



# Research in Brief

## Lifetime Substance Use Patterns of Women Offenders

**KEY WORDS:** *Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA), women offenders, severity of substance use, injection drug use, poly-substance use, lifetime substance use*

### What it means

The Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA) demonstrates that over three-quarters of federally-sentenced women have a substance use issue. These results, as well as those indicating relatively high rates of prescription drug use, poly-substance use, and injection drug use, support the continued use of interventions such as the Women Offender Correctional Program. This multi-target program is available in a range of intensities, both in institutions and in the community, according to women's level of risk and need.

In addition, the provision of drug-specific interventions such as Opiate Substitution Therapy further aid women offenders to address their substance use issues, especially since twice as many women have significant drug use problems as alcohol use problems and almost two-thirds of women indicate lifetime opioid use.

### What we found

- Over three-quarters (77%) of women have an assessed substance use issue, with 55% identified as having a moderate to severe problem.
- A greater proportion of women had a moderate to severe problem related to drug use (50%) than to alcohol use (23%).
- Two-thirds of women have used both alcohol and drugs during their lifetime. More women indicated trying alcohol only (24%) versus drugs only (3%). Seven percent reported no prior alcohol or drug use.
- On average, women were 15 years of age when they first tried alcohol or drugs.
- Among women who had used drugs, the three main drug types were marijuana (88%), cocaine/crack (81%), and opioids, including heroin (61%).
- Overall, two-thirds of women had abused medication for which they had a valid prescription.
- Thirty-four percent of women reporting combining

drugs and alcohol use while 35% had combined two or more types of drugs on the same day.

- Almost one-third (30%) of women offenders had a history of injection drug use. Among those, 53% had shared needles and 64% were worried about the transmission of blood-borne diseases.
- Almost half (46%) had a history of substance use treatment participation. Forty-five percent thought that they needed treatment to address their current substance use issue.
- Sixteen percent of women currently in a relationship reported that their partner had a substance use problem. In contrast, 61% of all respondents had a past partner with this issue.
- For 47% of women, their criminal offending was related to their substance use.

### Why we did this study

Previous research indicated the approximately 80% of women offenders have substance use issues. However, little information was available about the nature and scope of their substance use histories.

### What we did

The W-CASA assesses substance use issues of women offenders at admission to federal custody. In total, 962 women (29% Aboriginal) completed the W-CASA between February 2010 and February 2014.<sup>2</sup>

### For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

You can also visit the website for a full list of research publications.

**Prepared by:** Shanna Farrell MacDonald

<sup>1</sup> Matheson, F.I., Doherty, S., & Grant, B.A. (2009). *Women offender substance abuse programming & community reintegration (R-202)*. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

<sup>2</sup> The W-CASA was piloted in 2010 and nationally implemented in 2011. Overall 90% of federal women offenders admitted to custody after national implementation completed the W-CASA.