Suicide Prevention in the Criminal Justice Sector

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON SUICIDE

Background

People who come into contact with the criminal justice system, which can include the police, courts, prisons, jails, and community sentences or supervision orders like probation and parole — are at a much higher risk of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and dying by suicide than people who are not in contact with the criminal justice system. Suicide prevention in the criminal justice sector is a global public health priority. Millions of people worldwide pass through police, court, prison, and community justice settings each year, creating important opportunities to identify risk early and provide support that can save lives. Research has shown that people who are either in jail or prison, or have been released from a jail or prison, or serving a community sentence are 6-10 times more likely than people in the general population to die by suicide.

Some well-known factors which increase a person's risk of suicidal behaviour — including problems with mental health and substance use, unstable housing, unemployment, previous trauma and victimisation, and financial stress — are more common among people in contact with the criminal justice system than in the general population. There are several likely reasons for this: (1) the health and social inequalities experienced by this population; (2) the potentially damaging nature of their contact with the criminal justice system; and (3) their lived experiences, including their previous interactions with friends and family members, education and employment, and the wider community.

Importantly, people in contact with the criminal justice system do not all experience the same level of risk. Suicide risk varies by gender, ethnicity, age, geographical location, and the type of criminal justice setting or supervision involved. Paradoxically, this risk is often highest in groups that are not routinely monitored or researched, such as those serving community-based sentences, parole, or probation, especially during periods of transition e.g. on contact with police, sentencing or entering or leaving prison. This emphasises the benefits for public health engagement with people across the entire criminal justice system to make a meaningful difference in preventing suicide. This will require multi-agency engagement and an appreciation of the differing patterns of risks and service needs at different stages of the journey.

Facts & Figures

An international study of 24 countries found that people in prison were several times more likely to die by suicide than people in the general population, although rates varied considerably between countries.

In one 2024 study of 1.5 million people released from prison in eight countries, suicide was the second leading cause of death in the first week following release (after drug and alcohol poisoning).

In England and Wales suicide is the most common cause of death in custody, accounting for one in every four deaths. It also accounts for 15% of all deaths among the much larger population of people under probation supervision (i.e., those on post-prison release and community sentenced).

One in every eight people in the general population who die by suicide has been in contact with police or probation services within the 12 months prior to their death.

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Further Details

There is a growing focus on preventing suicide in the criminal justice system and good practice in suicide prevention has continued to evolve since the World Health Organization published an international template for suicide prevention in prisons and jails in 2000. This template emphasised the importance of understanding and addressing the common risks, needs, and environmental factors contributing to the increased risk of suicide in prisons and jails. It also highlighted the importance of individual assessment, staff training, mental health treatment, incident response, and the physical environment in relation to suicide prevention.

There are many examples of good practice. These include safe custody processes, staff training, individualised assessments, suicide and safety planning, peer support programmes, access to mental health care, and creating environments that support wellbeing. Effective suicide prevention also extends beyond custody, with 'through-the-gate' support helping people safely transition from prison back into the community. A wider implementation of systems based on these principles could help reduce the incidence of suicide among people in contact with the criminal justice system internationally. Staff working across police, prison, court, and community justice settings also play a vital role in suicide prevention. Supporting staff through appropriate training, supervision, and wellbeing initiatives is essential, as responding to suicide risk can be complex and emotionally demanding work.

While progress has been made, significant gaps remain in our knowledge and its implementation in practice. Future research and service development are needed to better understand what works to prevent suicide across different criminal justice settings and among diverse populations.

How can I get involved?

Connect with our SIG and help build an international community focused on suicide prevention in the criminal justice sector. We welcome input from researchers, practitioners, policy makers, advocates, people with lived experience, and anyone interested in sharing ideas, experiences, challenges, and examples of good practice. We are also keen to hear your thoughts on the most important information to share and the most effective ways to do so, in order to contribute to increased discussion and action on this issue.

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Resources

- Preventing suicide in jails and prisons. (2000). World Health Organization (WHO); Geneva, Switzerland. Practical international guidance on identifying and responding to suicide risk in custodial settings.
- Preventing suicide in community and custodial settings: NICE Guideline [NG105]. (2018). National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE); London, UK. Evidence based recommendations for suicide prevention across community and custodial settings.
- Suicide prevention following conviction within the criminal justice system: an overview of good practice using a social-ecological framework. Slade, K, & Borschmann, R. (2025). BMC Global and Public Health, 3:79. Overview of effective suicide presentation approaches using a socio-ecological framework.
- Worldwide incidence of suicides in prison: a systematic review with meta-regression analyses. Mundt, A, et al. (2024). The Lancet Psychiatry, vol. 11 (7), p536-544. Global review of prison suicide rates and factors associated with increased risk.
- Rates and causes of death after release from incarceration among 1 471 526 people in eight high-income and middle-income countries: an individual participant data meta-analysis. Borschmann, R, et al. (2024). The Lancet, vol. 403 (10438), p1779-1788. Provides evidence on mortality risks, including suicide, during the critical period following release from prison.
- Preventing Self-Injury and Suicide in Women's Prison's. Walker, T. & Towl, G. (2016). Waterside Press, London, UK. Provides practical guidance on preventing self-injury and suicide in women's prisons.

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