Preventing Suicide in Prisons

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A review of the research found that prison suicides can be prevented with comprehensive programs that focus on the specific risk factors for suicide in prisons (such as receiving a new charge or conviction or isolation). The authors also found that prison suicides potentially can be prevented with programs that train inmates to detect and respond to suicide risk among their peers.

The authors concluded that, to be successful, prison suicide programs must address four major categories of risk: (1) demographic risk factors (e.g., having a prior criminal history, being single), (2) clinical risk factors (e.g., a personal or family history of psychiatric problems), (3) psychosocial risk factors (e.g., past suicide attempts, poor coping skills), and (4) institutional risk factors (e.g., overcrowding, lack of staff supervision, isolation).

Comprehensive programs made use of a variety of strategies including screening and assessment at intake, staff training, psychological treatment, safe housing for individuals at risk, limits on isolation, and staff debriefing and support after a suicide or serious attempt.

The authors warned that peer programs are only effective when inmates chosen as helpers are “carefully selected and trained” in skills such as active listening and suicide prevention and intervention.

The 12 studies included in the review were from the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Austria.
