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CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS

Women Offenders' Substance Use Patterns across Regions

Women in the Prairie, Pacific, and Atlantic regions were most likely to have a moderate to severe substance use issue. CNS stimulant and opioid use were most common in the Pacific and Prairie regions while injection drug use and poly-substance use were most common in the Atlantic and Prairie regions.

Why we did this study

Previous research shows that women offenders' substance use patterns vary across regions. This study was completed to highlight the varying substance use profiles of the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) five geographic regions: Atlantic, Quebec, Ontario, Prairie, and Pacific.

What we did

Pre-incarceration substance use patterns for women are assessed at admission to federal custody using the Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA); 3,579 women (33% Indigenous) were assessed between June 2010 and December 2021. Substance use indicators were compared across regions.

Table: Examination of Substance Use Indicators by Region

What we found

Region of W-CASA Assessment (%) Pacific Atlantic Prairie Characteristic Overall Substance Use Severity 25.6 32.8 8.4 22.8 31.8 26.4 19.6 24.1 Low Moderate to 72.0 65.0 42.6 40.8 64.1 Severe 92.9 88.6 86.8 94.8 93.5 Ever drank Ever used drugs 81.9 68.4 58.3 85.1 79.2 Link between 42 6 38 1 70.8 56.7 substance use 61.8 and offending Substance Used Most-12 months prior arrest 43.8 Alcohol 33.7 28.2 33.5 Opioids 15.7 3.6 12.0 11.7 10.2 Cocaine/Crack 14.2 10.3 7.1 CNS Stimulants 4.1 6.3 4.9 14.5 11.8 11.0 4.7 Cannabis 6.5 5.2 6.9 3.3 0.9 0.5 1.3 0.8 Depressants 0.4 0.0 0.4 0.5 0.4 Other drugs 41.9 Did not use 17.7 30.5 16.0 27.4 History of Injection 41.9 15.7 23.7 36.0 31.4 Drug Use Poly-substance 56.7 61.8 42 6 38 1 70.8 use Used during pregnancy 24 4 26 4 17.3 30.0 27.4 (among women

Women in the Prairie, Pacific, and Atlantic regions were most likely to have an identified substance use issue, particularly a moderate to severe problem (72%, 64%, and 65%, respectively, see Table). Women in the Ontario region were least likely to indicate a history of trying drugs, while proportions reporting ever drinking alcohol was similar across all regions. Across all regions, women in the Prairie (71%) and Atlantic (62%) regions were most likely to have an identified link between their substance use and criminal offending, with women in the Quebec (43%) region being least likely to report this finding.

Substances used in the 12 months prior to arrest varied across region. Alcohol use was reported most often in all regions. After alcohol, women in the Atlantic region reported opioid and cocaine/crack use most often while cocaine/crack and no use was most common in the Quebec region. Over forty percent of women in Ontario also indicated no use in the 12 months prior to arrest, followed by opioid use. For women in the Prairie and Pacific regions, central nervous system (CNS) stimulants and opioids were most common. History of injection drug use (IDU) and poly-substance use also varied across regions, being highest in the Atlantic and Prairie regions. Substance use during pregnancy was less commonly reported by women in the Ontario region (see Table).

What it means

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Distinct regional substance use patterns for women offenders were identified. A greater demand for substance use supports and interventions may exist in the Prairie, Atlantic, and Pacific regions.

For more information

For questions, please email Research Branch.

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Prepared by: Shanna Farrell MacDonald & Sarah Cram



with prior pregnancies)

¹ Ritchie, M.B., & Farrell MacDonald, S. (2015). Regional comparisons of men's and women's substance use (RIB 14-45). Ottawa, ON: CSC.