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Research at a glance

Women Offenders, Substance Use, and Behaviour

Both the severity of women's substance use and the types of substance used prior to admission are linked to their subsequent institutional behaviour and success in the community after release.

Why we did this study

Although four-in-five women offenders in Canada have substance use problems, little research has focused on the variability in their substance use and its relationship to correctional outcomes. Given that consideration of such variability has been shown to improve treatment success in community samples, a study was undertaken to examine the relationships of both substance use severity and type of user with institutional and post-release behaviour.

What we did

Participants were 962 Canadian women offenders admitted to a federal women's institution from February 2010 to February 2014 who completed a computerized assessment of their substance use problems. Women were categorized based on the severity of their substance use issue and on the type of substance that was most problematic for them (none, alcohol, drugs, or alcohol and drugs).

What we found

Both substance use severity and type of user were found to be associated with the women's offence, risk, and substance use characteristics. As severity increased, so did the proportion of women who had committed a violent offence and who had served a previous federal sentence. Not surprisingly, severity of problem was also associated with a more extensive history of substance use, as well as use of a wider variety of drugs.

In terms of the type of substance user, women in the alcohol and drug group were more likely than those in the other groups to be convicted of a violent offence, have served a previous federal sentence, and present more elevated risk. The breadth of their substance use history was also more extensive.

Both substance use severity and type of user were also associated with institutional behaviour and post-release outcomes. Women with more severe

substance use problems and those who used drugs (either as their sole problematic substance or together with alcohol) were more likely to be found guilty of disciplinary offences, to be placed in segregation, and to be returned to custody after their release, even after accounting for possible covariates.

What it means

Overall, results emphasize the importance of considering the differences in substance use among women offenders. The Correctional Service of Canada offers women offenders correctional programs that address behaviours directly or indirectly linked to their crime – which may include substance use. The programs aim to help women understand the impact of their particular problematic behaviours and to enhance their ability to live balanced and crime-free lives. Conforming to this principle, at CSC, women offenders participating in correctional programs create individual self-management and healing plans focused on the behaviours they identify as problematic in their own lives and offence cycles, including substance use.

For more information

Farrell MacDonald, S., Gobeil, R., Biro, S. M., Ritchie, M. B., & Curno, J. (submitted). *Women offenders, substance use, and behaviour* (Research Report R-358). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#) or contact us by phone at (613) 995-3975.

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