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Co-Occurring Mental Health and Substance Use Problems in Offenders: Implications for Risk Assessment

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We undertook a secondary data analysis to study issues relevant to co-occurring mental health and substance disorder in a combined sample of offenders ($N = 3,197$). Using the Personality Assessment Inventory, we compared the frequency of depressive, traumatic stress, and personality disorder symptom elevations across offenders with and without substance problems, identified the extent to which co-occurring problems were accompanied by risk factors for suicide and aggression, and tested for gender differences. Offenders with substance problems were more likely than others to have increased mental health problems and risk factors for suicide or aggression. Women with substance problems, compared with men, had higher depression, traumatic stress, and borderline features, in addition to lower antisocial features. The frequency with which suicide and aggression risk factors were associated with mental health problems was generally similar across men and women. Measurement issues relevant to co-occurring disorder and risk assessment are discussed.

Keywords: co-occurring disorder, substance abuse, risk assessment, personality assessment inventory, offenders

The assessment of co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders is a critical task in managing criminal offenders. Offenders have prevalence rates of alcohol and drug problems that are much higher than those found in the general population (Fazel, Bains, & Doll, 2006; Karberg & James, 2005). Their substance use is often tied to criminal offending and high-risk behavior (McClelland, Teplin, Abram, & Jacobs, 2002; Mumola & Karberg, 2006). Indeed, many consider addiction treatment an essential component of offender rehabilitation and community re-entry (Chandler,

Fletcher, & Volkow, 2009; Prendergast, 2009). Comprehensive evaluation of substance-involved offenders is complicated by their increased prevalence of mental health disorder (Abram, Teplin, & McClelland, 2003; James & Glaze, 2006). Offenders with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders, compared with other offenders, tend to have increased functional impairment and re-arrest rates (Grella, Greenwell, Prendergast, Sacks, & Melnick, 2008; Hiller, Knight, & Simpson, 1996; McNiel, Binder, & Robinson, 2005). Offenders with co-occurring disorders also have

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