



## A descriptive analysis of self-harm reports among a sample of incarcerated adolescent males

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The present study examines 89 separate incidents of self-injurious behaviour displayed by 60 male young offenders, incidents which were recorded by prison staff on “self-harm” forms. The results show that the reasons for raising a self-harm form can be separated into two main categories: actual self-injury by the inmate or behaviours believed by staff to indicate a risk of self-injury. A believed risk of self-injury as opposed to actual self-injury was the most frequently reported reason for opening a self-harm form, with verbal threats of self-injury being the most frequently reported type of behaviour. Self-injury does appear to occur relatively early on in periods of custody and inmates who display self-injurious behaviour appear distinct from the rest of the prisoner population in a number of ways. Differences are also evident between those with only one form raised on them and those with more than one form raised. Directions for future research are discussed.

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### Introduction

The rates of suicide and self-injury among prisoners is reportedly much higher than the rate reported among the general population (Liebling, 1993). This has been found even when equivalent populations have been studied (Liebling, 1993). Blud (1997) states how in 1987, prison suicides doubled to 46 and in 1994 this increased to 60. In 1994 the “Caring for the Suicidal in Custody” strategy was launched by the Prison Service which introduced improved methods of monitoring prisoners perceived to be at risk using a multi-disciplinary approach aimed at both protecting the prisoner and addressing underlying causality (Coates and Fleming, 1997). The emphasis was on moving away from seeing prison suicide as primarily a medical/mental health problem (Blud, 1997).

McHugh and Towl (1997) note how terms such as “self-injury” and “attempted suicide” pose problems of definition. Individuals may self-injure either with or without any intention to kill themselves. Kreitman and Philip (1969) proposed the term “parasuicide” to describe behaviours displayed by an individual to parody suicide but with no intention of killing themselves.

Issues also surround the perceived lethality of the injurious behaviour. Some researchers have argued that if the method an individual chooses to harm themselves is not a highly lethal one (e.g. superficial cuts to limbs), then this act can be perceived as “deliberate self-injury” as opposed to attempted suicide. In deliberate self-injury the individual has little or no intention to kill themselves. However, Livingston (1997) states that the concept of “deliberate self-injury” cannot be applied to a prison population, arguing that it is common for prisoners, young offenders in particular, to select a highly lethal method of self-injury (such as hanging) and yet have a low level of suicidal intent. In view of this Livingston describes “self-injurious behaviour” as, “. . .any instance in which a prisoner deliberately

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harms him/herself regardless of the method(s) used or the expressed intent to die" (p. 22). This will be taken here as a working definition of self-injurious behaviour for the present study.

Research suggests that there may be three groups of individuals involved in self-injury: those who injure themselves just once; those who injure themselves more than once with no rising suicidal intent between episodes; and those who injure themselves more than once with rising suicidal intent between episodes. Pierce (1984) found some evidence suggesting that individuals who fall into this latter category tend to be younger than other repeaters. Pierce argues that self-injury for this group may be an attempt to communicate an interpersonal problem which they are experiencing to others: if the initial self-injury is ignored, or an unsympathetic response incurred from others then the self-injurious behaviour may be repeated in a more threatening way until his/her goal is achieved. Such a notion of self-injury being somewhat manipulative has received little support from other researchers, with Gibbons *et al.* (1978) describing how a positive professional response does not prevent overall repetition, and Albanese's (1983) finding that self-injury is almost always an impulsive act.

Self-injurious behaviour can take many forms. The most common method adopted in Britain and the United States is self-poisoning (Power and Spencer, 1987). Beck *et al.* (1975), in a sample of 384 suicide attempters admitted to hospital, reported that 65 per cent of these had ingested a dangerous substance (with 88.8% of these using coma-inducing drugs), 17 per cent had cut or pierced themselves, with the remainder jumping, inhaling gas or attempting to drown themselves. The authors did not indicate whether or not firearms were used.

In a prison setting the methods adopted may be different as a function of the environment: Power and Spencer (1987) argue that the "restriction of available 'parasuicidal' options" in a prison setting may influence the methods chosen. Loucks (1998) reported that the majority of women offenders who reported deliberately injuring themselves did so by cutting. Of the women who reported attempting suicide, 71 per cent reported cutting themselves followed by 57 per cent who reported trying to hang themselves. In a more descriptive study, Power and Spencer (1987) found, in a sample of 76 male young offenders, that 49 per cent of inmates verbally "threatened suicide", 31 per cent lacerated their wrists or forearms, 8 per cent set fire to cell items, 7 per cent engaged in pica (swallowing inedible items) and 5 per cent "feigned hanging". Power and Spencer also reported that the medical lethality in 92 per cent of the cases was minimal, moderate in 4 per cent and high in 4 per cent.

Regarding the characteristics of prisoners who self-injure, Liebling and Krarup (1994) stated how prisoners could be identified less by their background (e.g. previous psychiatric history, behaviour at school, previous self-harm etc.) and criminal justice histories than by descriptions of their experience in prison (e.g. sleeping problems, taking part in activities, ability to cope etc.). A number of descriptive characteristics have also been identified as possible factors. Liebling (1993) described 305 incidents of self-injury carried out by 248 prisoners and found over half of the prisoners were under the age of 21. Livingston (1997) citing Haycock (1989) reports that there is a tendency for non-caucasian prisoners to be under-represented in self-injury figures, whereas caucasian prisoners tend to be over-represented. Regarding custodial status (e.g. sentenced or remand) and its relationship to self-injury, Liebling and Krarup (1994) describe how in a study of 50 self-harmers, a higher percentage were on remand compared to the rest of the prisoner population. Livingston (1997), however, argues that the differences regarding custodial status are unclear and that past research which has concluded that remand prisoners are more at risk of suicide or self-injury have either failed to describe the population under study adequately, or to have

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