

## CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

## Men Offenders with a History of Substance Use During a Prior Incarceration

*The majority of men offenders with a history of substance use during a prior detention or incarceration were assessed as having an identified substance use issue. Cannabis was reported as the substance used most often in the twelve months prior to arrest, as well as the substance most commonly used during incarceration.*

**Why we did this study**

Substance use during incarceration may present important health and safety concerns for offenders, such as the transmission of blood borne infections via injection drug use and needle sharing, the potential risk of overdose, and involvement in the drug subculture. Understanding the substance use patterns of offenders who use during incarceration may assist in identifying potential strategies for reducing substance use or for minimizing the impacts of this use on the correctional environment. This study explored the substance use patterns of men offenders who reported substance use during a prior incarceration.

**What we did**

The Computerized Assessment for Substance Abuse for men (M-CASA) assesses pre-incarceration substance use patterns of men offenders upon admission to federal custody. Of all men offenders who completed the M-CASA between 2006 and 2021, 24% ( $N = 8,993$ ) indicated substance use during a prior period of incarceration. Basic demographic information, as well as patterns of substance use for this sub-population were examined.

**What we found**

Approximately two-thirds of men offenders with a history of substance use while incarcerated were White (65%), while nearly a quarter were Indigenous (25%), 6% were Black, and 4% belonged to other ethnocultural groups. Offenders assessed in the Quebec region were more likely to report prior substance use during incarceration (34%), followed by the Ontario (28%), Prairie (21%), Atlantic (9%), and Pacific (8%) regions.

Overall, 93% of men had an identified substance use issue. A quarter (25%) of men had low severity substance use issues, 21% had moderate, 28% substantial, and 19% severe (68% moderate to severe). About two-thirds of men reported a link between their substance use and criminal offending (68%).

In the twelve months prior to their arrest, nearly two-thirds of offenders used multiple substances in the same day (polysubstance use; 63%). Cannabis (35%) was the most common substance used in the 12 months prior to arrest, followed by cocaine/crack (22%), and opioids (16%). In comparison, the three main substances used during a prior

incarceration were cannabis (85%), alcohol (33%), and opioids (26%) (multiple substance types could be indicated).

Examination of the custodial location reported for substance use during a prior incarceration revealed that men offenders were more likely to use in detention/remand centres (58%). Medium security institutions were also common sites of prior incarceration substance use (39%), followed by maximum security institutions (23%), youth custody (14%), and minimum security institutions (12%). A low proportion of offenders (8%) indicated prior use in a community-based residential facility.

More than one-third (38%) of men indicated a lifetime history of injection drug use (IDU); in comparison, 13% reported IDU during a prior incarceration. Among those indicating prior incarceration IDU, nearly two-thirds (62%) reported sharing needles during that incarceration.

**What it means**

The majority of men offenders with a history of substance use during a prior incarceration were assessed as having a substance use issue, including a history of poly-substance use and IDU. Cannabis was reported as the substance used most often in the twelve months prior to arrest, as well as the substance most commonly used during incarceration. However, opioid use was also evident among this group. Although a small proportion of these offenders reported IDU during a prior incarceration, many indicated sharing needles, which underscores the need for on-going harm reduction initiatives in institutions such as prison needle exchange programs. Finally, prior incarceration substance use was reported most often in detention/remand centres and medium security institutions, highlighting that these settings may have to deal with a variety of substance use related challenges.

**For more information**

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