



Research Snippet

The Cultural, Social and Substance Use Histories of Male Offenders Enrolled in the Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program (AOSAP)

KEY WORDS: *Aboriginal, prison, intervention, characteristics, culture, social history, substance abuse*

Impetus

Correctional populations have high rates of family and substance use problems which impact on their ability to reintegrate into society. The Aboriginal Offender Substance Abuse Program (AOSAP) is a culturally specific alternative for Aboriginal male offenders aimed at addressing their substance abuse issues. It uses a blended approach that integrates Aboriginal cultural healing traditions with contemporary best practices in substance abuse treatment. An examination of the cultural, social and substance use histories of those enrolled in AOSAP provides a better understanding of these offenders and issues which may impact their program participation.

What we did

We examined self-report data from the AOSAP pre-program interview for 316 offenders¹: 64% of our sample was enrolled in the high intensity version (AOSAP-H), while 36% was enrolled in the moderate intensity version (AOSAP-M). Data from all regions and institutions offering AOSAP were included in the sample.

What we found

With respect to early background, half of the sample (49%) indicated they had been in the care of the child welfare system, with 71% having spent time in foster care and 39% in a group home.

The examination of family history characteristics showed that 61% had family members who spent time in prison. In addition, 73% reported a familial history of involvement with the residential school system with 18% of the sample indicating that they themselves were residential school survivors.

Those enrolled in AOSAP responded that they first tried alcohol at the average age of 12 and drugs at 13. Almost all (96%) indicated that substance use was related to their current offence: 85% reported that they were under

the influence at the time of their offence and 29% committed their current offence to get drugs/alcohol. Substance abuse was evident in their family history as well, with 88% reporting that they had a family member with alcohol/drug issues and 40% having a current partner with a substance abuse problem.

Three quarters (75%) of the sample reported they belonged to an Aboriginal Band/First Nation and 54% reported they spoke an Aboriginal language. Half of these offenders identified Cree as the language spoken. With respect to their introduction to Aboriginal cultures, 32% indicated they were first introduced to Aboriginal cultural teachings in prison.

The majority of the enrollees (94%) stated they currently participate in Aboriginal cultural activities. Twenty-two percent indicated they participate in cultural activities in an attempt to avoid using alcohol/drugs and 16% reported that they would go to an Elder for help with their substance abuse problems.

What it means

Aboriginal cultures offer a way of being, knowing, perceiving, behaving and living in the world that is vital for healing of Aboriginal peoples (AFN et al, 2012). An examination of the family background, substance use history and cultural involvement of offenders enrolled in AOSAP supports the importance of providing specialized, culturally-based interventions aimed at addressing the distinct needs of these offenders.

Reference

AFN, NNAPF & Health Canada. (2012). *Honouring our strengths: A renewed framework to address substance use issues among First Nations People in Canada*. Retrieved from: <http://nnadaprenewal.ca/>

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¹ Data from AOSAP-H enrollees were compiled from 2007 – 2010; data from AOSAP-M enrollees were compiled from 2009 – 2010.