

ABSTRACT

Objectives. This study examined the self-reported needs of women in jail who indicated a need for drug abuse services.

Methods. A total of 165 interviews were conducted of women held in a large, urban county jail in Ohio in May 1999.

Results. Drug-abusing women were more likely to report a need for housing, mental health counseling, education, job training, medical care, family support, and parenting assistance when released from jail.

Conclusions. The provision of drug abuse treatment referrals to women in jail may not break the continual cycle of drug use and incarceration if other needs cannot be addressed. (*Am J Public Health*. 2001;91:798–800)

Women in Jail: Is Substance Abuse Treatment Enough?

Sonia A. Alemagno, PhD

That the number of women in America's prisons is increasing has been well documented in the literature since the early 1980s.¹ A growing population of concern includes women who are incarcerated in local jails. There are more than 3000 short-term confinement jails in the United States housing more than half a million inmates, including offenders convicted of misdemeanors serving relatively short sentences, felony offenders awaiting assignments to long-term confinement facilities, and sentenced offenders serving time in local jails owing to overcrowded prisons. Since 1990, the nation's jail population on a per capita basis has increased over a third. On average, the adult female jail population has grown 7.0% annually since 1990, while the adult male jail population has grown 4.5%. Although women compose only 11% of the US jail population, the rate of incarceration is rising faster among women than among men, and female arrestees are more likely than male arrestees to be found drug positive. It is estimated that about two thirds of female arrestees use illicit drugs.¹

Since jails historically have held predominantly men, facilities and services have not been developed to meet the special needs of women in jail.^{2,3} Women offenders with histories of substance abuse present complex clinical profiles with a range of medical, psychological, educational, vocational, and social problems.⁴⁻⁷ Effective programs for substance-abusing women need to address physical concerns,^{7,8} psychological issues,^{5,8} vocational preparation,^{5,9-11} family issues,^{6,9,12} child care issues,¹¹ and educational needs.^{3,6} Studies have been primarily based on the observations of clinicians. Few studies, however, have examined women's self-reported hierarchy of needs.

Methods

During May 1999, interviews were conducted with 165 women incarcerated in a large, urban county jail in Ohio. We recruited women to the study by asking for volunteers within the female housing unit. There was no opportunity to perform random sampling owing to considerable transition and court appointments; therefore, this study reports on a convenience sample. Because of transition within this unit and the anonymity of respondents, we are unable to report the participation rate. There was no compensation other than coffee and snacks provided at the time of the interview. Research assistants in a private setting just outside the jail pod conducted interviews.

Respondents were asked questions about demographics, services used in the past year, and their general history. By means of a checklist and a series of open-ended questions, respondents described services that they would need when they were released from jail. The checklist categories had been developed in a prior project on the basis of open-ended responses. Women were asked to rank their reported needs, including those offered in the open-ended questions. The objective of the interview was to determine what self-perceived spectrum of needs the women in jail would elaborate. For this study, women requesting a

The author is with the Institute for Health and Social Policy and the Department of Public Administration and Urban Studies, University of Akron, Ohio.

Requests for reprints should be sent to Sonia A. Alemagno, PhD, Institute for Health and Social Policy, University of Akron, Polsky 5th Floor, Akron, OH 44325-1915 (e-mail: salemagno@aol.com).

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need for drug abuse services were compared with women who did not.

Results

Demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Most respondents were African American (72%) and aged 30 to 40 years. More than half of the women had graduated from high school (56%). Almost all of the women reported having children.

The sample included women in all phases of the judicial process. Most women had considerable experience within the criminal justice system. Only one quarter reported that this was their first time in jail. The women had been charged with a spectrum of offenses.

In this sample, the 50% of women (n=83) who reported a need for substance abuse

services were compared with the women who did not. There were no significant differences between the 2 groups by age, race/ethnicity, or education.

Table 2 indicates that women who self-reported the need for drug treatment services were more likely to report fair or poor health status and having been hospitalized in the past year than were women who did not report a drug problem. Further, although almost half of the treatment-seeking women had been in some kind of substance abuse treatment in the past year (44%), they were much more likely to report continued family problems due to substance abuse. These women were more likely to have been in jail multiple times in the past year, to have a drug-related charge, and to be unemployed.

The treatment-seeking group in this sample was more likely to need housing, medical care, education, mental health services, family support, and parenting assistance. The need most often expressed was for housing (84%). In fact, when asked to self-report the most important need on release, 40% of the treatment-

seeking group indicated a priority need for housing (vs 26% in the comparison group).

When we further examined housing status, women in the treatment-seeking group were more likely to indicate a lack of stable housing (staying in a hotel, boarding house, on the street or homeless, or in a shelter) before their arrest (17%, vs 7% in the comparison group). Women in the treatment-seeking group also reported more transition in their living situation in the past year (35% moved 3 or more times in the past year, compared with 10% in the comparison group). More than one quarter of the treatment-seeking group indicated that they did not know where they would go on being released from jail (vs 11% in the comparison group).

Discussion

There are several limitations to the study. The sample reflects a convenience sample selected from 1 county jail; the project should

TABLE 1—Demographic Characteristics of Respondents to Survey of Self-Reported Needs of Women in Jail: Ohio, 1999

Characteristic	%
Race/ethnicity	
African American	72
White	23
Other	5
Age, y	
18–29	30
30–39	48
40–49	19
≥50	3
Education	
<9th grade	3
Some high school	41
High school graduate	56
No. children	
0	<1
1	23
2	23
3	24
≥4	29
Arrest charge	
Drugs	32
Parole/probation violation	23
Theft	14
Assault	10
Warrants	4
Solicitation	4
DUI	3
Contempt of court	2
Murder	1
Other charges	7
Times in jail	
First time	25
2	19
3–5	29
>5	27

Note. DUI = driving under the influence (of alcohol). Percentages adjusted for missing data.

TABLE 2—Profile and Needs of Women in Jail Requesting Drug Abuse Services: Ohio, 1999

	Need Drug Abuse Services, % (n=83)	Do Not Need Drug Abuse Services, % (n=82)	Total (n=165)	χ^2	df	P
Profile						
Self-reported health fair or poor	57.4	34.1	45.7	13.96	2	.003*
Used substance abuse services in past year*	43.9	16.0	30.1	15.04	1	.000*
Used mental health services in past year	32.1	22.0	27.0	2.13	1	NS
Hospitalized in past year	32.9	19.5	26.2	3.81	1	.038*
Ever arrested for drinking/drugs	85.4	31.7	58.5	48.64	1	.000**
Family problems due to drinking/drugs	85.4	36.6	61.0	41.00	1	.000**
Unemployed at time of arrest	63.4	28.0	45.7	20.67	1	.000**
Drug charge at arrest	43.9	19.5	31.7	13.66	1	.000**
Assault or theft charge at arrest	13.4	32.7	20.7	4.52	1	.005*
In jail 3 or more times in past year	22.0	3.7	12.8	15.90	2	.001**
Self-Reported Needs on Release						
Housing/place to stay	84.1	45.1	64.6	27.32	1	.000**
Medical care	80.5	51.9	66.3	14.96	1	.000**
Education/training	62.0	37.0	49.4	9.99	1	.001**
Mental health services	61.5	24.4	42.5	22.57	1	.000**
Family support	51.9	34.6	43.2	4.93	1	.019*
Parenting assistance	46.9	22.0	34.4	11.26	1	.001**
Legal help	45.1	35.4	40.2	1.62	1	NS

Note. NS = not significant. * $P < .05$; ** $P < .01$.

be replicated across a number of county jails with a larger sample. Further, this study did not validate the self-reported needs of the women. The results may indicate local issues.

Even so, there are possible treatment policy implications. Drug policy in the United States appears to be shifting from a “get tough on crime” emphasis (incarcerating drug offenders) to expansion of drug treatment opportunities. However, even if services are offered in jail or within the community when the women are released from jail, the women in this sample may not be able to follow through on referrals without stable housing or a legal source of income when they are released. Many women had already been through drug treatment within the past year only to find themselves in jail again.

This study supports previous work indicating that successful drug treatment of released jail detainees must go beyond addressing pathology alone. Efforts to manage the cases of women released from jail will require careful consideration of the *multidimensional* needs of these women. Most of the women had children and reported having no health insurance. A treatment referral may seem like a low priority to women faced with challenges such as homelessness.

Recent US drug policy has recommended treatment for drug-dependent offenders in all

phases of the criminal justice system. Is treatment enough? From the responses of the 165 women interviewed, the answer appears to be no. Regardless of the matrix of services offered, treatment must serve as a bridge to a new way of life, likely to include a new living arrangement. □

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