

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences of Canadian Federal Offenders: Available information and Correctional Outcomes

The majority of men and women offenders have had exposure to adverse childhood experiences, and these experiences are associated with a number of negative institutional and community outcomes.

Why we did this study

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to instances of abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction that are linked to a number of negative outcomes relevant to the offender population, including substance use, engagement in violent behavior, offending and incarceration, among others. Ten ACEs have been identified in the literature: emotional abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional neglect, physical neglect, violent treatment towards mother, household mental illness, household substance use, parental separation or divorce, and having an incarcerated household member (CDC, 2019).

Research suggests that offenders were exposed to ACEs at a much higher rate than the general population. Knowledge of offenders' exposure to ACE factors can aid in the development and implementation of case management strategies and interventions that are responsive to the needs of the offender population.

What we did

This study aimed to identify the prevalence of ACEs in the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC) administrative data and to explore their association with both institutional and community outcomes. The sample included a release cohort of offenders released onto community supervision between September 28, 2009 to October 9, 2015 with at least 30 days of supervision. This resulted in a final sample of 22,096 men and 1,264 women.

In total, four ACE categories were identified through administrative data, including: (1) abuse (physical, sexual, or emotional) or neglect (emotional or physical); (2) witness to intimate partner violence in childhood or mother treated violently; (3) substance misuse in household; and (4) incarcerated household member.

What we found

The findings of this study suggest that the majority of offenders (80% men; 86% women) experienced at least one ACE. The most common ACE among men and Indigenous women was the childhood experience of substance misuse in the household.

The most common ACE among Non-Indigenous women was abuse or neglect in childhood. Notably, Indigenous men and women had the highest rates of exposure to ACEs across all categories, and were more likely to have exposure to multiple ACEs than other ethnocultural groups.

Increased exposure to ACEs was associated with a number of negative institutional and community outcomes, such as substance use, institutional charges, institutional incidents (both as an instigator/associate or victim), self-injurious behaviour, correctional program dropout, and revocations with and without an offence. In some cases, the association between institutional and community outcomes varied across gender and ethnocultural group.

What it means

This research shows that ACEs are prevalent in the federal offender population, and these experiences are associated with a number of negative outcomes. CSC has the ability to provide interventions to offenders to mitigate further adverse outcomes associated with ACE, such as utilizing trauma-informed interventions. Although CSC already utilizes trauma-informed interventions, a broader trauma-informed correctional program model may be beneficial to the majority of offenders.

For more information

Sheahan, C., & Wardrop, K. (2023). *The adverse childhood experiences of Canadian federal offenders: Available information and correctional outcomes* (Research Report R-445). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, or for other inquiries, please e-mail the [Research Branch](#).

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