



Research at a glance

Mental health needs of federal women offenders

KEY WORDS: *women offenders, mental health*

Why we did this study

Over the last decade, the proportion of federal women offenders identified at admission as presenting with a mental health problem has significantly increased. An ongoing priority of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) is to improve the capacity to address mental health needs of offenders. It is therefore essential to understand the nature of women's mental health needs. The current study aims to provide an overview of federal women offenders' mental health needs by examining lifetime rates of psychiatric disorders and patterns of psychological distress.

What we did

To assess the mental health needs of women offenders, two measures were used: a screener version of the Computerized Diagnostic Interview Schedule (C-DIS-IV) and the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI)¹.

All women incarcerated at one of CSC's federal institutions between September 2009 and February 2010 were eligible to participate. A sample of 88 women completed the C-DIS-IV (a more comprehensive instrument taking up to three hours) and 217 women completed the shorter PAI.

What we found

The overwhelming majority of the sample had experienced symptoms consistent with a lifetime diagnosis of a psychiatric disorder (94%) on the C-DIS-IV. Moreover, 85% of the sample had experienced diagnostic symptoms of more than one disorder. While elevations were noted for many disorders, the most notable elevations were seen on

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (52%), Major Depressive Episode (69%) and Antisocial Personality Disorder (83%). Associated PAI results mirrored these results. Additional PAI results to emerge concerned Borderline Features (32%) which were markedly elevated in comparison to a community sample.

Substance use disorders also emerged as a significant area of need in the sample. The majority of the sample (80%) had experienced a lifetime dependence on at least one substance. Substance misuse emerged as the most notable area of difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, with difficulties more frequently experienced by Aboriginal women offenders.

What it means

Results demonstrate the widespread and complex mental health difficulties experienced by women offenders and their unique needs in comparison to men. This highlights the need for consistent and adequate resources in both institutions and the community to address these challenges for treatment and successful reintegration. Therefore, it is imperative that women be provided with comprehensive and ongoing mental health assessment and treatment to facilitate this transition.

For more information

Derksen, D., Booth, L., McConnell, A., & Taylor, K. (2012). *Mental health needs of federal women offenders*. Research Report R-267. Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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¹ The C-DIS-IV is a structured interview designed to approximate the presence/absence of major psychiatric disorders as defined by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The PAI is a self-report test of personality designed for the clinical assessment of adults over the age of 18.