

Inmate suicide in jails

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The high rate of prison suicides experienced in recent years could indicate an upward trend or it could merely be an aberration. In this paper I will try to analyze the problem of suicide in jails and discuss how we can prevent such actions. National studies of prison suicide rates have been conducted; therefore, this paper is limited to research on individual state prison systems reporting widely disparate finding.

The limited research available on national prison suicide rates is both somewhat dated and plagued by inconsistent reporting problems. Lester (1982, 1987) cited previous calculations of national prison suicide rates for two periods: 1978 to 1979 and 1980 to 1983. The rate of suicide for male inmates was 24.6 and 24.3, respectively, for these two periods.

Unfortunately, the above calculations were based on nationally reported Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) data that were underreported.

For example, the most recent data available on prison suicide from the BJS reported a total of 89 Prison suicides throughout the United States in 1991. This total, however, does not include data from six “nonreporting” jurisdictions, as well as an unknown number of possible suicides contained within inmate death data listed by BJS as “unspecified causes.” excluding nonreporting jurisdictions, the national prison suicide rate based on BJS data would be 13.9 suicides per 100,000 inmates. This rate is low, however, compared to other data. For example, analyzing annual national survey data from both the Criminal Justice Institute (1992) and Corrections Compendium (1992) as well as from telephone follow-up with several jurisdictions, NCIA was able to verify 127 prison suicides for all state and federal prison during 1991.

Thus, a more accurate national prison suicide rate for 1991 would be 16.4 suicides per 100,000 inmates. In an effort to collect the most recent national data on prison suicides, NCIA surveyed all 50 state departments of correction (DOC), plus the District of Columbia and the Federal Bureau of Prisons and inquired as to the number of inmate suicides each prison system had during 1999. In addition, to review historical trends in the rate of prison suicide throughout the country, I gathered and analyzed data from the 1984 through 1992 annual surveys of both the Criminal Justice Institute and Corrections Compendium. Table 1 presents the aggregate nine-year (1984-1992) total of prison suicides and rates combined with NCIA's 1993 data.

As indicated, there were 1,339 suicides in state and federal prisons throughout the United States between 1984 and 1993, resulting in a 10-year suicide rate of 20.6. California led all states with 176 prison suicides, with New Mexico reporting only two suicides during the 10-year period. New Mexico also had the lowest suicide rate (7.1), while North Dakota had the highest (101.7) – perhaps a misleading statistic since this prison system has not experienced an inmate suicide since 1988.

In addition, 10 large jurisdictions (Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and the Federal Bureau of Prisons) accounted for almost 50 percent of all suicides yet had a combined suicide rate below the national rate (17.8 versus 20.6). Dual system of both pretrial and sentenced inmates Table 1 also indicates that 31 jurisdictions had suicide rates above the national rate (including extremely high rates in Alaska, Minnesota, Montana and North Dakota). At first glance it would appear that the seven jurisdictions operating dual systems of

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confining both pre-trial and sentenced inmates, excluding the Federal Bureau of Prisons, had suicide rates that far exceeded the national average.

From a low of 15.6 in the District of Columbia to a high of 87.3 in Alaska, these seven dual-system jurisdictions had a combined suicide rate of 34.4. Given that pre-trial inmates appear more vulnerable to suicide and the suicide rate in local jails is estimated to be more than nine times greater than in the community (Hayes 1989 p. 27), the rate of suicide within dual-prison systems is not surprising.

However, it would appear that the uniqueness of jurisdictions with dual systems is not the sole cause of high suicide rates in prison systems throughout the United States. The analysis found that the seven smallest prison systems (excluding dual systems) of Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wyoming had a combined suicide rate of 53.8 – more than two and a half times greater than the national average. ...