

THE CRIMINAL HISTORY PROFILE OF METHADONE CLIENTS: A RESEARCH NOTE

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The success of methadone maintenance treatment as a tool to reduce offending depends not only on the effectiveness of the treatment in reducing clients' offending, but also on the ability of the treatment to attract dependent heroin users who engage in crime. This study examines the criminal histories of 503 persons drawn from the New South Wales methadone program register. More than 85% of the sample had received one or more criminal charges in New South Wales, and 57% of them had experienced at least one episode in custody. The findings suggest that a large proportion of persons registered with the New South Wales methadone program are offenders, most commonly with involvement in acquisitive crime.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between heroin dependence and involvement in crime is strong. Most of the evidence for a relationship between heroin dependence and crime has come from studies showing an over-representation of heroin-dependent users among offender populations (Dobinson & Ward 1986; Kozel, DuPont & Brown 1972; Parker & Newcombe 1987; Stevenson, Forsythe & Weatherburn 1998). Similarly, several studies of heroin-dependent populations have found high rates of offending, particularly for acquisitive crimes, which are typically committed to raise revenue to purchase illicit drugs (Jarvis & Parker 1989; Lehman & Simpson 1990; Piper Deschenes, Anglin & Speckart 1991). Hall, Bell & Carless 1993 found that 78 per cent of applicants to a methadone treatment service in western Sydney had one or more convictions for property offences. Reducing heroin use, then, may benefit the community through a reduction in property crimes.

Methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) has been shown to reduce heroin use among heroin dependent users (Gerstein & Harwood 1990; Ward, Mattick &

Hall 1998) and to substantially reduce offending while patients remain in treatment (Bell, Hall & Byth 1992; Hall 1996). This was one of the main reasons for the expansion of the New South Wales methadone program after 1985 (McArthur 1999). While there have been studies conducted in New South Wales examining the criminal histories of clients at individual methadone treatment services (Bell, Hall & Byth 1992; Bell et al. 1997), the generalisability of these findings to the state-wide methadone program are limited due to potential regional differences among sample populations. To date no study has directly assessed whether those who are registered on the methadone program throughout New South Wales are recidivist offenders. The case for MMT as a crime control measure (Hall 1996) may be overstated if the New South Wales methadone program is not attracting a population of repeat offenders.

As part of a larger study investigating methadone and offending behaviour, an investigation of the criminal histories of an essentially random sample of patients registered on the New South Wales methadone program was conducted. The opportunity to draw a sample directly from the New South Wales

methadone program register allowed for the examination of criminal histories of methadone recipients across the state of New South Wales, building on earlier studies limited by their restricted samples.

METHOD

The records of a sample of 503 people registered on the New South Wales methadone program were acquired from the New South Wales Department of Health. The larger study constraints restricted the sample to persons who commenced an episode of methadone treatment between 1992 and 1998, and ended an episode of treatment on or after 1 January 1997 or were still in treatment as at 19 July 2000. Persons who met these criteria were sorted by their unique personal identification number and the first 503 numbers were selected.

The records of the 503 persons identified from the methadone program register were linked with criminal histories obtained from the New South Wales Police Service, and episodes of custody from the New South Wales Department of Corrective Services' Offender Management System.

Offences were classified into eight offence categories: break, enter and steal; motor vehicle theft; other theft (including stealing, larceny, goods in custody); fraud; robbery; offences against the person; drug offences and other offences (including offences against justice procedures). Criminal record checks were conducted and the number of unique charge episodes for each of the offence categories was recorded for each person in the sample.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Of the 503 people in the sample, 319 (63%) were male. The mean age of the sample was 36.2 years (range 24.8-55.2 years) and males were significantly older than females (the mean ages for males and females were 37.0 years and 34.0 years respectively; $t = 3.8, p = 0.000$).

The sample had received methadone from over 170 methadone dosing points throughout New South Wales.

Criminal Charges

Four hundred and thirty persons in the sample (86%) had received a criminal charge in New South Wales. Of those who had a criminal charge, the median number of unique charge episodes was 11 (range 1-75). Table 1 shows the proportion of the sample with at least one charge by offence type.

The most common type of offences people were charged with were 'other theft' (73%), followed by 'other' offences (73%), drug offences (69%), offences against the person (47%), break, enter and steal (44%), motor vehicle theft (32%), robbery (20%) and fraud (17%). About 75 per cent of the sample had been charged with at least one theft offence (including other theft, break, enter and steal and motor vehicle theft, but excluding robbery).

All 348 persons charged at least once with a drug offence had also been charged with at least one other offence type, of which 314 (90%) had been charged with at least one type of theft offence.

Table1: Percent of sample charged at least once by offence type.

<i>No. of 'fail to appear' finalisations per person</i>	<i>Males (n = 319)</i>	<i>Females (n = 184)</i>	<i>Total (n = 503)</i>
Other theft	77.4	65.8	73.2
Other	81.5	58.2	73.0
Drug	76.5	56.5	69.2
Against the person	59.2	26.1	47.1
Break enter & steal	55.5	24.5	44.1
Motor vehicle theft	40.1	19.0	32.4
Robbery	25.1	10.3	19.7
Fraud	17.9	16.3	17.3
Any theft (other theft, BES, MVT)	79.3	66.8	74.8
Any offence	90.0	77.7	85.5

An examination of New South Wales Department of Corrective Services' inmate records reveal that over half of the total sample (57%) and almost two-thirds (66%) of those with at least one charge had experienced at least one custodial episode in New South Wales.

Gender Differences

Males were more likely than females to have received a charge (90% and 78% respectively; $\chi^2 = 14.12$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$). Males (79%) were significantly more likely than females (67%) to have been charged with a theft offence ($\chi^2 = 9.60$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.002$). Males were also more likely than females to have been charged for each offence category with the exception of fraud (against the person $\chi^2 = 51.50$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; break, enter and steal $\chi^2 = 44.70$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; drug offences $\chi^2 = 21.07$; $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; motor vehicle theft $\chi^2 = 23.73$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; other theft $\chi^2 = 7.18$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.007$; other offence $\chi^2 = 31.25$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; robbery $\chi^2 = 16.07$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$; and fraud $\chi^2 = 0.20$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.655$).

Males were more likely to have served time in custody than females (70% and 34% respectively; $\chi^2 = 61.17$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$).

DISCUSSION

This is the first linkage of criminal history data with an essentially random sample of patients registered on the New South Wales methadone program. A large proportion of the sample (86%) had at least one criminal charge in New South Wales, and more than half (57%) had been in custody at least once. Significantly, three-quarters of the sample had been charged with a theft offence. This clearly indicates that the New South Wales methadone program is attracting an offender population.

For MMT to be promoted as a crime control measure, it is important to demonstrate that MMT not only reduces offending for persons receiving the treatment, but also that a large proportion of the recipients actually engage in criminal activity. Importantly, the current findings indicate the New South Wales methadone program is effective in attracting heroin-dependent users who engage in acquisitive crime, especially among male patients. These offences are likely to be related, at least in part, to illicit drug use. Given the efficacy of MMT in reducing crime among those who stay in treatment, engaging these users in MMT is likely to have benefits, not only to users, but to the community as well. It will be the role of further research to determine the extent to which enrolment in MMT treatment reduces criminal behaviour.

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