



Research Results

Self-Injurious Behaviour

QUICK FACTS

Offenders who engage in self-injurious behaviour (SIB) present a significant concern for the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). Self-injury is a complex clinical and operational issue, and requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. In order to reduce the frequency and severity of these incidents, CSC has implemented a national strategy, policy, and interventions for SIB.

GENERAL STATISTICS

- Between 2008 and 2011, the number of unique offenders who engaged in SIB increased by seven per cent. The number of incidents rose 32 per cent over this period, but was relatively stable during the latter 18 months examined. Increases were due to a rise in the rate of self-injury by women offenders.¹
- The number of deaths resulting from self-inflicted injuries has decreased since 2008.²

MEN OFFENDERS – SELF-INJURY

Rates of Self-Injury

- Of 104 men with a history of SIB, about half first self-injured before being admitted to CSC.³
- Compared to women offenders, men offenders were more likely to cut themselves while incarcerated.¹ Men were also more likely to experience serious bodily harm as a result of their SIB.⁴

Motivations

¹ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

² Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

³ Power, Beaudette & Usher (2012). [Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders: A Multi-Method Investigation](#). Research Report R-270, Ottawa, ON: CSC

⁴ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

- Compared to men offenders who did not have a history of SIB, men offenders who engaged in SIB had higher rates of psychological disorders and substance abuse. History of childhood abuse and high levels of anger were also linked to this behaviour.⁵
- Men appear to be more likely to initiate SIB while incarcerated than women.⁶ Men were also more likely than women to threaten SIB.⁷
- Slightly less than half of men who self-injured reported first thinking of the idea to self-injure on their own. Fifteen per cent reported getting the idea from other offenders.⁸
- Coping with negative emotions was the most common reason cited for engaging in SIB.^{9,10} For men who first self-injured while incarcerated, using SIB to exert institutional influence was the most common motivation for self-injuring.¹¹
- The most common emotions reported by men prior to engaging in SIB were anger and frustration, followed by depression and sadness. After engaging in SIB, the most common emotion reported was relief, followed by regret.¹²

ABORIGINAL OFFENDERS – SELF-INJURY

⁵ Power & Usher (2011). [Correlates and Trajectories to Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Men](#). Research Report R-250. Ottawa, ON: CSC

⁶ Power & Usher (2011). [Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study](#). Research Report R-249. Ottawa, ON: CSC

⁷ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

⁸ Power & Usher (2011). [Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study](#). Research Report R-249. Ottawa, ON: CSC

⁹ Power & Usher (2011). [Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study](#). Research Report R-249. Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁰ Power, Beaudette & Usher (2012). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders](#). Research Report R-269, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹¹ Power & Usher (2010). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Women Offenders](#). Research Report R-225, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹² Power & Usher (2010). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Women Offenders](#). Research Report R-225, Ottawa, ON: CSC





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- Aboriginal offenders were more likely to self-injure than non-Aboriginal offenders.¹³ However, one study found that Aboriginal offenders are not more likely to die by suicide or engage in serious SIB than non-Aboriginal offenders.¹⁴

WOMEN OFFENDERS – SELF-INJURY

Rates of Self-Injury

- Twenty-four to 38 per cent of women offenders have self-injured at least once in their lifetime.^{15,16}
- Compared to men offenders, women offenders were more likely to head bang while incarcerated.¹⁷ Women were also more likely to experience no, or minor, bodily harm as a result of their SIB.¹⁸
- Women offenders were more likely than men offenders to engage in SIB. Women were also more likely than men to self-injure more than once.^{19,20}

- Compared to women offenders who did not self-injure, women with a history of SIB were significantly more likely to have experienced childhood emotional and sexual abuse. They also scored higher on measures of depression, impulsivity, hostility, and aggression and were more likely to meet the criteria for obsessive-compulsive disorder and borderline personality disorder.²¹
- The vast majority of women (93%) who engaged in SIB started their behaviour in the community and many did not continue to self-injure after being admitted to a CSC institution.²²

Motivations

- The most commonly reported motivation for women offenders engaging in SIB was coping with negative emotions. Coping with the stress of incarceration was not found to be a common motivation for engaging in SIB.^{23,24}
- The most common emotions reported prior to engaging in SIB were anger, depression, and anxiety. After self-injuring, women most commonly reported feelings of relief, followed by regret.²⁵

¹³ Gordon (2010). [Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions Over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-233, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁴ Power & Riley (2010). [A Comparative Review of Suicide and Self-Injury Investigative Reports in a Canadian Federal Correctional Population](#). Research Report R-221, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada

¹⁵ Power & Usher (2011). [A Descriptive Analysis of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women](#). Research Report R-251, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁶ Power & Usher (2011). [Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women: An Archival Study](#). Research Report R-249. Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁷ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁸ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

¹⁹ Power, Gordon, Sapers, & Beaudette (2012). [A Replication Study of Self-Injury Incidents in CSC Institutions over a Thirty-Month Period](#). Research Report R-293, Ottawa, ON: CSC

²⁰ Power, Beaudette & Usher (2012). [Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders: A Multi-Method Investigation](#). Research Report R-270, Ottawa, ON: CSC

²¹ Power & Usher (2011). [Correlates and Trajectories to Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women](#). Research Report R-245. Ottawa, ON: CSC

²² Power & Riley (2010). [A Comparative Review of Suicide and Self-Injury Investigative Reports in a Canadian Federal Correctional Population](#). Research Report R-221, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada

²³ Power & Riley (2010). [A Comparative Review of Suicide and Self-Injury Investigative Reports in a Canadian Federal Correctional Population](#). Research Report R-221, Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada

²⁴ Power & Usher (2010). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Women Offenders](#). Research Report R-225, Ottawa, ON: CSC

²⁵ Power & Usher (2011). [A Descriptive Analysis of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women](#). Research Report R-251, Ottawa, ON: CSC



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- The most commonly reported coping strategies used to help deal with stress or negative emotions were appropriate release of emotions, such as talking to someone about their emotions, followed by relaxation and distraction techniques, such as reading, exercising, and creating artwork.²⁶
- Almost three-quarters of women who self-injured reported first thinking of the idea to self-injure on their own, while two per cent reported getting the idea from other offenders.²⁷
- Women offenders reported higher rates of suicide risk factors than men offenders.³²

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SUICIDE AND SELF-INJURY

- There is strong evidence to suggest that suicide attempts and self-injury are distinct behaviours. Offenders who have made suicide attempts have different symptoms and histories than those who engaged in SIB.²⁸
- In a sample of 150 women, 44 per cent had both attempted suicide and engaged in SIB at some point in their lives.²⁹
- In a sample of 199 men offenders, 35 per cent had both attempted suicide and engaged in SIB at some point in their lives.³⁰
- The majority of offenders who had engaged in SIB or suicide attempts had histories of depression and/or hopelessness. Offenders who self-injured were

²⁶ Power & Usher (2011). [A Descriptive Analysis of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women](#). Research Report R-251, Ottawa, ON: CSC

²⁷ Power, Beaudette & Usher (2012). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders](#). Research Report R-269, Ottawa, ON: CSC

²⁸ Power & Usher (2010). [The Difference between Suicide Attempts and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury](#). Research Review RR 10-2. Ottawa, ON: CSC

²⁹ Power, Beaudette & Usher (2012). [A Qualitative Study of Self-Injurious Behaviour in Male Offenders](#). Research Report R-269, Ottawa, ON: CSC

³⁰ Power & Usher (2011). [Correlates and Trajectories to Self-injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Women](#). Research Report R-245. Ottawa, ON: CSC

³¹ Power & Usher (2011). [Correlates and Trajectories to Self-Injurious Behaviour in Federally Sentenced Men](#). Research Report R-250. Ottawa, ON: CSC

³² Mills & Kroner (2010). [Concurrent Validity and Normative Data of the Depression Hopelessness and Suicide Screening Form with Women Offenders](#). Research Brief B-47, Ottawa, ON: CSC