

# Research Paper: Arrestees Substance Abuse: Moving Toward Rehabilitation Camps or Prisons



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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Illicit drug abuse and drug-related crimes are still a growing problem worldwide. Understanding the increasing number of individuals arrested for drug charges, as well as their characteristics is necessary to predict and establish preventive and treatment programs.

**Methods:** This cross-sectional study was conducted in Shahroud, Northeast of Iran from 2015-2018. Data were collected at the time of arrest from all homeless addicts and drug offenders arrested by the police and were sent to the rehabilitation camps or prisons (n=5486).

**Results:** Drug-related charges were the largest category of arrest charges in Shahroud. The mean age of arrestees had significantly decreased each year. In total, 19.1% of the arrestees were referred to the rehabilitation camps (18.6% male and 40.3% female). The number of cases arrested for drug charges referred to the rehabilitation camps had significantly increased over time in both men and women. The number of arrestees showed an increase each year, whereas their mean age had decreased significantly.

**Discussion:** Drug-related laws in Iran have been reformed, emphasizing the judicial supervision of arrest, treatment, and release processes. Treatment of arrestees with drug abuse provides opportunities for decreasing substance abuse and criminal behaviors and rearrests.

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## Highlights

- Drug-related charges were the largest category of arrest charges.
- Arrestees with drug abuse were predominantly young males, often single, with a low level of education.
- The mean age of arrestees with drug abuse significantly decreased every year.
- The number of arrestees with drug abuse who referred to the rehabilitation camps significantly increased.

## Plain Language Summary

In small cities of Iran, which are situated on trafficking routes, drug addiction and trafficking are prevalent among young people. Drug charges comprised the largest category of arrest charges in Shahroud, Iran. Regarding the high cost and negative effects of imprisoning the substance users, many authorities have begun to consider different alternatives approaches. The number of arrestees with drug abuse referring to the rehabilitation camps significantly increased over time in both men and women. It should be noted that those who were referred to compulsory camps by the police are treated free of charge. Individual, family, and group counseling is included in the considered intervention in camps to prevent relapse after recovery and achieve complete abstinence.

### 1. Introduction

Substance abuse and drug-related crimes threaten public health and social security. Drug abusers and smugglers are more likely to commit crimes compared with others. Addicts normally show criminal and violent behaviors to gain access to illegal drugs. Many illegal activities have arisen from drugs [1]. Drug offenders comprise 3-29% of the prisoners in the European Union (EU), 4-29% of the prisoners in non-EU European countries, 5-53% of the prisoners in the United States, and 10-58% of the prisoners in Asia and Oceania [2]. In the United States, 82% of drug-related arrests were due to drug possession charges in 2009 [3]. In Iran, at least, 50% of all prisoners are imprisoned because of drug-related offenses, and as many as 70% use illicit drugs [4]. Generally, the number of drug-related prisoners is high in Iran, and more than 10000 drug traffickers were executed in the last decade [5]. Also, about 80000 people are imprisoned for drug-related offenses [6].

In an attempt to reduce crimes in the community, intervention programs for drug users have been integrated into the criminal justice system to be carried out at the time of arrest, prison sentence, and imprisonment and while receiving community services. Reduced criminal activity has been also reported among drug users receiving treatment for addiction [7]. The Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM), originally established in 1987 by the National Institute of Justice, was a survey

conducted by the United States to gauge the prevalence of illegal drug use among arrestees and monitor drug-use trends, treatment needs, and risky behaviors among recently booked arrestees in more than 20 large cities of the United States [8].

ADAM survey in 1999 revealed that cocaine was used by nearly one-third of all adult arrestees, while opiate was not that much popular among adult arrestees, with about 7-8% positive results for these drugs via urinalysis. Between 1991 and 2000, drug abuse arrests increased by 48% in males and 59% in females [9]. The ADAM data in 2002-2008 revealed that the prevalence of self-reported marijuana use was 42.4% among adult male arrestees over the past month. In addition, the prevalence of rock cocaine, crack, methamphetamine, and heroin use was 20.1%, 12.9%, 11.5%, and 11.5%, respectively [10]. Conversely, ADAM data in 2000-2010 clearly indicated that the crack epidemic had declined among male arrestees who tended to serve their sentences. Based on the finding, the drug of choice among younger arrestees continues to be marijuana, which is associated with fewer drug-related problems than crack cocaine [11, 12].

The results of a conducted in London, UK, showed that approximately half of arrestees reported heroin (55%) and crack cocaine (49%) use, 51% of whom had received no previous treatment for addiction and the majority of these prisoners (80%) reported previous convictions [13]. Globally, more than two-thirds of all countries have legislation for mandatory drug treatment [14]. In Iran,

the Police, besides fighting against drug-related crimes, is also involved in providing mandatory treatment programs for addictions [15]. For this purpose, homeless addicts are arrested and sent to rehabilitation camps by the Iranian Anti-Narcotics Force [16]. However, considering the specific Iranian culture and society, which provides a protective factor against substance abuse, only a few studies have been carried out on the background of drug arrestees and their drug-use behaviors in Iran.

To find an effective treatment for drug abuse in arrestees and promote suitable programs and strategies for reducing substance use in criminal justice groups, it is important to report detailed information on drug abuse charges, drug abuse patterns, and treatment demands among high-risk populations, such as arrestees. The current study aimed at investigating an increase in the number of drug-related arrests and the arrestees' transfer to rehabilitation camps or prisons to provide the necessary information for better planning against substance abuse.

## 2. Methods

In this retrospective, cross-sectional study, data were collected from adult addicts (>18 years) and drug offenders arrested by the police force in Shahroud, a small city in Northeast of Iran. Following the arrests, some demographic variables, such as age, gender, educational level, occupational status, and type of drug abuse were obtained and recorded by the police force within the first hour of being booked into local jails. Drugs were divided into three groups: natural (opium, burned opium, and opium sap), synthetic (crystal meth), and semi-synthetic (heroin and Iranian crack).

The arrestees were sent to the court and referred to a judge. According to the investigations and collected evidence, when the arrested person was only a substance abuser and had not committed any other crimes, the judge will refer him/her to a rehabilitation camp (compulsory) as a residential rehabilitation center for addiction treatment. Only arrestees who had committed crimes were imprisoned. In this study, the subjects were selected using census sampling method. Information was collected from those arrested due to drug-related crimes through a four-year period from 2015-2018. Data were collected using checklists and analyzed through the Minitab 18 and Microsoft Excel.

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents the census report of the sociodemographic characteristics of drug offenders arrested by the

police force in Shahroud. The number of arrestees was 846 in 2015, 1212 in 2016, 1447 in 2017, and 1981 in 2018. In total, 5437 cases (97.3%) were male and 139 cases (2.7%) were female. The mean age of the arrestees was 31.44 years (SD=10.27), ranged 18-67 years. The age of arrestees with drug abuse significantly had decreased every year from 2015-2017 ( $P<0.05$ ), except for 2017-2018. The mean age of subjects at the onset of drug abuse was 19.9 years. Also, 33.9% of them had been imprisoned at least once.

Opium was the most commonly abused drug among the arrestees. Table 2 presents the types of consumed drugs in the arrestees. About 6.7% of the subjects had abused drugs intravenously. The findings showed that 56.8% of the arrestees had a family history of drug abuse. Overall, 40% of male and 18% of female arrestees had been sent to rehabilitation camps for four years. Table 3 shows the census report of individuals arrested for drug charges who were referred to rehabilitation camps or prisons. By 2018, the number of female arrestees had decreased significantly in comparison with male arrestees ( $P<0.0001$ ). Additionally, the number of cases arrested for drug charges referred to the rehabilitation camps had significantly increased over time in both men and women.

## 4. Discussion

In this study, we evaluated the demographic characteristics, drug abuse patterns, and the number of arrestees sent to the rehabilitation camps in Shahroud, Iran. The arrestees were predominantly young males, often single, with a low level of education. Women comprised a small number of subjects and also no prison-based drug treatment facilities have been considered for this population.

The age range of the arrestees with drug-related crimes was 30-33 years. Considering the demographic characteristics of the arrestees, our participants were as young as the samples studied in other relevant studies, such as in French [17, 18], American [19], Chinese [20], and English [21] arrestees. Generally, being young and unemployed can increase the risk of being arrested [22]. In the studied subjects, those with non-governmental jobs and no access to higher education were more than unemployed cases. One possible explanation is that most of the arrestees had temporary jobs; therefore, they purchased and sold illegal drugs because of their low income.

Although smuggling, producing, and distributing drugs are serious offenses in Iran, associated with long-term imprisonment and serious penalties, drug-related crimes continue to be a growing problem. Our results showed

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of the arrestees

Variable		Mean±SD			
		2015	2016	2017	2018
Age		33.59±10.9*	31.56±9.1*	30.1±8.8*	30.52±12.3
Variables		No. (%)			
		2015	2016	2017	2018
Gender	Male	812 (96)	1186 (97.9)	1408 (97.3)	1941 (98)
	Female	35 (4)	26 (2.1)	39 (2.7)	40 (2)
Marital status	Married	322 (38.1)	478 (39.5)	568 (39.3)	788 (39.8)
	Single	457 (54.1)	614 (50.7)	727 (50.3)	1022 (51.6)
	Others	67 (7.8)	720 (9.8)	152 (10.4)	171 (8.6)
Educational level	Illiterate	42 (5)	60 (5)	86 (6)	59 (3)
	Primary school	219 (26)	303 (25)	405 (28)	435 (22)
	Secondary school	321 (38)	424 (35)	448 (31)	614 (31)
	High school and diploma	211 (25)	351 (29)	405 (28)	792 (40)
Employment status	College and more	53 (6)	74 (6)	103 (7)	81 (4)
	Unemployed	60 (7)	49 (4)	44 (3)	99 (5)
	Governmental jobs	9 (1)	18 (1.5)	22 (1.5)	20 (1)
	Non-government jobs	466 (55)	715 (59)	854 (59)	1545 (78)
	Others	311 (37)	430 (35.5)	527 (36.5)	317 (16)

\*The age of the arrestees significantly decreased (P<0.05).

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**Table 2.** Type of drug consumed by arrestees

Type of Drug No. (%)	2015	2016	2017	2018	F*
Natural	617 (73)	921 (76)	1056 (73)	1465 (74)	0.025
Synthetic	161 (19)	193 (16)	260 (18)	277 (14)	
Semi-synthetic	68 (8)	98 (8)	131 (9)	239 (12)	

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\* Consuming natural drugs is significantly higher than synthetic and semisynthetic drugs, but the pattern.

**Table 3.** The census report of drug offenders arrested in Shahroud moved to camps or prisons

Year	2015		2016		2017		2018		F*
	No. (%)	Camp	Prison	Camp	Prison	Camp	Prison	Camp	
Men	67 (8.25)	745 (91.75)	213 (17.95)	973 (82.04)	348 (24.71)	1060 (75.28)	365 (18.80)	1576 (81.19)	0.001
Women	7 (20.5)	27 (79.41)	8 (30.76)	18 (69.24)	19 (48.71)	20 (51.28)	22 (55)	18 (45)	0.001
Total	74 (8.75)	772 (91.25)	221 (18.23)	991 (81.76)	367 (25.36)	1080 (74.63)	387 (19.53)	1594 (80.46)	0.001

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\*The number of arrestees referred to the rehabilitation camps significantly increased over time in men and women.

an increase in drug abuse rate among arrestees in Shahroud. Opiates, marijuana, alcohol, and psychostimulants are the drugs of choice among arrestees [23, 24].

Self-reporting a relatively soft drug, such as marijuana by younger arrestees is more than a relatively hard drug, like psychostimulants [25]. In this regard, Hunt et al. (2015) reported that a substantial proportion of arrestees require

treatment for both mental and substance use disorders. However, relatively few arrestees had received these services over the past year or throughout their lifetime [14].

Currently, compulsory rehabilitation is a major drug rehabilitation intervention in some countries [26]. In our study, the number of drug-related arrestees, who were referred to the rehabilitation camps showed an increase each year. However, according to the results of studies in Southeast Asian countries, the total number of people in compulsory detention centers decreased by only 4% between 2012 and 2014 [27]. On the other hand, previous reports have revealed forced labor, physical abuse, and even sexual abuse in these camps [28]. Nine Asian countries, such as Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam have committed to transition from compulsory detention treatment models towards voluntary community-based treatment services, based on expanded voluntary community-based drug dependence care in health centers [29].

Few countries offer opioid agonist therapy in detention centers, except for Iran, where methadone therapy is provided in compulsory treatment centers [30, 31]. Arrestees sent by the police to compulsory camps are treated free of charge in Iran [15], however, policymakers have established a cohesive program to prevent relapse and re-entry into the addiction cycle after discharge. Individual, family, and group counseling is also an important part of camp services for the prevention of relapse after recovery and achieving complete abstinence.

A twelve-step intervention program is another useful strategy used by the government and rehabilitation camps to prevent relapse after recovery and achieve complete abstinence. Subcommittee meetings of the Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) associations, as non-governmental organizations, are held in prisons and camps. The purpose of these meetings is to transfer the message of recovery to addicts whose attendance in regular meetings is restricted [32-34]. Moreover, arrestees can use facilities to build a business after discharge from rehabilitation camps.

## 5. Conclusion

Regarding the high cost and negative effects of imprisoning the substance users, many authorities have directed their attention to different alternative approaches. Drug-related laws in Iran have been reformed, emphasizing the judicial supervision of arrest, treatment, and release processes. When drug addicts and offenders are

arrested, those with only addiction problems with no other criminal charges are referred by the judge to rehabilitation camps for drug abuse treatment. The obtained findings showed that the number of cases arrested for drug charges referred to the rehabilitation camps had significantly increased over time in both men and women. Treatment of arrestees with drug abuse provides an opportunity to decrease substance abuse and the associated criminal behaviors and rearrests.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The local Ethics Committee affiliated with the Shahroud University of Medical Sciences approved this study (Code: IR.SHMU.REC.1398.144). The present study complies with contemporary laws and regulations in Iran.

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### Authors' contributions

Conceptualization, methodology, original draft preparation: Fahimeh Mohseni; Data curation, investigation: Elie Moghimi Khorasani; Formal analysis: Ali Asghar Nadi Ghara; Supervision, writing - review & editing: Raheleh Rafeaiee.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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