



Research in Brief

Substance Use and Behaviour: The Role of Gender

The associations of substance use severity and scope with institutional and community behaviour differ by gender, with substance use severity more strongly associated with behaviour for women than men.

Why we did this study

Men and women offenders differ in their substance use patterns, but, for both genders, substance use is associated with institutional behaviour and post-release outcomes. There is emerging evidence that the relationship between substance use and these outcomes is stronger for women than for men; this study aimed to examine this possibility among Canadian federally-sentenced offenders.

What we did

The Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA) and the Women’s Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA) was used to assess the scope and severity of offenders’ substance use at admission to federal custody. In total, 10,310 men completed the CASA between January 2011 and February 2014, and 962 women completed the W-CASA between February 2010 and February 2014. Of these, 6,505 men and 587 women were subsequently released into the community.

The outcomes examined were institutional behaviour (institutional offences and segregation placements), discretionary releases, and post-release outcomes. Analyses focused on the severity of substance use (none, low, moderate, substantial, severe) and the type of substance used most problematically (none/low, drug only, alcohol only, drug/alcohol).

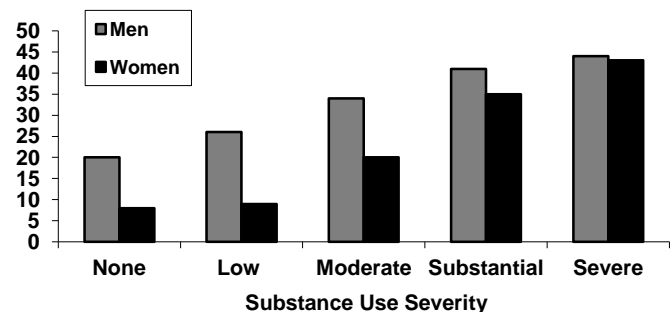
What we found

Overall, women were less likely than men to have institutional offences, segregation placements, a non-discretionary release, and to return to custody. More interesting, however, was the differences across levels of substance use severity. Specifically, the gap between women and men was greatest for those with less severe substance use, and diminished in a roughly linear fashion until the most severe level. Results were consistent across outcomes; given space constraints, only the patterns specific to post-release returns to custody are shown.

Results by type of user were less consistent. The gap between women and men is most apparent when examining those in the none/low substance use

group. However, when considering women and men who primarily use drugs, either alone or in combination with alcohol, rates for men and women are nearly identical for all outcomes except discretionary release.

Substance Use Severity and Returns to Custody, by Gender



What it means

It appears that gender may moderate the relationship of substance use severity with institutional offences, segregation placements, discretionary release, and returns to custody. Findings support the Correctional Service of Canada’s practice of providing men and women with gender-specific correctional programming of various levels of intensity, which are designed to address offenders’ substance use issues as part of a multi-target approach. Further, understanding the differences can aid in the case management of these offenders, both in the institution and in the community.

For more information

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