

Suicide rates inside penitentiary institutions in Lithuania, the UK, the USA and Australia: a narrative literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Suicide remains a major public health issue, resulting in 800 000 deaths every year; while it is the second main cause of death among adults aged 15 to 29, it is the most common reason of death in penitentiary institutions – suicide rates are three times higher for men and nine times higher for women, compared to the general population [1, 2]. Findings across various countries show increasing suicide rates in prisons [3, 4, 5, 6]. Causes for this could be unsatisfactory living conditions and poor psychological support [2]. Some studies, on the contrary, show decreasing suicide numbers. This study aims to investigate the changing suicide numbers in prisons and the reasons behind it, while also naming ways to battle increasing statistics.

METHODS

Research material was gathered via PubMed indexing system; articles older than 2012 were excluded. Used keywords: "suicide", "prison", "penitentiary". Out of 306 articles, the selected articles analyse suicidal tendencies in prisoners and comment on their shifting prominence over time.

CONCLUSIONS

Suicide in penitentiary institutions is a prevalent issue - its increasing numbers in Lithuania, UK and the USA are associated to overcrowding, prevalent mental disorders and staff cuts, while the decrease in Australia is a result of dealing with said problems. Prison suicides are caused by synergistically interacting factors, hence, a comprehensive approach ought to be taken, namely controlling prison populations and promoting a healthier mental environment.

AIM

The goal of this review is to summarize the findings in selected up-to-date articles in order to identify causes that lead to suicide inside prisons in Lithuania and globally, while also identifying the reasons behind increasing or decreasing numbers over time in various countries and ways to improve statistics.

RESULTS

Suicide primarily affects those who are most disadvantaged [7]. High suicide rates in prisons are attributed to overcrowding – 119 of 205 countries currently exceed their prison capacity – this results in lower staff engagement [2]. Research has drawn conclusions that prisoners display high rates of psychiatric disorders and violent tendencies – these conditions are linked with elevated suicide rates [8] and are rarely resolved due to aforementioned issues [9, 10].

According to the Lithuanian Prison department, suicide rates in prisons have increased from 2 in 2017, to 7 in 2020. This increase could be related to a decrease in psychologists in penitentiary institutions, due to legal changes. A study performed in Switzerland showed similar tendencies – a 57% increase in suicide risk among incarcerated citizens; statistics in the US and UK show an increase in suicide numbers as well [5, 6]. The Australian Institute of Criminology display the opposite - while 50% of prison deaths from 1980 to 1998 were suicidal, since 2004 this number was reduced to a quarter. Reasons for this may be an increase in natural deaths and improvements in handling issues mentioned above [11].