



Research at a glance

Initial Results of the Computerized Mental Health Intake Screening System (CoMHISS) for Federally Sentenced Women

KEY WORDS: *Federally Sentenced Women, Mental Health Screening, Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), Depression, Hopelessness and Suicide Screening Scale (DHS)*

Why we did this study

Addressing the needs of federally sentenced women with a mental health disorder is a priority for the Correctional Service Canada (CSC). Evidence indicates that an increasing number of women are being incarcerated in federal prisons and that women offenders have considerable mental health problems. The Computerized Mental Health Intake Screening System (CoMHISS) was developed as a standardized mental health screening tool for offenders entering the federal correctional system to ensure that those requiring mental health services are identified upon admission. A previous report presented the results of the pilot of the CoMHISS on incoming federally sentenced men. This study provides the results for federally sentenced women.

What we did

The CoMHISS is composed of three self-report instruments: The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), the Depression, Hopelessness and Suicide Scale (DHS) and the Paulhus Deception Scale (PDS). From January 2009 to June 2010, 264 women offenders from the five regions entering CSC on a new sentence completed the CoMHISS. Using the BSI, the proportion of offenders scoring at or beyond a recommended cut-off score for potential indicators of mental health issues was calculated. Women who meet or exceed the cut-off score are identified for follow-up assessment and if necessary, treatment for their mental health needs. Further analyses were also done to calculate the percentage of women who would meet the cut-off criteria using scores from other key scales of the instruments.

What we found

Results using the chosen cut-off score on the Global Severity Index on the BSI showed that nearly 46% of offenders (42.5% non-Aboriginals; 51.6% Aboriginals) reported elevated levels of psychological distress. Only 7% of women in the Canadian population would score this high. Using the DHS, 7% of the women endorsed one or more of the current suicidal ideation

items. When criteria from two self-report instruments in the CoMHISS were combined, 62% of the women met the criteria for a follow-up assessment.¹

Although Aboriginal offenders report experiencing higher levels of psychological distress, these differences were not statistically significant. Additional analyses indicated that women with high rates of substance abuse were significantly more likely to report mental health problems than those with no or lower levels of substance abuse.

What it means

The CoMHISS provides information that will identify women offenders who require follow-up assessment and may inform case formulation and resource planning for women with mental health needs. While the rates of self-reported psychological distress as assessed by the CoMHISS are high for federally sentenced women, these results do not provide diagnoses of mental disorder. More specific clinical interviews are required to determine the rates of mental disorder in this population.

For more information

Archambault, K., Stewart, L., Wilton, G., & Cousineau, C. (2010). *Initial results of the Computerized Mental Health Intake Screening System (CoMHISS) for Federally Sentenced Women*. Research Report R-230. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

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¹ Note: Appendix J of the report discusses the application of the CoMHISS norms to the federal population.