

Offenders as victims: post-traumatic stress disorder and substance use disorder among male prisoners

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Abstract

Background: Comorbid substance use disorder(s) and post-traumatic stress disorder (SUD-PTSD) is common among prisoners and linked to an increased risk of criminal recidivism; however, little is known about the characteristics of prisoners with this comorbidity.

Aim: This study provides a preliminary examination of the clinical and criminal profile of male inmates with symptoms of SUD-PTSD, and examines whether this profile differs according to whether a person has experienced a trauma while in prison.

Methods: Thirty male inmates from two correctional centres in Sydney, Australia, were recruited and assessed using a structured interview.

Results: The sample reported extensive criminal, substance use and trauma histories. A history of substance dependence was almost universal (90%) and 56.7% met diagnostic criteria for PTSD with the remainder experiencing sub-threshold symptoms. Forty-three per cent reported a traumatic event while in prison. Those who had experienced trauma in prison, compared to those who had not, were more likely to nominate heroin as their main drug of concern and to be receiving drug treatment in prison. There was also a trend toward inmates who had experienced a trauma in prison being more likely than inmates who had no prison trauma to have experienced a physical assault.

Conclusion: Male prisoners with SUD-PTSD are a high-needs group yet treatment responses are poor. Further research examining treatment options for this comorbidity may improve prisoner well-being and reduce recidivism.