Preventing suicide and suicidal behaviour in prison settings: from academic data to practical implementation

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INTRODUCTION

World Health Organization: suicide prevention as a global imperative

Suicidal process

Suicidal ideation *(thinking, considering, planning)*

Suicide attempt *(non-fatal outcome)*

Suicide

Progression along the suicidal continuum can be halted → interventions should target the early phases of this process
General population

suicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants

EU data (OECD, 2015)
Study rationale and methodology

Internationally: prisoners as a high-risk population
• Pre-prison vulnerabilities (diathesis) imported into custody
• Prison-specific deprivations and stressors

What about Belgium?
• No national suicide prevention policy in Belgian prisons
• Data essential for development and evaluation of prevention strategies

Cross-sectional survey design
15/16 prisons in Flanders region of Belgium
Representative sample of 1,326 prisoners (85% response rate)

→ Extent of the problem and relevant factors in the prison population
## RESULTS

(Lifetime) prevalence rates of suicidal ideation and attempts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>LEGAL STATUS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total N=1,326</td>
<td>Men N=1,203</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Suicidal ideation(^a)</strong></td>
<td>45.2</td>
<td>43.9(^{**})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During detention (12m)</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>24.5(^{**})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suicide attempt</strong></td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>20.3(^{**})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While in prison</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
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\(\chi^2\) tests: \* \(p<.05\); \** \(p<.01\)

\(^a\) Suicidal thoughts and plans
RESULTS

Relevant factors associated with recent SI during incarceration

↑ Duration of incarceration (< 12 months)
↑ History of suicide attempt
↑ Exposure to (attempted) suicide of fellow prisoner

↓ Coping skills (problem-focused vs. emotional strategies)

↓ Social support (incl. prison staff)
↓ Work and purposeful activities in prison
↓ Perceived autonomy and safety
DISCUSSION

• Prevalence rates of suicidal behaviour in prisoners are elevated compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts in the community at large, but consistent with previous research in custody.

• As a significant risk factor for suicide, suicidal behaviour constitutes an important target for prevention and intervention in this high-risk population.

• HOW?
Roundtable discussion

PREVENTION: from academic data to practical implementation

• General: quality of prison life / climate
  • Social support, purposeful activities, perceived autonomy and safety

• Systematic screening of at-risk prisoners
  • Recently incarcerated, exposure, history SA

• Monitoring, referral and follow-up

• Psychosocial interventions (coping skills): PST, CBT
  • Implementation in a restrictive prison setting?

→ Multidisciplinary approach, with multi-agency collaboration, focused on the individual and its surroundings
Selected literature


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