

Regular article

Gender differences in outcomes from prison-based residential treatment

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Abstract

This study examines gender similarities and differences in background characteristics, the effectiveness of treatment, and the predictors of post-release outcomes among incarcerated drug-using offenders. The sample of 1,842 male and 473 female treatment and comparison subjects came from a multi-site evaluation of prison-based substance abuse treatment programs. Three-year follow-up data for recidivism and post-release drug use were analyzed using survival analysis methods. Despite the greater number of life problems among women than men, women had lower three-year recidivism rates and rates of post-release drug use than did men. For both men and women, treated subjects had longer survival times than those who were not treated. There were both similarities and differences with respect to gender and the other predictors of the two post-release outcomes. Differences in background characteristics and in factors related to post-release outcomes for men and women suggest the plausibility of gender-specific paths in the recovery process. © 2003 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

In the 1990s, an increase in the prosecution and conviction of prisoners with current or past substance abuse problems (Kassebaum, 1999) created pressure to expand the use of prison-based drug treatment programs. Recent attention to female offenders, and, more specifically to female substance abusing offenders, is due to the increasing incarceration rate of females. Although women represent a much smaller portion of imprisoned persons than men, the rate of incarceration of women has increased much faster than that of men for the past two decades. Between 1980 and 1989, the female population of State and Federal prisoners increased by 202%, compared to an increase of 112% among men (Greenfeld & Minor-Harper, 1991). In addition, between 1990 and 2000 the annual rate of growth of female inmates averaged 8.1% while the average for men was 6.2% (Beck, 2001).

The growth of drug abuse programs for women indicates increased attention to women's drug dependency. Since

1980 the Federal government has funded more than 100 demonstration treatment programs for women with substance abuse problems. The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT) created a women's and children branch and some of its activities include the administration of 65 residential treatment programs for women and children and 12 outpatient programs for parenting and pregnant women (Mactas, 1998). More recently, CSAT awarded grants for seven demonstration programs to treat women with substance abuse problems in correctional settings (e.g., prisons and jails; Kassebaum, 1999).

The growth of programs for women has been accompanied by a body of literature on gender differences in the etiology of drug use, in specific drug treatment needs, and in the recovery process. Despite the growth of drug treatment programs for women and an expanding literature on gender issues, there have been few studies where researchers have evaluated outcomes of treatment programs designed specifically for women (Landry, 1997). Indeed, most of the treatment evaluation literature is devoid of any important analysis of gender effects. An understanding of gender similarities and differences in responsiveness to treatment is important to help practitioners design programs that are

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most effective for women. Such knowledge will help integrate the literature on gender differences among drug abusers, on gender-specific treatment needs and on differences in the process of drug abuse onset and desistance. To begin addressing the gap on gender issues in the drug treatment outcome literature, this paper compares and contrasts men and women within the context of a multi-site prison-based drug treatment evaluation.

1.1. Previous research on gender differences

Previous research on gender differences among drug users has consistently found that women have a greater number of life problems than men. The few studies of incarcerated female drug users mirror the findings of non-incarcerated users (Henderson, 1998; Langan & Pelissier, 2001; Peters, Strozier, Murrin, & Kearns, 1997). Furthermore, many of these gender differences parallel gender differences found within non-offender populations. Women are more likely to have employment problems, mental health problems, and family problems (Byqvist, 1999; Chatham, Hiller, Rowan-Szal, Joe, & Simpson, 1999; Davis & DiNitto, 1996; Fiorentine, Anglin, Gil-Rivas, & Taylor, 1997; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Griffin, Weiss, Mirin, & Lange, 1989; Inciardi, Lockwood, & Pottieger, 1993; Kingree, 1995; Marsh & Miller, 1985; National Evaluation Data and Technical Assistance Center [NEDTAC], 1997; Robles et al., 1998; Stevens & Glider, 1994; Weiss, Martinez-Raga, Griffin, Greenfield, & Hufford, 1997). Women are also more likely to have experienced trauma in the form of physical and sexual abuse (Bloom, Lind, & Owen, 1994; Browne, Miller, & Maguin, 1999; Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Kilpatrick, Resnick, Saunders, & Best, 1998; Moras, 1998; Peters et al., 1997; Robles et al., 1998; Snell & Morton, 1991; Taylor, 1996). Criminal behavior is the only life area where women have been found to have a less serious problem than men. One study found that women are less likely to have a prior record and that their prior records are less serious (Langan & Pelissier, 2001).

Not only do women show different life problems, but the reasons women use drugs and the process by which they become drug users differs. Women are more likely to use drugs to alleviate either physical or emotional pain (Corcoran & Corcoran, 2001; Langan & Pelissier, 2001). Furthermore, women are more likely to have been initiated into drug use as well as antisocial behavior by male partners (Griffin et al., 1989; Henderson, Boyd, & Mieczkowski, 1994; Hser, Anglin, & McGlothlin, 1987; Kassebaum, 1999; Robles et al., 1998).

Much of the literature on women's treatment needs states that female substance users require specialized, gender-specific services. However, as noted by Henderson (1998), attempts to understand and address incarcerated women's drug treatment needs have been patched together from a variety of indirect sources. In discussing treatment needs, some authors cite the type of service needed, such as

specialty health care (Hagan, Finnegan, & Nelson-Zlupko, 1994). Many identify the types of issues to be addressed in treatment as including sexual and/or physical abuse (Drabble, 1996; Kassebaum, 1999; Landry, 1997; Morash, Bynum, & Koons, 1998; Root, 1989), the need for vocational training (Drabble, 1996; Landry, 1997; Reed, 1985; Wellisch, Prendergast, Anglin, & Owen, 1993), child care or parenting issues (Doshan & Bursch, 1982; Drabble, 1996; Kane-Cavaiola & Rullo-Cooney, 1991; Koons, Burrow, Morash, & Bynum, 1997; Reed, 1985; Wallen, 1998; Wellisch, Prendergast et al., 1993), and relationships with partners (Laudet, Magura, Furst, & Kumar, 1999; Wallen, 1998). Lastly, some discuss the style of the program such as the need to focus on support, skill-building, and strength-identifying rather than on confrontation, as is the case with many programs for men (Landry, 1997).

Despite the literature on gender differences in background characteristics, the etiology of drug use and drug treatment needs, and the proliferation of programs for women, the evaluation literature addressing gender issues is very limited. The limited literature on treatment outcomes within community-based settings is fraught with conflicting findings with respect to gender. Some analysts have reported that women have a greater reduction in drug use and criminal activity following treatment (Hagan et al., 1994; Schildhaus et al., 1998; Weiss et al., 1997), while others have found either no difference (Anglin & Hser, 1987; Davis & DiNitto, 1996; Rounds-Bryant, 1999) or less positive change among women than among men (Doshan & Bursch, 1982; NEDTAC, 1997). In addition, one study found that the gender differences vary with the type of outcome examined (Gerstein et al., 1997). One study compared factors predictive of treatment outcomes for men and women assigned to therapeutic community treatment (Messina, Wish, & Nemes, 2000), and this study found that predictors of outcome were similar for men and women.

The drug treatment evaluation literature pertaining to prison-based settings further highlights the limited information available on gender. The limited studies of female-only prison programs do not contribute to our knowledge about gender similarities and differences (Gransky & Jones, 1995; Jarman & Lowe, 1993; Prendergast, Wellisch, & Wong, 1996). Furthermore, most of the prison-based studies report results only for men and find that treatment lowers recidivism, decreases post-release drug use, and curtails self-reported illegal activities (Field, 1985, 1992; Inciardi, Martin, Butzin, Hooper, & Harrison, 1997; Knight, Simpson, Chatham, & Camacho, 1997; Knight, Simpson, & Hiller, 1999; Martin, Butzin, Saum, & Inciardi, 1999; Wexler, DeLeon, Thomas, Kressel, & Peters, 1999; Wexler, Falkin, Lipton, & Rosenblum, 1992; Wexler, Melnick, Lowe, & Peters, 1999). However, one mixed-gender study of correctional treatment programs in Delaware, where 19% of the participants were women, found no overall gender difference in the percent drug-free or the percent arrest-free after release (Martin et al., 1999).

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