



Research at a glance

A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders

KEY WORDS: *male offenders, self-injurious behavior, suicide, 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. NSSI may include cutting, ligature use, burning, hitting, swallowing sharp or indigestible objects, inserting and removing objects, and head banging. NSSI poses a serious threat to the safety and well-being of offenders and staff within the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The purpose of this study was to acquire a better understanding of the motivations, emotions, and precipitating events related to NSSI in male offenders to inform interventions and management strategies.

What we did

One-hundred and four federally sentenced men participated in semi-structured interviews designed to assess their history of NSSI in-depth. Men were recruited from a medium and maximum security institution in each of the five regions in Canada.

What we found

Coping was the most common reason cited by the men with almost 60% of participants reported using NSSI as a method of coping with negative emotions or to moderate their mood in some way. The second most common reason was institutional influence, which involved using NSSI instrumentally while incarcerated to exert control or obtain external rewards. Among men who initiated NSSI in a CSC institution, institutional influence was the most common motivation.

The most common emotions reported by the men prior to engaging in NSSI were anger and frustration, with more than two-thirds endorsing these emotions. Depression and sadness were the next most common emotions. Ninety-two men described emotions they experience after engaging in NSSI. After engaging in NSSI, the most common emotion report was relief, followed by regret. About 14% of men reported they had self-injured after being moved

to segregation, and almost 13% self-injured in response to interpersonal conflict, such as a problem with an intimate partner or family member.

One-quarter of the participants reported that they had begun using a more appropriate release of emotions other than self-injury, such as talking to someone, writing, or participating in programs. About 18% of the men reported focusing on positive experiences and positive thinking as an alternative to NSSI.

What it means

This study confirms that there is a need for assessment and treatment of NSSI in offenders that addresses when the behaviour was initiated and the motivations for engaging in the behaviour, which can vary greatly among offenders. This study shows that some of the reasons for NSSI differ between men and women. Given that federally sentenced men most commonly reported engaging in NSSI as a means of coping, interventions could train offenders on appropriate coping strategies. The role of using NSSI to exert institutional influence should be explored in the assessment of NSSI in men, particularly for those who initiate their behaviour after being admitted to CSC.

For more information

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