



Research in Brief

Drug overdose among federally incarcerated men offenders

Severity of substance abuse problem, the use of prescription opiates and length of sentence are associated with overdose among incarcerated male offenders

Why we did this study

Overdose is a frequent phenomenon among drug users.¹ Due to high rates of serious drug problems among the offender population, these individuals may be at increased risk of experiencing both fatal and non-fatal drug overdose.² This study sought to identify key personal characteristics and examine static and dynamic risk factors and socio-demographic factors related to drug overdose among incarcerated men offenders.

What we did

Data were collected for all 92 men offenders who experienced a drug overdose during incarceration from fiscal year 2011/2012 to 2013/2014. Data were extracted from the Offender Management System (OMS) and the Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA). Information regarding the context of the drug overdose incidents was obtained from internal Board of Investigation reports.

What we found

A total of 97 drug overdose incidents occurred during the study period for the group of men offenders (5 offenders experienced 2 overdoses each). Non-fatal drug overdose accounted for 88% of all overdose incidents, with oral drug administration being the most common method of consumption involved in the incidents. As a group, these offenders evidenced serious substance abuse problems; almost half of the offenders had been previously assessed as having substantial or severe problems with substance use.

These prevalence rates are higher than men offenders in general. When the types of drugs involved in the overdose incidents could be identified, opiate-based drugs, including prescription medications, were involved in more than half of the

overdose incidents. In addition, combinations of drugs were also common, and multiple drugs were present in one-quarter of the overdose incidents. The average length of time served by the offenders at the time of the overdose incident was 3 years. On average, overdose occurred after offenders had served approximately 50% of their sentence.

What it means

Severity of substance use among offenders who experienced a drug overdose is concerning, and differs on average from that of men offenders, in general. Thus, severity of substance use may be a factor that can help to flag offenders at increased risk of experiencing a drug overdose during incarceration, especially offenders assessed as having substantial or severe substance use.

Opiate-based drugs, including prescription medications, were involved in the majority of overdose incidents. This suggests that drug overdose is not limited to the use of illicit drugs, but can result from the use of licit, prescription medication as well.

The average length of time served when the overdose incidents occurred suggests that a gradual decrease in physiological drug tolerance during initial years of incarceration may have contributed to the experience of both fatal and non-fatal drug overdose.

For more information

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¹ Coffin, P.O., Tracy, M., Bucciarelli, A., Ompad, D., Vlahov, D., & Galea, S. (2007). Identifying injection drug users at risk of nonfatal overdose. *Academic Emergency Medicine*, 14, 616-623. doi:10.1197/j.aem.2007.04.005

² Weekes, J. R., Thomas, G., & Graves, G. (2004). Substance abuse in corrections: Frequently asked questions. Ottawa: Research and Policy Division, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.