INTRODUCTION

Historically, the use of drugs among women has been associated with prescription drugs, whereas drug use among men often is linked to the use of illegal substances such as cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine. Illicit drug use among women and the associated negative health consequences has only recently become a serious topic of investigation. Only since the 1960s have studies on the use of illicit drugs among women become common, a change that coincided with the second wave of the feminist movement in the western world. In most early 1960s/1970s studies, female drug users primarily were included as a comparison sample to male users. Consequently, the findings of these studies tended to emphasize differences between men and women, with female users typically being depicted as much more negative than their male counterparts. For example, women were described as weak, unable to control their drug use, and dependent on male users for the support of their drug habit (Sutter, 1966; Fiddle, 1976; File, 1976).

During the 1970s, much of the substance abuse research among women was based on the emancipation thesis, which assumes that as women become more “liberated,” they also are more likely to become involved with criminal activities, including drug use (Adler, 1975). During this same decade, researchers in the drug field began emphasizing a link between drug use and crime (Goldstein, 1979). Whereas no studies confirmed a causal link between drug use and crime, the two phenomena were often presented as closely linked to each other. In addition, women who used drugs, independent of any involvement in other illegal activities, continued to be stigmatized far more than their male drug-using counterparts (Musto, 1973; Johnson et al., 1985).

A criminal activity especially assumed to be connected to female drug use is prostitution (James, 1976; Goldstein, 1979). The drug use–prostitution connection has been used to create a double stigma for female users. They are accused of deviating from mainstream gender role expectations because of their use, as well as their involvement with prostitution.

Since the onset of the crack epidemic, the
The dynamics of the women's involvement in drug use and criminal activities further crystallized. This is partly due to the fact that women are more represented among crack cocaine users than among users of other drugs. It is also due to the financial drain caused by the need to support a crack cocaine habit. Compared to women who used other illicit drugs, female crack cocaine users are more likely to be involved in the drug business. The latter includes preparing, packaging, transporting, and, to a lesser extent, selling drugs (Inciardi, Pottieger, & Lockwood, 1993; Fagan, 1994; Sterk, 1999). Also, with the onset of the crack cocaine epidemic, a new form of prostitution emerged. Women began to exchange sex directly for crack cocaine (Inciardi, Pottieger, & Lockwood, 1993; Ratner, 1993; Sterk & Elifson, 1990; Sterk, 2000).

In many U.S. metropolitan areas, the emergence of the crack cocaine epidemic coincided with the beginning of the heterosexual spread of HIV. Prior to the onset of the AIDS epidemic, little attention was given to the health consequences of drug use. Previous concerns tended to be focused on the consequences for the users' families and society at large. Had the AIDS epidemic not occurred, the health consequences to drug users never may have received much attention. After all, observers appear to feel much more comfortable with female drug users as criminals than as patients.

The one health area that received particular attention, even prior to the AIDS epidemic, involved the reproductive health consequences of illicit drug use. The majority of the studies on reproductive health emphasized the negative impact of the women's drug use on the development of the fetus (Chasnoff, 1988; Chavkin, Allen, & Oberman, 1991; Garcia & Mur, 1991). For example, prenatal exposure to cocaine was associated with dysmorphia, growth retardation, and neurological damage (Chasnoff, 1988). Coles (1992) challenged these findings and stressed the potential negative impact of the sociocultural context, e.g., poor nutrition and disorganization in everyday life, on the development of the fetus and child. In much of this research, the focus appears to be on the regulation of the reproductive behaviors of female drug users and on "fetal rights," which assume that a fetus is a person who has rights separate and independent from the pregnant woman carrying the fetus.

In addition to criminalizing women for drug use during pregnancy, they also are challenged in their role as mothers and many are declined the option to show they can be responsible mothers (Rosenbaum, 1981; Taylor, 1993; Kearney, Murphy, & Rosenbaum, 1994; Leib & Sterk-Elifson, 1993; Murphy & Rosenbaum, 1999; Sterk, 1999). Despite society's increasing concern for women drug users, their offspring, and their families, few resources are put aside to assist the women. For example, limited drug treatment options taking the unique needs of women into consideration are available.

In order to provide the reader with insight into some of the main issues surrounding illicit drug use among women, we will address a wide range of topics in this chapter. These include epidemiological, clinical, and ethnographic assessments of drug use, epidemiological profiles of female drug users, including age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and pregnancy, research and theoretical perspectives of female drug use, health outcomes, and issues related to drug treatment. The chapter concludes with remarks and suggestions for future research.

ASSESSMENT AND EPIDEMIOLOGY OF FEMALE DRUG ABUSE

Assessment of Drug Abuse

Epidemiological Data

Drug use is a complex behavior, comprised of factors such as the frequency, quantity, and length of use by type of drug, the route of drug administration, the psychopharmacological effects of various classes of drugs, and the use of multiple drugs simultaneously or sequentially. Drug use patterns and experiences also vary depending on the company and the