

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Electronic Interventions for Substance Use Disorders Among Offender Populations: A Systematic Review

Substance use disorders (SUDs) are overrepresented in individuals involved in correctional settings; therefore, identifying feasible treatment options is critical. Existing studies, while limited, demonstrate that electronic interventions have substantial promise for providing positive outcomes in substance use, quality of life, self-efficacy, and other mental health symptoms.

Why we did this study

Substance use disorders (SUDs) occur at a high prevalence of up to 75-86% in incarcerated individuals and offender populations. Untreated SUDs confer increased risk of recidivism and therefore, worse outcomes for individuals. Unfortunately, although SUDs are common in this population, research in other jurisdictions have found that a substantial proportion of individuals do not receive treatment. Therefore, it is important to identify effective, feasible, and accessible treatment modalities to engage individuals in treatment. Specifically, electronic interventions have clear potential in these settings. The purpose of this systematic review was to synthesize research on electronic interventions for SUDs in correctional settings and identify clinical and policy relevance for Correctional Service of Canada.

What we did

First, we conducted a literature search across multiple databases with key terms associated with SUDs, electronic interventions, and correctional settings. Due to limited findings from this search and knowledge of two electronic interventions for SUDs (Breaking Free Online – BFO and Computer-Based Training for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy - CBT4CBT), a second literature search was conducted with the SUD search terms and CBT4CBT and BFO. A total of 11 studies were included in the review. Six were from the primary search, with one economically evaluating a CBT4CBT intervention (from which another study assessing CBT4CBT was found), and no others examining exclusively electronic interventions. The second search yielded 3 studies examining the efficacy of BFO in correctional settings or justice-involved individuals. An additional two articles investigating BFO were included from other sources.

What we found

Studies were heterogenous with promising and limited applicability to the Canadian correctional system. There were early-stage ‘open-label’ (uncontrolled) intervention trials showing positive short-term benefits of decreased

substance use, increased self-efficacy, increased quality of life, and decreases in depressive/anxiety symptoms. The most common intervention was BFO, showing favourable outcomes and perspectives of the intervention. There were no CBT4CBT studies in correctional settings exclusively.

What it means

The results demonstrate early-stage feasibility and proof of principle studies. Nonetheless, the findings demonstrate that electronic SUD interventions have substantial promise for use in corrections. Considering there are no Canadian studies, an uncontrolled open-label study is a critical next step, which will lay the foundation for randomized controlled trials in Canadian settings. Furthermore, an intervention approach will require consideration of existing programs in consultation with stakeholders and offenders.

For more information

Punia, K., Massey, M., Balodis, I., & MacKillop, J. (2026). *Electronic Interventions for Substance Use Disorders Among Offender Populations: A Systematic Review* (Research Report R-487). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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