

Higher return to prison for women without drug abuse programs

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Female prisoners who did not participate in a drug treatment program after their release were 10 times more likely to return to prison within one year than other prisoners, a new study has found.

More than one-third of those [women](#) were sent back to [prison](#) within six months, according to the national study led by Flora Matheson, a medical sociologist at St. Michael's Hospital.

The findings, published in the June issue of the [American Journal of Public Health](#), underline the importance of post-release treatment programs for prisoners with substance abuse problems, Matheson said.

Since women are particularly vulnerable to drug relapse in the first two or three weeks after release, it's important to begin the community care programs as soon as possible, she said.

"We don't want these women re-offending, we want them to remain in the community and be successful," said Matheson, a scientist in the hospital's Centre for Research on Inner City Health who collaborated on the study with the Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada.

Matheson evaluated the effectiveness of the Community Relapse Prevention and Maintenance program, which was developed by CSC in 2003 for women on parole from six federal prisons. At the time the study was conducted, the community portion of the program consisted of

20, two-hour group sessions offered on a weekly basis. Cocaine was the most common drug that had been used by women in the program (58.9 per cent), followed by crack cocaine (44.3 per cent).

Women who were not exposed to the program were more than 10 times more likely to be back in prison within 52 weeks.

Women make up five per cent of the federal [prison population](#) in Canada, although that number has tripled in the past 20 years. About one-third of them were convicted of drug-related offenses.

Matheson noted that drug-using offenders are twice as likely to have unstable housing in the community, are less able to manage stress, are hospitalized more often for mental health issues and have higher recidivism rates than do non-substance-abusing women. Many of them have experienced trauma in their lives, such as childhood, physical or sexual abuse, or domestic abuse, which may have contributed to their substance abuse and mental health issues.

She said there are many barriers to women who want to participate in post-release treatment programs, including childcare and high unemployment rates that make it difficult to afford transportation. Canada is such a vast country geographically that it's difficult for CSC and other correctional jurisdictions to offer [treatment programs](#) in every community.

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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