

The Role of Adult Correctional Officers in Preventing Suicide

Suicide among jail and prison inmates: A problem with a solution



- Approximately 10 inmates in jails or prisons take their lives every week.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death in local jails.
- The rate of suicide in jails is almost three times the rate in prisons.

There is help and hope when correctional staff and suicide prevention professionals join forces to prevent suicide. Because you interact with inmates daily and often serve as the first responder when there is a suicide attempt or death, you have a key role in preventing suicide in your facility.

An inmate may become suicidal at any time during incarceration. So, suicide prevention should be ongoing, starting at the time of the arrest and continuing throughout the individual's incarceration.

Why are inmates at high risk for suicide?

Inmates are more likely than people in the general population to have the most common risk factors for suicide.

These risk factors include:

- Mental illness
- Abuse of alcohol or drugs
- Chronic or serious medical conditions
- Prior suicide attempt

For example, the rates for major depression and psychoses in inmates are two to four times the rates in the general population. Withdrawal from alcohol or drugs is a problem for some inmates who have recently been incarcerated.

Arrest and/or conviction can contribute to risk.

Inmates may experience:

- Guilt and shame
- Loss of family, financial, and/or community support



The environment of prisons and jails can increase the risk for suicide.

When incarcerated, inmates lose their privacy, personal choice, and control over their lives and futures. They may fear for their personal safety in the facility, especially if there is conflict, violence, or sexual coercion among inmates. In addition, these facilities (especially the smaller ones) often do not have the needed mental health resources.



When are inmates at highest risk for suicide?

Times of greatest risk include:

- The first four months in jail:
 - 23% of suicides occurred within the first 24 hours of an inmate's stay
 - 27% occurred between 2 and 14 days
 - 20% occurred between 1 and 4 months
- Within two days before or after a court hearing
- After getting bad news from a court hearing, e.g., denial of appeal or parole, or getting a new, longer, or more severe sentence
- After a difficult visit or getting bad news, e.g., the death of a close family member or a spouse filing for divorce
- When placed in a special housing unit, e.g., restrictive housing

Warning signs of immediate risk for suicide

Some behaviors may indicate that a person is at immediate risk for suicide. These three should prompt you to take action right away:

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- Looking for a way to kill oneself
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live

Other behaviors may also indicate a serious risk, especially if the behavior is new or has increased. The most important ones in the general population are listed below. Be alert for these signs among the inmates in your facility:

- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or feeling isolated
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Displaying extreme mood swings

Giving away possessions is also considered a warning sign by many experts in the corrections field.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

- Open 24 hours, toll-free, confidential
- Available in English and Spanish
- For a wallet-sized card with the warning signs of suicide, go to:
<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/getinvolved/materials.aspx>

Responding to a suicidal inmate

Stay alert to signs of suicidal behavior in inmates. Take all suicide threats and attempts seriously, even if you think the inmate is being manipulative. Following is a list of general steps to take in responding to a suicidal inmate. Also, be sure to follow your facility's specific protocols and procedures.

1. Talk with an inmate who may be suicidal and encourage expressing feelings. Listen carefully and interact in a calm, nonjudgmental, and supportive way. Let the inmate know you are there to help.
2. Ask if the inmate is thinking about suicide, e.g., "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" This will not encourage him or her to make an attempt but will let the inmate know it is okay to share how he or she is feeling. Even if the person says no, do not necessarily disregard the immediate threat, especially if the inmate has a history of suicide or is showing some of the warning signs listed above.
3. Remove any potentially lethal means from an inmate who appears to be suicidal or threatens or attempts suicide.
4. You or your supervisor should contact your facility's designated mental health professional immediately.
5. Keep the inmate in a safe environment with constant supervision until he or she can be seen by a mental health professional.
6. If an inmate is determined by facility staff and/or a mental health professional to be suicidal, he or she should be placed in a suicide-resistant cell and under suicide precaution or watch. The inmate should be checked at least every 10–15 minutes (at irregular intervals), if not continuously. The specific timing depends on the individual's level of risk, for example, whether he or she is expressing suicidal thoughts and/or has a previous history of suicide attempts or is actively threatening or engaging in suicidal behavior.
7. Suicidal inmates should not be placed in isolation unless it is absolutely necessary, and if so, they should be kept under constant observation.



Helping Your Colleagues

Suicide can occur among your colleagues as well as among the people you serve. Correctional officers are at risk for suicide because of the stresses of their jobs. If you notice signs of risk for suicide among your colleagues, you can assist them in receiving help. For more information, see the sheet [The Role of Co-Workers in Suicide Prevention](#).

For more information

- For information on suicide prevention in general, go to the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#).
- For a list of resources related to suicide prevention in adult correctional facilities, see [Suicide Prevention Resources for Adult Corrections](#).
- For the references used in this sheet, see [Referenced Version of The Role of Adult Correctional Officers in Preventing Suicide](#).



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Suicide Prevention Resource Center

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