

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Indigenous and non-Indigenous Women Offenders' Substance Use over Time: 2010 to 2021

A greater proportion of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women had identified substance use issues over time, as well as increased CNS stimulant use and injection drug use.

Why we did this study

Previous research has illustrated the differences in substance use patterns among Indigenous and non-Indigenous women offenders.^{1,2} This study was conducted to examine substance use patterns among Indigenous and non-Indigenous women offenders over time.

What we did

Upon admission into custody, the Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA) assesses the substance use patterns of federal women offenders prior to their sentence. In total, 1,170 Indigenous women (33%) and 2,409 non-Indigenous women³ (67%) completed W-CASA between June 2010 and December 2021.⁴ Year of W-CASA completion was categorized into two-year periods for analysis.

What we found

Similar patterns in lifetime alcohol use were observed among Indigenous women (96% to 97%) and non-Indigenous women (90% to 92%) during the study period. Lifetime drug use increased for Indigenous women (80% to 91%) and non-Indigenous women (62% to 75%) over time. Examination of substance use severity demonstrated that moderate to severe⁵ substance use issues have increased among both Indigenous (75% and 79%) and non-Indigenous (43% to 55%) women. The largest increases occurred among Indigenous women assessed with moderate substance use issues (16% to 25%) and non-Indigenous women assessed with substantial substance use issues (17% to 23%).

Indications of a link between substance use and criminal offending increased among both Indigenous (68% to 78%) and non-Indigenous (38% to 52%) women offenders over time. Lifetime injection drug use (IDU) also increased among both Indigenous (41% to 44%) and non-Indigenous women (18% to 26%). Among non-Indigenous women, reports of poly-substance use increased by 14% (33% to

47%). However, it remained the same among Indigenous women at 64% during the study period.

In 2010-2011, Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women indicated that the three most used substances in the 12 months prior to arrest were cocaine/crack (23% and 19%, respectively), alcohol (20% and 13%), and opioids (17% and 11%). In 2020-2021, the most used substances for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women were alcohol (61% and 47%), opioids (11% and 10%), and central nervous system (CNS) stimulants (9% and 12%).

Similar proportions of Indigenous women reported substance use during pregnancy over time (33% to 31%) while this increased for non-Indigenous women (17% to 21%). Among Indigenous women who reported substance use during pregnancy, drugs only use increased (3% to 17%) over time, however, alcohol only (15% to 9%) and both alcohol and drug (15% to 5%) use decreased. Among non-Indigenous women, alcohol only use remained the same (4%), drugs only use increased (6% to 13%) and both alcohol and drug use decreased (7% to 3%) over time.

What it means

Understanding women's substance use patterns helps the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) inform interventions and supports for substance use issues. These results demonstrate that substance use issues have increased among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women offenders over time, such as increased CNS stimulant use, lifetime drug use, and IDU. Additionally, these findings highlight that substance use continues to be an important criminogenic need for women offenders.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#). You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

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¹ Farrell MacDonald, S. (2014). *Lifetime substance use patterns of women offenders* (RIB-14-24). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

² Cram, S., & Farrell MacDonald, S. (2019). *Substance use patterns of Indigenous and non-Indigenous women offenders* (RIB-19-08). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

³ Among non-Indigenous women, 76% were White, 11% were Black, and 13% were from other ethnocultural groups. Due to the small proportions of Black women and

women from other ethnocultural groups, the non-Indigenous offender group could not be broken down to examine substance use patterns over time.

⁴ In total, 3,579 women offenders were included in this study.

⁵ Substance use severity was categorized into none, low, moderate, substantial, and severe. Moderate to severe severity may indicate a substance use disorder.