



Research at a glance

Awareness and Use of Harm Reduction Measures for Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) in Canadian Penitentiaries

KEY WORDS: *risk-behaviours, harm-reduction, sexually transmitted infections (STIs); condoms; dental dams; lubricant; inmate survey*

Why we did this study

Correctional Service Canada (CSC) conducted the 2007 National Inmate Infectious Disease & Risk Behaviours Survey. In part, this survey was conducted to understand the sexual risk behaviours of inmates and their access to harm reduction items for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) available at CSC. With this information CSC can better address the sexual health issues of inmates and decrease the transmission of STIs among inmates and their sexual partners.

What we did

In collaboration with inmates and the Public Health Agency of Canada, CSC developed a self-administered questionnaire. 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

Although a minority of inmates (17% of men; 31% of women) reported sexual activity, virtually all of these inmates engaged in sexual risk-behaviours that increase their risk of acquiring STIs. Women, especially younger women, those who served fewer years of their present sentence, single people, Aboriginal men, and men in maximum security, were all more likely than their counterparts to report sex in the penitentiary only (i.e., no sex reported in private family visits). Women were also more likely than men to engage in several types of risky sexual behaviours.

Most inmates (90%) were aware of CSC's policy about access to harm reduction items. Among sexually active inmates, 57% tried to get at least one harm reduction item; however, of these inmates, 35% reported access issues. The primary problem was a maintenance issue (i.e., dispensers that were broken, empty, or provided damaged items). Majority of inmates who had sex in private family visits did not report access issues.

Demand for harm reduction measures was higher among inmates reporting high risk sexual behaviours.

What it means

Due to the high rates of STIs among inmates and the normative practice of unprotected sex, women, especially younger women, those who served fewer years of their present sentence, single people, Aboriginal men, and men in maximum security should be considered at high risk for STIs. Targeted interventions that decrease the risk-behaviour or increase the use of harm reduction items may decrease the risk of STI transmission among these groups.

Furthermore, it may be useful to target visitors who participate in private family visits about the association between unprotected sex and STIs, and the harm reduction measures available at CSC. This may limit the transmission of infectious disease between penitentiaries and communities.

It appears that harm reduction items for STIs are being accessed among those at high-risk for STIs; however, CSC could increase the availability of these items by decreasing access issues related to maintenance and having to ask staff. An increase in the availability of these items may increase their use.

For more information

Thompson, J., Zakaria, D., & Borgatta, F. (2010). *Awareness and Use of Harm Reduction Measures for Sexually Transmitted Infections in Canadian Penitentiaries R-209* Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.

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