



Research at a glance

A Comparison of Drug-Related and Sexual Risk-Behaviours in the Community and Prison for Canadian Federal Inmates

KEY WORDS: *drugs, sex, change in risk-behaviours, community, penitentiary, inmate survey*

Why we did this study

Correctional Service Canada (CSC) conducted this study to obtain information about inmates' health risk-behaviours, use of health programs, and knowledge of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV). This report focuses on how inmates' risk-behaviours change between the last six months in the community, prior to the current incarceration, and past six months in penitentiaries. This information will help CSC to better address the health needs of inmates.

What we did

In collaboration with inmates and the Public Health Agency of Canada, CSC developed a self-administered questionnaire that asked inmates about their risk-behaviours, such as drug use and sexual activity, and use of health programs offered by CSC. A random sample of men and all women were invited to complete the questionnaire. Inmate participation was voluntary. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, an external private company administered and retained the anonymous questionnaires, and provided CSC with an anonymous database for analysis. In total, 3,370 inmates across Canada completed the questionnaire in 2007.

What we found

Non-injection drug use and injection drug use declined in penitentiaries compared to the community.

Men who injected drugs in penitentiaries were more likely to share needles than men who injected drugs in the community. This was not entirely due to the riskiest injectors continuing their risky practices as they moved from the community to penitentiaries. Rather, some men were more likely to share needles in penitentiaries than in the community.

The proportion of inmates reporting sex and specific sexual behaviours declined in penitentiaries compared to the community except for sex with a partner of the same sex. The proportion of men reporting sex with other males remained stable across environments while the proportion of women reporting sex with females increased in penitentiaries compared to the community.

The bulk of inmates who reported unprotected sex in penitentiaries also reported unprotected sex in the community except when examining unprotected casual sex among women. Specifically, the majority of women who reported unprotected sex with a casual partner in penitentiaries did not engage in the behaviour during their last months in the community.

What it means

Generally, the results indicate that the rates of drug- and sex-related risk-behaviours decline in penitentiaries compared to the community. Men who inject drugs while incarcerated, however, may be injecting in a riskier fashion thereby increasing their risk for blood-borne infections. To prevent, control and manage infectious diseases, CSC offers prevention, health education, testing and treatment programs as well as harm-reduction measures, such as bleach and condoms. The results of the survey are being used to assess the need for enhancing current health programs.

For more information

Zakaria, D., Thompson, J., Borgatta, F. (2009). *A Comparison of Drug-Related and Sexual Risk-Behaviours in the Community and Prison for Canadian Federal Inmates*. Research Report R-207. Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.

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