

Early substance use and its impact on adult offender alcohol and drug problems

The link between substance abuse and offending is widely acknowledged and has been of considerable interest to both researchers and correctional agencies.⁽²⁾ In fact, current data indicate that 55% of federal offenders reported that they were under the influence of alcohol, drugs or both on the day they committed the offence(s) for which they are now incarcerated.⁽³⁾

However, it is likely that current offender alcohol and drug problems begin during their younger years and, along the way, become entwined in their lifestyle, and social and behavioural patterns.⁽⁴⁾ This article investigates the origins of adult offender substance abuse problems through an examination of a number of characteristics of their early alcohol and drug use.

More specifically, the article examines offender responses to questions about substance use prior to 18 years of age within the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument⁽⁵⁾ (a comprehensive assessment tool that examines the nature and severity of substance use). The responses were compared with the offenders' present substance abuse problems as measured by the Alcohol Dependence Scale⁽⁶⁾ and the Drug Abuse Screening Test⁽⁷⁾ - both of which are standardized substance abuse measures. **Sample description** The sample for this study was made up of 8,850 male offenders in Correctional Service of Canada institutions across Canada. These individuals completed the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument as part of their assessment after admission to an institution. The average offender age at the time of the assessment was 30.7 years (ranging from 18 to 75).

Of these offenders, 48% reported no alcohol problems (as measured by the Alcohol Dependence Scale), 36.4% reported low-level alcohol problems, 8.7% reported intermediate-level alcohol problems and 6.9% reported severe problems with alcohol.

The Drug Abuse Screening Test further indicated that 51% of the offenders had no drug problems, 20.2% had low-level drug problems, 12.9% had intermediate-level drug problems and 15.9% had severe drug problems.

To determine the overall level of alcohol and drug problems, offenders were categorized according to the highest level of alcohol or drug problem they reported. For example, if an offender had a severe alcohol problem and a low-level drug problem, he was considered have a severe substance abuse problem. The results indicated that 31% of offenders reported no substance abuse problems, 32% reported low-level problems, 17% reported intermediate-level problems and 20% reported severe problems. **Alcohol, drugs and criminality before the age of 18** The average age at which the offenders first tried alcohol was 14. Of those that tried alcohol, 29% (2,455) were preteens (12 or younger) when they first tried alcohol, 55% (4,582) were teenagers (between the ages of 13 and 17) and 16% (1,370) were adults (18 or older). This means that 84% of those who had tried alcohol reported that they had had their first drink by the age of 18.

Of these offenders, 59% admitted to drinking alcohol regularly (at least once a week) - 13% began drinking alcohol regularly during their preteen years and 87% began drinking regularly as teenagers.

The average age at which offenders first tried either prescription or nonprescription drugs for nonmedicinal purposes was 16. More specifically, 65% of the offenders who had tried drugs did so before their 18th birthday - 18% (1,347) were preteens when they first tried drugs and 47% (3,519) were teenagers.

Further, approximately 75% of the offenders who tried drugs before the age of 18 used drugs regularly - 16% of these offenders began using drugs regularly during their preteen years and 84% began using drugs regularly as teenagers.

As for crime, approximately 58% of the overall sample reported that they had been involved in illegal activities before the age of 18. However, offenders who first tried alcohol in their preteen years became involved in illegal activities at a significantly younger average age (15.8 years) than those who first tried alcohol as teenagers (18.8 years) or as adults (24.9 years).

The result patterns were identical when first regular use of alcohol, first use of drugs and first regular use of drugs was examined. This suggests that offenders who used alcohol or drugs at an earlier age also became involved in illegal activities at an earlier age.

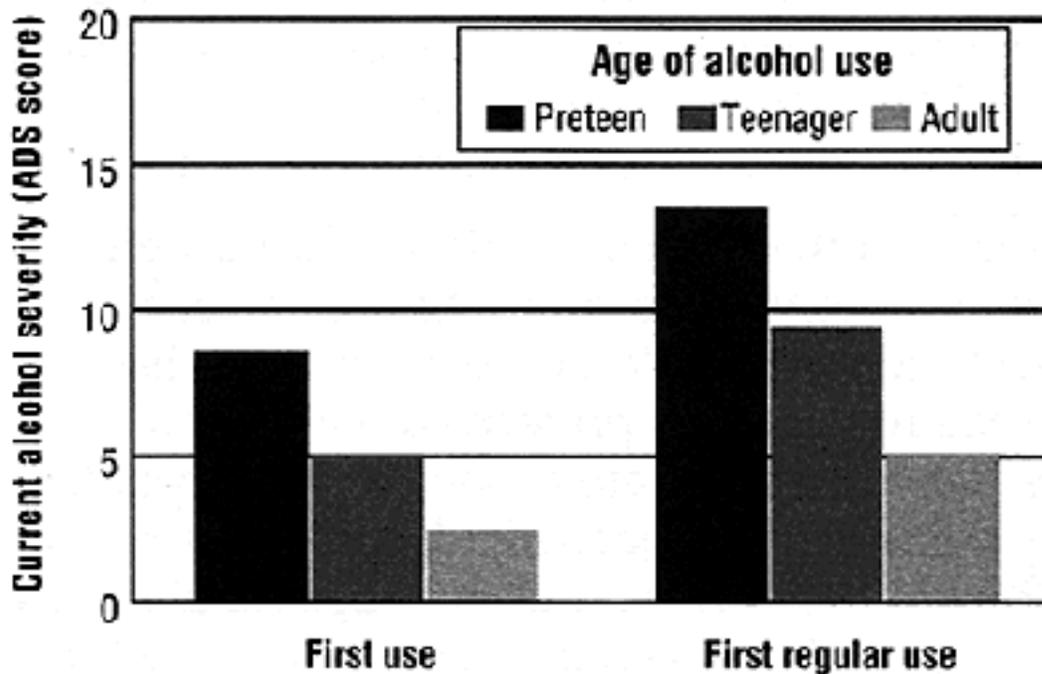
A second set of analyses focused on the 58% of the sample who were involved in illegal activities before the age of 18, to determine if age of first conviction was related to age of first alcohol or drug use, and first regular use of these substances.

Almost 90% of this subsample had been convicted of a crime as a young offender. Not surprisingly, the offenders who first used alcohol or drugs at a very early age had been convicted of a crime at a significantly younger age than offenders who first used alcohol or drugs as a teenager or as an adult. For example, offenders who were younger than 13 when they first tried alcohol had an average first conviction age of 15.6 years, compared with 17.5 years for those who first tried alcohol as teenagers and 20.8 for those who first tried alcohol as adults.

Once again, the result patterns were identical when first regular use of alcohol or drugs was examined. Taken together, the results indicate a strong interrelationship between early involvement in substance use and criminal activity. Severity of adult substance abuse There was a strong relationship between the age at which offenders first tried alcohol and the severity of their adult alcohol problems. For example, offenders who first tried alcohol as preteens had higher average alcohol severity scores on the alcohol assessment measure than did offenders who first tried alcohol as an adult (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Current Alcohol Severity Level by Age of First Use and First Regular Use



Almost 27% of the offenders who tried alcohol as a preteen developed serious (intermediate to severe) alcohol problems, as did 14% of the offenders who first tried alcohol as a teenager. By contrast, only 5.7% of the offenders who first tried alcohol as an adult consequently developed serious alcohol problems.

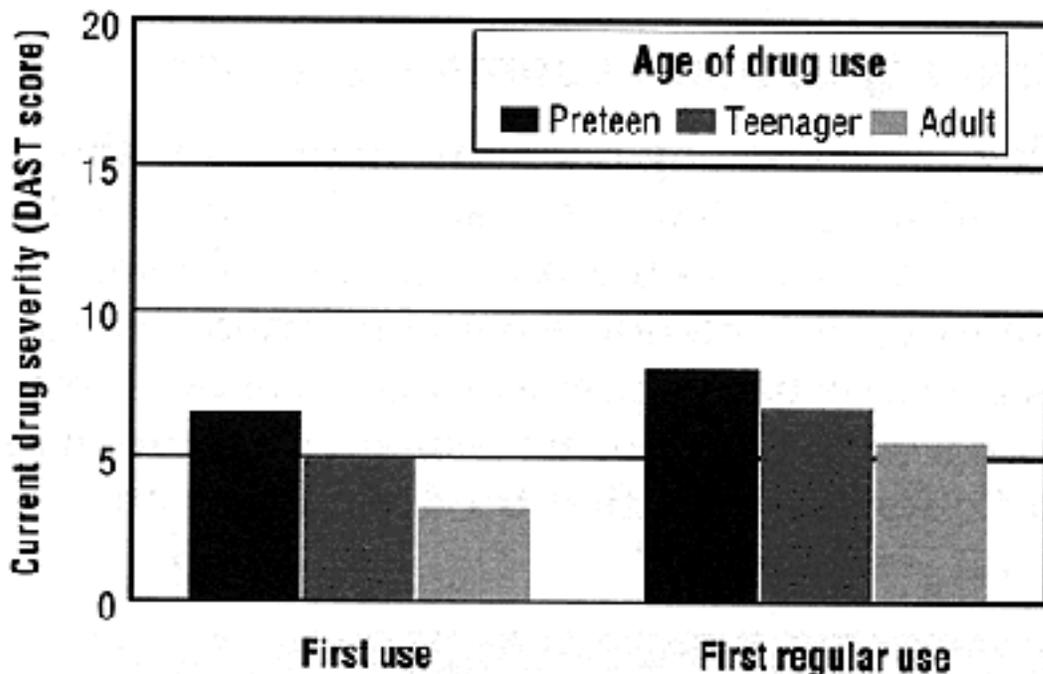
Further, 43% of offenders who used alcohol regularly as a preteen developed serious alcohol problems as adults, as did 31% of those who used alcohol regularly as teenagers. In contrast, just 13% of offenders who began using alcohol regularly as an adult developed serious alcohol problems.

Similar results were obtained in analyzing offender drug use. For example, the younger the offender when he first tried drugs, the higher the average score on the drug assessment instrument (see Figure 2).

More specifically, 51% of the offenders who first tried drugs during their preteen years developed serious (intermediate to severe) drug problems as adults, as did 37.7% of those who first tried drugs as teenagers. In contrast, just 20% of those who first tried drugs as adults developed serious drug problems.

Figure 2

Current Drug Severity Level by Age of First Use and First Regular Use



Once again, the result patterns duplicated themselves when examining regular use. Approximately 64% of the offenders who used drugs regularly as preteens developed a serious (intermediate to severe) drug problem by the time they reached adulthood, as did 52% of offenders who used drugs regularly as teenagers. However, only 30% of those who did not begin using drugs regularly until adulthood developed serious drug problems. A long-term problem We were struck by the sheer magnitude and consistency of offender substance abuse problems - the offenders appeared to have both extensive and longstanding alcohol and drug problems.

More important, the results of this study clearly indicate that offenders who are first exposed to alcohol and drugs at an early age run a higher risk of developing serious substance abuse problems as adults (compared with those offenders who began using these substances at a later age). This pattern is even more dramatic when you look at offenders who began to use alcohol or drugs regularly during their formative years.

The knowledge that offenders who begin using alcohol and drugs regularly at young ages risk developing serious problems as adults emphasizes the need for accurate identification (through assessment) of young people whose substance use is problematic. Early intervention may prevent the continuation and increased severity of substance abuse problems.

However, there is (at least) one limitation to this study. The data were based strictly on offender recollection of alcohol and drug use. The results, therefore, may be dependent on the accuracy of recollections of events that, in some instances, occurred many years earlier. As well, offender recall may be influenced by their knowledge and understanding of their present substance abuse problems.

Regardless, this study can be added to the growing body of empirical evidence that emphasizes the extent

of offender substance abuse problems. It also emphasizes the tremendous number of resources needed to deal with offender substance abuse.

- (1) Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 4B-340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9.
- (2) J.J. Collins, *Drinking and Crime: Perspectives on the Relationships Between Alcohol Consumption and Criminal Behaviour* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1981). See also R. R. Ross and L.O. Lightfoot, *Treatment of the Alcohol-abusing Offender* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1985).
- (3) J. R. Weekes, S. A. Vanderburg and W. A. Millson, unpublished Correctional Service of Canada data, 1994.
- (4) Considerable research has focused on the development of substance abuse problems during adolescence. See J. Donovan, R. Jessor and L. Jessor, "Problem Drinking in Adolescence and Young Adulthood: A Follow-up Study," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 44 (1983).
- (5) The instrument was originally developed by Dr. Harvey Skinner in collaboration with the Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario. See H. A. Skinner, *The Computerized Lifestyle Assessment* (Toronto: Multi-Health Systems, 1994). The Service adapted it for use with offenders and added a number of sections to measure the relationship between drug and alcohol use and criminal activity. See D. Robinson, E. Fabiano, F. I. Porporino, W. A. Millson and G. Graves, *A Guide to the Use of the Computerized Lifestyle Assessment Instrument* (Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada, 1992).
- (6) J.L. Horn, H. A. Skinner, K. Wanberg and F.M. Foster, *The Alcohol Use Questionnaire* (Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, 1984).
- (7) H. A. Skinner, *The Drug Abuse Screening Test* (Toronto: Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario, 1982).