

United States federal prisons: Drug users, drug testing, and drug treatment

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This article describes the fundamentals of the extent of drug use among Bureau of Prisons (BOP) inmates highlighting differences between State and Federal offenders. We also characterize the Bureau's drug screening program and the treatment offered to inmates. However, to understand the scope of the problem, we first depict the continuing growth of the BOP inmate population.

From year end 1990 to midyear 1999, the rate of incarceration in the United States prison system increased from 1 in every 218 residents to 1 in every 147 residents. During this time period, the average annual increase in the number of inmates was higher for the federal prison system than for the average of all of the individual State prison systems. The average increase for the Federal and State prison populations and the local jail population were 8.5%, 6.1% and 4.6% respectively.³ On May 7, 2001 the Bureau of Prisons had 151,308 inmates in its custody, many of whom had drug treatment needs.

History of drug use: Comparison of State and federal inmates

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Survey of Inmates in State and Federal correctional facilities, which is conducted every 5 to 6 years with a representative sample of State and Federal inmates, provides information on drug use histories of inmate populations. The most recent surveys were conducted in 1991 and 1997.⁴

Using the results of the BJS surveys, Table 1 shows that in 1997, almost three-quarters of federal inmates reported ever having used drugs as compared with approximately 60% in 1991. While the percentage of Federal inmates who ever used drugs was lower than that of State inmates, the gap narrowed between 1991 and 1997. This is because the percentage of inmates using drugs increased more among federal inmates than among State inmates, 12.8% and 3.6% respectively.

Other indicators of previous drug use — regular use of drugs (that is, use at least once per week for at least one month), use in the month before arrest, and use at the time of offence — also confirmed higher rates of drug use among State inmates than among federal

Table 1

Federal and State Inmates Reporting Drug Use — Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey of Inmates 1991 and 1997

		Ever used drugs	Used drugs regularly	Used drugs in the month before arrest	Used drugs at the time of the offence
State	1991	79.4%	62.2%	49.9%	31.0%
Federal	1991	60.1%	42.1%	31.8%	16.8%
State	1997	83.0%	69.6%	56.5%	32.6%
Federal	1997	72.9%	57.3%	44.8%	22.4%

Source: Mumola, 1999⁵

inmates. For example, 57.3% of federal inmates reported having used drugs regularly in the past as compared with 69.6% of State inmates. In addition, 44.8% of federal inmates used drugs in the month before arrest as compared with 56% of State inmates.

Among those who used alcohol or drugs, a lower percentage of federal inmates reported engaging in various behaviors while under the influence of alcohol or drugs (see Table 2). For example, more than one-quarter of State inmates reported having had job or school problems because of alcohol or

Table 2

Experiences While Under the Influence of Alcohol or Drugs: State and Federal Inmates — Bureau of Justice Statistics Survey of Inmates 1991 and 1997

	State	Federal
Ever driven car or other vehicle while under the influence of alcohol/drugs	64.3%	58.6%
Ever had arguments with spouse, family or friends while or right after drinking/using drugs	56.0%	41.2%
Ever lost a job because of drinking/using drugs	22.0%	10.7%
Ever had job or school problems because of drinking/using drugs	28.0%	15.5%
Ever been arrested or held at a police station because of your drinking/using drugs	44.6%	30.3%
Ever gotten into a physical fight while or right after drinking/using drugs	48.5%	28.3%

Source: Mumola, 1999⁶

Table 3

Drug Use in The Year Before Arrest — Men and Women Drug Users in the Bureau of Prisons Drug Treatment Evaluation		
Type	Men (n = 1,842)	Women (n = 473)
None	38%	32%
Alcohol only	18%	8%
Marijuana only	10%	9%
Marijuana and alcohol	6%	3%
One hard drug without alcohol	11%	22%
One hard drug with alcohol	8%	12%
Two hard drugs without alcohol	5%	9%
Two hard drugs with alcohol	4%	5%

drug use as compared with 15.5% of federal inmates. Similarly, State inmates (48.5%) were more likely to report having gotten into a fight under the influence of alcohol or drugs than Federal inmates (28.3%).

Characteristics of drug users in federal prisons

Information on drug users within the federal prison system is available from the Bureau of Prisons' three-year, multi-site evaluation of its residential drug treatment programs. The data are from a sample of 2,315 individuals who were either enrolled in a residential drug treatment program or were comparison subjects who had a history of drug use.⁷

Thirty-eight percent of the men and 32% of the women in this sample had no daily drug use in the year before arrest (see Table 3). Among those who were using drugs on a daily basis before arrest, men (18%) were more likely to have used alcohol as compared to women (8%). In contrast, women (48%) were more likely to have used one or more hard drugs (e.g., illegal drug other than marijuana) than men (28%).

Table 4 presents information on various characteristics of the sample of inmates with a drug use history. Similar percentages of men (34%) and women (39%) inmates with a history of alcohol or drug use reported having previously received treatment. The percentages reporting alcohol treatment were small, 6% and 4% respectively for men and women. Gender differences were apparent in social relationships. More than twice as many women (55%) reported having been married to an individual with a drug problem than did men (23%). In addition, almost three times as many women (45%) reported having had a spouse with an alcohol problem than did men (16%).

Similar percentages of men and women reported having been hospitalized due to a drug problem, 21% and 18% respectively. On the other hand, a greater percentage of men (54%) than women (43%) reported using drugs at the time of their instant offense. Furthermore, men (38%) were more likely to have reported an increase in criminal activity associated with increased drug use than women (28%).

Drug testing in the federal prison system

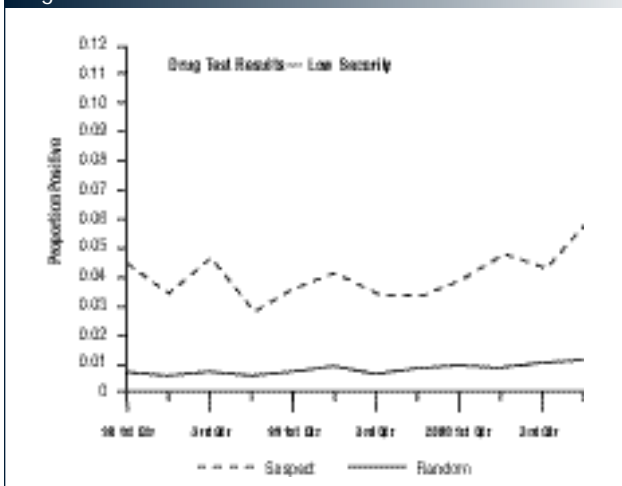
Drug testing policies of the federal Bureau of Prisons are used to control drug use within institutions. These policies mandate several types of drug testing procedures. The two groups having the highest numbers of drug tests are the "suspect" and the random sample groups. Inmates who fall in the "suspect" category are identified through intelligence gathering and these individuals are tested for at least three consecutive months. However, the primary method of controlling drug use is through the testing of a random sample. Each month five percent of the population at each prison, except maximum and minimum security, is tested for drug use. The percentage is three percent at minimum security level prisons and ten percent at high security level prisons.

The urinalysis testing screens for the following drugs and/or metabolites: morphine, methadone, codeine, other opiates, barbiturates, amphetamines, cocaine, cocaine metabolite, phencyclidine (PCP), and marijuana. Testing positive for drug use is classified among the most serious of disciplinary infractions. Sanctions for a positive drug test include forfeiture of statutory good time, recommendation of parole date rescission (if applicable), disallowance of good conduct time credit, and disciplinary segregation. In addition, an inmate may forfeit a halfway house placement.

Table 4

Selected Characteristics of Men and Women Drug Users in the Bureau of Prisons Drug Treatment Evaluation		
	Men (n = 1,842)	Women (n = 473)
Ever had spouse with drug problem	23%	55%
Ever had spouse with alcohol problem	16%	45%
Received drug treatment in past	34%	39%
Received alcohol treatment in past	6%	4%
Ever hospitalized due to a drug problem	21%	18%
Used drugs at the time of crime	54%	43%
Reported criminal activity increased with increased drug use	38%	28%

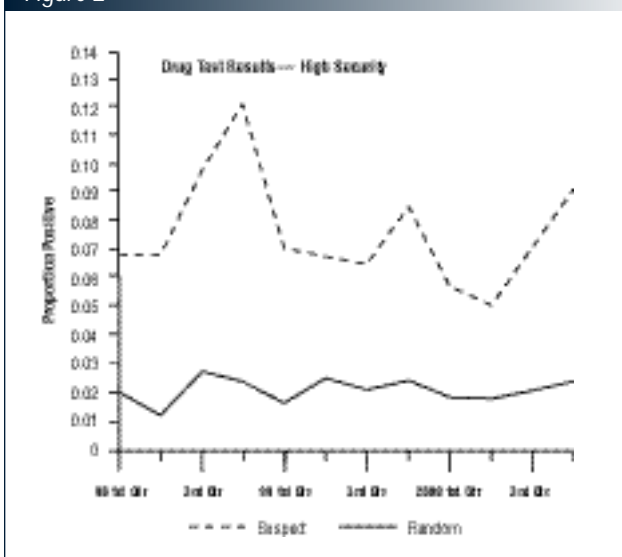
Figure 1



Figures 1 and 2 provide information on the proportions of positive drug test results at two different security level prisons: low security and high security. These figures provide quarterly proportions for calendar years 1998 through 2000. Not surprisingly, Figures 1 and 2 show that in both low and high security prisons, there was a higher proportion of individuals who tested positive for drug use among the “suspect” group than among those randomly selected for testing. The proportion of positive drug tests found among the randomly selected sample has remained stable in both low and high security prisons over the past three years. However, the proportion of positive drug tests was greater in the high security prisons than in the low security prisons, the proportion hovered around 0.01 at low security prisons but at 0.02 in high security prisons.

The proportion of positive drug tests for the “suspect” groups varied considerably from one quarter to

Figure 2



another between 1998 and 2000 at both security levels. As with the random sample, the overall proportion of positive drug tests was greater at high security prisons than at low security prisons.

Drug treatment programs in the federal prison system

Treatment programs available to federal prison inmates with a drug use history range from drug education to outpatient and residential treatment. Drug education is required of inmates if there is evidence in their Presentence Investigation Report that substance use contributed to their instant offense; if they received a judicial recommendation to participate in drug treatment; if they violated community supervision due to alcohol or drug use; or, if they have a history of alcohol or drug use.

Residential drug treatment programs are currently available at 47 institutions. These programs are offered at all security levels and at both men and women prisons. The residential programs provide a minimum of 15 hours treatment each week for 9 months.

The programs admit only inmates who meet the DSM-IV criteria for a diagnosis of alcohol or illegal drug abuse or dependence and who volunteer to participate in the program. The diagnostic information must be supported by official records. Inmates who successfully complete the in-prison residential program and also complete their halfway house placement, where they receive outpatient aftercare services, are eligible to receive up to a 12-month reduction in their sentence.

Non-residential programs are available at all prisons for inmates who do not meet the admission criteria for the residential programs. Treatment consists of individual and group counseling. Some prisons also provide support through self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous. ■

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- 2 320 First Avenue NW, Washington, District of Columbia 20534.
- 3 Beck, A. J. (2000). *Prison and jail inmates at midyear 1999*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- 4 Mumola, C. J. (1999). *Substance abuse and treatment, State and Federal prisoner, 1997*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics.
- 5 Ibid. Mumola, 1999.
- 6 Ibid. Mumola, 1999.
- 7 Pelissier, B. M., Rohdes, W., Saylor, W. G., Gaes, G. G., Camp, S. D., Vanyur, S. D., and Wallace, S. B. (2000). *TRIAD drug treatment evaluation project: final report of three-year outcomes: Part 1*. Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Prisons.