

Eating disorders in women's prisons: an under-reported phenomenon?

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Abstract

Self-injury, and self-harm such as in eating disorders, are commonly found in closed institutions where residents or inmates have little sense of control over their lives, and where the most basic bodily functions may be closely scrutinized and regulated. These behaviors are used to express a sense of control, despair, and anger that inmates or residents have difficulty expressing. Although self-mutilation has been widely reported in male and female prison populations, the reports on eating disorders in prison are surprisingly scarce. These reports suggest an unreported high rate of eating disorders in a women's prison in the USA, with a disturbing number developing for the first time during incarceration. It is suggested that the extreme controlling nature of the prison environment, combined with the unusual relational nature of this prison community, induced the development of new eating disorders by means of a contagious process which served to provide inmates with a sense of control and power over their jailers. A critical factor seems to be that the American penal system appears to be more controlling and punitive than other penal systems in the developed world.