

Mismatch Between Risk and Protection: Illicit Drug Use and Harm Reduction Service Utilization in Canadian Federal Prisons

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Background: Drug use is well established in prisons, with rates far exceeding those in the general population. People in prison who use drugs are at heightened risk of blood-borne infections, underscoring the need for prison-based harm reduction services (HRS). We aimed to understand individual characteristics among people who use drugs in prison and determine whether those most in need of HRS are accessing them.

Methods We conducted a secondary analysis of data from Correctional Service Canada's 2022 cross-sectional study using a stratified random sampling approach of individuals incarcerated in one of the 43 federal prisons for at least six months. Descriptive analyses were performed to identify factors associated with drug use and HRS utilization within the past six months among people who use drugs in prison.

Results: In total, 1,392 participants were included. Drug use in the past six months was reported by 27.4% of participants. Drug use was most prevalent among younger individuals (aged <25–29 years; aOR = 13.5, 95%CI:7.31–26.0) compared to those aged ≥60 years, with decreasing odds with increasing age. Male sex (aOR = 1.72; 95%CI:1.10–2.76) compared to female sex and Indigenous ethnicity (aOR = 1.47; 95%CI:1.10–1.96), compared with White ethnicity were associated with increased odds of drug use. Among participants reporting drug use, 62.2% reported using at least one HRS and female sex (aOR = 11.8; 95%CI:2.56–113) was associated with greater utilization of HRS than male sex. There was no statistically significant association of HRS use with age or ethnicity.

Conclusion: Drug use and engagement in HRS were not consistently aligned, as populations at highest risk were underrepresented in service utilization or did not consistently demonstrate statistically significant differences in HRS use. Further research is warranted to better elucidate the relationship between age, ethnicity, and HRS engagement, particularly given limitations in statistical power.

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