



Research at a glance

Self-Injurious Behaviour: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Corrections

KEY WORDS: *suicide, self-injurious behaviour, mental health, safety and security.*

Why we did this study

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, such as cutting, head banging, hair pulling, and the use of ligature for strangulation. Self-injurious behaviour (SIB) poses a serious challenge to the ability of correctional agencies to provide a safe environment for offenders and institutional staff. A literature review was required to determine what is currently known about SIB and what gaps exist in order to inform future research on SIB in the CSC's federal institutions

What we did

A literature review was conducted on SIB with a focus on adult correctional populations.

What we found

The best estimate of prevalence rates of SIB are: 4% for the general adult population; 1-5% for correctional populations; 23% for women offenders; and 53% for offenders with mental health issues. Skin cutting has been found to be the most common type of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI).

Numerous correlates of self-injurious behaviour have been found, including borderline personality disorder, history of trauma and abuse, posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, eating disorders, same-sex attraction, and homosexuality, impulsivity, anger and aggression. Suicide has been found to be a correlate, but is a distinct behaviour from NSSI.

A wide variety of motivations for engaging in SIB have been proposed, although few have been empirically validated. The strongest support has been found for the use of SIB as a method of coping with negative emotions.

No adequate SIB classification system has been developed and no one system is in widespread use and research has yet to determine the process by

which NSSI is initiated and maintained. An empirically-derived classification system that accounts for the unique environment of a correctional facility could help increase understanding of the behaviour and target treatment to the particular needs of at risk individuals

What it means

The current literature lacks large-scale, empirical research with incarcerated populations that adequately assesses NSSI. An increased understanding of NSSI within federal institutions could improve the safety of offenders and staff, as well as improve the treatment, management and prevention of NSSI. Research is needed to determine the prevalence of NSSI, to establish a classification system that can be used with incarcerated populations, and the impact, if any, of incarceration on NSSI. Most importantly, an increased understanding of the development and maintenance of NSSI is required for the development of appropriate strategies to address this behaviour, including efforts to reduce and ultimately prevent its occurrence. Research is currently underway within CSC to address these gaps.

For more information

Power, J. & Brown, S. L. (2009). *Self-Injurious Behaviour: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Corrections*. Ottawa: Correctional Service of Canada.

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