

Mental illness, child abuse and
drugs: the experiences of
Australian women detained by
police.

Lubica Forsythe & Mitchell Byrne

University of Wollongong

Acknowledgements

- The DUMA project is funded by the Australian Government National Illicit Drug Strategy. The data and tabulations used in this thesis were made available through the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC). These data were originally collected by the Sellenger Centre at Edith Cowan University, Marg Houritz Pty Ltd, Forsythe Consultants Pty Ltd and Walsh and Associates Pty Ltd with the assistance of the NSW, QLD, SA and WA Police Services for the AIC. Neither the collectors nor the AIC bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented herein.
- This analysis was conducted for UOW Bachelor of Psychology Honours thesis, supervised by Mitchell Byrne.

Drug Use Monitoring in Australia

DUMA is...

- National illicit drug monitoring program
- Samples people detained in police custody for less than 48 hours
- Quarterly data collection in QLD, NSW, SA, WA, VIC, NT.
- Voluntary and confidential – people can and do refuse
- Data de-identified
- Counts custody episodes – not individuals

Why is *DUMA* useful...

- Collects illicit drug use information from ALL detainees – not just those charged with drug offences
- Early warning system for changes in illicit drug use
- Quarterly and annual data
- Geographic & temporal trends
- Started in 1999 and ongoing

What data does *DUMA* collect?

- Survey -
 - Demographic – including ethnicity, income (legal & illegal)
 - Illicit drug & alcohol use: history, current use, dependence
 - Illicit drug purchasing patterns
 - Illicit drug & alcohol treatment
 - Current medication use
 - Recent involvement in criminal justice system
 - Gambling habits
 - Weapons
- Urine – analysed for drugs
- Current charge information

Study rationale

- Few studies examine crime and gender
- Legal, social and political forces vary between countries
- Drug markets are localised
- Prisoner research – illicit drugs use, trauma history, poor mental health
- Prisoners are a small proportion of offenders

This study sample

- 2002 to 2006 inclusive
- Sites: Bankstown, Parramatta, Adelaide, Elizabeth, Southport, Brisbane, Perth
- Sample = 18, 280 adults
- 84% = male, 16% = female
- Participants assumed independent

This study examined

- Gender *and*
- Mental illness indicators
 - Psychoactive medications (past fortnight)
 - Psychiatric hospitalisation (ever)
- Relationship between mental illness *and*
 - Illicit drug use
 - Criminal activity
- Psychological distress of a subset of detainees
- Abuse experience of a subset of detainees

Mental illness indicators

	Males	Females
1. Psychiatric hospitalisation (ever)*	16%	21%
2. Psychoactive meds (fortnight)		
taking benzodiazepines	10%	18%
taking anti-depressants	7%	13%
taking anti-psychotics	4%	4%
taking at least 1 of above meds*	18%	29%
Mental illness indicator (1 and/or 2)*	27%	39%

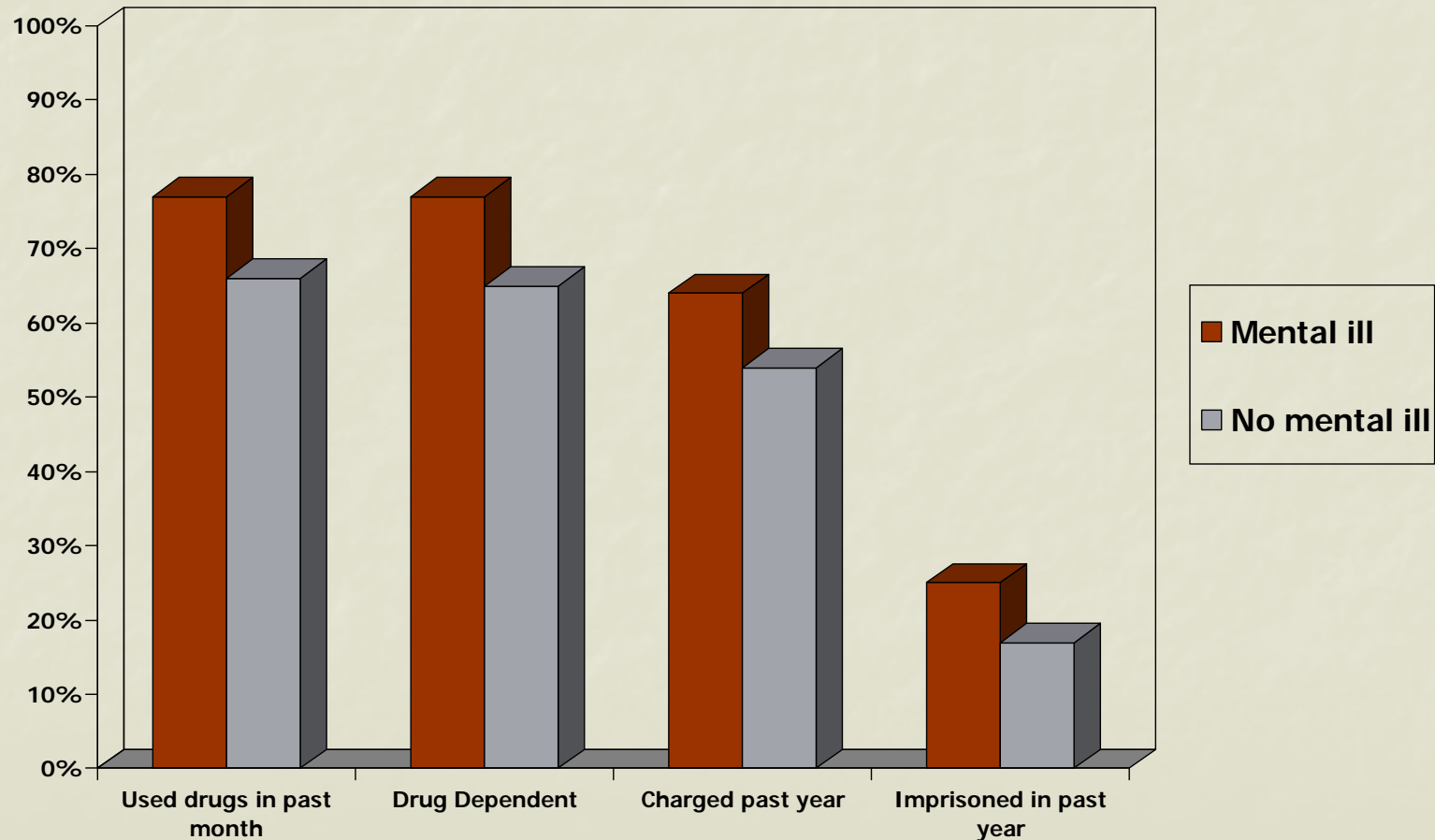
AIC DUMA [Computer file 2002-2006]

* = statistical significance

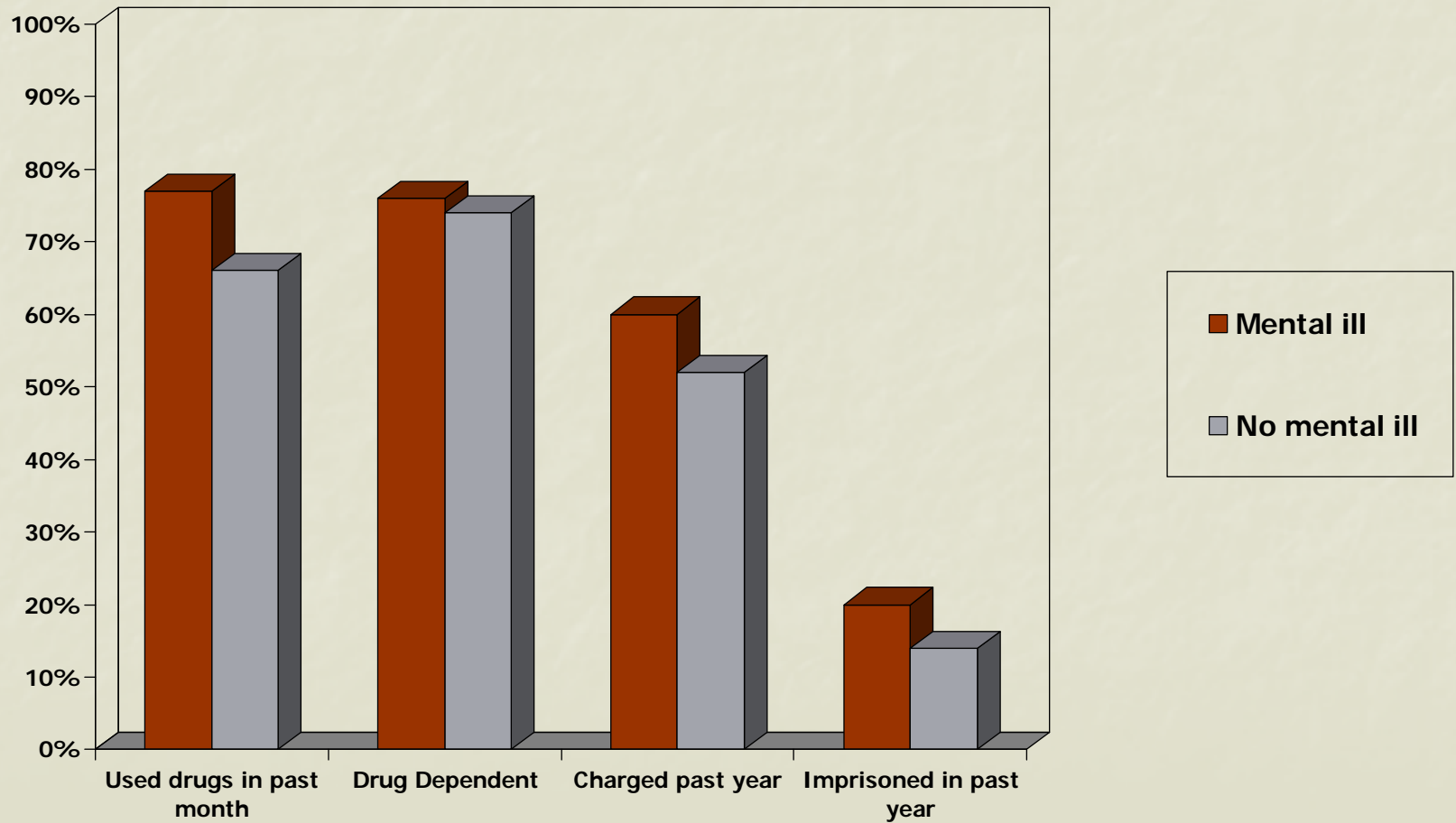
Drug use

- 70% used at least 1 illicit drug during past month
- Gender differences:
 - women more likely to have used amphetamines, heroin, illegal benzodiazepines
 - women used more types of drugs
 - women used drugs more frequently
 - more women (72%) were dependent on illegal drugs compared to males (66%)

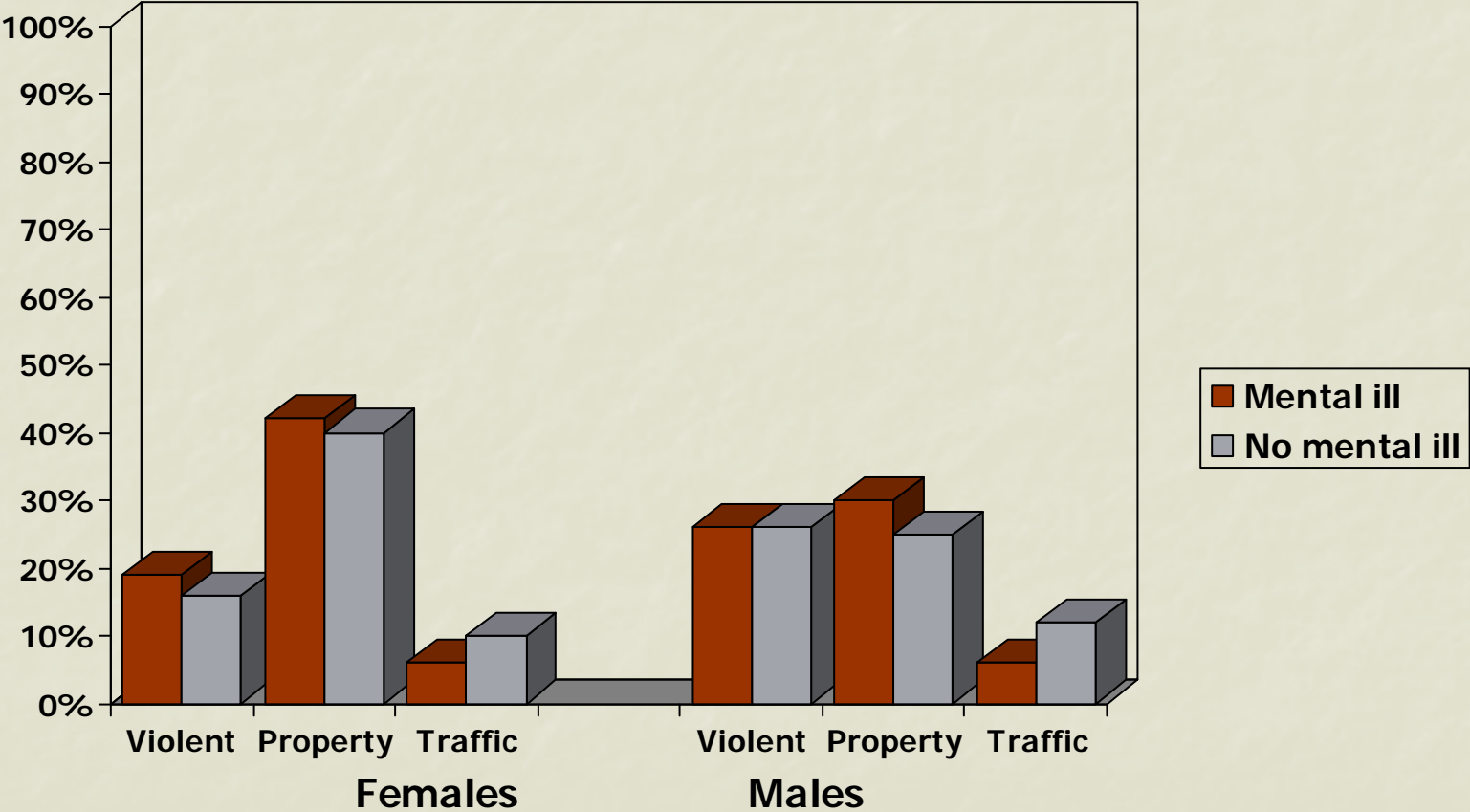
Men - mental illness, illicit drug use and criminal activity



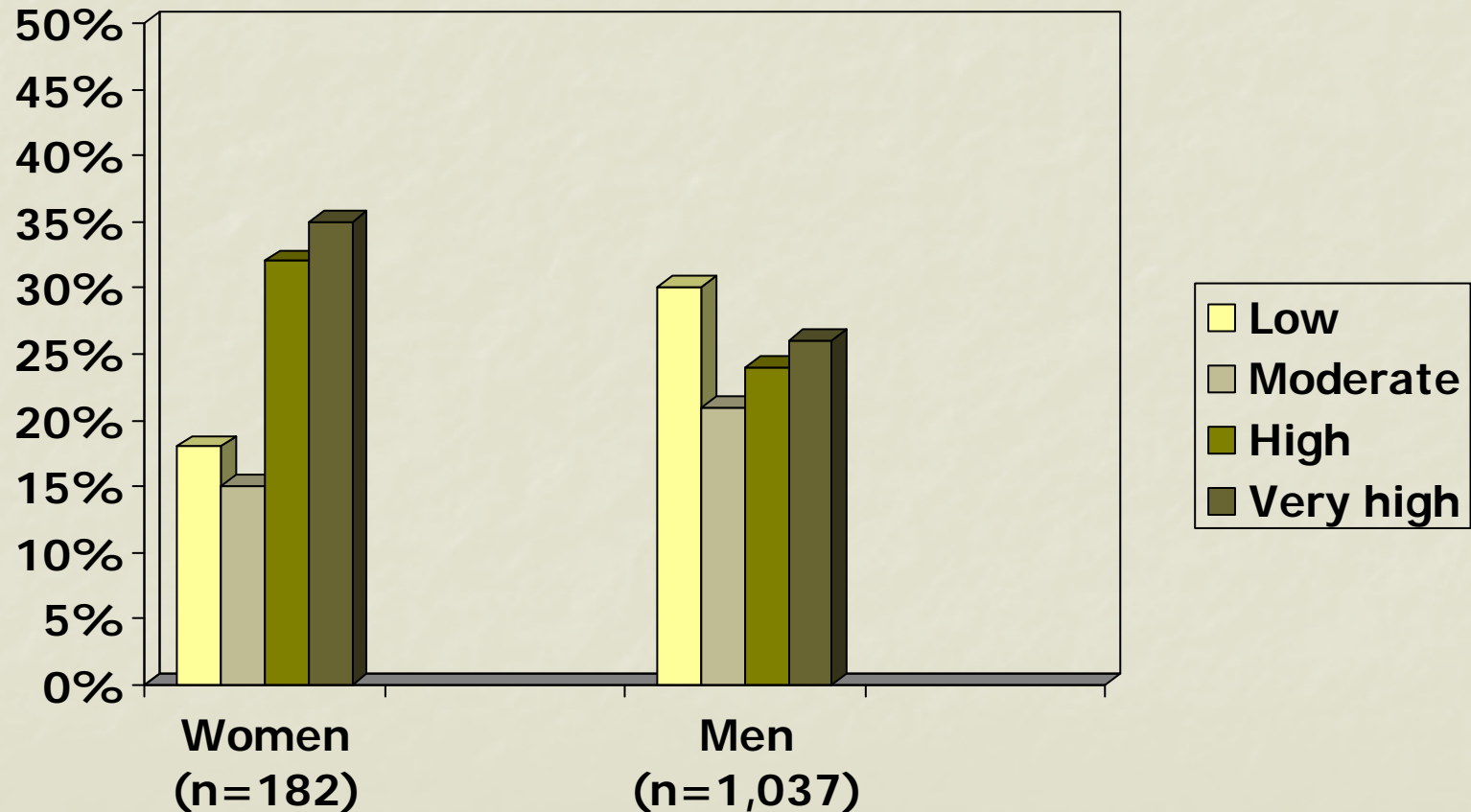
Women - mental illness, illicit drug use and criminal activity



Mental illness, gender and current MSO



Gender and psychological distress



Psychological distress in a subset of participants

- High/very high psychological distress related to
 - Recent drug use, esp illegal benzo
 - Drug dependence
 - Charged in past year
 - Mental illness indicator
- No relationship with
 - Current MSO type
 - Imprisonment in past year

Abuse experiences

- Subset answered questions about violence
- Physical/sexual abuse before age 18
- 1,606 participants (94% RR)
- Women (n=247)
 - 49% reported childhood abuse
- Men (n=1, 355)
 - 34% reported childhood abuse

Childhood abuse associated with..

- Recent drug use
 - Heroin, amphetamine and illegal benzo
- Drug dependence
- Charged in the past year
- Mental illness indicator
- Males only – imprisonment in past year

But NOT associated with

- Cannabis use
- Most serious offence for current custody
- For women – imprisonment in past year

Summary

- Compared to male detainees, women were
 - More likely to have experienced mental illness
 - Have high psychological distress
 - Use more types of drugs & more frequently
 - Be drug dependent
 - Physically/sexually abused during childhood

Summary cont...

- Mental illness indicator was associated with:
 - Recent drug use
 - Drug dependence
 - Recent recidivism
 - Psychological distress
 - Childhood abuse experience

Policy implications

- Need to develop better mental health measures for police detainees
- Need for mental health services for offenders who are not incarcerated
- Screening and diversion to treatment at the time of arrest
- Treatment for mental illness should be integrated and gender specific ie: substance dependence & trauma