



Research at a glance

Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study

KEY WORDS: *non-suicidal self-injury; offender suicide attempts, mental health.*

Why we did this study

Self-injurious behaviour (SIB) can be defined as any type of direct bodily harm or disfigurement that is deliberately inflicted on oneself that is not considered to be socially acceptable. It can include such behaviours as cutting, ligature use, burning, hitting, swallowing sharp or indigestible objects, inserting and removing objects, and head banging. When SIB is undertaken without suicidal intent, it is referred to as non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). SIB creates serious challenges for the safety and well-being of offenders and staff within the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the treatment and prevention of SIB is a priority for many correctional institutions. The purpose of this report was to examine SIB in a randomized, nationally representative sample of federally sentenced women to improve understanding of SIB among women offenders.

What we did

Archival data were obtained for 400 randomly selected federally sentenced women who were incarcerated between April 1, 2008 and March 31, 2009. Data were coded from files. Variables for coding were selected based on previous research indicating their relationship to SIB. The variables included information on demographics, SIB history, CSC history, criminal history, and mental health. A comparison between women with a history of SIB and those who do not have was conducted, along with an analysis of SIB incidents occurring at CSC.

What we found

Almost one-half of the women in the study ($n = 185$) had an incident of SIB in their past (either an incident of NSSI or a suicide attempt). About 11% ($n = 43$) had engaged in SIB while in a CSC institution and 4% (15 women) had engaged in SIB at CSC during the year of study. Approximately 24% of women ($n = 95$) had either engaged in an incident of NSSI prior to CSC or SIB in CSC. About 2% of women ($n = 8$)

engaged in SIB in CSC but did not have a history of NSSI or suicide attempts prior to entering CSC.

Women with a history of SIB were more likely to have been diagnosed with a psychological disorder, such as mood, psychotic, substance use, anxiety, and personality disorders. These women were also more likely to have a history of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation, as well as being a victim of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Incidents of SIB occurring at CSC most often took the form of cutting, followed by ligature use and head banging. These incidents were more likely to be engaged in by women classified as maximum security. When motivations for self-injury were explored, the reduction of negative emotions was most often found on the women's' files.

What it means

About 46% of women offenders have a history of SIB and approximately 11% have self-injured while in a CSC institution. The majority of women offenders who self-injure initiate their behaviour prior to being admitted to CSC. Interventions should address motivations for SIB that include factors outside of the correctional environment.

For more information

Power, J. & Usher, A. (2011). *Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study*. Research Report R-249. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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