Medical Xpress

Up to one in four female prisoners in England and Wales self-harm

December 15 2013

Led by Dr Seena Fazel and Professor Keith Hawton from the University of Oxford in the UK, the study examined the prevalence of self-harm in all prisoners in England and Wales between 2004 and 2009—a total of 139 195 incidents of self-harm, involving 26 510 inmates. Risk factors for self-harm were assessed and compared with those of the general prison population, and associations with suicide examined.

Despite reductions in suicide rates over the 6-year study period, incidents of self-harm in custody did not decrease, and ranged from about 20 000 to 25 000 per year, with women accounting for roughly half of these incidents.

Incidents of self-harm were 10 times higher in female than in male prisoners—with 20–24% of female prisoners and 5–6% of male inmates self-harming every year—and around 30 times that of the general population of the UK (0.6%).

"Repetition rates were striking—if a female prisoner self-harmed, she would self-harm eight times per year, and there were 102 women (and two male) inmates who self-harmed more than 100 times per year", explains Dr Fazel, a Wellcome Trust Senior Research Fellow.

The researchers found that several factors increased the risk of self-harm in both sexes, including: younger age (

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Citation: Up to one in four female prisoners in England and Wales self-harm (2013, December 15) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-12-female-prisoners-england-wales-self-harm.html

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