



Research at a glance

Correlates and Trajectories to Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women

KEY WORDS: *self-injurious behaviour; women offenders; mental health.*

Why we did this study

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) may be defined as deliberate bodily harm or disfigurement without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned. It may include behaviours such as cutting, ligature use, burning, hitting, swallowing sharp or indigestible objects, inserting and removing objects, and head banging. The treatment and prevention of NSSI is a priority for CSC. However, there is a lack of knowledge regarding SIB in federally sentenced women in Canada. The purpose of this report was to improve our understanding of the NSSI in federally sentenced women.

What we did

A total of 150 federally sentenced women participated in the study. These women were recruited from Nova Institution for Women, Joliette Institution, Grand Valley Institution for Women, Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, Edmonton Institution for Women, Fraser Valley Institution for Women, and the Regional Psychiatric Centre. Participants completed a semi-structured interview and a series of questionnaires designed to assess their NSSI and factors associated with their NSSI, such as mental health, impulsivity, aggression, and childhood trauma. A comparison between women with a history of NSSI and those who do not have this history was conducted. In addition, the origins of the behaviour are explored.

What we found

Almost two-thirds of the participants had at least one incident of NSSI or a suicide attempt in their past. Approximately half of the participants had attempted suicide and more than one-third had engaged in NSSI. Participants who had a history of NSSI scored significantly higher on measures of impulsivity, depression, hostility, sexual abuse, and aggression. Participants in the NSSI group were also significantly more likely to meet the criteria for Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Borderline Personality Disorder.

Women with a history of NSSI were significantly more likely to have experienced childhood emotional and sexual abuse. Impulsivity, anger, and aggression were also found to be correlated with NSSI, although of the three components of this model, the relationship of NSSI with impulsivity is the most significant. Incarceration was not found to have a significant effect on NSSI. The majority of women who engaged in NSSI initiated their behaviour in the community and many did not continue to self-injure after being admitted to a CSC institution. Suicide attempts and NSSI, while correlated, were viewed as distinct behaviours by the participants.

What it means

The current study improves our understanding of NSSI, particularly among federally sentenced women. In order to better comprehend and ultimately manage the behaviour, a targeted focus on mental health issues and early life experiences, such as childhood abuse, is needed. Further, in order to effectively treat and prevent suicide attempts and NSSI, they must be approached as distinct behaviours.

For more information

Power, J. & Usher, A. (2011). *Correlates and Trajectories to Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women*. Research Report R-245. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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