



Associated Press

Self-mutilation Rampant at 2 Ivy League Schools

Survey: 17 percent at Cornell and Princeton purposely cut themselves

June 5, 2006

CHICAGO - Nearly 1 in 5 students at two Ivy League schools say they have purposely injured themselves by cutting, burning or other methods, a disturbing phenomenon that psychologists say they are hearing about more often.

The results of the survey at Cornell and Princeton are similar to other estimates on this frightening behavior. Counselors say it's happening at colleges, high schools and middle schools across the country. Repeat self-abusers were more likely than non-injurers to be female and to have had eating disorders or suicidal tendencies, although self-injuring is usually not considered a suicide attempt.

Greg Eels, director of counseling and psychological services at Cornell, said the study's findings are not surprising. "We see it frequently and it seems to be an increasing phenomenon." While Eels said the competitive, stressful college environment may be particularly intense at Ivy League schools, he thinks the results reflect a national problem.

Dr. Daniel Silverman, a study co-author and Princeton's director of health services, said the study has raised consciousness among his staff, who are now encouraged to routinely ask about self-abuse when faced with students "in acute distress." "Unless we start talking about it and making it more acceptable for people to come forward, it will remain hidden," Silverman said.

Some self-injurers have no diagnosable illness but have not learned effective ways to cope with life stresses, said Victoria White Kress, an associate professor at Youngstown State University in Ohio. She consults with high schools and says demand for her services has risen in recent years.

Psychologists who work with middle and high schools "are overwhelmed with referrals for these kids," said psychologist Richard Lieberman, who coordinates a suicide prevention program for Los Angeles public schools. He said one school recently reported several fourth-graders with burns on their arms, and another seeking help for "15 hysterical seventh-grade girls in the office and they all have cuts on their arms." In those situations, Lieberman said there's usually one instigator whose behavior is copied by sympathetic but probably less troubled friends.

© 2006 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.