



(infoEXCHANGE)

Prison Inmate Suicide - Why it Matters

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Prison inmates get little respect or pity from the general public. Many feel that they are a pampered lot who deserve to receive nothing more than the punishment for their committed crimes. Additionally, some may feel no compassion for inmates who choose to take their lives; the simplistic view being that one less prisoner equals a saving of vital tax dollars otherwise wasted on the incarcerated.

While the majority of us might not hold opinions quite this extreme, there does seem to be a noticeable lack of support for criminals. There is no shortage of newspaper rants or coffee shop invective scolding them. Of all population groups at risk of suicide, inmates seem to be the one for which the public holds the least empathy.

Unfortunately, there has been a shift in government policy toward prisons lately that has done little to encourage this empathy. There used to be an emphasis on the rehabilitation of criminals, and a stance that a person had the inherent potential to turn his or her life around. This healthy, restorative approach has given way to a hard line – the so-called “tough on crime” agenda – that sees only the rudimentary connection between punishment and cost benefit – <http://bit.ly/OAADIJ>. It is conventional knowledge that this myopic approach to crime prevention does not work. Offenders will be stockpiled in our prison system with a not-so-subtle message from the government that reformation of their lives is not on the priority list. Inevitably, conditions in prisons will worsen as funding for corrections is cut, yet the prison population continues to grow: <http://bit.ly/RZODrp>.

Suicide in prison may become an increasingly attractive option for those who cannot bear the overcrowding, violence, and overall malaise which will characterize the corrections environment in the coming years.

This is perhaps the perfect time to inquire about the current reality of inmate suicide, as we await the pending fallout caused by the “tough on crime” legislation.

So, some **background**...

Suicide is the **leading** cause of death in prison (John Howard Society, 1999).

Inmates on remand – those either awaiting trial or sentencing – as well as those already serving sentences in penitentiaries, have extremely high rates of suicide compared to the general population. The World Health Organization (WHO) states that those awaiting trial are **seven and a half times** more likely to attempt suicide, and those already sentenced are **six times** more



likely to attempt suicide than the general population (WHO, 2007). The rates of actual suicide are hard to gauge, though, because of the transient nature of the prison population. One Canadian estimate is that the rate in incarceration is at least **twice** (but can be as high as **ten times**) that of the general adult population (John Howard Society, 1999).

According to Corrections Services Canada (CSC), between 2003 and 2008 there were **66 suicides** of inmates in federal custody. This statistic also includes **20 suicides** of inmates released on parole into the community (Power & Riley, 2010). There have been **28 suicides** since 2009 (CSC, personal communication, September 7, 2012). These numbers do not include deaths that occurred by inmates on remand or in provincial penitentiaries.

More than half of suicides occur while the inmates are on **remand**, and immediately after they are initially incarcerated. These individuals are generally **white males between 20-25 years old**, and are first-time offenders. **Alcohol/drug dependency** and withdrawal, as well as the overall **shock** of being in **jail**, are the most common precipitating factors for the suicides.

The next largest group who dies by suicide is sentenced prisoners in federal custody (which carry sentences of two years or more). They are **between 30-35 years old**, and have been incarcerated for **five** or more years. They are generally violent offenders who have had a precipitating factor (e.g. conflict with prison authorities, loss of a loved one, or denial of parole) that, combined with other risk factors, causes them to take their lives (CSC, 1993).

Hanging is the leading means of suicide, so the lethality of suicide attempts is high.

Some key **risk factors** for those in federal custody include: the days immediately following **release from prison, overcrowding conditions** in custody, **isolation, long sentences** for violent offences, **psychiatric disorders**, and **substance abuse** (Power & Riley, 2010).

Other stressors in prison which can exacerbate the risk of suicide are: **another inmate suicide, lengthy incarceration, denial of appeal/parole, closeness to release, prison transfer, threat of assault, disciplinary actions, and physical illness** (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 1998).

The WHO states that a suicide prevention program is essential for any penitentiary. They recommend that key components of a prison suicide prevention program include: **staff training in suicide prevention programs, intake screening of inmates, post-intake observation, monitoring, sufficient mental health treatment**, and several other pertinent recommendations (WHO, 2007).

The difficulties in meeting these criteria are immense. First, is the common reticence of a prisoner to self-identify feelings of suicide. This is because a disclosure of mental illness or suicidality might cause unwanted attention – inviting intimidation by other inmates, for example – and make the adjustment to incarceration even more difficult. For this reason, many inmates will remain silent.

A second source of difficulty is that a new detainee might not have a mental health history to disclose because they developed mental health problems and suicidal thoughts and actions as a result of exposure to the prison environment. These are sometimes called “clean suicides,” because their lack of personal history makes detection and assessment incredibly difficult (Hanson, 2010).



Also, the transient nature of the prison population creates a barrier in the assessment and subsequent monitoring of high-risk individuals. Sadly, it is quite common for an inmate to simply get “lost” in the corrections system.

Although they have been criticized in the past for not doing enough to prevent suicides – <http://bit.ly/RZ0Drp>, Corrections Canada does have suicide prevention policies in place. They have publicly stated that it is a priority to reduce the number of inmate suicides and incidences of self-injury because they threaten the safety of other offenders and staff, take up large amounts of staff time and resources, and affect the mental health of prison employees (Powers & Riley, 2010).

Whether or not Corrections Canada has been effective in their recent suicide prevention policies may become a moot point very soon because all prison programs in operation may be modified by the federal government’s “tough on crime” laws. Security, of course, must trump everything else in a prison environment. Unfortunately, we run the risk of **everything else** becoming **nothing**, as administration continues to try to contain as many prisoners as possible with minimum expense.

The “tough on crime” law agenda is one issue, but the decrease in funding for prisons will prove to be equally detrimental to prisoner rehabilitation. This depletion of prison resources may create a present-day situation eerily similar to that of the “double-think” concept in Orwell’s visionary novel, **1984**. There is cash earmarked for the construction of new prisons, but less money for staff and operations – it does not add up. The new crime legislation will inevitably mean more prisoners, which will cause our prisons to become “Increasingly harsh, tense and stressed” (Mallea, 2010). Educational programs focusing on emotional well-being or individual self-improvement will undoubtedly be affected negatively, and treatment for mental health will be less available. Suicide prevention programs may all but disappear, and it will become increasingly difficult for penitentiaries to function as anything but houses of punishment.

But so many of these inmates are worthy of redemption and deserve the opportunity to change or concentrate on improving their lives. A swing in political policy should not close the door on the potential rehabilitation of the incarcerated, and effectively stamp “no future” on their foreheads. There are arguably some prisoners who are irretrievably lost and are career criminals to the end, with little or no chance or desire for rehabilitation. Even these offenders should be offered the option of seeking assistance that will give them hope for the future and, ultimately, a reason to live.

The punitive penal approach is not good for Canadian prisoners. It does not jibe with what we represent in suicide prevention and it certainly does not match my ideals of what a just and compassionate society should be.

If conditions in the penal system are allowed to deteriorate further, we may see major increases in prison inmate suicide in the near future.

We encourage your feedback and participation in the conversation of this topic.

Do you have any particular views on the issue?

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