

Gender Differences in Health Services Utilization

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BACKGROUND / RATIONALE:

OBJECTIVE(S):

This study describes gender differences in the need for, utilization of, and barriers to health and social services prior to drug abuse treatment. The framework for the study is the Aday et al. (1993) model for access to healthcare, which posits that population and delivery system characteristics are related to access to health services. The specific aims are: 1) To compare predisposing, need, and enabling characteristics of male and female adult drug abusers; 2) To evaluate gender differences in the utilization of health and social services prior to drug treatment; and 3) To evaluate gender differences in barriers to health and social services, including drug treatment.

METHODS:

Clients were recruited from a central drug abuse treatment referral center in Des Moines, Iowa. Clients who agreed to participate completed a 2-hour interview during which they provided information about: 1) drug and alcohol use, physical and mental health, family and social relationships, criminal activity, housing, and financial resources; 2) use of health and social services during the 60 days preceding the interview for 9 service categories (medical, mental health, treatment, employment, legal, housing, financial, crisis, and family services); and 3) ability to obtain desired services in five areas (dental care, medications, medical, mental health, and substance abuse treatment). Recruitment was conducted from February 2001 through September 2002. During that time, 605 males and 343 females provided permission to be contacted by our research staff. Of those, 269 males were not eligible due to random elimination, lack of drug use, or residence outside the referral center catchment area. Of the remaining 336 (55%) males, 154 (46%) completed the interview. The remaining 182 (54%) either could not be reached after multiple attempts or declined to participate after being contacted. Of the 343 available females, 291 (85%) were eligible for participation. Of those, 157 (54%) completed the interview. Data analyses evaluated: 1) gender differences in client characteristics, including characteristics related to the need for services, ability to obtain services, and predisposition to use services; 2) gender differences in the use of health and social service and; and 3) gender differences in perceived barriers to services.

FINDINGS / RESULTS:

There was substantial evidence that women perceive greater need for assistance for mental health and physical health problems. They also reported significantly more problems with mental health and physical health issues. Furthermore, women reported more distress attributed to drug use, although they did not necessarily report a more severe history of drug use.

Female clients were more likely than male clients to report a time when they wanted but could not get care for every type of service, although the difference was significant only for medications (32% females vs. 19% males; $p=.011$); mental health services ((24% females vs. 15% males; $p=.046$), and substance abuse treatment services (27% females vs. 17% males; $p=.047$). Males and females were both more likely to report that they had difficulty obtaining dental services than any other type of service (54% of females and 45% of males). For men and women both, the most frequently provided reason for not obtaining dental care, medications, medical care, or mental health care reflected the affordability of care and lack of health insurance. The percent of men and women who indicated affordability or lack of insurance as reasons for not obtaining necessary services did not differ significantly.

Limitations: This study includes a convenience sample of drug users referred to a central drug abuse assessment center and thus does not necessarily reflect the experience of drug users not referred for assessment. Furthermore, the study was conducted at a central referral center in Iowa, and may not be generalizable to other communities in the United States.

IMPACT:

The emphasis on gender differences is important because predisposing and need factors such as sexual abuse, depression, single parenthood, and self-esteem affect females and males differently, leading to different service utilization for men and women. This research will also add to existing information regarding barriers to services, including drug treatment, faced by women.

PUBLICATIONS:

None at this time.