

SUICIDES IN PRISON

Caring for people at risk

The current public and political debate about the use of custody should not be conducted without some reference to suicides in prison. The last five years have seen a gradual but welcome transformation in attitudes towards this problem from within the prison service, away from a defensive and over-medicalised set of procedures and attitudes towards 'a positive team approach to the care of people at risk' (Advice to Governors 21/1993: Prisoner Care).

This important change - most marked at the policy level, but also reflected in changes in practice at many establishments - has come about as a result of many significant but to some extent coincidental developments. They include: a dramatic rise in the number of suicides in prisons in England and Wales from 1987 to almost 50 per year (a rate many times higher than the rate in the community); the encouragement and support by the prison service of detailed and long-term research into suicides in prison; the introduction of a suicide awareness support unit in DIA1; the development of prisoner listener schemes and a major direct input by the Samaritans into establishments; and a review of prison suicide prevention procedures carried out by the Chief Inspector of Prisons. Perhaps most important in terms of the context in which these other developments have been achievable and effective has been the impact of the Woolf Report in setting the agenda for change. It is this aspect of the current debate, which seems to be being carried out almost without regard for informed opinion, which is most worrying for those who have been actively involved in whatever particular way in the development of a better climate in prison for the vulnerable, the isolated and the 'at risk'. This 'better climate' was perhaps most needed by the staff, who are the agents expected to care for prisoners, to deliver constructive regimes, to provide value for money, and to combine the conflicting and constantly changing roles defined for them by the public, by politicians, by prison service headquarters and to some extent by prisoners themselves.

Some of the operational changes of most significance to the improving climate in suicide prevention in particular establishments over the last few years can be linked directly to recommendations made by Woolf and taken up in the

White Paper which followed his report. Reducing overcrowding, locating prisoners nearer to their homes, improving health care services, increasing training and being more open with prisoners, giving reasons for decisions taken: these are all examples of a better climate in some establishments which have turned themselves around from defensive, closed, crowded and unresponsive institutions to positive, innovative and flexible prisons with caring, supportive staff working together to minimise suicide. As Joseph Rowan said in his contribution to suicide awareness training teams: 'good custody is good suicide prevention'.

There are many reasons for the increase in prison suicides. Suicides are increasing in the community; they are increasing most rapidly amongst young males, often from the lower socio-economic classes: those with no job, no family, no support, no hope. The role of drug use, family breakdown, unemployment, physical or sexual abuse in contributing to increasing suicide risk amongst imprisoned populations has been poorly understood in the past. If we were to describe the most 'at risk' population in the community for suicide, we would describe a group of people strongly

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resembling the prison population.

There are however, reasons relating to prison environments too. Few prison suicides are found to have psychiatric diagnoses - a third or less. Many prisoners attempt suicide because they are lonely, upset, afraid and unable to cope with the situation they find themselves in. Some are unable to manage unoccupied time, distance from families, bullying, guilt, rejection and uncertainty. Many require constant support, company, activity and distraction from unmanageable feelings they would avoid in other ways in the community.

Given this understanding, of an increasingly vulnerable prison population, whose law-breaking, violence and drug-taking may be linked in very complex ways to a pattern of social and economic marginalisation, of multiply 'dysfunctional' and unhappy lives, is it appropriate to be talking at all about 'austere regimes' and an increasing emphasis on

the use of prison to 'cure crime'? As a researcher who has talked and listened through countless tears, some of them shed by officers and governors but most of them shed by prisoners, over many many years, who has seen the use of strip cells decline and attitudes towards self-injury improve, who has witnessed the introduction of suicide awareness management teams in all establishments, and the provision of activity and support for those thought to be at risk, I cannot comprehend the purpose of this word 'austere'.

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The Samaritans

All prisons in England and Wales, many in the Republic of Ireland, and some in Scotland and Northern Ireland, are working with their local Samaritan Branch so that staff have support when caring for prisoners at risk of suicide and self harm, and prisoners have the opportunity to contact The Samaritans, including emergency access in an emotional crisis.

Samaritan Branches are also involved in developing and supporting Prisoner Befriending schemes. Recognising that prisoners have always cared for each other and are able to take on some of the responsibility for fellow prisoners' welfare; the schemes, 'Listeners', 'Care Supporters', 'Ears', and 'Stress Busters', are based on the belief that Samaritan principles can be adapted to a prison setting. Volunteer prisoners are selected and trained to befriend fellow prisoners in confidence with the support of Samaritans and prison staff. There are now forty schemes in establishments in England and Wales, including four 'Listener' groups in young offender institutions. A pilot scheme is due to begin at one of the Scottish Prison Service's establishments early next year and the Criminal Justice Department in the Republic of Ireland are looking, with The Samaritans at how they could involve prisoners in a similar way.

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