

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Substance Use Patterns of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Women Offenders

A greater proportion of Indigenous women offenders report problematic substance use in the twelve months prior to arrest.

Why we did this study

Substance use issues continue to be prevalent among women offenders, particularly Indigenous women.^{1,2} Given that Indigenous women are disproportionately represented among federally sentenced women, this study was conducted to examine differences in substance use patterns among Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

What we did

The Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA) assesses federal women offenders upon admission to custody.³ In total, 908 women (35% Indigenous, $n = 316$)⁴ completed the W-CASA between November 2016 and January 2019.

What we found

Eighty percent of federal women offenders reported problematic substance use in the twelve months prior to arrest; 97% of Indigenous women compared to 71% of non-Indigenous women. Eighty percent of Indigenous women compared to 49% of non-Indigenous women had a moderate to severe substance use issue.

The majority of Indigenous women (92%) indicated using alcohol and/or drugs in the twelve-month period prior to arrest, compared to 75% of non-Indigenous women. Among women who used substances in the twelve months prior to arrest, Indigenous women were more likely than non-Indigenous women to report CNS stimulants⁵ as the drug used most (27% versus 13%) while non-Indigenous women were comparable to Indigenous women for alcohol (20% versus 21%, respectively) and opioids (16% each).

Indigenous women were nearly twice as likely as non-Indigenous women to indicate a history of injection drug use (IDU; 46% versus 24%). Among those who reported IDU, sharing needles was reported by similar proportions

(40% each). Two-thirds (67%) of Indigenous women compared to 42% of non-Indigenous women reported same day use of multiple drugs and/or alcohol.

Almost one-third (30%) of Indigenous women and 15% of non-Indigenous women indicated substance use while pregnant. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women reported using alcohol most often while pregnant.

Criminal behaviour was linked to substance use⁶ for over half (58%) of all women. Over three-quarters (78%) of Indigenous women compared to about half (48%) of non-Indigenous women reported this link. However, among those with a substantial to severe substance use issue, there was no difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women in the substance use-crime link (89% versus 87%, respectively).

What it means

Understanding substance use patterns, particularly in the twelve months prior to arrest, allows the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to provide targeted interventions, informed case management, and health services for Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. CSC's correctional programs, including the Women Offender, Aboriginal Women, and Women Sex Offender Correctional Programs, address a multitude of criminogenic behaviours, including substance use. However, incorporating new information related to substance use patterns into interventions and case management as they emerge, such as the increased use of CNS stimulants among Indigenous women, further supports successful rehabilitation and reintegration.

For more information

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

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 Farrell MacDonald, S. (2014). *Comparing substance use patterns of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal women offenders* (RIB 14-26). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

³ 97% of all federal women were assessed during the study period.

⁴ Women self-identifying as White comprised 50% of the study group while 15% self-reported other ethnicities.

⁵ Central nervous system (CNS) stimulants included amphetamines, methamphetamines, crystal methamphetamines, ecstasy, mephedrone, ketamine, and other stimulants such as Ritalin®, Adderall®, Dexedrine®, etc.

⁶ Women were either under the influence when they committed their crime or committed the crime to support their substance use.

