



## Psychosocial influences on prisoner suicide: A case-control study of near-lethal self-harm in women prisoners

Lisa Marzano, Keith Hawton\*, Adrienne Rivlin, Seena Fazel

University Department of Psychiatry, Warneford Hospital, Oxford OX3 7JX, United Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

We examined the psychosocial influences on female prisoner suicide by carrying out a study of near-lethal self-harm. We interviewed 60 women prisoners who had recently engaged in near-lethal self-harm (cases) and 60 others who had never carried out near-lethal acts in prison (controls) from all closed female prison establishments in England and Wales, using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. We gathered information on socio-demographic and criminological variables, life events and childhood trauma, exposure to suicidal behaviour, contributory and precipitating factors for near-lethal self-harm, social support and psychological characteristics. While socio-demographic factors were only modestly associated with near-lethal self-harm, being on remand, in single cell accommodation, and reporting negative experiences of imprisonment were strong correlates. Recent life events and past trauma, including different forms of childhood abuse, were also significantly associated with near-lethal self-harm, as were a family history of suicide and high scores on measures of depression, aggression, impulsivity and hostility, and low levels of self-esteem and social support. Our findings underline the importance of both individual and prison-related factors for suicide in custody, and hence the need for a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention in women's prisons. Given the multiple needs of female prisoners at-risk of self-harm and suicide, complex psychosocial interventions are likely to be required, including interventions for abused and bereaved women, and initiatives to improve staff–prisoner relationships and reduce bullying. The findings of this research may provide insights into factors leading to suicidal behaviour in other forensic and institutional settings, such as detention centres and psychiatric hospitals, and may assist in developing suicide prevention policies for prisoners and other at-risk populations.

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### Introduction

Internationally, suicide rates in prisoners are considerably higher than in the general population. In a recent study of 12 countries, rates of prison suicide were above 100 per 100,000 prisoners in the majority of countries, compared to an average general population suicide rate of 21 per 100,000 (Fazel, Grann, Kling, & Hawton, 2010). Although this problem has been traditionally associated with male prisoners, who worldwide represent on average 95% of the prison population (Walmsley, 2009), there is evidence that rates of suicide may be as high, or even higher amongst female prisoners (Charles, Abram, McClelland, & Teplin, 2003; Mackenzie, Oram, & Borrill, 2003; Ministry of Justice, 2010), despite women's lower risk of suicide in the community (WHO, 2002). In England and Wales, between 1978 and 2004, female prisoners were twenty times more

likely to die by suicide than women of the same age in the general population, a proportional excess greater than for male prisoners (Fazel & Benning, 2009).

Theoretical models of prison suicide, and suicidality more generally, suggest that suicidal behaviour is rarely the consequence of a single cause or stressor, but rather depends on several state and trait-dependent factors (Hawton & Van Heeringen, 2009; Jenkins et al., 2005; Liebling & Krarup, 1993). Understanding these factors, the ways in which they interact, and their role in the disproportionately high rates of suicide in prison might assist in developing models of prevention policy in custody and in institutions in general, including detention centres and psychiatric hospitals. However, much of the research in this area has focused on a relatively narrow range of variables (Fazel, Cartwright, Norman-Nott, & Hawton, 2008). Previous research has tended to study these factors within two relatively isolated bodies of literature. On the one hand, psychiatric and psychological studies focussing on the “imported vulnerability” of at-risk prisoners; on the other, sociological analyses of the role of imprisonment itself in precipitating self-harm.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 (0)1865 738585; fax: +44 (0)1865 738674.  
E-mail address: [Keith.Hawton@psych.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Keith.Hawton@psych.ox.ac.uk) (K. Hawton).

More recently, developments in the field have led to the view that “prisons expose already vulnerable populations to additional risk” (Liebling, Durie, Stiles, & Tait, 2005, p. 210), and thus that prison suicide is best understood as a complex phenomenon resulting from the dynamic interactions between individuals and their surroundings. Related attempts to bridge situational and dispositional models of prisoner suicide are consistent with wider theoretical models of suicide as a process within the individual and in interaction with their environment, involving an underlying vulnerability (mostly defined in terms of biological and psychological trait characteristics) which becomes heightened under the influence of specific stressors (Van Heeringen, 2001). Research findings support a life-course model of the aetiology of suicidal behaviour in which risk depends on cumulative exposure to social, environmental, social, personality and mental health factors (Mann, Waternaux, Haas, & Malone, 1999). Personality characteristics, especially hopelessness and low self-esteem (Van Heeringen, Hawton, & Williams, 2000), as well as environmental/contextual factors, and social circumstances, for example recent adverse events, social isolation and institutional bullying, have been highlighted (Blaauw, Winkel, & Kerkhof, 2001; Leese, Thomas, & Snow, 2006; Rojas & Stenberg, 2010; Shiner, Scourfield, Fincham, & Langer, 2009).

Despite repeated calls for a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the problem (see e.g. McHugh & Snow, 2002), few studies have examined both individual and environmental factors related to prisoner suicide. With much of the previous research on prisoner suicide being in male-only and predominantly male samples (Fazel, Cartwright et al., 2008), risk factors and indicators of vulnerability for suicide in female prisoners are little understood. An important exception is a study by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) (Jenkins et al., 2005; Meltzer, Jenkins, Singleton, Charlton, & Yar, 1999; Singleton, Meltzer, & Gatward, 1998), in which demographic, social and psychiatric correlates of suicidal behaviour in prisons were explored in a large sample of male and female prisoners. However, this study did not include direct assessment of psychological states or traits, which may provide important insight into the pathways leading to suicidal behaviour. In addition, no qualitative data about triggers and motivations for suicidal behaviour were collected. These may complement and triangulate quantitative analyses of the relationship between particular risk factors and suicidal behaviour, and thus provide a potentially richer and more complex understanding of the meaning and significance of different associations. A further limitation of the ONS study is its focus on lifetime and previous suicidality (based on self-reported intent) in prisoners, rather than suicide in prison. To further theoretical understanding of this problem and develop appropriate intervention strategies, it is potentially more useful to investigate the social and environmental influences on suicidal behaviour occurring (exclusively) during incarceration. Also, although self-harm and attempted suicide have previously been used as proxies for suicide (Marzano, Rivlin, Fazel, & Hawton, 2009), there is evidence that physically dangerous and medically severe self-harm acts provide a better approximation of actual suicide than other forms of self-harming behaviour or suicide attempts more generally. Medically serious suicide attempters are epidemiologically very similar to individuals who die by suicide (Douglas et al., 2004; Moscicki, 1995), and twice as likely as other suicide attempters to kill themselves (Rosen, 1976).

As means to self-harm are restricted in prison and therefore fatal and near-fatal injuries are more likely to result from behaviour that had not been motivated by suicidal intentions, individuals who have been involved in a ‘near-lethal’ act (based on severity of method and/or injuries) provide a useful focus for analysis (Marzano, Rivlin et al., 2009). In women’s prisons, where self-harming and suicidal behaviours are widespread (Daigle & Côté, 2006; Völlm & Dolan,

2009), near-lethal self-harm is an important problem in its own right, as well as a valid proxy for suicide. We report findings of a case-control study of women who had recently engaged in a near-lethal act in prison, utilising experiences gained from an earlier pilot study (Borrill, Snow, Medlicott, Teers, & Paton, 2005). We aimed to identify socio-demographic, criminological and psychological variables associated with near-lethal self-harm in order to provide further understanding of this behaviour and inform preventive initiatives. We have elsewhere reported on psychiatric disorders (Marzano, Fazel, Rivlin, & Hawton, 2010).

## Method

### *Sample and selection criteria*

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with 60 female prisoners over the age of 18 years who had carried out near-lethal suicide acts and 60 control prisoners who had no history of engaging in near-lethal self-harm in prison. This study received ethical approval from the Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (Ethics number 06/MRE12/83), and the Prison Service (Reference PG 2006 063).

Participants were selected from all ten ‘closed’ female prison establishments in England and Wales. ‘Open’ establishments, which have lesser security levels and restrictions, were excluded from the study due to their low rates of suicide and suicide attempts. Between November 2007 and October 2008 each establishment was visited every four to six weeks to identify prisoners who had engaged in potentially lethal methods of self-harm. Suicidal intent was deliberately not a criterion for inclusion in the study, so not to exclude prisoners whose self-harm may have very nearly caused death but not have been motivated by suicidal intentions. This also ensured consistency with prison service definitions of self-harm and self-inflicted death, neither of which relies on assessment of suicidal intent. To reduce the risk of sampling biases we developed detailed criteria to assist prison officers to refer suitable cases (see Marzano, Fazel et al., 2010, for details of criteria), held meetings with staff to discuss the correct referral procedure and, where possible, had direct access to the establishment’s monthly self-harm reports to verify whether any incident fitting our criteria had occurred in the previous four weeks.

All prisoners who had carried out a near-lethal act within the past month were approached and invited to participate. Twenty-six potentially suitable prisoners were excluded from the study, due to unwillingness, and concerns about their psychological well-being. There were no significant differences between the excluded and participating prisoners in relation to socio-demographic and criminological characteristics (data available on request from the authors).

Control prisoners were from prisons of the same security category (but not the same prison) and within five years of the cases. Members of the control group were randomly selected by the Ministry of Justice from the Prison Service’s daily list of prisoners.

### *Interviews and measures*

Interviews were carried out in a private room with prisoners’ written informed consent, and lasted between 30 and 90 min. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used to collect data in the following areas:

#### *Details of the near-lethal act*

We recorded information about method (or methods) used for self-harm, and incident location, date and time. Although not an inclusion criterion for the study, we also measured suicidality at the

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