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Research *at a glance*

Distinguishing Characteristics of Substance Abuse Program Completers and Non-Completers

KEY WORDS: *substance abuse programs, substance abuse program non-completion, motivation to treatment, men offenders*

What it means

This study found that offenders who do not complete a substance abuse program (SAP) for offender reasons (e.g., personal reasons, dropped out, suspended) have a higher risk profile than both offenders who do not complete for administrative reasons (e.g., transferred, released, program cancelled), and program completers. Identifying offenders at higher risk for SAP drop out and tailoring interventions to facilitate their program completion could help reduce program attrition and reduce risk of recidivism. Additionally, given that SAP non-completers appear to be a heterogeneous group, future studies examining SAP effectiveness may benefit from taking these differences into account.

What we found

Almost 85% of offenders in our sample completed their program. Of the 15% who were non-completers, 13% did not complete for offender reasons, and 2% did not complete for administrative reasons. Compared to completers, non-completers for offender reasons were:

- younger;
- less educated;
- more likely to report an unstable employment history;
- less motivated for intervention;
- had higher levels of risk of recidivism;
- more likely be serving their current sentence for having committed a violent crime;
- more likely to incur a serious charge while incarcerated; and
- more likely to have participated in a high-intensity SAP rather than a moderate-intensity SAP.

Compared to non-completers for administrative reasons, non-completers for offender reasons were serving longer sentences, had lower motivation for treatment, were more likely to be serving their current sentence for having committed a violent crime, and were more likely to have participated in a high-intensity SAP rather than a moderate-intensity SAP.

Why we did this study

SAPs are offered to federally sentenced offenders who are assessed as having an alcohol or other drug problem upon admission to a federal institution. These

programs have been shown to be effective in reducing recidivism for offenders who complete all components of the intervention; however, a notable proportion of offenders entering SAPs do not complete the program in its entirety. SAP attrition is linked to higher levels of reconviction (e.g., McMurran & Theodosi, 2007¹). The goal of this study was to determine if offenders who do not complete SAPs have distinct characteristics from those who complete. This information could be used to target interventions to increase rates of completion and long-term success.

What we did

We examined data from 4,592 federally sentenced men offenders who participated in SAPs between 2005 and 2010 and who had completed the Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse. The objective of the study was to verify the extent to which SAP non-completers for offender reasons and for administrative reasons differ from each other and from SAP completers on a variety of individual characteristics and behaviours.

For more information

Richer, I., Lemelin, M., Ternes, M. (2014). *Distinguishing characteristics of substance abuse program completers and non-completers* (Research Report, R-326). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service 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.

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

¹ McMurran, M., & Theodosi, E. (2007). Is treatment non-completion associated with increased reconviction over no treatment?. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 13(4), 333-343.