**SUICIDE IN PRISONS AND THE LISTENER SCHEME**

This September marks the 25th anniversary of Samaritans working in partnership with HM Prison Service and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to reduce suicide in prisons in England and Wales.

Suicide and self-harm in prisons is increasing and concerted action is needed to reverse this trend.

- Every suicide is a tragedy and we must focus action on high risk groups, including prisoners, providing support to this vulnerable group.
- More research is required into the psychology of suicide in prisoners to improve our understanding of this group and help inform the development of services and support.
- The early days in custody are a time of heightened suicide risk and therefore it is important that awareness of, and access to, appropriate support, including Listeners, is embedded into all reception and induction processes for new prisoners.
- Samaritans is concerned about the impact of the problem of low staffing levels in prisons. We believe that this problem has contributed to the rising suicide rates of prisoners and needs to be addressed.

**Samaritans’ prison Listener scheme**

The Listener scheme is a confidential peer-support service where prisoners who are struggling to cope can access confidential emotional support, talk about how they are feeling and try to find a positive way forward. Prisoners are selected, trained and supported by Samaritans volunteers to become ‘Listeners’. There are Listener schemes in almost every prison in England and Wales.

The Listener scheme can play a vital role in an establishment’s overall safer custody agenda by helping to reduce self-harm and suicide. Importantly, it helps to create an ‘enabling culture’ whereby prisoners feel that it is okay to talk. Talking about problems can lead to a reduction in frustration and anger, build trust between prisoners and help to create a calmer, safer environment which provides a foundation upon which the prison service can work to reduce reoffending.
How the Listener scheme helps prisoners

There have been a number of studies and operational surveys, which provide insights and evidence into how the Listener scheme helps both prisoners who use the service and Listeners.

**The Listener scheme helps prisoners who use the service:**

- Talking to Listeners allows prisoners to vent their frustrations, making them more calm and less likely to be violent towards others.¹⁰
- Prisoners most commonly use Listeners during the night or when locked up.¹¹
- Prisoners describe talking to Listeners as a way of “getting things off their chest” and a “weight being lifted.”¹¹
- Many prisoners report a sense of “hope, mastery and relief” after talking to Listeners.¹¹
- Prisoners believe that Listeners are effective in reducing/preventing suicide in prisons.¹²
- In a survey of prison staff in 2016, the majority of respondents thought that the Listener scheme helps to reduce suicide and self-harm.⁶

**The Listener scheme helps prisoners who ‘Listen’:**

- Listeners notice positive changes in themselves as a result of Listening, which gives a sense of meaning to their time in prison.¹³
- In multiple studies, Listeners describe that they experience a sense of achievement, personal satisfaction, increased empathy, improved communication skills, greater patience, improved problem solving and a greater self-confidence through becoming Listeners.¹⁰,¹⁴,¹⁵
- In multiple studies, Listeners describe how the scheme has helped them to be a “better person.”¹¹,¹³,¹⁴
- Prison staff believe that Listening has a positive influence on those who are part of the scheme.¹⁰

Samaritans is committed to evaluating its services and ensuring that we improve the support we offer vulnerable people is based on robust evidence. We are currently completing a large scale evaluation of the scheme, which looks at the psychological impact on prisoners who use the service.²

“Can you imagine doing a night shift without the Listeners?”

Senior prison officer; Time Well Spent (2011)

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¹ Survey only completed by 63 members of prison staff across the NOMS estate so is not necessarily an opinion that is representative of all prison staff.
² For further details about this research, contact Elizabeth Scowcroft, Samaritans Research Manager (e.scowcroft@samaritans.org)
Prisoners are more likely to die by suicide than the general population

The suicide rate in prison is estimated to be between 7 and 12 times that of the general population\(^c\)

Data from the Ministry of Justice shows that while there had been a general downward trend in the self-inflicted death rate in prison during the previous decade, there are now widespread concerns that safety in prison has deteriorated in recent years with a sharp rise in the rate since 2012. The rate of self-inflicted deaths in custody has increased by 55% since 2011, and is at its highest in 8 years since 2007. Rates of self-harm and assaults also on the increase\(^1\).

Every suicide is a tragedy and we must focus action on high risk groups, including prisoners, providing support to this vulnerable group.

What makes prisoners more at risk of suicide?

Suicide is a hugely complex phenomenon and researchers continue to strive to explain the interplay of factors that make some individuals more likely to take their own lives than others.

Some suggest the interaction of ‘environmental stressors’ in prison (factors related to prison life) and ‘imported risk’ (those in prison are more likely to be those who are more vulnerable to suicide in the community e.g. men from lower socio-economic backgrounds) can explain prisoners increased vulnerability\(^2,3\).

Prisoners are not just one ‘type’ of individual though - there are differences between the type of people in prison, their circumstances, their sentences and their experiences that will mean some are more at risk than others\(^4\). We must understand more about these differences and what leads some people to a greater vulnerability than others in order to helpfully find ways of reducing suicide in prison. Samaritans is contributing to the evidence about prisoners and suicide, with a research project evaluating the psychological impact of the Listener scheme and the development of suicidal feelings in prisoners\(^d\).

More research is required into the psychology of suicide in prisoners to improve our understanding of this group and help inform the development of services and support.

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\(^1\) Estimate based on: 120 per 100,000 compared to either the male only UK rate or the overall UK suicide rate; 95% of the prison population are male

\(^2\) For further details about this research, contact Elizabeth Scowcroft, Samaritans Research Manager (e.scowcroft@samaritans.org)
Support when and where it’s needed
Suicide risk is particularly high when prisoners first arrive in prison, on remand, or in early days particularly the first 24 hours 4,5.

“the first 24 hours in custody in a crucial time for prisoners. It is a time when prisoners are at their most distressed and risks of self-harm and suicide are extremely high. It is therefore extremely important that individuals are made to feel safe and supported by staff and other prisoners.” 5

Recent findings from Samaritans and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons surveys show that Listeners are estimated to only be made available when prisoners enter prison between 24% and 48% of the time5,6.

The early days in custody are a time of heightened suicide risk and therefore it is important that awareness of, and access to, appropriate support, including Listeners, is embedded into all reception and induction processes for new prisoners.

Is suicide increasing because of a shortage of prison staff?
The most recent HM Chief Inspector of Prisons’ annual report suggests that the consequences of staff shortages include 7:

- poorer living conditions and reduced access to provisions such as health care
- poorer staff-prisoner relationships
- being unable to fully implement programmes of purposeful activity (such as work or education)
- increased time that prisoners remained locked in their cells. Some prisons having no provision for evening association and no access to showers or telephones at these times.

Problems relating to the pains of prison life and management (e.g. less time out of cells and low staffing levels) are suggested as one of the key explanations of high suicide rates in prison 8. The House of Commons Justice Select Committee suggest that low staffing levels contribute to declining prison safety and an increase of self-inflicted deaths, self-harm and assault incidents 8. They note that prison safety is reliant on good staff-prisoner relationships, that many prisons do not have sufficient staff to maintain safe environments, and deep-rooted problems of staff retention were hampering efforts to improve this situation (despite a sustained recruitment exercise, which the report suggests was unsuccessful and “valueless”). In response to this report, the then Justice Secretary, Michael Gove, acknowledges the “terrible” recent statistics and allocates an additional £10m with immediate effect to help deal with prison safety problems8.

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Statistics from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) show that over the last six years there has been a reduction of 25% in the number of prison officers.  

Prisons remain badly understaffed and this inevitably limits the ability of prison officers to build relationships with prisoners to ensure that prisoners remain safe. Without sufficient resource they can’t tackle key problems that impact on the mental well-being of prisoners, enable access meaningful activity, healthcare services or contact friends and family.  

Samaritans is concerned about the impact of the problem of low staffing levels in prisons. We believe that this problem has contributed to the rising suicide rates of prisoners and needs to be addressed.

References:
5. HMI Prisons. Life in prison: The first 24 hours in prison. . 2015.
15. Griffiths L. The nottingham prison listeners scheme: Providing a voice to those who listen. [MSc]. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University; 2009.

Footnote: A reduction of 6,129 FTE prison officer posts (Band 3-5) between 31st March 2010 and 30th June 2016, down a total of to 18,090 prison officer posts.