



Research at a glance

A Descriptive Analysis of Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women

KEY WORDS: *non-suicidal self-injury; offender suicide attempts*

Why we did this study

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a complex behaviour that can pose health risks to offenders and correctional staff. Few studies have specifically examined this phenomenon with federally sentenced women. The treatment and prevention of NSSI is a priority for CSC. The purpose of this report was to add to the growing body of research conducted in CSC on self-injury to improve our understanding of the NSSI in federally sentenced women and inform intervention and management strategies.

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.

What we did

A total of 150 federally sentenced women participated in the study. These women were recruited from all of the federal women's institutions in Canada. Participants completed a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire designed to assess history of NSSI and factors associated with the behaviour. Items included in questionnaire assessed factors such as initiation of NSSI, frequency and lethality, methods used, body parts injured, and motivations. A descriptive analysis of NSSI is presented based on the responses of the women in the sample who reported a history of self-injury.

What we found

Of the women with a history of NSSI ($n = 57$), 93% first initiated the behaviour prior to admission to CSC, and 40% reported at least one incident of NSSI while incarcerated. Most women reported first self-injuring prior to the age of 20.

Cutting was the most common form of self-injury for incidents occurring both prior to CSC and after being admitted. The body parts most frequently injured were the arms, hands, and wrists.

Types of suicide attempts most frequently reported were drug overdose, cutting, and ligature use. While many women reported engaging in both NSSI and suicide attempts, they were viewed by the women as distinct behaviours.

Participants endorsed diverse reasons for engaging in NSSI. The majority of participants indicated multiple motivations for the behaviour. The most commonly reported motivations were related to coping with negative emotions. Incarceration was not found to be a common motivation for engaging in NSSI.

What it means

The majority of women offenders engage in NSSI do so to cope with negative emotions. Also, NSSI and suicide attempts were found to be distinct behaviours which argues for a differential treatment and management strategy. Rates of NSSI and suicide attempts are already high in this population prior to incarceration.

For more information

Power, J. & Usher, A. (2011). *A Descriptive Analysis of Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women*. Research Report R-251. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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