

Substance Misuse and Supervision: An Examination of Drug and Alcohol Misuse Among Probation Service Clients*

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Summary: There is a well-documented relationship between substance misuse and offending behaviour. A history of substance misuse has been identified as a strong predictor for reoffending, highlighting it as one of the foremost risk factors for criminal recidivism. Engagement with the Probation Service is a critical juncture at which assessment, intervention and appropriate referral for substance misuse issues can take place. This study aimed to identify the prevalence of substance misuse, including alcohol, among persons on probation supervision, examine the relationship between substance misuse behaviour and offending, and assess service-user engagement amongst clients on referral to the Probation Service. To achieve these aims, a cross-sectional quantitative design incorporating online survey measures was carried out with a representative sample of Probation Officers supervising people in the community. Key findings are discussed in the context of the existing research, and recommendations for Probation policy and practice are offered.

Keywords: Drug misuse, alcohol misuse, prevalence, supervision, Probation Service, courts, prisons.

Introduction

Drug misuse amongst the general adult population (15–64 years) has become more common (EMCDDA, 2019). This is evidenced by research that shows an increase in illicit drug misuse from almost 2 in 10 adults in 2003, to almost 3 in 10 in 2015, with the highest prevalence rates reported for young adult males (aged 15–34) (EMCDDA, 2019). Similarly, statistics released by the World Health Organization (WHO) reveal elevated levels of alcohol misuse worldwide, with consumption levels in Ireland being remarkably higher than in most other countries (WHO, 2018).

* This paper comprises a summary of findings from the report, *Informing and Supporting Change: Drug and Alcohol Misuse Among People on Probation Supervision in Ireland* (Probation Service, 2021).

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There is a well-documented relationship between substance misuse¹ and criminal behaviour (Fridell *et al.*; 2008; Wallace *et al.*, 1998). Whilst research indicates that some substance misusers commit crime to finance their misuse, it also reveals a strong association with acts of criminal and sexual violence (Steadman *et al.*, 1998; Stewart *et al.*, 2000). The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA, 2007) provides a concise four-category model for deciphering different types of drug-related offending: *Psychopharmacological Crimes* are committed under the influence of a psychoactive substance, as a result of its acute or chronic use; *Economic-Compulsive Crimes* are committed in order to obtain money (or drugs) to support drug use; *Systemic Crimes* are committed as part of the business of drug supply, distribution and use; and *Drug Law Offences* are crimes committed in violation of drug legislation. It is also important to note that a history of substance misuse is repeatedly identified as a strong predictor for reoffending, highlighting it as one of the foremost risk factors for criminal recidivism (Baillargeon *et al.*, 2009; Larney and Martire, 2010; Walter *et al.*, 2011).

Substance misuse and offending: The Irish context

The Irish Prison Service estimates that approximately 70% of people come into prison with an addiction or substance-abuse problem (Health Research Board, 2021). Domestic research identifies elevated rates of drug and alcohol misuse amongst male and female prisoners (aged 18+ years) when compared to the general population. For instance, a study conducted by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (Drummond *et al.*, 2015) found that almost the entire sample (96%) of prisoners drank alcohol at some point in their lives, 70% of whom reported drinking an average of 12 alcoholic beverages 2–3 times a week. Nine out of ten prisoners reported usually drinking alcohol in a typical week, with men more likely to do so than women. Prisoners also reported elevated lifetime prevalence across several major drug categories (cannabis 87%; cocaine 74%; benzodiazepines 68%; heroin 43%; methadone 33%; crack cocaine 36%), with women significantly more likely than men to report heroin, methadone and crack cocaine misuse (*ibid.*) Similarly, research published by the Probation Service relating to adults' subject to supervision, detailed that the majority of persons on probation (89%) were identified as having some form of substance misuse issue either 'currently' or 'in the past' (Probation Service, 2012). A sizable

¹ Substance misuse = drug and/or alcohol misuse

42% of the sample reported misusing both drugs and alcohol, while 27% reported misusing just drugs and 20% reported misusing just alcohol. A considerable level of polydrug misuse was also identified, with a fifth of misusers reportedly misusing two or more substances (ibid.)

Over the course of 2019, the Probation Service assessed and supervised 16,607 people in the community (Probation Service, 2019). That number of annual referrals with reported high levels of substance misuse demonstrates that Probation Service involvement represents a critical juncture at which assessment, intervention and appropriate referral can be progressed. All those referred to the Probation Service must undergo an initial assessment, which assists in informing a pre-sanction report for court. It is at this stage that the relationship between substance misuse and offending behaviour is first explored by Probation Officers and important next steps are planned. That exploration will be further progressed when case management plans are developed.

Indeed, given the significance of substance misuse as a criminogenic risk factor, a key focus of Probation interventions is to address the association between patterns of misuse offending behaviour and resulting harm. Structured interventions that draw from cognitive behavioural therapy and motivational interviewing frameworks are delivered in conjunction with activities that support referral and engagement with appropriate treatment services.

Article objective

In conjunction with the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Probation Service conducted a Drug and Alcohol Misuse Survey of all offender cases on supervision in the community in January 2019. The study aimed to identify important information on substance misuse issues and patterns among persons on supervision, to support development of better service delivery and to inform the use of resources in the management of Probation Service priorities. Drawing on data from this nationwide study, this article provides key insights into the nature and frequency of substance misuse, drug-and-alcohol-related offending, and Service clients' level of engagement with drug-and-alcohol-misuse services on referral to the Probation Service. This collection of findings provides an evidence-based profile of substance misuse behaviour amongst people on probation supervision, calls attention to potentially 'at risk' groups within this cohort, and highlights key areas for future developments within criminal justice policy and practice.

Methodology

This study adopted a cross-sectional quantitative design, incorporating online survey measures. Probation Officers on community-based supervision teams (n=218) were invited to participate in the study. A representative sample was established, with a response rate of 81%.

An invitation to participate in the Drug and Alcohol Misuse Survey was sent to Probation Officers via email. Participants were asked to complete an anonymised survey in respect of all clients (adults and young persons) who were subject to a probation order, supervision order, adjourned supervision, or supervised temporary release. In total, 3,096 surveys were completed by Probation Officers (Male n=2,566; Female n=522; Unknown n=8). Persons included in the research sample ranged in age between 12–17 years and 60+ years; the vast majority of the sample were White Irish (80%), Irish Traveller (11%), Other White Background (5%) (see Table 1). It is worth noting that these findings demonstrate an overrepresentation of Irish Travellers in the Probation Service supervision population, given that census data from 2016 indicate that Irish Travellers make up less than 1% of the general population (CSO, 2019). Given the high representation of Irish Travellers within the research sample, special consideration and exploration will be given to the data generated on this minority group so that recommendations for service provision and development may be made accordingly.

The survey was developed by a multidisciplinary team of Probation Officers, statisticians and researchers employed by the Probation Service and the Central Statistics Office. Survey questions were broken down into four main sections — namely, Demographics, Alcohol Misuse Behaviour, Drug Misuse Behaviour and Service Engagement — and Probation Officer response.

Survey data were collated by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) and inputted in the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was undertaken (frequencies and averages), along with inferential analysis (t-tests, chi-square) to examine trends, identify prevalence rates, and explore relationships within the dataset.

Table 1: *Sample demographics*

Sex	%	Age	%	Ethnicity	%	Probation Service Region	%
Female	17	12–17 yrs	5	White/ Black Irish	80	YPP	5
Male	83	18–24 yrs	24	Irish Traveller	11	Dublin Nth and NE	24
		25–34 yrs	34	Other Ethnicity	5	Dublin South and Wicklow	16
		35–49 yrs	27	Unknown	4	West NW and Westmeath	14
		50–59 yrs	7			Southwest	20
		60+ yrs	3			Midlands and SE	21

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study's methodology. Firstly, the measure employed was a 'self-to-other' survey completed by Probation Officers based on information compiled in client case files. It is important to note that gathering life histories from clients is not always straightforward as individuals may be tentative about being forthright regarding their level of drug and alcohol misuse. Secondly, some case files may be more developed than others, depending on the length of time a client has been on probation supervision and their level of engagement with their Probation Officer. As a result, there were some gaps in the information provided for some people.

Results***The nature and frequency of substance misuse***

Analysis revealed that 81% of the sample were reported to have misused drugs or alcohol at some point in their lifetime. Combined Drug and Alcohol Misuse (50%) was the most common type of misuse pattern reported, followed by Drug Misuse Only (17%), Alcohol Misuse Only (14%), No Substance Misuse (10%), and Unknown (9%).

Combined drug and alcohol misuse

Male clients (52%) were reported as having a higher rate of Combined Drug and Alcohol Misuse than females (42%). However, gender differences were not statistically significant. The highest prevalence rates of Combined Drug and Alcohol Misuse were observed for clients aged 25–34 years, with a peak prevalence rate of 61%. Elevated levels were also observed for clients aged 18–24 years (57%), 35–49 years (51%), and 12–17 years (47%). These findings indicate that persons aged 25–34 years are the most at-risk group for drug and alcohol misuse on presentation to the Probation Service. Finally, similar rates of Combined Misuse were identified for White/Black Irish (55%) and Irish Travellers (50%), while the lowest frequencies were reported for clients from Other ethnic backgrounds (38%) (see Table 2).

The nature of alcohol misuse

Of the sample, 64% (n=1,982) were reported to have misused alcohol at some point in their lives. Binge drinking (44%) was identified as the most common type of alcohol misuse amongst clients, followed by Harmful (31%) and Dependent (18%). When exploring gender differences, male clients were observed to have significantly higher rates of Binge (56%) and Harmful (38%) alcohol consumption than females (36%, 27%), while comparable rates of Alcohol Dependence were reported for men (20%) and women (19%). The types of Alcohol Misuse engaged in by clients differed across the lifespan. For instance, high rates of Binge drinking were identified amongst younger clients aged 12–34 years, whilst Alcohol Dependency was more frequent amongst older clients aged between 35 and 60+ years. Finally, Binge drinking was reported as the most common form of Alcohol Misuse for all three ethnic groupings, followed by Harmful Misuse and Dependent drinking (see Table 2).

The nature of drug misuse

A total of 2,074 (67%) persons were reported to misuse drugs. A sizable 84% (n= 1,765) of the sample were reported to misuse Cannabis, highlighting it as the most popular drug among the research sample. High rates of misuse were also identified for Benzodiazepines (55%), Cocaine (48%), Heroin (41%), and Ecstasy (27%). When exploring the types of substances misused by clients, findings revealed a series of significant differences across client Sex, Age and Ethnicity. Males misused Cocaine, Ecstasy, and Cannabis at a higher

Table 2: Substance misuse: Nature and frequency

	Combined Misuse %	Alcohol Misuse			Drug Misuse				
		Binge %	Harmful %	Dependent %	Cannabis %	Benzo %	Cocaine %	Heroin %	Ecstasy %
Female	42	36	27	19	39	35	22	38	11
Male	52	56	38	20	61	37	35	27	20
12–17 yrs	47	45	13	3	63	33	24	4	16
18–24 yrs	57	56	26	7	65	41	26	10	21
25–34 yrs	61	46	34	16	44	35	42	36	23
35–49 yrs	51	39	36	28	48	35	31	42	16
50–59 yrs	27	32	29	26	24	12	12	18	5
60+ yrs	14	28	24	27	9	7	8	5	5
White/ Black Irish	55	44	31	18	60	39	35	30	21
Irish Traveller	50	49	31	14	47	33	26	22	12
Other	38	39	29	19	47	30	21	19	10

rate than females, whereas females misused Heroin at a significantly higher rate than males. Furthermore, White/Black Irish clients were found to misuse Heroin, Cocaine, Ecstasy, Benzodiazepines, and Cannabis more frequently than Irish Travellers and clients from Other ethnicities. Whilst Cannabis was the most common substance used by clients across all Age categories, findings revealed that different types of substance misuse peaked at different times across the life course. For instance, Cannabis misuse (69%) peaked amongst young adult clients aged 18–24 years, whereas Heroin misuse (42%) was highest amongst older clients aged 35–49 years. Finally, peak misuse of Benzodiazepines (44%), Cocaine (41%) and Ecstasy (23%) was observed amongst clients aged 24–34 years (see Table 2).

Misuse link to current offence

Alcohol

Results from the present study revealed a link between alcohol misuse and current offence amongst 38% ($n=1,172$) of the research sample, revealing a considerable level of alcohol-related offending. Males (42%) were reported to have a significantly higher rate of alcohol-related offending (Alcohol Link to Current Offence) than females (32%). Differences were also observed across Irish ethnic groups, with members of the Traveller Community (49%) having a higher frequency of alcohol-related offending than White/Black Irish (40%) and Other ethnicities (39%). Finally, Alcohol Misuse was linked to the current offences of 61% of Binge drinkers, 50% of Harmful misusers and 35% of Alcohol Dependent clients. These findings indicate that more Binge drinkers come into contact with the Probation Service as a result of their alcohol-related offending than Harmful and Dependent misusers.

Drugs

A link between drug misuse and current offence was reported for almost half of the research sample (48%). In contrast to the findings outlined above, analysis revealed comparable rates of drug-related offending across male (48%) and female (47%) clients; and White/Black Irish (54%) were reported to have a significantly higher rate of drug-related offending than Irish Travellers (43%) and clients from Other ethnicities (36%). Cannabis (56%) and Benzodiazepines (37%) were the most frequently misused substances by clients whose current offence was linked to drug misuse. Clients who misused

Cannabis were three times more likely to have their current offence linked to drugs misuse.

Service engagement

Alcohol services and interventions

Whilst considerable rates of Alcohol Misuse (n=1,981) were identified within the research sample, low levels of engagement with alcohol-specific Medical Interventions (16%) and Community Support Services (25%) were reported for clients presenting to the Probation Service. The most common Medical Intervention was GP Attendance (11%), whereas Counselling and Psychotherapy (14%) was the most frequent Community Support Service reported. No differences were observed across Sex, Age, Ethnicity, or Region when examining clients' engagement with alcohol-misuse interventions and services (see Table 3).

Drug services and interventions

On referral to the Probation Service, a total of 2,169 offenders reported drug misuse to their Probation Officers. One-third (33%) of clients were engaged with some form of Medical Intervention when presenting to the Probation Service. Methadone Treatment (18%) was the most frequently cited Medical Intervention. Significant differences across Sex were observed, with females (50%) reporting a higher rate of engagement with Medical Interventions than their male counterparts (30%) on referral to the Probation Service. Specifically, women (35%) were over twice as likely to be engaged with a methadone programme as men (15%). Differences were also identified when examining Age, with the highest rates of engagement observed among 35–49-year-olds (48%), 25–34-year-olds (37%), and 50–59-year-olds (32%), and the lowest observed for clients aged 12–17 years (8%) and 18–24 years (17%), and 60+ years (20%). Furthermore, White/Black Irish (34%) reported a significantly higher rate of engagement with Medical Interventions than Irish Travellers (25%) and clients from Other (25%) ethnic backgrounds (25%) (see Table 3).

Almost a third of clients who reported Drug Misuse were engaged with a Community Support Service on referral to the Probation Service, of which Counselling/Psychotherapy (19%) was the most common. Sex differences were observed, with women (47%) reporting a significantly higher rate of

engagement than men (31%). Differences were also identified across Ethnicity with White/Black Irish clients (35%) engaging with Community Support Services at a higher rate than Irish Travellers (25%) and clients from Other ethnicities (26%). Finally, Community Support Service engagement differed across client Age. The highest levels were observed for 35–49-year-olds (38%), 25–34-year-olds (36%), and 50–59-year-olds (35%), whereas the lowest levels were observed amongst clients aged 12–17 years and 18–24 years, and 60+ years (27%) (see Table 3).

Table 3: *Service engagement*

<i>Engagement with Alcohol Misuse Services</i>				<i>Engagement with Drug Misuse Services</i>			
<i>Medical Interventions</i>		<i>Community-Based Services</i>		<i>Medical Interventions</i>		<i>Community-Based Services</i>	
	%		%		%		%
GP	11	Counselling/ Psychotherapy	14	GP	12	Counselling/ Psychotherapy	19
Inpatient	3	Aftercare	5	Inpatient	3	Aftercare	5
Outpatient	5	Pharmacies	1	Outpatient	6	Pharmacies	3
Other	2	Family Support	2	Low Threshold	1	Family Support	3
		Alcoholics Anonymous	8	Prison	6	Narcotics Anonymous	6
		Outreach	6	Methadone Treatment	18	Other	9

Discussion

The present study identifies a high level of drug and/or alcohol misuse (81%) amongst people on probation supervision. A similar figure for drug and/or alcohol misuse (87%) was reported in the Probation Service's 2011 Drug and Alcohol report (Probation Service, 2012), suggesting that substance misuse has remained relatively stable throughout the target population in the intervening eight years (2011–2019). Moreover, findings also reveal that drug

and alcohol misuse, the impact it has on offending behaviour, and the level of client engagement with substance misuse services on referral to the Probation Service varied across age, gender, and ethnicity. Next, these findings will be situated within the context of the existing research. They will also be used to identify potential 'at risk' groups, and to highlight key areas for future developments within criminal justice policy and practice.

The importance of early intervention

The highest prevalence rates of Combined Drug and Alcohol Misuse were observed for clients aged 25–34 years, with a peak prevalence rate of 61%, identifying them as the most at-risk group for drug and alcohol misuse on presentation to the Probation Service. However, a more focused look at the nature and frequency of drug and alcohol misuse revealed some interesting age-related trends. For instance, the drinking habits of clients on supervision varied somewhat according to age profile. Binge drinking was highest among clients aged 18–24 years, Harmful alcohol misuse was most prevalent among clients aged 35–49 years, and Alcohol Dependency was most frequent amongst clients aged 60+. These findings are in line with domestic scholarship which shows that Binge and Harmful drinking among the general population is associated with a younger demographic (see Health Research Board, 2016; Long and Mongan, 2014). Similarly, differences in the misuse of illicit substances were also observed across age category. Cocaine misuse was more prevalent among younger clients (12–35 years), whereas Heroin misuse was more frequent among older clients (25–59 years). Finally, clients under 25 years of age had the lowest levels of engagement with drug misuse services, on referral to the Probation Service. This is particularly concerning given findings that show clients as young as 12 years of age misuse a variety of substances at a significant level.

Early-onset and frequent substance misuse in young persons (aged 10–24 years²), specifically those in early adolescence, increases the risk of developing a range of adverse outcomes, such as serious physical health issues (Stankowski *et al.*, 2015), mental health issues and psychiatric disorders (Welsh *et al.*, 2017), neurocognitive deficits (Jovanovski *et al.*, 2005), sleep disorders (Schierenbeck *et al.*, 2008), alcohol and/or drug dependence, educational underachievement, and psychosocial difficulties (Hall, 2006; Loxley *et al.*, 2004; Newcomb *et al.*,

² Definition of youth set out by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, available at <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf> (accessed 27 July 2021)

2007). Because young people are at a different developmental stage, and because they are less likely to be drug and/or alcohol dependent when compared to the adult population, responses to drug and alcohol misuse often focus heavily on prevention, early intervention, and harm reduction, as opposed to intensive treatment programmes involving detoxification and psychological therapies (Stockings *et al.*, 2016). The development of such programmes is of the utmost importance given that continued and chronic misuse amongst young misusers increases their chances of developing substance dependency and augmenting offending behaviour (Lubman *et al.*, 2007).

This study highlights Young Persons Probation as an opportune juncture for effective screening, followed by the delivery of substance misuse education, prevention, awareness, and early intervention programmes where appropriate. For that reason, it is important that Probation Officers in all areas are adequately trained in evidence-based approaches specifically designed for implementation with young offenders. However, it is also important to note that the Probation Service has contact with only a small subset of this population. The pervasiveness of substance misuse amongst Irish youths warrants a collaborative multi-agency response that includes HSE, community-based youth programmes, An Garda Síochána, TUSLA, and Drug Task Forces, education services, etc. This approach is very much reflected in the actions set out in the current National Drug Strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* (Department of Health, 2017).

Gendered risk

This study identified variability in the nature and frequency of substance misuse among men and women. It also uncovered gender differences across service engagement on referral to the Probation Service. These findings call attention to the differential risk profiles of male and female substance misusers on probation supervision.

Divergent substance misuse behaviour

Exploration of alcohol misuse amongst the sample revealed that men were not only significantly more likely than women to misuse alcohol but were reported to have significantly higher rates of alcohol-related offending. These findings are in line with national research conducted with the general population, which reveals a higher rate of problematic alcohol misuse amongst Irish men (Long and Mongan, 2014). Interestingly, results concerning

drug misuse across gender relayed quite a different story. Indeed, while men and women were reported as having similar levels of drug misuse, findings also showed that their risk of misusing particular types of substances differed somewhat across gender. Men on supervision were significantly more likely to misuse cocaine, cannabis, and ecstasy; whereas women were significantly more likely to misuse heroin. These findings echo international evidence to show that male offenders typically misuse higher rates of cannabis, amphetamines and ecstasy (Adams *et al.*, 2008; Holloway and Bennett, 2007), whereas their female counterparts typically misuse higher rates of heroin and prescription medications (Johnson, 2004; Loxley and Adams, 2009).

Help-seeking for substance misuse

Despite the fact that two-thirds of the sample were reported to misuse alcohol, engagement with both medical interventions and community support services for alcohol misuse on referral to the Probation Service were considerably low. Poor levels of engagement may be a reflection of the cultural normalcy that exists around alcohol consumption in contemporary Ireland, which perhaps fuels a belief amongst misusers that their drinking behaviour is not problematic (Hope and Mongan, 2011). Moreover, even though men were found to misuse alcohol at a significantly higher rate than women, no gender differences were detected when exploring service engagement on referral. These findings are at odds with research conducted on the general population, which shows that two-thirds of persons engaged with alcohol misuse interventions between 2011 and 2017 were male (Health Research Board, 2019).

In direct contrast to the findings outlined above, differential rates of engagement with community-based support services and medical interventions for drug misuse were observed across gender. Indeed, women were more inclined to be engaged with drug misuse services and interventions than men, on referral to the Probation Service. Evidence-based research investigating masculinities and help-seeking behaviour perhaps helps to shed some light on why such differences in service engagement were revealed. For instance, males are less likely than females to seek professional help for a broad range of physical and mental health issues (Addis and Mahalik, 2003), even when experiencing severe levels of distress (Biddle *et al.*, 2004). Addis and Mahalik (2003) suggest that men may struggle to ask for help because they feel it demonstrates vulnerability and challenges their masculine

identities. Poor help-seeking behaviour among men is especially problematic within the context of the criminal justice system given that offenders (in custody and on community supervision) have higher rates of mental and physical illness than the general population (Pratt *et al.*, 2006), report a higher incidence of substance misuse disorders (Sirdifield *et al.*, 2009), radically underuse health services (Howerton *et al.*, 2007), distrust health professionals, and are often unaware of the services available to them (Mitchell and Latchford, 2010). When considered altogether, results from the present study outlining poor service engagement by male clients, coupled with key learnings from the masculinities and help-seeking research, highlight a male-centric risk factor that warrants consideration within Probation practice.

Given compelling evidence to show that a range of gender-specific factors impact substance misuse behaviour and recovery, academics and practitioners have called upon criminal justice decision-makers to introduce approaches and interventions that are gender-informed (Gobeil *et al.*, 2016; SAMHSA, 2009; 2017). The Probation Service is committed to delivering a gender-informed approach to meet the needs of women offenders, to offer effective and appropriate community sanctions, and to achieve improved outcomes for this client group.^{3,4} This is extremely positive given recent research indicating that women and girls are more likely to respond well to gender-informed approaches, especially if their backgrounds and pathways to offending are associated with gendered issues (Gobeil *et al.*, 2016). However, while efforts have been made to make Probation Service practice more gender-informed when working with women, it is important to note that similar efforts have not been made regarding gender-informed policy and practice as it applies to men. Looking to the future, consideration should be given to the establishment of a gender-informed policy for male offenders subject to Probation Service Supervision, with a specific focus on the identification of gender-based barriers and facilitators associated with male help-seeking behaviour, engagement, and desistance.

Cultural competency and inclusivity

The present study revealed interesting findings regarding ethnic background and substance misuse. Firstly, significant differences in the types of drugs

³ See: 'A Gender Informed Approach to Writing Pre-sanction Reports on Female Offenders: Probation Service Operational Guideline', October 2015.

⁴ See: *Joint Probation Service–Irish Prison Service Strategy 2014–2016: An Effective Response to Women Who Offend*, available at http://www.irishprisons.ie/images/pdf/women_strat_2014.pdf (accessed 27 July 2021)

misused by clients were observed across ethnic groups, with White/Black Irish more likely to misuse Ecstasy and Benzodiazepines than clients from the Traveller Community and Other ethnicities. Secondly, Irish Travellers were reported as having the highest level of alcohol-related offending of all ethnic groups, whereas White/Black Irish were identified as having the highest rates of drug-related offending. Thirdly, clients from the Traveller Community and Other ethnic groups were less likely to be engaged with both Medical and Community Interventions for drug misuse than White/Black Irish clients, on referral to the Probation Service. Findings show ethnic diversity across alcohol-related offending, level of service engagement and the types of substances misused by service clients, emphasising the importance of implementing cultural awareness and sensitivity training for Probation Officers. Moreover, such findings evidence the need for the development and roll-out of culturally appropriate substance misuse interventions, especially given the overrepresentation of clients from the Traveller community engaged with the Probation Service.

The paucity of research investigating substance misuse amongst ethnic minority groups in Ireland makes it difficult to draw comparisons across the general population and the present study's sample of probationers (Crowley, 2017). However, evidence-based research that does exist reveals a low level of engagement with community-based services resulting from social and systemic barriers. For instance, limited knowledge and understanding of the services available, coupled with a lack of culturally specific programmes, has been identified as a barrier to engagement (Corr, 2004). Moreover, language barriers, an absence of cultural competency, discriminatory attitudes and behaviour by professionals, and racist stereotyping have also been highlighted as significant barriers faced by ethnic minority groups when it comes to accessing community-based substance misuse services (Kelly *et al.*, 2009). Irish Travellers face many of the same challenges experienced by other indigenous and ethnic minorities across the globe. Specifically, negative stereotyping and prejudice, marginalisation and discrimination, socio-economic deprivation and poverty, and perilous environmental conditions (Gracey and King, 2009; King *et al.*, 2009). Recent research has documented not only a rise in mental ill-health and suicide amongst the Traveller Community, but an increase in substance misuse behaviour (Van Hout and Hearne, 2017). This is especially problematic given that Travellers experience a variety of barriers when it comes to accessing support services, which in turn works to deter help-seeking behaviour. For instance, research investigating the Traveller Community's experience of primary care and drug

services reveals that they often suffer discrimination, feel their confidentiality is undermined, experience difficulties accessing referral networks, and report feeling a lack of cultural acceptance from both healthcare professionals and administrative staff (Van Cleemput, 2009). As a result, Irish Travellers have a tendency to rely heavily on acute services (such as Accident and Emergency departments) and avoid preventive health services (such as community-based addiction services) (Van Cleemput et al., 2007).

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014 requires public agencies to work toward eliminating discrimination, promoting equality, and protecting human rights when fulfilling their functions. Public agencies are also required to identify any equality and human rights issues that may be relevant to their function and to implement policy and practice to address such issues. In accordance with this Act, Ireland's most recent drug strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A Health-Led Response to Drug and Alcohol Use in Ireland 2017–2025* (Department of Health, 2017), states:

There is a need to recognise the diversity evident among drug users and to take steps in providing services that can accommodate this diversity and address the needs of particular groups in relation to problem drug and alcohol use. (p. 44)

Moving forward, it is important that the Probation Service continues to build on cultural competency and equality training for staff. It is also essential that Probation Officers have the skills and the resource capacity to make culturally appropriate assessments and referrals that are respectful, relevant, and accessible for these client groups.

Conclusion

This study has endeavoured to build on previous research conducted by the Probation Service regarding substance misuse. Specifically, it has aimed to identify substance misuse among persons supervised by the Probation Service, to examine the relationship between substance misuse behaviour and offending, and to explore service-user engagement. Findings generated by research indicate a high prevalence of substance misuse amongst people on probation supervision. They also demonstrate that the risks associated with substance misuse behaviour vary considerably across client age, gender, and ethnicity. These findings inform the following recommendations.

Firstly, substance misuse is a pervasive issue amongst young people in Ireland. Accordingly, structured and co-ordinated engagement between the HSE and key stakeholders to facilitate increased accessibility to youth-focused substance misuse services is required. Additionally, to ensure that the support needs of young people are met within the Probation Service supervision, Probation Officers should receive training in adolescent assessment and the delivery of early intervention, prevention and harm-reduction techniques.

Secondly, it is recommended that the Probation Service continue in the development and implementation of gender-informed research, policy and practice. Particular attention should be given to the identification of gender-based barriers and facilitators associated with male help-seeking behaviour, engagement, and desistance. Such consideration will enhance the Probation Service's response to the gendered risks associated with substance misuse and offending behaviour.

Thirdly, Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity Training should be provided to all Probation Service staff to promote and support anti-racism, cultural competency, and equity. Training should be specific to Probation practice and include evidence-based principles regarding effective engagement with individuals from ethnic minority groups and new communities. Education surrounding the differential acceptability of substance misuse and offending behaviour across minority groups would also be appropriate.

Finally, there is a need to increase service-user access to programmes and interventions that provide information, support, and methods that are culturally relevant and appropriate. Accordingly, consideration should be given to the development of culturally specific substance-misuse-and-offending-behaviour programmes and services.

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