

An investigation into the characteristics of substance abusing women offenders: Risk, need and post release outcome (R-81, 1999)

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This investigation compared women offenders who were substance abusers to those who were not. The groups were compared on a number of criteria: risk and need variables, demographic characteristics, and recidivism data. To obtain the required information for the present study, the Correctional Service of Canada's automated database, the Offender Management System (OMS) was accessed in conjunction with the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) records. The final sample comprised 251 women offenders for whom institutional program participation information was available. The first set of comparisons focused on demographic information (age, race). It was found that the mean age for the substance abuser was 32.7 years compared to 34.9 years for the non-abusers.

An extremely high proportion (93%) of Aboriginal women was classified as substance abusers, compared to 49% of non-Aboriginal women. The majority of substance abusers were classified as medium (46%) and high-risk (26%) offenders whereas only 28% were low-risk. Comparisons were also performed on the global need rating assigned (at intake) to both groups of women offenders. Statistically reliable differences were found in five of the seven overall target domains.

The final set of comparisons examined the recidivism rates of the study sample. There was a trend for substance abusers to recidivate at a higher rate than non-abusers; however, this was not statistically significant.

Results of this study have raised some important concerns regarding the continuum of offender care, from assessment to programming. This research has identified important differences between substance abusing and non-abusing women offenders, reflecting the validity of the Offender Intake Assessment (OIA) strategy. The high proportion of women substance abusers in this study demonstrates the importance of examining this area more extensively in the future.

The study highlights the area of correctional treatment planning as one that merits some attention with improvements likely to enhance the assessment and treatment of women offenders. The results clearly demonstrate that treated substance abusers were less likely to return to custody than their untreated counterparts.

The overall result of the present study reveal clear and reliable differences between substance abusers and non-abusers in a variety of areas assessed at intake. ■