

# Consumption of psychoactive substances in Quebec prisons

Doctoral Thesis, Université de Montréal<sup>1</sup>

Chantal Plourde<sup>2</sup>

Advisor: Serge Brochu

Committee Members: Pierre Landreville, Guy Lemire, Dan Kaminski,<sup>3</sup> and Andrée Demers

**T**his article provides a summary regarding the self-reported consumption of psychoactive substances by federal prisoners in Quebec. Among the various factors considered in the thesis, the following were selected for this article: the prevalence of self-reported consumption by security level, types of substances consumed and frequency of use, motivations and perceived psychological state, and the reported perception of guards' tolerance and subject-reported drug availability.

## Problem

**T**here have been only a very few studies on drug consumption during incarceration,<sup>4</sup> and the phenomenon is widely misunderstood because of the difficulties involved in investigating it. For most people, consumption inside prison walls spells danger, whether from the violence inherently associated with the drug trade or from misbehaviour by those under the influence. Many staff members can remember incidents that threatened people's physical safety. However, if we want to explain the presence of psychoactive substances in prisons, we need to examine a number of factors that are often overlooked during discussions of issues, such as the pre-incarceration consumption history, the large number of inmates incarcerated for drug-related offences, recent changes in the prison environment, and the nature of routine inmate management. These are the factors that underlie this study, and are vital to an understanding of the context within which drugs are used. A final point, which bears mention is that consumption during incarceration cannot be separated from issues of adjustment to prison life, since substance use can play a role in adjustment.

## Objectives and methodology

The study aims to reveal the prevalence of drug consumption in Quebec federal institutions and the path inmates follow with respect to such consumption. The objectives, as well as certain ethical considerations, dictated the use of a questionnaire to be filled out during an interview. A total of 317 randomly selected inmates at 10 federal institutions in Quebec participated. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the sample.

## Results

### Consumption

As explained in detail in Plourde & Brochu<sup>5</sup>, 16% of subjects reported they had consumed alcohol and 29% used one or more illicit drugs during the three months preceding the interview. The combined result for alcohol and drugs together was 33%, which suggests that the majority of respondents (67%) had not used alcohol or drugs during the preceding three months. There was more consumption at maximum-security institutions (52%) and medium-security institutions (35%) than at minimum-security institutions (19%) ( $\chi^2(2) = 16.91, p < .000$ ).

### Substances consumed and frequency of use

The majority of subjects who reported they had used drugs in the previous three months, reported cannabis (91%) as their drug of choice during incarceration, while 7% reported heroin. Cannabis was also by far the most frequently consumed substance: 91% said they mainly consumed cannabis, while 6% named heroin.<sup>6</sup> These results are far from surprising and confirm the common notion that cannabis is the drug most used in prisons.<sup>7</sup>

Reviewing the consumption patterns of respondents who had used during the three months before the interview (alcohol = 50/317; drugs = 91/317) revealed that in prison, frequency is much higher among drug users than among alcohol users. With regard to drugs specifically, 87% reported changes in consumption since they arrived in prison (change of substance, reduced frequency, and reduced quantities). Still, among the 91 users, 15% reported daily use, and 62% reported using at least once a week, which differs considerably from the results for alcohol consumption.

### Motivation and mental state

With regard to the motivations for using drugs before and during incarceration, the majority who had used drugs in the previous three months did so to relax (62%), whereas previously they had used drugs in order to forget their problems (38%), for recreational purposes (31%), or to relax (21%). The *McNemar* test was used to examine changes in motivation among subjects who had used drugs recreationally prior to incarceration. The results show that 25 of that 31% who had been recreational

Table 1

## Profile of institutions, sample and participation rate

Institutions	Number of inmates <sup>1</sup>	Segregated <sup>2</sup>	Outside institution <sup>3,4</sup>	Regular population	Sample (10% or at least 30)	Rate of refusal	Response rate (including refusals and absences)
<b>Minimum security</b>							
Federal Training Centre	410	15	67	328	33	20%	65%
Montée St-François.	265	5	62	198	30	9%	68%
Ste-Anne-des-Plaines	173	2	29	142	30	6%	83%
<b>Total</b>	<b>848</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>668</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>Medium security</b>							
Cowansville	368	15	-	353	36	22%	67%
Leclerc	540	28	152 <sup>5</sup>	360	36	16%	82%
Archambault	370	14	-	356	36	26%	67%
Drummondville	230	28	-	202	30	20%	75%
La Macaza	302	10	-	292	30	6%	94%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,810</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>1,563</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>Maximum security</b>							
Donnacona	268	42	-	226	26	43% <sup>6</sup>	51%
Port-Cartier	268	48	-	220	30	12%	88%
<b>Total</b>	<b>536</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>446</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>70%</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>3,194</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>2,677</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>74%</b>

<sup>1</sup> Figures give the approximate number of inmates in the institution (included escapees and others unlawfully at large) at the time the sample was selected between August and December 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Administrative segregation or punitive dissociation.

<sup>3</sup> Inmates who were outside the institution on work release or on escorted temporary absence for community service or personal development.

<sup>4</sup> Inmates who were outside the institution when the interviews were being conducted (due to appointment, private family visit, illness, etc).

<sup>5</sup> Post-suspension inmates in temporary detention.

<sup>6</sup> Among the inmates who refused to participate at Donnacona Institution ( $n = 22$ ), 10 were prospects for recruitment to groups of criminal biker gang members, or hangers-on of these groups; 2 were members of an inmate group, and 5 were informally associated with these groups.

users now (that is, in prison) use drugs to relax or to forget their problems — a significantly higher figure inside prison than outside ( $p = 0.001$ ).

The data on subjects' psychological state indicate a perceived improvement when intoxicated ( $Z = -5.54$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ).

### **Perception of tolerance and availability of psychoactive substances**

During the interview, inmates had to indicate on a scale their perception of how tolerant correctional officers are with regard to alcohol, hard drugs, and soft drugs. Keeping in mind the limitations on an exercise in which inmates simply report their opinions, it does seem that there is greater tolerance for soft drugs than for alcohol or hard drugs. Seventy percent believe guards are "not at all" or "not very" bothered by cannabis, as compared to 6% for hard drugs and 19% for alcohol. Note that it is the respondents at maximum-security institutions who most often believe that the guards are "not at all" bothered by soft drugs (33%), as compared to 17% at minimum-security institutions and 7% at medium-security institutions ( $\chi^2(8) = 29.49$ ,  $p < .000$ ). The percentage for inmates who feel that guards are "not very" bothered show more uniformity among the security levels.

With regard to the inmates perception of their ability to obtain the various substances, 90% versus 77% of inmates reported that it is fairly easy (always easy or sometimes easy) to obtain the alcohol or drugs they want. At minimum-security institutions, 88% of subjects reported that it was either "always" or "sometimes" easy to obtain the drugs or alcohol they want. The figure for medium-security institutions was 73% and for maximum-security institutions 72%. It seems that it is easier to obtain drugs at minimum-security institutions. Although there appears to be less consumption of drugs at minimum-security institutions, the perception of availability suggests that this factor has a considerable influence on inmates. The argument that minimum-security inmates have more to lose appears to have some merit.

### **Limitations and conclusion**

The interpretation and import of the study results are subject to several limitations, specifically as regards the methodological biases in the recruitment of subjects, the measuring instrument and the research topic itself. The results are all based on the subjective reports of the inmates; no additional method was used for corroboration.

In considering the results, it is important to bear in mind the theoretical, methodological, political and social context. Inmates' motivation for using is of the greatest interest because it is part of a continuum that extends from the period prior to incarceration to (probably) the post-incarceration period. Thus it would be preferable not to confine our examination of substance use at penitentiaries to the matter of the imperfect effectiveness of the system for punishing dealers; it would be better to look at it from the point of view of safety but also, and mainly, from a clinical and public health standpoint.

For some years now, it has been common to speak of "harm reduction" to identify certain intervention models that focus on the problems caused by consumption rather than on the consumption itself.<sup>8</sup> The aim of these new approaches is to achieve greater retention, which is increasingly seen as the main factor in successful treatment.<sup>9</sup> Harm reduction does have its limitations, but experience with it shows that it better meets client needs because people are dealt with in terms of "where they are" rather than "where they should be".

The question thus arises whether it is possible to adopt a harm reduction approach to drug consumption in penitentiaries, rather than an approach focused on abstinence and punishment. Is it appropriate to talk about harm reduction in view of the function of incarceration, its punitive role, and the fact that most psychoactive substances are prohibited at penitentiaries? The mission of the correctional services and the current status of drugs in Canada represent limitations which must be considered when looking at solutions to the drug problem other than punishment.

According to Riley,<sup>10</sup> adopting a harm reduction approach in a prison context would require recognition that some substances, such as cannabis, are less harmful to the institution than others because they are less likely to lead to aggressive behaviour. It must also be recognized that drugs are not simply a pharmacological or moral issue; other factors are involved such as infection (from injection or needle sharing), inmate health, and violence induced by drugs or inherent in the drug trade. According to Fuhrer and Nelles,<sup>11</sup> a harm reduction approach is essential if the penal system is to succeed in socializing inmates. Some studies in Australia and Europe have shown the effectiveness of programs based on a harm reduction approach.

Based on the results of our study, it would seem that several aspects of the current situation in federal institutions lend themselves to interpretation in terms of harm reduction: the use of cannabis, the abandonment of more harmful substances, smoking rather than injection, the reduced frequency of consumption and reduced quantities ingested, and the perceived tolerance of cannabis by guards. The

incarcerated user is engaged in a process which may be involuntary but which nevertheless has a considerable affect on behaviour. Since inmates believe it is fairly easy to obtain the substances they want, and since very few of them identify fear of being caught as a factor affecting their consumption, it is plausible to think that the punishments administered cannot by themselves explain the changes in behaviour. Other factors must be playing a role, specifically the motivation to consume and the fact that subjects feel good when intoxicated. Access to this source of "momentum" is of undeniable importance in educating inmates to engage in less risky behaviour, and taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded amounts to adopting a harm reduction strategy.

To conclude, the impact of incarceration on the use of psychoactive substances need not be measured solely by the extent to which inmates abandon drug use (the ideal of abstinence is not the "opposite" of dependency, and it does not represent a cure, according to Jacques<sup>12</sup>); the impact of incarceration can also be measured in terms of the extent to which inmates adopt behaviour that is less harmful to the individual and, implicitly, to society. It would thus be useful, bearing in mind the whole context involved, to reconsider the impact of strategies that are aimed at interrupting the supply of drugs or punishing users. ■

<sup>1</sup> Abstract from Plourde C. (2000). *La consommation de substances psychoactives dans les pénitenciers québécois*, Ph.D. Thesis, Université de Montréal.

<sup>2</sup> 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0P9.

<sup>3</sup> Dan Kaminski, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

<sup>4</sup> Plourde, C., Brochu, S., and Lemire, G. (2001). Drogues et prison : Faits et enjeux actuels, *Revue internationale de Criminologie et de police technique et scientifique*, 2, (in press).

<sup>5</sup> Plourde, C., and Brochu, S. Drogue et alcool durant l'incarcération : Examen de la situation des pénitenciers québécois, *Revue canadienne de criminologie* (submitted for publication).

<sup>6</sup> Plourde, C., and Brochu, S. (2001). Drug use during incarceration: A break into the trajectory, *Substance Use and Misuse*, 37, in press.

<sup>7</sup> There is no point in comparing institutions of differing security levels, because of the degree of uniformity in the consumption profiles "before" and "during" incarceration and because of the small number of inmates who use drugs other than cannabis.

<sup>8</sup> Beauchesne, L. (1997). Legalization of Drugs: Responsible Action towards Health Promotion and Effective Harm Reduction Strategies in *Harm Reduction: A new direction for drug policies and programs* (p. 32-46). In P. G. Erickson, D. M. Riley, Y. W. Cheung, & P. A. O'Hare (eds.), Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press; see the full text of the thesis for other literature.

<sup>9</sup> Brochu, S., and Schneeberger, P. (1999). *L'impact des contraintes judiciaires dans le traitement de la toxicomanie*. Montreal, Quebec: Comité permanent de lutte à la toxicomanie.

<sup>10</sup> Riley, D. (1994). *Drug Use in Prisons*, Correctional Service Canada, p. 152-161.

<sup>11</sup> Fuhrer, A., and Nelles, J. (1997). Harm Reduction in Prison: Aspects of a scientific discussion. In Nelles, J. & A. Fuhrer, (eds), *Harm Reduction in Prison*. Bern: Peter Lang.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques, J.-P. (1999). *Pour en finir avec les toxicomanies : Psychanalyse et pourvoyance légalisée des drogues*, Brussels, De Boeck.