

## Prevalence of substance use among incarcerated pregnant women in New South Wales

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**Introduction and Aims:** Little is known about pregnant women in custody. Data on the prevalence of substance use among pregnant women or their needs in this setting are lacking. We sought to determine the prevalence and characteristics of women with substance use histories who present to prison pregnant in NSW.

**Design and Methods:** A retrospective review of prison medical health records was completed for pregnant women entering NSW custodial settings between January, 2020 and June, 2021.

**Results:** We identified 158 prison receptions comprising 141 incarcerated pregnant women (mean age 28.8 years (SD: 5.72), 42% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Most women reported recent use of more than one substance (88.7%,) and 36.2% had injected drugs. The most commonly used substances were (meth)amphetamine (54.6%), cannabis (39%) and opioids (24.1%). We found discrepancies between drug problems self-reported during reception screening on entry to prison and self-reported drug use collected during detailed D&A assessments. Only 11% of pregnant women had no change in their self-reported substance use history. Most (87.3%) women described their current pregnancy as unplanned (2.8% planned, 9.9% not recorded). Half (52.2%) of the women were unaware they were pregnant before incarceration.

**Discussions and Conclusions:** These findings highlight the high prevalence of substance use in incarcerated pregnant women and that many women are unaware of their pregnancy prior to incarceration. Further research is needed to understand the barriers to disclosing substance use and accessing health care while in custody and in the community.

**Implications for Practice or Policy:** Given the risk of unplanned pregnancies for women with substance use issues, ensuring timely and appropriate drug and alcohol assessment and management is crucial to reducing harm for both the mother and foetus. Findings also highlight the urgent need for improved access to contraception for these women.