

Prison Suicide: What happens afterwards?

By Philippa Tomczak

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In 1992, when a previous authoritative book on suicide in prisons was written,¹ there were 2 self-inflicted deaths per 1,000 prisoners. During 2016, when the research for this book began, there were 124 self-inflicted deaths in UK jails, 354 prisoner deaths overall, the highest since records began in 1978. The last 30 years have seen a worsening of the situation for many people at risk of self-harm in prisons as the rate of suicide in prisons in England and Wales has doubled to 4 for every 1000 prisoners.² It is within this terrible and distressing reality that Dr Philippa Tomczak's book exists and therefore, rightly, the book begins with a plea. This plea asks the reader to consider the current situation for many vulnerable people in custody and their families and to look to those who are still with us, whom may yet be protected from harm if we can make the changes needed. Tomczak begins her work by offering a way in which scholars and officials could respond to their plea and that's by taking more interest in what happens *after* a suicide, to take up a '*post-death*

vantage' (p. 3) in opposition to current practice which, perhaps too narrowly, focuses on the lead up to a suicide.

The opening chapter concerns itself mainly with illustrating for the reader the reality of the above challenge. How the prison system is to accurately define and detect risk factors in suicide, how does it influence how staff are motivated (or not) in programmes of suicide prevention and how are scholars and officials to assess the heavy and traumatic emotional burden placed on other prisoners, staff, and families by a death. Next the book concerns itself with the role of the deceased's intentions in official reviews following suicide. It asks why there is seemingly such strong desire for authorities to find the motivation for suicide. Perhaps, it is argued, it's a means for the 'system' to protect itself from its responsibility as the overseers of the environment where so much death occurs. One interviewee sums up these motivation debates simply '*their just as dead, no matter the motivations*' (p. 16). The middle sections of the book move forward to discussions concerning the role of prison staff and offers a useful critique of the narrow focus on their actions in the administrative and investigative process following a death (i.e. was the correct form filled in) and how not enough time and attention appears to be spent on the experiential and perhaps harm motivating aspects of prison life. There is a great deal of discussion on how the stigmatisation of prisoners affects matters related to suicide in prisons. Having worked in prisons for over 12 years I know it is not uncommon to hear *some* staff responses to issues effecting self-harm by saying the behaviour is 'attention seeking', 'medication seeking', 'vape

seeking', there are at times some truth in these concerns, prisons are tough and understaffed, people can and do manipulate staff and systems. Some staff can all too often see themselves as 'above' those they care for, after all prisoners are criminals, some of whom have done terrible things. Some staff can all too easily fall back on the old adage 'if you can't do the time, you shouldn't do the crime' in response to poor coping. Tomczak argues for the front centring of individuals to combat this potential view, in turn ensuring actions, recommendations and expectations don't 'de-personalise' the very real suffering experienced by prisoners.

The complexities of the current system are robustly demonstrated in the authoritative sections dealing with Prison Service Rules, Instructions, recommendations and the role of prison governors and directors (p. 116-122). These pages will be extremely enlightening for researchers new to the prison bureaucracy in England and Wales. Tomczak suggests that the overseers, the executive bodies who investigate and audit prisons, could be delivering much more than they are now, if only they could only focus their, as Tomczak frames it, 'bark' and 'bite' on those who really can enact meaningful and lasting change. In the current system, too many recommendations fall to individual governors to fix rather than ministers who might have a hope of developing and champion the system change needed to make a lasting difference. The disastrous impact of poor government reforms, such as the Transforming Rehabilitation project, have shown that significant damage to the criminal justice system can be done by those officials who can seem unaccountable for their decisions. It

1. Liebling, A. (1992). *Suicides in prison*. Routledge.

2. Ministry of Justice (2023). *Safety in custody statistics England and Wales: Deaths in Prison Custody to December 2023 Assaults and Self-harm to September 2023*. Ministry of Justice.

is for these people that the hardest 'bite' needs to be reserved.

Due to the subject matter, at times this book is a bleak and difficult read, the challenges are not shied away from, and it remains authoritative and thought provoking. Its concluding paragraph a clarion call for the criminal justice system to ask itself again whether vulnerable people should ever be brought into prison, as a place of safety or otherwise. Whilst it does not seek to offer any concrete policy changes, nor is it

entirely even handed '*government certainly deserves some more shaming*' (p. 132) the data is distressingly clear and so frustration with the political class does come through strongly at times.³ It asks us to consider in more detail a vitally different angle to suicide prevention and suggests that more focus on the *as afterwards* will potentially impact on *the before*. As a practitioner I found myself nodding my head in agreement with this viewpoint as I recognised and relived the experiences of my prison

work. Throughout this well researched and informative work Tomczak has a clear message for those working within this field '*prison suicide is a substantially, although not entirely, preventable crisis*' (p. 2). It is an inescapable truth that people in Prison throughout England and Wales continue to die in record numbers, therefore this book has a vital and important 'bite', and I am sure we could all do with 'barking' a bit more about that.

3. There is a special spotlight retained for the impact of Chris Grayling throughout.