

BOOK REVIEW

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Review of: *Suicide and Self-Harm in Prisons and Jails*

REFERENCE: Tartaro C, Lester D. *Suicide and self-harm in prisons and jails*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009, 238 pp.

This book is a thoroughly researched and comprehensive review of the current state of knowledge on the subject of suicide prevention in the custodial environment. It should prove valuable for any mental health professional who works with inmates, as well as for correctional staff and administrators who are tasked with ensuring the safety of an incarcerated population.

The book first examines the extent of the problem of suicide, suicide attempts, and deliberate self-harm in police lockups, county jails, juvenile detention facilities, and state and federal prisons. Research from facilities in other countries is cited frequently as well.

Subsequent chapters discuss prevention and the treatment of mentally ill, suicidal, and self-injurious inmates. One chapter examines the screening of inmates for suicide risk while another discusses physical changes to the environment which can reduce the opportunities for self-injury while in custody, as well as guidelines for appropriate supervision and monitoring of identified at-risk inmates. There is also a chapter on diversion and re-entry programs, which can reduce suicide rates by minimizing the time that mentally ill individuals spend incarcerated.

The book is written in a clear style that should be accessible to a broad audience. Observations from the personal experiences of author Tartaro in working with jail and prison staff make several points more memorable. They also serve to emphasize some of the practical obstacles to implementing effective suicide prevention programs in jails and prisons.

The authors clearly understand the real-world challenges inherent in working with an incarcerated population. For example: "A note of caution: Trendy concepts such as unit management and direct supervision are attractive to corrections personnel who are looking to do something innovative. Some administrators and managers, however, are not willing to fully commit to the idea, and the result is the creation of a watered-down shell of a program that bears little resemblance to the original successful models. An example of this can be found with podular direct supervision jails...many jail administrators [did not want to] adopt some of the politically risky aspects of the jail, such as the comfortable, normalized environments" (p. 136).

A number of topics covered in the book may be unfamiliar even to many mental health professionals. There is a discussion of the Samaritans, a worldwide suicide prevention group which has

trained inmates as peer counselors in a number of countries. There is also a discussion of how an institution should respond to the family of an inmate who has completed suicide. The recommendation that family members be allowed to see the location where their loved one died is one that this reviewer was not familiar with.

There are a few minor points on which the authors' knowledge seems out-of-date or at odds with other experts in the field. The statement that suicide is "very common" (p. 78) in psychiatric patients who appear to have improved or soon after a home pass or hospital discharge is not referenced and seems to be something of an overstatement. On page 96, the authors warn of the risk of inmates hoarding antidepressant medication for use in suicide. While this was certainly a major problem when tricyclics were the mainstay of pharmacological treatment for depression, the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors and other newer antidepressants that have essentially replaced the tricyclics are much less lethal in overdose. Indeed, for the most part tricyclic antidepressants are no longer prescribed to treat depression in custodial settings due to their risk in overdose and the availability of safer alternatives. The book also speaks favorably at several points about "no-harm" contracts, although many forensic mental health experts advise against the use of (or certainly the reliance on) such agreements.

The chapter covering litigation issues contains only a brief mention of the available published standards for mental health care in these settings, such as those promulgated by the National Commission on Correctional Health Care (1), the American Psychiatric Association (2), the American Public Health Association (3), and others. A more extensive listing of these standards, plus further discussion of their impact (if any) on day-to-day operations as well as litigation would have been helpful.

These are minor concerns. Overall, *Suicide and Self-Harm in Prisons and Jails* is a comprehensive, eminently practical guide to this critical topic, and represents an important contribution to the field.

References

1. National Commission on Correctional Health Care. *Standards for mental health services in correctional facilities*. Chicago, IL: National Commission on Correctional Health Care, 2008.
2. American Psychiatric Association. *Psychiatric services in jails and prisons*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2000.
3. American Public Health Association Task Force on Correctional Health Care Standards. *Standards for health services in correctional institutions*, 3rd edn. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association Task Force on Correctional Health Care Standards, 2003.

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