Reviewer's report

Title: Validity of self-reported criminal behaviour in substance abusing women at five-year follow-up

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Reviewer: Norman G Poythress

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Review for BMC Psychiatry:

“Validity of Self-reported Criminal Behaviour in Substance Abusing Women at Five-year Follow-up

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined? Previous investigators have explored the general question posed by these authors; however, the current research appears to be rather unique in extending this research question to a female sample of substance-abusing women.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

Minor Essential Revisions.

The critical issue in this research is the extent to which participants accurately reported specific charges by the police within discrete time frames in a retrospective interview. Thus, it would be desirable to see 1 or more examples of the specific questions used to solicit this information. This would show the reader (and investigators who might aspire to replicate this research) the structure of inquiries in this study. E.g.,

A. How specific were the instructions to participants regarding dates (“In the past six months … ” versus “Between April 1, 2000 and Sept. 30, 2000, …”)

B. Were the queries in recall format (“During period X, what criminal charges were placed against you?”) or some type of recognition format (“During period X, were you charged with theft? Were you charged with any crime against a person? Were you charged with violating a drug law?)

Also, how did the authors deal with the issue of potentially changing charges? I know little about how these things work in Sweden, but in the US a defendant’s initial charges may change over time, e.g., as a result of plea negotiations.

Did the authors have a strategy for exploring crime-related events that occurred very near the end of their discrete 6-month windows? A defendant may have been officially charged with theft just 4-5 days prior to the end of a particular 6-month window but, due to imprecise memory, report having been charged in the following 6-month period. Any brief description as to whether/how these issues were considered would be helpful.
3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

Minor Essential Revisions.

Clarification of Sample. The original sample consisted of 132 women, 12 were excluded from follow-up due to consent issues or death, leaving a possible 120 to be interviewed. 109 were interviewed, so the reader is left wondering about the 11 additional missing cases. The authors should briefly clarify.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

Major Essential Revisions.

It may be just me, but despite reading the text several times I had a bit of trouble understanding some of the data in Table 1. I thought I understood it until I looked at the row of data for Drug-related Offences for year 0. As best I understand it, 43 people were interviewed regarding drug charges during the year of the interview, but none (0%) of these individuals actually had charges. These people must have reported something about being charged with drug-related offenses (Yes I was Charged, or, No I wasn’t charged), so why cannot a %-agreement be calculated?

I also found the definitions on page 6 for “false negatives” (described as a function of all subjects) and “false positives” (described as a function of all women) on page 6 to be confusing. First, it seems from the sample description that “all subjects” = “women,” so using different terms here is confusing. Second, clearer definitions of these terms are needed. If I understand the authors’ intent here, it seems that the false negative rate is the proportion of those participants for whom official records indicate that an event did occur (charge for a particular offense type, or being placed in prison) that denied such an event occurred; a false positive rate would be the proportion of those participants for whom official records indicate that an event did not occur (charge for a particular offense type, or being placed in prison) that nevertheless claimed that such an event did occur. Whatever their intent, the text could be clearer.

5. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

Yes

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:
I declare that I have no competing interests