Lifetime prevalence and correlates of self-harm and suicide attempts among male prisons with histories of injecting drug use

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Introduction and Aims: Histories of self-harm and suicide attempts are common among people in prison in Australia, and substance dependence is an established risk factor for these lifetime experiences. We describe the prevalence of self-reported history of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and suicide attempts in a cohort of men with recent histories of injecting drug use (IDU) imprisoned in Victoria, Australia.

Design and Methods: Participants completed a researcher-administered structured questionnaire in the weeks prior to release from prison. Exposure measures were examined with Poisson regression.

Key Findings: More than one third (37%) reported a history of NSSI and almost half of participants (47%) reported a history of suicide attempts. A history of NSSI was associated with: self-reporting a mental illness diagnosis (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] = 1.65; 95%CI = 1.06-2.58); current poor psychiatric well-being (aOR = 1.40; 95%CI = 1.07-1.85); and self-reporting ≥3 drug overdoses (aOR = 1.71; 95%CI = 1.21-2.42). History of a suicide attempts was significantly associated with: self-reporting a mental illness diagnosis (aOR = 1.80; 95%CI = 1.21-2.69); and self-reporting a history of 1-2 (aOR = 1.36; 95%CI = 1.01-1.82) and ≥3 (aOR = 1.44; 95%CI = 1.10-1.89) drug overdoses.

Discussions and Conclusions: We observed a disconcertingly high lifetime prevalence of NSSI and suicide attempts among incarcerated males with IDU histories. Significant associations with indicators of mental illness and drug related harms support the need to prioritise in-prison screening and continuity of care between community and prison health to reduce the risk of prospective harms for this population.