



Research in Brief

Comparing Lifetime Substance Use Patterns of Men and Women Offenders

Men and women offenders have varying patterns of substance use, particularly with respect to severity, drug types, and method of use.

Why we did this study

Among those assessed, 70% of men and 77% of women offenders have a substance use issue.^{1,2}

Examining the differences in men and women's substance use patterns will aid in the case management of offenders and in identifying interventions for these offenders.

What we did

The Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA) and the Women's Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA) assess offenders' substance use issues at admission to federal custody. In total, 3,388 men (19% Aboriginal) completed the CASA between April 2013 and March 2014 and 962 women (29% Aboriginal) completed the W-CASA between February 2010 and February 2014.³ Men's and women's results were compared.

What we found

- More women (77%) than men (69%) had an identified substance use issue.
- The same proportion of men and women has a moderate to severe issue with alcohol (5%), but women were more likely than men to have a problem with drugs (32% vs. 25%) or with both (18% vs. 7%). Overall, over half of women (55%) had a moderate to severe problem with any substance, compared to 37% of men.
- On average, both women and men were a similar age when they first tried alcohol (16 vs. 15) and drugs (16).
- Among those who indicated drug use in the 12 months prior to arrest, women were most likely to indicate cocaine/crack (36%) as the drug used most, followed by opioids, including heroin (25%)

and marijuana (19%). In comparison, men were most likely to report marijuana (50%) followed by cocaine/crack (22%) and opioids (14%).

- Almost twice as many men as women (61% vs. 34%) reported using alcohol and drugs in the same day. A similar pattern was evident when examining the same day use of multiple drugs (63% vs. 36%).
- A greater proportion of women than men indicated a history of injection drug use (30% vs. 21%). Among those who did, more than half (53%) of women reported sharing needles compared to 39% of men. In addition, women with a history of injection drug use were more likely to worry about the risks of disease transmission than men (64% vs. 52%).

What it means

Men and women offenders have different patterns of substance use. Prevalence, severity, drug most used, polysubstance/polydrug use, and injection drug use all vary by gender. The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) offers programs of different intensities to both men and women in order to address the diverse levels of treatment need. In addition, CSC ensures that women's programming is gender specific and trauma informed, incorporating women-centered principles to support them in their reintegration. Understanding the differences in substance use patterns for men and women can further inform program delivery as well as highlight additional areas of intervention that may be beneficial, such as the Opioid Substitution Therapy program or public health interventions.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

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¹ Kelly, L. & Farrell MacDonald, S. (submitted). *Lifetime substance use patterns of men offenders* (RIB-14-43). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

² Farrell MacDonald, S. (in press). *Lifetime substance use patterns of women offenders* (RS 14-24). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

³ Men assessed account for 70% of all federal men admitted to custody while women account for 90%.