

Assessing the risk of self-harm in an adult offender population: an incidence cohort study

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Declared competing interests of authors: Simon Gilbody is a member of the HTA CET Commissioning Board.

Notes: The correlation matrix is available following application to the authors. This provides the bivariate correlations for the entire data set.

Published October 2014

DOI: 10.3310/hta18640

Plain English summary

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Health Technology Assessment 2014; Vol. 18: No. 64

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NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

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Some people engage in what is called deliberate self-harm. They may cut or burn themselves, or engage in reckless activities with the intention of hurting themselves. Self-harm is common in our prisons, and the rising number of prisoners who engaged in self-harm behaviours was a cause for concern, so the prison service introduced a process that was designed to improve the care of those at risk of self-harm. However, the process had no method by which a prisoner could be assessed for risk, and the current project set out to see if one or more questionnaires could be used for such a purpose.

In total, 450 prisoners took part in the study and five questionnaires were administered to each participant in a single interview. The prisoners were followed up for a period of 6 months, or until their release, and the number of self-harm events recorded. Just over one-quarter engaged in one or more self-harm behaviours during the follow-up period. Although all the questionnaires were shown to be reasonably robust for use in a prison setting, none was predictive of future self-harm. However, some of their individual questions, along with other factors such as alcohol dependency, were found to be predictive, and so individual male and female screening instruments were constructed from the questions. These turned out to be very good at predicting those who would not self-harm and may be useful for guiding interventions for those at risk of future self-harm.

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)

ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)

Impact factor: 5.116

Health Technology Assessment is indexed in MEDLINE, CINAHL, EMBASE, The Cochrane Library and the ISI Science Citation Index and is assessed for inclusion in the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects.

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number 09/22/46. The contractual start date was in November 2010. The draft report began editorial review in April 2013 and was accepted for publication in February 2014. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HTA programme or the Department of Health.

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