

# **Briefing paper on prison overcrowding and suicide**

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## 1. Suicide in prison: key points

- Two people per week take their own lives in our prisons; this has almost doubled since the early 1990s;
- This is despite the Prison Service having invested far more time and resources in suicide prevention work in that time
- Over half of those who take their own lives are on remand
- Overcrowded local jails suffer from the greatest number of suicides
- Over half of all suicides since 1 January 2004 took place in a quarter of all jails
- Need also to remember that in addition to the 95 people who committed suicide in 2004 a further 228 required resuscitation following a recognised suicide attempt
- There were 17,678 recorded incidents of self-harm in prisons in 2004 (some of these will have been from serial self-harmers)
- Over half of all prisons are overcrowded
- Overall, in Sept 2005 the prison estate was overcrowded to 111% of its capacity; 14 prisons (11 of which operated as local prisons) were overcrowded to over 150% of capacity, with a further 21 prisons overcrowded to between 125-149% of capacity
- 17,200 prisons were doubled-up in cells meant for one in August 2005

## 2. Suicide in prison: facts and figures

### 2005

There have been 64 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales so far this year. 13 of these happened in the space of a fortnight in June.

Figures collected by the Howard League for Penal Reform show that the 64 include:

- Three women
- Two children: Gareth Price aged 16 who died at HMYOI Lancaster Farms in January and Sam Elphick aged 17 died at HMYOI Hindley in September
- Five 18 year olds, two 19 year olds and three 20 year olds
- Therefore 12 out of the 64 were aged 20 or under.

The figures show that:

- Over half (53%) of those who took their own lives were on remand
- Hanging was overwhelmingly (97%) the most common method used
- 19 had been assessed as at particular risk of self-harm and suicide and were subject to special prison service monitoring arrangements
- 52 were white, nine were black and two were Asian (Prison Service categories)
- The average age at which people took their own lives was 32

## Recent years

In 2004 95 people took their own lives. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons has described this as the tip of an iceberg of distress as, in addition who succeeded in taking their own lives, 228 attempted suicide to the extent that they required resuscitation, and there were 17,658 incidents of self-harm (this figure will include serial self-harmers).

27 children have taken their own lives in penal custody since 1990. Including: one 14 year old, three 15 year olds, eight 16 year olds and fifteen 17 year olds.

Three women committed suicide in prison in 1995. This rose to 13 last year. So far three women have taken their own lives in prison in 2005.

This table lists the number of suicides in each year for the last twenty years and the average prison population for that year:

Year	Number of prison suicides	Average prison population
1985	29	46,234
1986	21	46,769
1987	46	48,425
1988	37	48,872
1989	48	48,500
1990	50	44,975
1991	42	44,809
1992	41	44,718
1993	47	44,552
1994	62	48,621
1995	59	50,962
1996	64	55,281
1997	68	61,114
1998	82	65,298
1999	91	64,771
2000	82	64,603
2001	72	66,301
2002	95	70,778
2003	94	73,038
2004	95	74,658

The table shows that while the prison population has increased rapidly the rate of suicide in prison has increased more rapidly still. For example:

by 2004 the prison population had increased by:

- 61% compared with 1985
- 65% compared with 1990
- 47% compared with 1995

- 15% compared with 2000

by 2004 the number of people killing themselves in prison had increased by:

- 228% compared to 1985
- 90% compared to 1990
- 61% compared to 1995
- 16% compared to 2000

#### Howard League for Penal Reform ten-year analysis

In July 2005 the Howard League for Penal Reform released figures which revealed that in the ten-year period 1995 – 2004 804 men, women and children took their own lives in jails in England and Wales.

Of these 804:

- 65 were women
- 17 were children
- 92% hanged themselves
- 55% were on remand, despite remandees comprising only 19% of the prison population

The following table shows those prisons which experienced 10 or more suicides between 1995 and 2004. The vast majority are local prisons.

Prison	Number of suicides 1995 - 2004	Prison	Number of suicides 1995 - 2004
Manchester	27	Hull	16
Leeds	25	Blakenhurst	16
Winchester	23	Exeter	14
Durham	23	Woodhill	14
Norwich	23	Belmarsh	14
Nottingham	23	Holme House	13
Liverpool	22	Pentonville	13
Preston	21	High Down	12
Lewes	21	Cardiff	11
Birmingham	20	New Hall	11
Wandsworth	17	Gloucester	11
Brixton	17	Holloway	11
Leicester	17	Aylesbury	10
Doncaster	17	Bullingdon	10
Bristol	17		

### **3. Suicide rate in prison**

The suicide rate in prison has been rising as the suicide rate in the community has been falling. An Oxford University study published by the Lancet on 15 September 2005 found that:

- prisoners are five times more likely to take their own lives in prison as in the community
- young people are 18 times more likely to commit suicide in prison than in the community

As part of the ten year analysis, the Howard League for Penal Reform calculated that women were 30 times more likely to take their lives in prison than in the community.

### **4. Prison conditions and suicide**

#### Overcrowding

The massive increase in the prison population in recent years has caused extreme prison overcrowding. Put simply, overcrowding means too many prisoners, not enough spaces for them, and not enough staff to care effectively for each prisoner. Overcrowding causes prison regimes to be squeezed even further and threatens the ability of a prison to treat a prisoner with decency and compassion. Overcrowding and the consequent movement of prisoners around the estate limits the ability of staff to get to know and develop personal relationships with prisoners.

The Joint Committee on Human Rights, in its 2004 report on deaths in custody, emphasised that the overall culture of a prison, including whether prisoners are treated humanely and with dignity, can have a significant impact on prisoner distress and vulnerability to suicide and self-harm.

In her most recent annual report, published on 26 January 2005, the Chief Inspector of Prisons claimed that the levelling off of the prison population at around 75,000 was “the difference between a manageable crisis and an unmanageable one”. At the time of publication of her report the operation capacity of the prison service was put at 78,210. Since then the prison population has increased by 3,600 to a record 77,702. The operational capacity has only increased by 1,750. In the last four weeks the population has increased by 752, the size of a large prison such as Brixton or Norwich.

Latest Prison Service statistics show that in September 2005:

- 77 out of 142 prisons were overcrowded
- 14 prisons – all local prisons - held over 50% more prisoners than they were designed to

- A further 21 prisons held 25% - 49% more prisoners than intended
- Overall a quarter of all prisons were housing at least 25% more prisoners than they were supposed to.

Figures for August 2005 show that 17,207 prisoners were sharing cells meant for one person. This is an increase of over 900 since July 2005.

Prison overcrowding increases prisoner vulnerability and the current Director General of the Prison Service admitted in 2003 that overcrowding was implicated in the increase in the number of self-inflicted deaths in prison in recent years.

This table shows those prisons which in September 2005 were operating at more than 125% of their capacity and the number of suicides each of those prisons had experienced since 1 January 2004. It shows that out of the 159 suicides in prison since 1 January 2004 90 of them occurred at the 35 currently most overcrowded prisons. This means that over half of all suicides in prison since 1 January 2004 have occurred in just a quarter of all prisons.

<b>Prison</b>	<b>Number of prisoners current accommodation is designed to hold (In-use Certified Normal Accommodation)</b>	<b>Number of prisoners actually held</b>	<b>Capacity rate</b>	<b>Number of suicides between since 1 January 2004</b>
Preston	330	595	180%	3
Shrewsbury	168	302	180%	5
Leicester	206	363	176%	5
Swansea	248	427	172%	2
Dorchester	147	252	171%	1
Exeter	316	537	170%	3
Wandsworth	845	1,437	170%	4
Usk	150	249	166%	0
Altcourse	614	1,003	163%	4
Lincoln	307	490	160%	2
Leeds	806	1,258	156%	4
Canterbury	196	305	156%	1
Durham	496	748	151%	5
Lancaster	159	240	151%	0
Reading	190	284	149%	4
Bedford	324	480	148%	2
Winchester	476	691	145%	0
Doncaster	771	1,111	144%	1
Cardiff	524	749	143%	0
Bristol	426	604	142%	2
Gloucester	214	295	138%	7
Pentonville	868	1,194	138%	5
Hull	721	983	136%	1
Northallerton	152	206	136%	0
Brixton	606	810	134%	3

Chelmsford	437	585	134%	1
Cookham Wood	137	184	134%	0
Norwich	587	780	133%	7
Nottingham	385	513	133%	4
Forest Bank	800	1,059	132%	0
Elmley	753	988	131%	1
Manchester	954	1,249	131%	7
Blakenhurst	821	1,058	129%	3
Bullington	759	965	127%	2
Birmingham	1,121	1,408	126%	1
			Total suicides:	90

The Chief Inspector of Prisons has frequently drawn attention to the indecent conditions caused by overcrowding and how these can have a negative impact on prisoner welfare. The impact of overcrowding is prisoners 'doubled-up' two to a small cell meant for one, and in this confined space they will sleep, eat, wash-up and use the often unscreened lavatory.

In her report of the inspection of Pentonville prison, published 5 July 2005, the Chief Inspector referred to the problems of overcrowding and recorded how vulnerable prisoners were being placed in stained cells infested with cockroaches.

### Reception

The sheer number of people being received into local jails from the courts limits the ability of the prison authorities to spend sufficient time with each individual prisoner on arrival at the jail to determine whether they are at risk of suicide or self-harm.

- Instead of being a thorough examination of a prisoner's welfare, the reception interviews are often cursory and frequently take place in a corridor with no health care representative present.
- This rushed process does nothing to engender a feeling of prisoner safety.

### Bullying

Bullying has been endemic in our prisons, particularly those housing young offenders and juveniles, and has an insidious effect on those targeted, causing fear and anxiety and worsening the prison experience for those already deemed vulnerable to risk of self-harm or suicide. Efforts have been made to effectively tackle have been made by the prison service but the result are patchy.

The Chief Inspector of Prisons reported this year that:

- there was a culture of bullying at Liverpool prison and that 93% of prisoners on a wing holding the most had felt unsafe.
- at The Mount prison 42% of prisoners had felt unsafe and 25% had been victimised by other prisoners.
- anti-bullying strategies at Stoke Heath and Brinsford Young Offender Institutes, which are responsible for the welfare of vulnerable children and young adults, were seriously deficient.
- To be effective anti-bullying and violence reduction strategies have to be incorporated into the culture of the prison.

## 5. Policy responses

Both the Director General of the Prison Service and Home Office Ministers have spoken of suicide prevention as being one of their top priorities for the prison system.

The Prison Service is committed to reducing the tragedy of self-inflicted deaths in prison and has responded with a series of initiatives under the safer custody umbrella. The Safer Custody Group, under whose auspices this work takes place, is now part of the National Offender Management Service.

While the focus on reducing prison suicides is to be applauded there is a danger of the system focusing on one or two particular 'cures' that may have unintended consequences. For example, part of the safer cells initiative saw the creation of cell windows without any ligature points. The consequence of this was that these windows do not open to allow proper ventilation. Already distressed prisoners would therefore find themselves in sweltering cells unable to access fresh air. This has led to disturbances, such as those that occurred in Nottingham in July 2004.

### Ist night in custody

The risk of suicide in prison decreases with the length of time a prisoner serves:

- Around 40% of suicides occur within the first month of being in custody,
- The first 24 hours are a particularly crucial time when around 10% of all suicides take place.

As a response the prison service has sought to develop first night in custody suites. These aim to provide a smooth and supportive introduction to the prison. However:

- as the Chief Inspector of Prisons reported, despite housing desperate and severely disturbed women, Brockhill prison had no 1<sup>st</sup> night in custody centre.
- even when they do exist, there are often insufficient places for the number of people being sent to prison direct from the courts, let alone

for those being moved from other prisons, for example as the Governor at Wormwood Scrubs admitted in September 2005.

### Suicide and self-harm monitoring procedures

The Prison Service is also moving from the existing suicide and self-harm monitoring processes – the F2052SH – to the new Assessment, Care in Custody, and Teamwork plan (ACCT).

- The F2052SH is being replaced because it is now felt to be a tick-box exercise, which in practice could be operated as a system to protect staff rather than prisoners
- The ACCT, which is currently being rolled out across the prison estate, with the whole prison estate covered by the end of March 2007 aims to be a less process-driven and more interactive approach. It aims to build on the notion that “suicide is everyone’s concern”

## **6. What should government do to reduce suicide and self-harm ?**

The Howard League for Penal Reform believes that:

- Individual prison staff do their best in difficult circumstances to alleviate people’s suffering. However, the sheer numbers of people being sent to custody threaten to overwhelm their efforts, particularly in local prisons where the majority of suicides already occur.
- If the government is really serious about reducing suicide and self-harm in prisons, then it needs to take concerted action now to reduce the numbers entering custody. Particularly the majority of non-violent, non-dangerous offenders who could be more appropriately managed on a community sentence, which enables them to make amends for their crime and encourages them to live a law abiding life.
- Accordingly, the government must talk down sentencing and make it clear that short prison sentences serve no purpose other than to create more victims of crime when they are released from prison.
- This is particularly the case with remands to custody, where over half of all those who kill themselves in prison are on remand, and 60% of those remanded to custody do not subsequently receive a custodial sentence.
- The government must drastically reduce the number of mentally ill people languishing inappropriately in our prisons, by increasing both court diversion schemes and the number of secure and semi-secure psychiatric beds.
- For those that are sent to custody, the prison authorities need to ensure that first night in custody and induction programmes are available to all prisoners entering prison and are of appropriate duration to ensure that prisoners can realistically benefit from them.
- Proper training must also be available to all staff to allow them to constructively engage with prisoners in distress. Looking through a cell window every 15 minutes is not a proper care strategy for those in distress and at risk of suicide or self harm.

