



Research in Brief

Comparison of Characteristics across Types of Substance Users

Results show that certain substance users, such as opioid, cocaine/crack, and to a lesser extent, other drug users have more severe substance use histories and overall needs.

Why we did this study

Research has shown differences between offenders who use alcohol, other drugs, or both in regards to criminal offending, institutional adjustment, and post-release outcomes. Examining the characteristics of offenders who use specific types of substances, such as opioids and crack/cocaine, may assist with their case management and appropriate referral for interventions.

What we did

The Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (CASA) is used to assess federal offenders' substance use issues upon admission. In total, 6,170 men offenders (24% Aboriginal) were assessed between April 2012 and March 2014. Offenders were categorized by their most frequently used substance in the 12 months prior arrest, with the alcohol-only users categorized last.¹ Comparisons between criminogenic and substance use indicators were made across specific substance types used.

What we found

Opioid, cocaine/crack, and, to a lesser extent, other drug users demonstrated the most elevated levels of substance use issues, risk, and need.

- Opioid (46%), cocaine/crack (38%), and other drug (35%) users were more likely to be federal recidivists.
- Almost half of opioid users had a low reintegration potential compared to 32% of marijuana users and 20% to 25% of alcohol-only users, offenders with no lifetime substance use, or those with no use in the 12 months prior to their arrest.
- Almost three-quarters of opioid users, and two-thirds of other drug and cocaine/crack users were rated as having high overall dynamic need.

¹ The categories were marijuana ($n = 1847$), cocaine/crack ($n = 857$), opioids ($n = 489$), other drugs (e.g., LSD, amphetamines, steroids, etc.; $n = 493$), alcohol-only ($n = 1555$), no substance use 12 months prior to arrest ($n = 757$), and no lifetime substance use ($n = 172$).

- Those with no lifetime substance use, no substance use in the 12 months prior arrest, alcohol-only, and to a lesser extent, marijuana users were least likely to have the following needs: associates, substance use, and community functioning.
- Opioid (93%) and cocaine/crack users (83%) were more likely to have moderate to severe substance use issues compared to 9% of alcohol-only users.²
- Past injection drug use (IDU) was most frequently reported by opioid users (62%) compared to 10% to 27% of other substance users. Among those with IDU, opioid and cocaine/crack users were most worried about disease transmission.
- Opioid, cocaine/crack, and other drug users were most likely to indicate a link between substance use and their current offences (about 83% compared to 33% to 59%).

What it means

Offenders' criminogenic and substance use characteristics differ based on the substance used most prior to arrest; offenders who indicated opioid or cocaine/crack had more severe use histories and overall needs. Variations in substance use patterns may assist the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) to identify and refer offenders to targeted public health interventions, such as Opioid Substitution Therapy and infectious disease screening, as well as assist in identifying community supports to meet the needs of these offenders upon release.

For more information

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² Overall, 13% to 21% of offenders with specific drug types used in the 12 months prior arrest also had a moderate to severe alcohol problem.