

Women with a History of Sexual Offending: An Examination of Substance Use and Mental Health Needs

Austin Lam¹, Sirui Wu², Amanda Butler³, Michael C. Seto⁴, Maureen Olley⁵, Leigh Greiner⁵, Tonia L. Nicholls^{1,6}

¹Department of Psychiatry, UBC, ²Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, UBC, ³Faculty of Health Sciences, SFU, ⁴Forensic Research Unit, University of Ottawa's Institute of Mental Health Research at The Royal, ⁵BC Corrections, Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General, ⁶BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services

Background

Women who sexually offend are a complex needs population. A small proportion (2.2%) of sexual offences reported to police are committed by women (Cortoni et al., 2017).

While studies have reported the elevated prevalence of substance use and mental health needs among women with a history of sexual offending (Fazel et al., 2010), this population remains **poorly understood** (Cortoni & Stefanov, 2020).

Objectives

To compare women with **sexual offences (SO)** with women with **strictly non-sexual offences (NSO)** across sociodemographic, clinical (substance use and mental health needs), and risk-related variables (self-harm, suicide, violence).

Methods

Sample: All women admitted to BC provincial correctional centres from January 2009 to September 2017. $N = 5,185$ women: 79 women had SOs, and 5,106 women had NSOs.

Data Sources:

- Jail Screening Assessment Tool (JSAT; Nicholls et al., 2005)
- BC Corrections Operations Network (CORNET)

Measures: The JSAT is a validated structured professional judgment tool that screens for mental health and management needs, completed by trained screeners.

CORNET is the primary repository for data relating to an individual's involvement with BC Corrections.

Results

A small proportion (1.5%) of women had a sexual offence.

Women with SOs were on average 35.1 years old; the majority were Indigenous (58.2%), 32.9% Caucasian; and 77.2% reported having children.

Most of the women with SOs reported some form of family support (55.7%) or social support (67.1%); 5.1% received financial support; 31.7% were homeless or unstably housed; and 49.4% finished high school.

- Compared to women with NSOs, the women with SOs
- More likely to be Indigenous $X^2(1, N=5,185) = 13.11, p < .001, V = .05$;
 - But not significantly different across other sociodemographic variables.

Substance Use / Treatment / Mental Health	Women who Sexually Offended (SO)	Women with Strictly Non-Sexual Offences (NSO)	Cramér's V ; p
Alcohol	30.4% (24)	21.9% (1,116)	$p = .09$
Marijuana	20.3% (16)	11.3% (576)	$V = .03; p < .05$
Heroin	21.5% (17)	26.3% (1,342)	$p = .41$
Cocaine	15.2% (12)	18.9% (966)	$p = .49$
Methamphetamine	22.8% (18)	25.0% (1,276)	$p = .75$
Past Substance Abuse Treatment	53.2% (42)	55.8% (2,849)	$p = .64$
Substance Use Only	25.3% (20)	32.1% (1,637)	$p = .49$
Mental Health Needs Only	17.7% (14)	15.7% (801)	
Concurrent Disorders	38.0% (30)	31.6% (1,614)	

Mental Health Needs and Risk Items

Mental Health	SO	NSO	Cramér's V ; p
Mood / Anxiety	40.5% (32)	32.6% (1,666)	$p = .17$
Personality Disorder	8.9% (7)	4.7% (238)	$p = .14$
Past Head Injury	46.8% (37)	26.0% (1,326)	$V = .06; p < .001$
Mental Health Treatment	69.6% (55)	60.6% (3,095)	$p = .13$
Suicide/Self-Harm Issues	17.7% (14)	12.7% (650)	$p = .25$
Violence Issues	59.5% (47)	43.1% (2,201)	$V = .04; p < .01$

Conclusions

Women with a history of SOs represent an understudied group with unique needs. Consistent with prior literature, a small proportion of women committed sexual offences.

Our results suggest that women with SOs have extensive substance use and mental health needs.

Women with SOs demonstrated greater **marijuana abuse** and were more likely to have a **past head injury** compared to women with NSOs. Extant research on this population reports no differences on substance use. These findings inform prevention and treatment targets for this understudied group.

References

- Cortoni, F., Babchishin, K. M., & Rat, C. (2017). The proportion of sexual offenders who are female is higher than thought: A meta-analysis. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 44*(2), 145-162.
- Cortoni, F., & Stefanov, G. (2020). Female sexual offenders. In J. Proulx, F. Cortoni, L.A. Craig, & E.J. Letourneau (Eds.), *The Wiley handbook of what works with sexual offenders: Contemporary perspectives in theory, assessment, treatment, and prevention* (pp. 279-29). Wiley.
- Fazel, S., Sjöstedt, G., Gram, M., & Långström, N. (2010). Sexual offending in women and psychiatric disorder: A national case-control study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 39*, 161-167.
- Nicholls, T. L., Roesch, R., Olley, M. C., Ogloff, J. R. P., & Hemphill, J. F. (2005). *Jail Screening Assessment Tool (JSAT): Guidelines for mental health screening in jails*. Burnaby, BC: Mental Health, Law, and Policy Institute, Simon Fraser University.

Funding: Dr. T. Nicholls' CIHR Foundation Grant
 Questions? Email: austinl5@mail.ubc.ca