



Research Snippet

Substance Abuse Problem Severity, Treatment Readiness, and Response Bias among Incarcerated Men

KEY WORDS: *drug abuse problem severity, treatment readiness, motivation, response bias*

What it means

Offenders with severe substance abuse (SA) problems were aware of their SA problems and ready for treatment. This finding was true for both reliable and unreliable responders. In other words, those who needed help appeared to be the most ready to receive it. However, offenders with moderate to low level SA problems appeared less ready to accept treatment and were more likely to deny having a SA problem. This finding suggests that a focus on treatment readiness (TR) for this group could be beneficial, particularly for those with moderate level problems who may require intervention while incarcerated.

What we found

Approximately 72% of offenders in the sample had a SA problem, with 31%, 16%, and 25% classified as having a low, moderate, and severe SA problem, respectively. Offenders with a severe SA problem were most likely to endorse TR variables (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentages of offenders who endorsed listed variables by SA Severity Level

| TR Variable | SA Severity Level | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-----|--------|
| | Low | Mod | Severe |
| Recognizes SA problem | 35% | 80% | 95% |
| Needs to change SA habits | 39% | 82% | 94% |
| Needs help to change SA habits | 17% | 62% | 89% |

The sample was divided into reliable and unreliable responders based on Paulhus Deception Scale (PDS) results. More reliable responders endorsed TR variables than unreliable responders. For example, 73% of reliable responders acknowledged that they had a SA problem, while just 48% of unreliable responders endorsed this variable. When problem severity was considered, differences between reliable and unreliable responders were reduced, especially for those with severe SA problems (Table 2).

Why we did this study

Readiness for SA treatment is associated with both more severe SA problems, as well as staying in treatment longer. This suggests that individuals with severe SA problems may recognize their need for treatment and be receptive to interventions that address this need. The present analyses examined the

relationship between TR and severity of SA problems among federal men offenders, while also considering the potential impact of response bias.

Table 2: Percentages of offenders who endorsed listed TR variables by SA severity level and reliability of responses

| TR Variable | SA Severity Level | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-----|--------|
| | Low | Mod | Severe |
| Reliable Responders | | | |
| Recognizes SA problem | 40% | 83% | 95% |
| Needs to change SA habits | 41% | 84% | 94% |
| Needs help to change SA habits | 20% | 66% | 90% |
| Unreliable Responders | | | |
| Recognizes SA problem | 26% | 71% | 92% |
| Needs to change SA habits | 36% | 75% | 92% |
| Needs help to change SA habits | 13% | 51% | 83% |

What we did

The Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA) is administered to men offenders upon reception into federal custody in Canada to determine the existence and severity of a SA problem. It includes several standardized alcohol and drug screening instruments, the PDS,¹ and items related to TR.² The PDS measures response bias, with individuals classified as either reliable or unreliable, based on their pattern of PDS responses. The sample was composed of 13,081 federally incarcerated men who completed the CASA between 2002 and 2009.

For more information

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

You can also visit the website for a full list of research publications.

Prepared by: Marguerite Ternes & Sara Johnson

¹ Paulhus, D. L. (1998). *Paulhus Deception Scales user's manual*. Toronto, Ontario: Multi-Health.

² Only those assessed with substance abuse problems answer questions related to TR.