

Developmental Disabilities in Ontario's Criminal Justice System: Using Federal Correctional Data to Tell the Story

What is the research about?

This project is one of four projects on the topic of developmental disabilities in the criminal justice, forensic, and community mental health sectors. In Canada, and in Ontario, we lack information on the prevalence of developmental disabilities in federal correctional institutions, where people serve sentences of two or more years. The goals of this project were to: (a) estimate the percentage of adults with developmental disabilities in federal correctional institutions; and, (b) explore socio-demographic and correctional characteristics and the health status and health care use among adults with developmental disabilities compared to people without developmental disabilities in federal correctional institutions.

What did the researchers do?

We used administrative data from the Correctional Service of Canada for adults who were incarcerated for their first federal sentence between January 1, 2002 and December 31, 2011. We linked these data with Ontario's health administrative data at ICES. Using the ICES health and social services data, we identified people with developmental disabilities using clinical diagnoses.

What did the researchers find?

The prevalence of developmental disabilities among people in federal correctional institutions was 2.0%, compared to 0.9% reported in the general population. Among people in federal correctional institutions those with developmental disabilities were slightly younger (32.5; SD: 10.6 vs. 34.9; SD: 11.4), and more likely to live in the poorest neighbourhoods than people without developmental disabilities (46.6% vs. 38.1%).

Within two years prior to their first federal incarceration, people with developmental disabilities were more likely than people without developmental disabilities to have psychiatric illness (90.1% vs. 64.3%), substance use disorders (52.9% vs. 29.8%), and injuries (50.3% vs. 32.8%).

What you need to know

The prevalence of developmental disabilities in federal correctional institutions is two times that reported in the general population. People serving sentences of two or more years with developmental disabilities in Ontario had substantial health concerns, and higher hospitalizations and emergency department visits post-release than people without developmental disabilities. They served more days in custody and were more likely to incur serious in-prison disciplinary charges compared to people without developmental disabilities.

They were also more likely to have a traumatic brain injury within five years prior to incarceration (29.3% vs. 21.1%).

Median days in custody was greater among people with developmental disabilities (595 vs. 517) than those without developmental disabilities, despite having shorter median sentence length (929 vs. 1,004). People with developmental disabilities were 7% more likely to receive a serious in-prison disciplinary charge in comparison to those without developmental disabilities.

Within one year after release from custody, people with developmental disabilities were more likely than people without developmental disabilities to visit the emergency department (48.1% vs. 30.3%), visit a psychiatrist (37.8% vs. 10.8%) and experience acute hospitalization (15.4% vs. 4.6%). They were also more likely to have 30-day repeat admissions to the hospital (5.1% and 1.1%) and 30-day repeat emergency department visits (23.1% vs. 13.1%).

How can you use this research?

People with developmental disabilities are over-represented in federal correctional institutions in Ontario. Historically, service providers and policymakers in Ontario have been limited in their ability to make evidence-based decisions regarding the services, interventions, and policies for people with developmental disabilities in federal correctional settings and on release from these settings. There are opportunities to support people with developmental disabilities. First, utilize opportunities before sentencing for diversion from custody such as problem-solving courts. Second, at entry into federal correctional institutions, screen for developmental disabilities and follow through with specialized support and services for people in custody; this may decrease serious in-prison disciplinary changes and shorten time in custody. Third, ensure people are connected with appropriate community-based services and supports at time of release. Finally, given that health and psychiatric needs are multifaceted among people with developmental disabilities, multidisciplinary teams combined with case management, service planning, and coordination between care professionals in both justice and developmental sectors are essential.

Do you want additional resources?

Click [here](#) to see the Community Networks of Specialized Care's Developmental Disabilities Justice Toolkit.

Click [here](#) to see the Human Services & Justice Coordinating Committee resource library on dual diagnosis.

Click [here](#) to learn about the role of Dual Diagnosis Justice Case Manager (DDJCM) in Ontario. If you require DDJCM assistance, contact your local DSO for a referral.

Do you want to know more?

This snapshot is based on the article: *"Intellectual/developmental disabilities among people incarcerated in federal correctional facilities in Ontario, Canada: examining prevalence, health and correctional characteristics"*, Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12995>

About the team:

This project was led by researchers at MAP Centre Urban Health Solutions at St. Michael's Hospital, McMaster University, ICES, the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, and Brock University. Team members include Flora I. Matheson, Parisa Dastoori, Lisa Whittingham, Anna Durbin, Fiona Kouyoumdjian, Elizabeth Lin, Tiziana Volpe, Andrew Calzavara, and Yona Lunsky.

About H-CARDD

Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities (H-CARDD) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services. H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively. For more information: www.hcardd.ca.

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Related Research

Read an overview of the study, Developmental Disabilities in Ontario's Criminal Justice and Forensic Mental Health Systems: Using Data to Tell the Story on our [H-CARDD project web page](#), including the [Summary Snapshot](#), [Provincial Study Snapshot](#), and [Forensic Study Snapshot](#).



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