

PRISON HEALTH IN IMAGES

Subcultural manifestations of self-injury in correctional settings

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Self-injury, defined as the act of deliberately harming your own body, is a common behavior among certain groups of inmates¹. This is determined because among the imprisoned population there are a series of related factors which are more common than in the general population. On one hand, psychopathology is more prevalent in this population, especially as far as depression and anxiety are concerned but regarding psychopathology and impulse control disorders too, all of them related to self-harming behaviors²⁻³. On the other hand, correctional facilities are socially isolated settings which involve the development of a culture of their own. When anthropologists consider human culture, they usually refer to a certain lifestyle, socially acquired between a group of people which manifests as standard recurrent ways of thinking, feeling and acting. The term subculture is used to make reference to certain models of culture particular to certain groups within society⁴. Life in prison facilitates the expression and maintenance of a specific subculture among inmates. Most of the inmates show in their behavior a series of values permeated by the marginalization of the social groups to which they belonged before their imprisonment. Other learnt and shared behavior and thinking patterns are developed as a consequence of their own experience of imprisonment and become part of what we could define as a real penitentiary subculture.

Within such subculture, self-injury can be used as a language and as a form of social relations⁵.

In some cases, common forms of self-injury such as puncture wounds on the arms, include clearly sub-cultural elements, shared actions within a social system of their own: informal, implicit, but with particular rules and firmly acquired values, among which we can find both group solidarity and the exercise of power within a bottom-up organization. It is com-



Image 1.



Image 2.



Image 3.

mon that some inmates simultaneously harm themselves to support a third inmate or that in a particular module some are forced to self-injury behaviors upon the order of a “Kie” of boss, in an attempt to manipulate the environment. Usually, the most common form of self-injury: puncture on the left arm, is used as a means of protest charged with drama and aggressiveness against regimental decisions⁶ (see Image 1).

Other subcultural self-injuries have more elaborate reasons. Sometimes self-injurers try to recreate the ritual of needle puncture in the more common areas of intravenous puncture to mitigate craving symptoms, although without syringes and abuse substances. In these cases, the needle needs to be removed if it is accidentally hosted in the venous return (Image 2).

Another aspect of prison subculture with regard to self-harm is the way of quickly and easily obtaining objects able of causing puncture injuries. In such cases, cigarette filters, previously pressed and later burnt can be used to obtain a sharp surface to cause injuries that although superficial bleed sufficiently (Image 3).

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