

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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National Prevalence of Mental Disorders among Federally Sentenced Women Offenders:
In Custody Sample

Rates of mental disorder among women offenders are very high; many of these women will require mental health services.

Why we did this study

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) requires information on the prevalence of major mental health disorders among federal offenders to plan for appropriate services. CSC research found higher rates of mental disorder among federal men offenders than in community samples. Rates of mental disorder among women offenders may be particularly high.

What we did

The study determined the prevalence rates of major mental disorders among women offenders currently in custody in CSC facilities. Using the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM Axis I and Axis II Disorders (SCID-I and SCID-II) the following disorders were assessed: 1) mood; 2) psychotic; 3) substance use; 4) anxiety; 5) eating; 6) pathological gambling; 7) Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD); and 8) Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Rates were obtained for both lifetime and current prevalence (i.e., the past month). From a list of women in custody every third woman was approached to participate in the diagnostic interview from February 2016 to October 2016. In total, 154 women from across the five regions provided consent and were included.

What we found

Most women met criteria for a current mental disorder (79.2%); among Indigenous women the rate was 95.6%. When women who only had APD or substance abuse disorders are not included rates remain high at over 60%. The highest prevalence rates were for alcohol and substance abuse disorders (lifetime) and for current anxiety disorders. The most common anxiety disorder was for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) with almost one-third of the women meeting criteria. Co-morbid diagnoses were common; for example, 64% of the women in custody have another mental disorder in combination with a personality disorder and 82% had another mental disorder in addition to a substance abuse disorder. Global Assessment of Function (GAF) scores indicate that 67% of the women with a disorder are functioning with no to minimal or moderate impairment. Seventeen percent of federally sentenced women suffer from major mental

illness defined as a diagnosis for any one of the following: major depressive disorder, bi-polar I, bi-polar II disorder, or any psychotic disorder.

Prevalence Rates for Current Diagnosis of Major Mental Disorders among Incarcerated Women Offenders (N=154)

Disorder	%
Any disorder	79.2
Mood disorders	22.1
Psychotic disorders	4.6
Alcohol/substance use disorders ^a	76.0
Anxiety disorders	54.2
Eating disorders	11.0
Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)	33.3
Antisocial Personality Disorder (APD)	49.4

Note. Percentages may not add to 100% as participants could meet the diagnostic criteria for more than one category.

^a Diagnoses of substance abuse disorders, APD and BPD rely on lifetime estimates.

What it means

Women offenders in custody have very high rates of mental disorder including high lifetime rates of alcohol and substance use disorders and APD. Many women in CSC require interventions to address their mental health problems. Findings from the study will inform management strategies for mental health services offered by CSC.

For more information

Brown, G., Barker, J., McMillan, K., Norman, R., Derkzen, D., & Stewart, L. (2018). *National prevalence of mental disorders among federally sentenced women offenders: In custody sample* (R-406). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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