

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Women Offenders' Substance Use over Time: 2010 to 2021

Over the time period examined reports of lifetime drug use, the use of CNS stimulants in the 12 months prior to arrest, injection drug use, and poly-substance use increased among women offenders.

Why we did this study

Substance use issues are prevalent among federal women offenders.^{1,2} Previous research demonstrated that federal men offenders' substance use patterns have changed over time.³ Therefore, this study was conducted to examine changes in women offenders' substance use patterns during an almost 11-year study period.

What we did

Substance use patterns of federal women offenders prior to incarceration are assessed by the W-CASA at intake. From June 2010 to December 2021, a total of 3,579 women offenders were assessed (33% Indigenous). For analysis purposes, year of assessment was categorized into two-year periods.⁴

What we found

The majority of women offenders reported lifetime alcohol use (91% to 94%) over the time period examined. Reports of lifetime drug use increased from 67% to 82% from 2010 to 2021.

In 2010-2011, 85% of women were assessed as having a substance use issue compared to 86% in 2020-2021, indicating that the proportion of women with substance use issues remained constant over time. However, an examination of substance use severity⁵ demonstrated that the proportion of women with low severity issues decreased from 35% to 21% over the same period, while women assessed as having a moderate to severe substance use issue increased by 15% (50% to 65%). The largest increase occurred among women with a moderate substance use issue (13% to 23%).

In 2010-2011, 45% of women offenders indicated being under the influence during their offence or committing their offence to support their substance use, and this increased to 63% in 2020-2021. Among those with a moderate to severe substance use issue, alcohol only use (5% to 2%) and both alcohol and drug use (14% to 12%) decreased

slightly while drug use only (31% to 46%) increased over time.

In 2010-2011, the three most used substances in the 12 months prior to arrest were crack/cocaine (20%), alcohol (14%), and opioids (12%). In 2020-2021, they were alcohol (53%), central nervous system (CNS) stimulants (11%), and opioids (10%).

During the study period, injection drug use (IDU) increased by 11% (23% to 34%) and poly-substance use (using alcohol and/or multiple drug types in the same day) increased from 40% to 55%.

Among women who had experienced pregnancy, the proportion indicating substance use during pregnancy increased from 21% to 25% during the study period. Of women who reported substance use during pregnancy, alcohol only (31% to 26%) and both alcohol and drug (43% to 17%) use decreased, while drug use only increased (26% to 58%) over time. The most commonly used drugs during pregnancy remained constant over time: crack/cocaine, cannabis, and opioids.

What it means

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) offers various supports and interventions for offenders with substance use issues. These findings emphasize the continued need for substance use related supports for women offenders. The increase in injection drug use among women reinforces the importance of the provision of harm reduction initiatives, such as the prison needle exchange program.

For more information

Please e-mail the [Research Branch](#).

You can also visit the [Research Publications](#) section for a full list of reports and one-page summaries.

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¹ Farrell MacDonald, S. (2014). *Lifetime substance use patterns of women offenders* (RIB-14-24). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

² Farrell MacDonald, S. (2014). *Comparing substance use patterns of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women offenders* (RIB-14-26). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

³ Cram, S. & Farrell MacDonald, S. (2022). *Federal men offenders' substance use patterns over time: 2006 to 2019* (RIB-20-06). Ottawa, ON: CSC.

⁴ Calendar year information was collapsed into two-year increments, covering June 1, 2010 to December 31, 2021.

⁵ Substance use severity was categorized into none, low, moderate, substantial, and severe. Moderate to severe may indicate a substance use disorder.

