

Substance Use Patterns of Women Offenders across Ethnocultural Groups

Indigenous and White women were more likely to have substance use issues and a higher proportion indicated a link between their substance use and offending.

Why we did this study

The women federal offender population decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic, although the proportion of Indigenous women continued to rise to almost 50%. Black women accounted for 3% of federal women offenders while 9% were from other ethnocultural groups.¹ Substance use continued to be a salient criminogenic need for women offenders; however, little is known about the substance use patterns for women across various ethnocultural groups.

What we did

Women’s pre-incarceration substance use patterns are assessed at admission to federal custody using the Women’s Computerized Assessment of Substance Abuse (W-CASA). Between June 2010 and December 2021, 3,579 women were assessed. Substance use indicators were compared across White, Indigenous, Black, and all other ethnocultural groups.

What we found

Indigenous women were more likely than the other groups to have an identified substance use issue (96% versus 49% to 81%, see Table). Black women were least likely to have a moderate to severe substance use issue (13% versus 28% to 78%).

Examination of lifetime substance use patterns indicate that at least three-quarters of all women report having ever drunk alcohol; however the proportions indicating ever using drugs differed across groups (29% of Black women to 89% of Indigenous women, see Table). A greater proportion of Indigenous (75%) and White (53%) women indicated a link between their substance use and criminal offending.

Substances used in the 12 months prior to arrest varied across ethnocultural group. Indigenous women were most likely to indicate alcohol, opioid or central nervous system (CNS) stimulant use. White women were most likely to indicate alcohol, opioids, and cocaine/crack use. About half of women in the other ethnocultural group did not use, but about one-third indicated alcohol use. For Black women, almost two-thirds did not use, with one-quarter indicating alcohol use. History of injection drug use (IDU) and poly-substance were most common among Indigenous and White women, as was substance use during pregnancy.

Table: Examination of Substance Use Indicators across Ethnocultural Groups

Characteristic	Ethnocultural Groups (%)			
	White (N = 1,834)	Indigenous (N = 1,170)	Black (N = 253)	Other Groups (N = 322)
Overall Substance Use Severity				
None	19.4	4.2	51.4	39.1
Low	24.5	17.7	35.6	33.2
Moderate to Severe	56.1	78.1	13.0	27.7
Ever drank	92.1	96.6	78.3	78.3
Ever used drugs	75.6	89.2	29.3	48.1
Link between substance use and offending	53.4	75.2	11.5	30.1
Substance Used Most-12 months prior arrest				
Alcohol	31.7	49.0	26.1	30.8
Opioids	13.2	11.7	2.4	5.3
Cocaine/Crack	10.6	8.0	3.6	5.9
CNS Stimulants	10.3	10.1	2.0	3.7
Cannabis	6.7	5.4	4.0	6.8
CNS Depressants	1.4	1.5	0.0	0.3
Other drugs	0.3	0.5	0.0	0.6
Did not use	25.9	13.9	62.1	46.6
History of Injection Drug Use	28.3	44.3	4.7	11.5
Poly-substance use	47.7	66.5	11.9	27.3
Used during pregnancy (among women with prior pregnancies)	22.2	35.5	7.7	12.1

What it means

Women’s substance use patterns differ across ethnocultural groups, which may have implications for the provision of in-custody substance use interventions and drug interdiction practices.

For more information

For questions, please email [Research Branch](#).

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¹ Motiuk, L. & Keown, L-A. (2022). *Pandemic era impacts on the federal custody population profile: Women* (RIB 22-09). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada (CSC).