

Assessing Offender Substance-Abuse Problems at Reception: Preliminary Findings from the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument

In a sample of offenders admitted to Canadian federal institutions in the Atlantic and Prairie regions in 1989 and 1990, about 40% had used cannabis in the six months before their arrest, and about 23% had used cocaine or other stimulants.

These and other statistics on substance abuse were recently made available by the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument pilot project, a collaborative effort of the Research and Statistics Branch and the Education and Personal Development Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada. The Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument will yield a wealth of research data on the alcohol and drug patterns of offenders and on the relationship between substance use and criminal behaviour. The development of a front-end assessment method to screen inmates for substance-abuse programming will also be made possible through the Lifestyle project.

The Lifestyle Assessment Instrument gathers data through a computerized assessment procedure: newly admitted inmates sit at a microcomputer in a reception unit and respond to a variety of questions about their alcohol and drug use. Perhaps the primary advantage of the computerized approach is that inmates will probably respond more honestly to a computer than to an interviewer. In addition, the computerized system provides offenders with instantaneous feedback on the level of severity of their substance use. At the end of the 90-minute computer session, the offender receives a printout of the results. A special printed report is also made available to the offender's case management officer.

The Lifestyle Assessment Instrument covers a broad range of assessment issues related to substance abuse, including nutrition, physical and mental health, quality of functioning in family and social relationships, criminal behaviour patterns, and readiness for substance-abuse treatment programming.

The original Computerized Lifestyle Assessment procedure was designed by Dr. Harvey Skinner, formerly of the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario. Initially developed for use in family medical practice, the computerized assessment package was adapted by the Research and Statistics Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada for use with offenders. Two key components of the system the Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST) and the Alcohol Dependence Scale (ADS), both designed by Skinner - have been widely used in substance-abuse research.

Throughout 1989 and early 1990, the system was introduced as a pilot project in two Atlantic Region institutions and one Prairie institution. Following admission, each new inmate is asked to complete the Lifestyle Assessment procedure during the orientation phase of reception. So far the system has been used exclusively with male inmates, although it can also be used with female inmates. The Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument is currently being translated for use with Francophone offenders.

Below are some preliminary research findings based on a sample of 371 respondents from the two Lifestyle pilot regions. As more data become available, work will focus on the development of substance-abuse typologies for matching offenders to substance-abuse programs. The Computerized Lifestyle Assessment project will provide a valuable data base for the ongoing assessment of offender needs for

substance-abuse programming. The rich data base will also make it possible to research a number of questions on the link between substance abuse and criminality.

Drug Use

Fifty-six percent of the inmates surveyed reported some type of drug use in the six months prior to their incarceration. Of this group, many were relatively heavy users. In fact, a full 32% of all of the offenders who completed the survey admitted to taking some type of illicit substance a few or more times a week. As Figure 1 shows, nearly 11% of the reception inmates consumed some type of drug every day in the six-month period before the arrests that led to their current federal sentences.

Cannabis products were the most frequently used illicit drugs - 39.7% of the offenders reported using them at least once in the six-month period under study. (See Figure 2 for a breakdown of the types of drugs used by the reception inmates prior to their arrests.) About 17% used cannabis derivatives every day or almost every day within this period. Relative to the cannabis users (39.7%), a considerably smaller proportion of offenders (22.7%) consumed stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamines. These drugs were also used less frequently than cannabis on a daily basis - only 7.3% used some type of stimulant every day or almost every day. Interestingly, only 14% reported using opiates such as heroin or codeine, while 17.3% used tranquilizers, and 10.8% used sedatives. Only 2.7% of the reception inmates said they had used an inhalant (e.g., aerosols or solvents) during the six-month period before arrest.

According to Skinner's Drug Abuse Screening Test (DAST), which was designed to assess the severity of drug abuse, the substance-abuse patterns of about 25% of the sample's offenders fell within the moderate to severe range. Based on information about the inmates' drug-use patterns prior to their current arrest, 4.5% were classified as having severe substance-abuse problems, and 9.6% were classified as having a substantial problem.

While these figures imply significant drug problems in this sample of Atlantic and Prairie Region offenders, substance-abuse problems may be even more extensive in other regions. Dr. Lynn Lightfoot and Dr. David Hodgins of the Addiction Research Foundation found a larger proportion of offenders who fell within the substantial and severe drug-abuse categories of the DAST in a survey of 275 Ontario Region inmates. In the Lightfoot and Hodgins study, conducted between 1984 and 1987, 63% of the 275 inmates who volunteered to be tested were classified in the moderate to severe range of substance-abuse problems. One factor that might account for the higher incidence of drug problems in this earlier survey is that inmates with severe drug problems may have been more interested in the survey and therefore volunteered to participate in greater numbers.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Frequency of Offender Drug Use
in the Six-Month Period Prior to Arrest

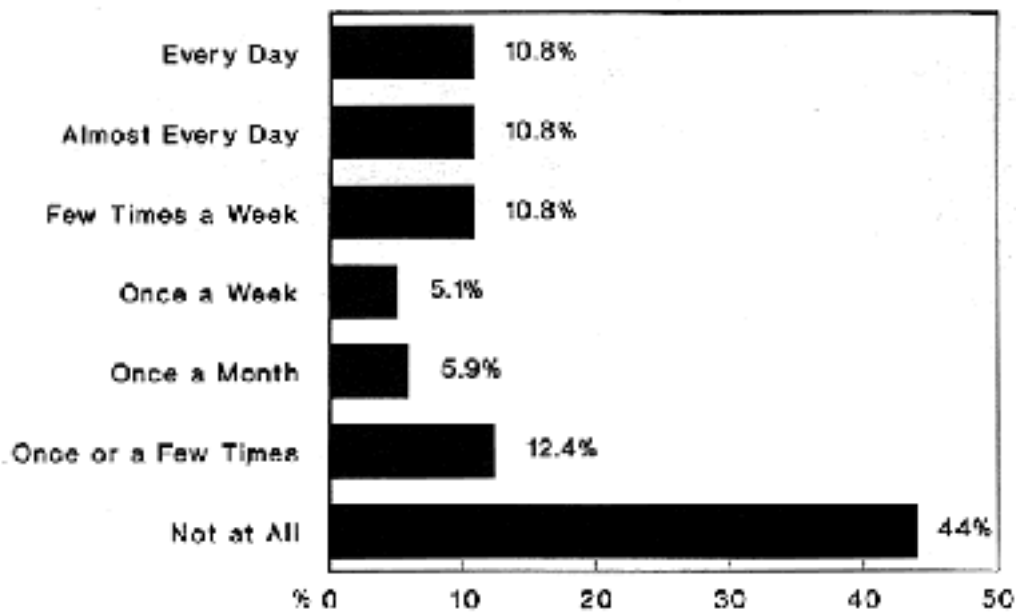
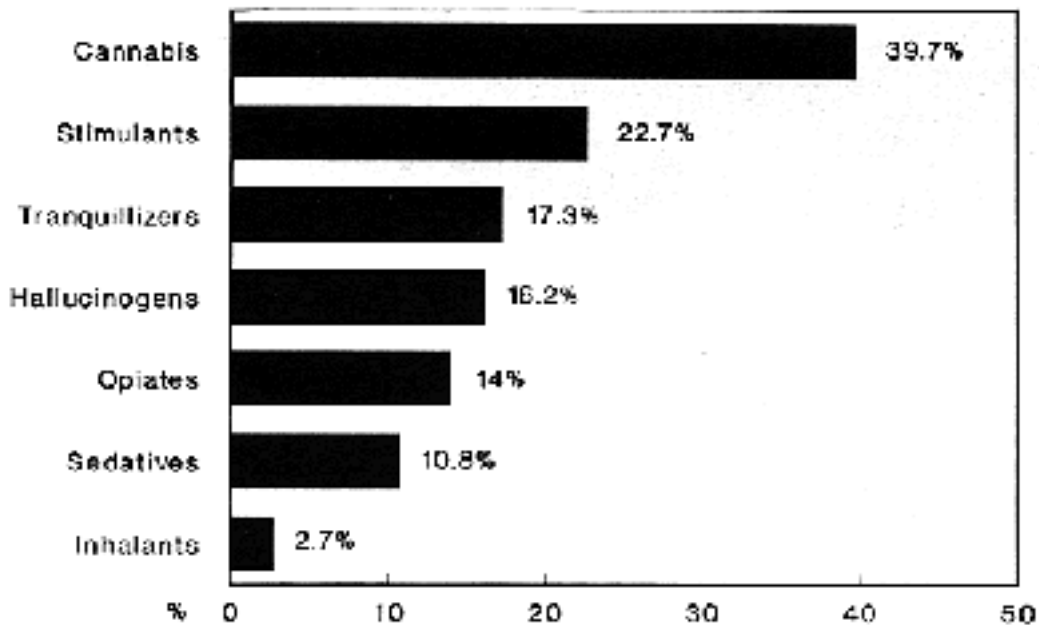


Figure 2

Figure 2
Types of Drugs Used by Offenders in the
Six-Month Period Prior to Arrest



Alcohol Use

Some alcohol use during the six-month reporting period was indicated by 85% of the sample. This figure is not dramatically different from the proportion of Canadians who report alcohol use. The 1989 National Alcohol and Other Drugs Survey by Health and Welfare Canada indicated that 78% of Canadians had consumed alcohol in the previous year.

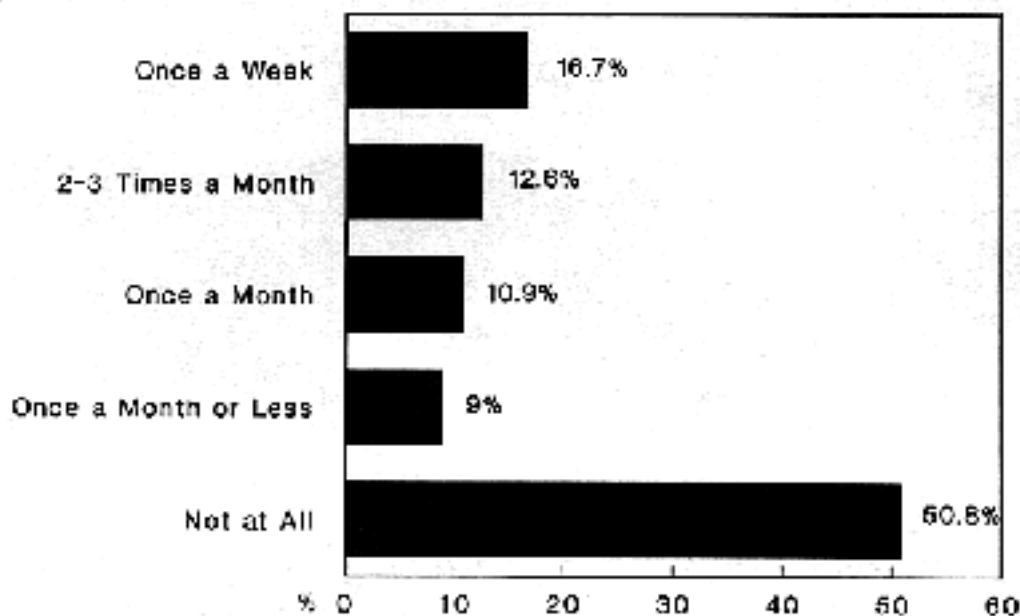
Thirty-five percent of the offenders reported using alcohol from a few times a week to every day, and 17.6% said that they had drinking bouts (or binges) at least once a week. A drinking bout was defined as an episode in which the offender was affected by alcohol for at least a few consecutive days. Another interesting finding is that 49% of the offenders admitted to at least one binge-drinking episode in the six-month period. Figure 3 displays the frequency of binge drinking by this sample of inmates.

The offenders also frequently combined drug use and alcohol consumption. About 43% of the sample said they used drugs and alcohol together at least once in the six months before they were arrested. Of those who used drugs at least once a month, 19% reported always using alcohol with drugs.

The survey also provided information for assessing the severity of alcohol problems in this population. Only about 18% of the offenders were grouped in the moderate to severe categories of Skinner's Alcohol Dependence Scale. This figure is substantially lower than the finding by Lightfoot and Hodgins when they used the same assessment tool on their earlier sample of Ontario inmates, approximately 47% of whom were classified as having "moderate to severe" alcohol dependence.

Figure 3

Figure 3
Frequency of Offenders' Binge Drinking
in the Six-Month Period Prior to Arrest



Substance Use and Criminal Behaviour

The relationship between alcohol or drug use and criminal activity is not yet well understood by researchers, and many questions about how these two aspects of behaviour are linked remain unanswered. However, it is clear that substance use and criminal behaviour often occur together.

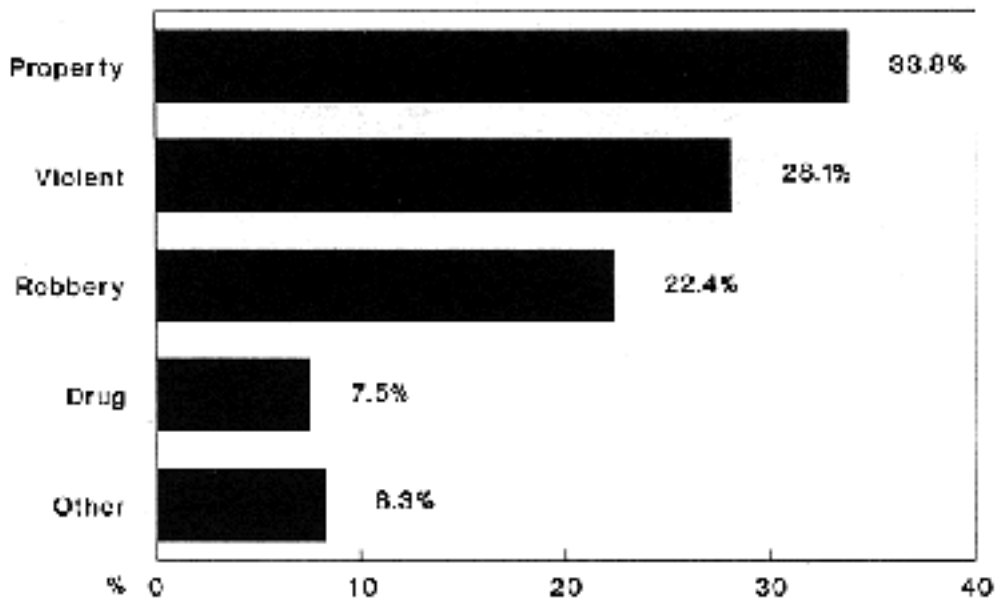
In our Lifestyle sample, 64% of the offenders had consumed alcohol or other drugs on the day they committed the crimes for which they were currently incarcerated. Furthermore, roughly 60% claimed being under the influence of alcohol or drugs at the time they committed at least one of the offences associated with their current prison term - 14% had been under the influence of some type- of drug (usually cocaine or marijuana), 18% under the influence of alcohol, and 28% under the influence of both drugs and alcohol.

In order to gain more information about the relationship between substance use and crime, the computer asked the offenders to select one of the crimes they had committed while under the influence of alcohol or drugs and to supply more details about the circumstances surrounding the crime. In particular, this section of the survey provides important information about the types of crimes committed under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Property crimes (including break-and-enter, theft, and possession of stolen property) were reported as the most frequent type of crime committed by offenders under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Figure 4 shows that nearly 34% of the crimes committed by offenders under the influence of alcohol or drugs were property related. However, it is important to note that a substantial proportion of the crimes (28%) were violent offences, including murder and manslaughter, weapon offences, physical assault and sex offences. Robbery accounted for an additional 22% of the crimes. If robbery is classified as a violent offence, a full 50% of the crimes committed under the influence of alcohol or drugs were violent in nature. A surprisingly small proportion of the offences committed under the influence were classified as "drug offences."

Figure 4

Figure 4
Types of Offences Committed Under
the Influence of Drugs or Alcohol



Violent crimes (except robbery) were more likely to be committed under the influence of alcohol alone than under the influence of drugs or of alcohol and drugs together. However, drug use was somewhat more likely than alcohol use to be associated with robbery.

The offenders were asked a number of questions about their perceptions of the role of alcohol and drugs in their criminal activities. About 82% of the offenders who committed a crime under the influence of alcohol and 69% of the offenders who had been under the influence of drugs claimed that they probably would not have committed the offence if they had not been using these substances at the time.

These figures show that the offenders who have completed the survey to date clearly relate substance use to criminal activity. According to the respondents, they would have been substantially less likely to commit the crimes for which they were sentenced if they had not been under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The Lifestyle Assessment Instrument also asked the offenders to describe the effect of alcohol or drug use on their past criminal activities, including crimes for which they had not been convicted. About 36% of the inmates admitted that drug use had been a factor in most or all of their previous crimes. A similar proportion expressed the same opinion about alcohol consumption. Roughly 17% of the sample admitted that their crimes had been committed only under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Treatment Readiness

An important function of the Lifestyle Assessment Instrument is to determine the perceptions of new inmates regarding alcohol or drug use as a significant problem in their lives and their receptivity to substance-abuse treatment programs.

Forty-three percent of the survey respondents had been involved in some type of treatment program for alcohol and drug problems at least once and most of these inmates had participated in a program on more than one occasion. Alcoholics Anonymous was the program cited most frequently (41%) by those who had been involved in previous programming. Many offenders obviously made contact with a treatment program as a result of their conflict with the law. Of those who had been exposed to some form of treatment, about 24% said they had been involved in programs during previous incarcerations, and 12% reported that they were currently participating in a program for substance abuse.

Excluding those inmates who used no drugs in the six months before their arrests, roughly half of the sample admitted to problems related to drug use, and about 22% felt that the problem was serious. Thirty-two percent of drug users felt they could use help to stop or control their drug use. Of the more regular drug users (those who had been using drugs more than once a week), about 55% said they could use help.

Offenders in this sample appeared considerably more ready to admit to their drinking problems 76% of those who drank at least a few times a week felt they had problems related to drinking. Thirty-nine percent of this group perceived their level of alcohol use as a "serious problem," and about 53% admitted that they needed help to stop or control their drinking.

Many offenders appear to have positive views about receiving treatment for substance-abuse problems. When asked if they would like to participate in a drug or alcohol program during their current sentence, 61% of the sample said yes, and about 58% indicated that treatment would help them quit using drugs or alcohol.

Although the Lifestyle Assessment data very clearly show that many of the offenders in the sample used substances regularly and that many exhibited problem use, the offenders had a very positive outlook on the future. The vast majority (86%) believed that they would be able to get along without any drugs or alcohol following their release from prison.

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