



Research at a glance

Correlates and Trajectories to Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Men

KEY WORDS: *self-injurious behaviour; mental health; federally sentenced men.*

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. Recent research in CSC has focused on NSSI in federally sentenced women; however, there is a lack of knowledge regarding NSSI in federally sentenced men in Canada. The purpose of this report was to improve our understanding of the NSSI in federally sentenced men.

What we did

A total of 199 federally sentenced men participated in the study. These men were recruited from 11 medium and maximum security Canadian federal institutions. Men with a known history of NSSI were selected for recruitment, along with a matched control group of men who did not have a known history of NSSI. 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 men with and without a history of NSSI was conducted. In addition, the origins of the behaviour were explored.

What we found

One hundred and four men with a history of NSSI were compared to 95 men without this history. Compared to men who did not have a history of NSSI, men with this history scored significantly higher on hostility, impulsivity, and aggression. Men with a history of NSSI were also significantly more likely to meet the criteria for depression, substance abuse, panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, antisocial personality disorder, and borderline personality disorder. Participants with a history of NSSI were also more likely to use self-distraction and

venting as methods of coping compared to those who had not engaged in NSSI.

Additionally, participants with a history of NSSI were significantly more likely to have experienced childhood sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. Impulsivity, anger, and aggression were all correlated with NSSI, although only anger and impulsivity significantly predicted NSSI.

While suicide attempts and NSSI were correlated, participants clearly perceived these behaviours as distinct. Recent research conducted with federally sentenced women found similar results, with a few exceptions. Anger was found to be more predictive of NSSI for men than women and sexual orientation was found to be correlated with NSSI in women but not men. Coping through venting and self-distraction were related to NSSI in men but not women.

What it means

Differences were found between men who had engaged in NSSI and those who had not, such as higher rates of psychological disorders and substance abuse. History of childhood abuse and high levels of anger can be considered predictive of the behaviour. There are likely different ways in which men develop NSSI and effective treatment should take these differences into account.

For more information

Power, J., & Usher, A. (2011). *Correlates and trajectories to self-injurious behaviour in federally sentenced men*. Research Report R 250. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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