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Research at a glance

Exposure to Trauma among Women Offenders: A Review of the Literature

KEY WORDS: *women offenders, trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*

What it means

Given high rates of trauma among women offenders and evidence of positive gains associated with support in this area, trauma and trauma-informed treatment should be available for women with histories of physical and sexual abuse or other traumatic experiences. All of the Correctional Service of Canada's (CSC's) programs for women offenders are trauma-informed; in addition, CSC offers the *Survivors of Abuse and Trauma* program, which provides counselling to women offenders to deal with issues of trauma. Although program participants reported benefits from their participation, long-term and in-depth follow-up research could provide further support for the continuation of the program.

What we found

A review of the literature found that, while many offenders of both genders have been exposed to trauma, the rates are higher among women offenders. Women are also more likely to both develop and experience a higher intensity of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can develop as a result of exposure to a traumatic event. PTSD has been linked to other psychiatric disorders such as major depression, lifetime substance use disorder, borderline personality disorder, and self-injurious behaviour.

Both substance abuse and self-injurious behaviour have been argued to be maladaptive responses to traumatizing experiences or to PTSD. Drugs and alcohol are often used to cope with exposure to trauma and the symptoms of PTSD but can develop into a larger problem and exacerbate PTSD symptoms. A relationship between previous trauma and self-injurious behaviour has also been demonstrated in several studies, with the majority of women offenders who have reported self-injurious behaviour having experienced sexual, emotional, or physical abuse. Women offenders with a history of self-injurious behaviour often report doing so to cope, to release negative emotions, or as a reaction to negative emotions arising from exposure to trauma.

Although research has not demonstrated a causal link between exposure to trauma and subsequent criminality, there is a strong association between trauma exposure and women's offending behaviour. Support and

treatment in coping with exposure to potentially traumatizing experiences has been found to allow participants to better benefit from correctional programs that target criminogenic risk factors, such as substance abuse, and thereby potentially decreasing the likelihood of recidivism.

Evaluations of trauma and trauma-informed treatment programs have demonstrated a positive effect on women offenders, including reductions in trauma symptoms, substance use, institutional adjustment, and recidivism, but further research is required to determine overall effectiveness.

Why we did this study

In recent years, there has been increased focus on the relationship between exposure to trauma and criminality, especially for women offenders. Research on trauma may support mental health-related interventions.

What we did

A literature review was conducted on the experience of trauma and related constructs, such as PTSD, self-injurious behaviour, and substance abuse. Several assessment tools used to assess exposure to trauma and PTSD among women offenders were reviewed to provide a description of the assessment tools and example of studies in which the measures have been used. Some trauma-related treatment programs were also examined to assess for their outcomes.

For more information

Tam, K., & Derkzen, D. (2014). *Exposure to trauma among women offenders: A review of the literature* (Research Report, R333). Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service of Canada.

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