**Why do people self-harm?**

Self-harm is when a person hurts themselves, as a means for coping with uncomfortable emotions, disturbing memories, or overwhelming circumstances. After engaging in self-harm, victims often feel a sense of release from their problems, only for them to return later once the pain has subsided. Types of self-harm including scratching, biting, and cutting oneself with a sharp blade. Victims of self-harm claim to do so for lots of reasons, including:

* Expressing feelings, one cannot articulate
* Converting emotional pain into physical pain
* Having a sense of being in control
* Punishing oneself
* Stopping being numb and dissociated

Risk factors to self-harm include:

* A history of self-harm
* Substance abuse issues
* Mental health issues

**Self-Harm in Young Offenders**

Particularly in young people, self-harm appears to an ever-growing problem; a recent survey found that a third of 16-25-year old’s have engaged in some form of self-harm[[1]](#footnote-1). Furthermore, a Prison & Probation Ombudsman (PPO) investigation estimates the number of self-harm related deaths in prison to be 66 per 100,000 (versus 12 per 100,000 in the general population)[[2]](#footnote-2), meaning that this figure is likely to be more pervasive in the prison population.

But why do so many young offenders self-harm? The thought of prison itself is enough to trigger waves of negative emotions in any of us, but when we imagine going into prison it becomes clear why self-harm is so prevalent among young offenders. The reasons for self-harm are dynamic and change regularly throughout a prisoner’s sentence. Prior to sentencing, a person might feel a sense of shame and guilt for their actions, in addition to high levels of anxiety at the thought of going to prison. People are at their greatest risk on the first night of their sentence, where they often feel extreme fear as they begin life as a prisoner. Throughout a young person's sentence, the risk of self-harm fluctuates depending on a range of factors. Prior to release, the young person faces new challenges around accommodation, employment, and reintegration into society, which triggers new negative emotions in the individual.

**How can young people seek help?**

Inside prison, there are services available for young people in need. Fortunately, as inmates are under constant supervision, self-harm incidents are often brought to the surface. However, many victims hide their injuries, making it hard to identify every case.

**Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT)**

Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) is the care planning process for prisoners identified as being at risk of suicide or self-harm. The ACCT requires a set of actions to be completed to ensure that the person is safe from harm. For example, if any member of staff receives information that the prisoner has self-harmed or is planning to, it should be recorded in a ‘concern and keep safe form’. This ensures fluid communication of the prisoners needs. Furthermore, an Immediate Action Plan (IAP) is agreed with the prisoner, and the frequency of contact and conversations is agreed by all involved. When it is agreed that the prisoner is safe from self-harm, they are taken off the ACCT.

**Listeners**

Aimed at preventing suicide, the listener scheme is a peer-support system within prison. The scheme is overseen by Samaritans, who select and train volunteers to become ‘listeners’. A listener's role is to provide confidential support to at-risk individuals, in conjunction with Samaritans values and guidelines.

The first Listener scheme was introduced in 1991. Now there are Listeners in almost every prison in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Samaritans provided support in prison 332,974 times in 2018; this comprised of 46,267 face to face contact with Listeners in prison, and 286,707 calls made to their volunteer-run helpline.

**Samaritans**

People in prison, including prison staff, have access to Samaritan’s service. In addition to the listener scheme, prisoners have access to the Samaritans helpline, where they can access support free of charge. A member of the Samaritans team is able to visit the prison for one-to-one meetings with prisoners, to provide support for those in need (subject to COVID-19 guidelines).

Self-harm is an issue that affects a huge proportion of us. We would all benefit from taking time to educate ourselves on the reasons behind self-harm and understand the ways in which we can begin a conversation about this sensitive issue to help remove the stigma attached to this often-misunderstood coping mechanism. This would help move us towards creating an environment where people feel supported enough to express their pain with others and build healthy solutions to their pain.

1. <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/press-releases/new-survey-shows-more-than-a-third-of-young-people-have-self-harmed/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.inquest.org.uk/ppo-annualreport-2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)