

FASD in Yukon Corrections – Prevalence Study Lay Summary

Why we did this research. Individuals who are exposed to alcohol during pregnancy experience a range of cognitive, emotional, and physical difficulties, and may be diagnosed with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD). People with FASD are involved in the criminal justice system at high rates. However, limited information is available to help understand exactly how many people with FASD could be in the criminal justice system in Yukon. It is important to understand how many people in the Yukon criminal justice system could have FASD in order to know about their needs and how best to help. They may “get stuck” in the criminal justice system, and may need extra services and supports across systems to be successful.

What we hoped to learn. This study aimed to estimate how many people in the Yukon criminal justice system might have FASD, with a focus on people incarcerated at the Whitehorse Correctional Centre. We also wanted to understand how many people might also have problems related to brain functioning, along with mental health and substance abuse needs. Lastly, we wanted to test whether screening tools could be used to identify people at risk of having FASD in the criminal justice system in Yukon.

How we did this research. All aspects of this research were carried out with the highest commitment to upholding ethical principles. We wanted to make sure that no harm was done, and that we did our best to help people who participated in our study. We made sure that participants were supported during and after their involvement in this study and that they received feedback about personal strengths and needs. We also wanted to help improve local resources, and hired and trained local clinicians and research assistants to carry out this study.

We expected that individuals of First Nation heritage would be impacted by this research and engaged with the Yukon First Nations Health and Social Development Commission across all stages of this research. We made sure that local and community stakeholders helped to design this study, and, that our findings were interpreted and communicated with their help. It is important to know that FASD happens at high rates when people and communities do not have the resources and connections they need to be healthy (such as poverty).

What we did. We invited justice-involved adults to get involved in this research. Participants completed an assessment that looked at their personal and medical histories, brain functioning, physical health, and mental health and substance abuse needs. Birth mothers and other informants also participated and provided information about prenatal alcohol exposure. FASD diagnosis followed the 2005 Canadian Guidelines. FASD screening tools were completed for each participant before a diagnosis was made.

What we found. Eighty people completed the entire study and we estimate that the rate of FASD in the criminal justice system in Yukon is approximately 17.5% (fourteen participants were diagnosed with FASD). Our findings apply best to adults incarcerated at the Whitehorse Correctional Centre. We had difficulty collecting information to make a reliable decision about FASD for 11 participants, and FASD was ruled out for the rest of the sample (55 people). The estimated rate of FASD could have been higher if more information, particularly about prenatal alcohol exposure, had been available. In addition to high rates of FASD, we also found that most participants had some kind of difficulty in their brain functioning, and we found very high rates of mental health and substance abuse needs. Our screening tools did not do a great job of helping us to identify people at risk of having FASD, suggesting that more research in this area is needed.

Recommendations. Our results were similar to other studies about FASD in the criminal justice system, and suggest that it is important to continue to do research in this area. It is important to understand the needs of people in the criminal justice system with FASD, and similar problems in brain functioning. We also have to develop methods to identify people at risk of having FASD, in order to know who to refer for more thorough assessments and services. Moving forward, it will be important to identify best practices in assisting offenders with FASD during all stages of their involvement in the criminal justice system