

A systematic review and mixed-methods synthesis of the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of prison staff regarding adult prisoners who self-harm

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Introduction

- Self-harm, including suicide, is highly prevalent among prisoners. Prior research indicates that staff attitudes and perceptions regarding self-harm affect both quality of care and prisoner safety.
- We aimed to systematically review the literature to answer the research question: ‘what are the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of prison staff regarding adult prisoners who self-harm?’.
- We additionally aimed to explore the impacts of self-harm on prison staff wellbeing.
- No prior review of this literature has been conducted.

Methods

- A systematic search of EMBASE, MEDLINE, PSYCINFO, and CINAHL was conducted, supplemented by hand-searching and grey literature review, to identify relevant English language articles published since 01/01/2000.
- Studies were included in the review if they assessed the experiences, perceptions, or attitudes of prison staff (of any role or grade) towards self-harm using any quantitative or qualitative method.
- Articles were screened by two authors and evaluated using standardised quality appraisal tools.
- Qualitative data were exported into NVivo and analysed thematically, while a narrative synthesis of quantitative data was performed due to high study heterogeneity.

Results

- 1788 articles were identified. 32 articles were included in the review, following application of study inclusion and exclusion criteria, involving over 6426 participants from five countries (UK, USA, Australia, South Africa, Portugal).
- Most studies were of moderate (n=15) or poor (n=11) quality, and 6 were rated as good quality.
- Staff witnessed numerous types of self-harm and described multiple risk factors and reasons for the behaviour. Perceptions that self-harm is “manipulative” or “attention-seeking” were associated with hostility and lower quality care - “They are just attention seekers, they are taking away from the real problem, people who have real problems”
- Barriers to preventing and managing self-harm included staffing difficulties, prison settings and cultures, poor staff confidence and lack of training: “There is (.) stigma attached to being a, ehm, a care bear, they call them in here – in the Prison Service – officers who care too much ...”
- The importance of multidisciplinary teamwork and building relationships with prisoners were highlighted: “You can manage their risk by working together – ask the prisoner what would help him to cope better and go from there”
- Staff occasionally experienced intense psychological reactions to self-harm, which resulted in either adaptive or maladaptive coping that influenced their capacity to care: “They [prison staff] used to phone me up at home in floods of tears because they kept hearing a prison chewing through her skin, and that’s all they could hear”

Conclusions

- Mixed attitudes and perceptions of self-harm amongst adult prison staff. Further training, support and resources are required to protect staff’s wellbeing and improve self-harm prevention and management in prisons.