	Age Group				
		<i>Young (under 22)</i>	<i>Intermediate (23 to 35)</i>	<i>Old (over 35)</i>	Total
Suitable, offered a place & accepted	No.	31	242	46	319
	%	52.5%	49.4%	34.1%	46.6%
Suitable, awaiting release date or parole decision	No.	1	2	1	4
	%	1.7%	0.4%	0.7%	.6%
Suitable, await prisoner decision	No.	1	5	3	9
	%	1.7%	1.0%	2.2%	1.3%
Refused	No.	15	89	28	132
	%	25.4%	18.2%	20.7%	19.3%
Unsuitable	No.	9	115	45	169
	%	15.3%	23.5%	33.3%	24.7%
All other outcomes	No.	5	33	13	51
	%	8.5%	6.7%	9.6%	7.5%
Total	No.	59	490	135	684
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3.7 Outcomes of initial assessments by age group of prisoner: April 2001 to September 2002**

There was also significant variation in recruitment patterns across different risk groups of prisoners. Low risk prisoners (with a score of 0, 1 or 2) who were assessed were more likely to be found unsuitable for the program, while high risk prisoners (with a score of 5 or more) were much more likely to refuse the offer of a place (Table 3.8). Within the unsuitable outcome group, low risk prisoners were mainly found to be unsuitable because they already

had post-release supports in place, while high risk prisoners were much more likely to be found unsuitable because they were moving to the country after release and would therefore not be accessible to the agencies.

Assessment outcome		Risk Group			Total
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>	
Suitable, offered a place & accepted	No.	64	69	186	319
	%	50.4%	54.3%	43.3%	46.6%
Suitable, awaiting release date or parole decision	No.		1	3	4
	%	.	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%
Suitable, await prisoner decision	No.	1	2	6	9
	%	0.8%	1.6%	1.4%	1.3%
Refused	No.	19	23	90	132
	%	15.0%	18.1%	20.9%	19.3%
Unsuitable	No.	37	25	107	169
	%	29.1%	19.7%	24.9%	24.7%
All other outcomes	No.	6	7	38	51
	%	4.7%	5.5%	8.8%	7.5%
Total	No.	127	127	430	684
	%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

**Table 3.8 Outcomes of initial assessments by risk group of prisoner: April 2001 to September 2002**

#### **4.5 *Bridging the Gap* recruitment patterns and program flows**

This analysis of recruitment to *Bridging the Gap* shows that the process of assessment was successful in two key respects. In the first place, the assessment process was selective in that only about half of those screened were ultimately offered a place in the program. Approximately a quarter of those screened were found to be unsuitable because they did not

fit the program's eligibility requirements. A further 20% of those assessed decided that they were not interested in the supports being offered, or were not prepared to commit to the pre-release planning and preparation that the program required. The relatively high post-release dropout rate (discussed in the next chapter) suggests that the screening process may not have always been effective in identifying those who were not really interested in the program. However, it is also clear that many prisoners had real problems in understanding the nature of post-release support in the abstract (see Chapter 6), and that as a result screening was always likely to be an approximate process.

The second key result of the screening process was that the program was able to selectively recruit high-risk prisoners. About 60% of those recruited into *Bridging the Gap* were in the highest risk group. This was achieved mainly because most screening was done with high-risk prisoners. In some respects, high-risk prisoners were harder to recruit. They were more likely to refuse to consider the program, and more likely to intend to live in places where the program was not available to them.

However, the effective targeting of program recruitment also meant that the flow of releasees through the *Bridging the Gap* program was lower than originally anticipated. In the planning of the *Bridging the Gap* program, it was anticipated that full-year throughput would be around 500 prisoners per year. However, in the first year of program operation the total number of prisoners recruited to the program was 224, and the recruitment rate slowed further in the second year. Uncertainty about program continuity may have limited recruitment in the second half of 2002. Nevertheless it seems clear that the recruitment rate across the five agencies was lower in the second year, and the annual recruitment rate almost certainly would not have exceeded 200 in the second year.

There are two factors that limit the flow of releasees through *Bridging the Gap*. The first is that eligible "high risk, high need" prisoners represent a relatively small segment of the total release stream. In the analysis of prison releases, it was proposed that eligible prisoners

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represented only about 20% of all prison releases. Taking into account the results of the screening assessment process in relation to refusals and unsuitability, the real proportion of releasees who are both eligible *and* likely to accept the offer of a program place is probably no more than 10%. Interviews with workers and co-ordinators confirm that the agencies experienced real difficulties in finding suitable participants. At some stage, all agencies reported that they having problems in filling program places. It is to their credit that all agencies maintained their focus on recruiting only those who were genuinely eligible for *Bridging the Gap*.

Note that this does not mean that only 10% of prison releasees have a need for post-release support. It is likely that there were people being released from prison with a genuine need for post-release support who were not eligible for *Bridging the Gap* because their sentence was too short, because they had outstanding legal matters, or because their level of risk was low, or because they were insufficiently motivated or otherwise unwilling to consider that they might need post-release support of the kind offered through *Bridging the Gap*. Some of the issues about participants' motivation and understanding of post-release support are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

The second factor limiting program recruitment was that, on average, participants spent longer on the program than the six months that was originally anticipated (see Chapter 5), and hence over time there was a tendency for programs to include a number of "long stay" clients. This picture of lower than anticipated flows and longer than anticipated stays raises the question of whether the *Bridging the Gap* program policy should be reformulated to reflect this kind of program participation. It is arguable that providing more intensive or longer duration services to a smaller group of program participants is an inherently better strategy than a high flow, short stay policy.