



# Most Substance Use Treatment Needs are Not Recognized

SUMMARY PREPARED BY: N. ZOE HILTON, PH.D., C.PSYCH.

## WHAT DID WE DO & WHY?

A medical diagnosis is often the first step to getting treatment. There are good treatments for substance use disorders, and evidence shows that substance use disorders can—and should—be treated alongside other mental illnesses when an individual has multiple diagnoses. Substance use has been shown to increase the risk of future criminal offending. Therefore, substance use treatment is important among forensic patients, who are admitted to hospitals because of their involvement with the criminal justice system. We studied mental illness and substance use disorders in a sample of 638 male forensic inpatients. We compared diagnoses recorded in the clinical record with clinical evidence gathered during forensic assessment meeting diagnostic criteria.

## OUR FINDINGS

There were 491 men with a major mental illness diagnosis. Most of these men (61%) met criteria for both a major mental illness (e.g., psychosis, depression, bipolar disorder) and also a substance use disorder. However, only 19% were diagnosed with the substance use disorder. Men with a substance use disorder were in hospital longer, and had higher scores on a tool that assesses risk of future violent offending.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

Mental health clinicians tend to focus on major mental illnesses like psychosis or bipolar disorder. Unfortunately, other diagnoses, such as co-occurring substance use disorders, can be missed. Without a diagnosis, patients may not be offered opportunities for treatment. Taking a more complete approach to diagnosis would give our forensic patients the best chance of recovery, and reduce risk of re-offending.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Substance use contributes to the risk of criminal behaviour
- Most forensic patients had a mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorders, but were not diagnosed as such
- Failure to diagnose substance use disorders means these men may not be flagged for the treatment they need to reduce their substance use and their risk of criminal re-offending

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CONTACT INFORMATION: [zhilton@waypointcentre.ca](mailto:zhilton@waypointcentre.ca) | 705-549-3181 x2611