

New crisis in prisons as suicides hit record levels

Liz Truss unveils fresh strategy as jails suffer 'epidemic' of self-harm

Jamie Doward

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Suicides in prison have reached “epidemic” proportions, with rates of self-harm and violence soaring to unprecedented levels. In addition, experts say the situation in women’s jails is now worse than a decade ago, when a landmark report was commissioned amid widespread concerns about deteriorating standards.

In the 12 months to 16 September, there were 107 self-inflicted deaths in prisons in England and Wales - almost double that for 2012, when 57 people took their lives, and nearly seven times the 16 suicides in 1978, when the current recording system began.

Frances Crook, chief executive of the Howard League for Penal Reform, has used her blog to highlight that at least 26 prisoners have taken their life since Liz Truss was appointed secretary of state for justice in July, the equivalent to one suicide every three days.

Crook, who describes suicides in prison as having reached “epidemic proportions”, said the situation was the worst she had known in her 30 years of campaigning.

“I haven’t seen anything like this, this is really, really bad,” she said. “There used to be enough experienced staff to know when someone was in distress, but they don’t have time to talk to anyone, there simply aren’t enough of them.

“I’ve been in prisons recently where you have two uniformed officers on duty with several hundred men on the wings. All they can do is go along the landings and open all the doors to allow people to fetch their lunch and then go back down the landings and shut all the doors again. They can’t say anything to anybody because they haven’t got time.”

Last Sunday, Celeste Craig, 26, became the 19th woman prisoner to take her own life this year. With two months of the year still to go, the number dwarfs the levels of a decade ago when the Corston report warned that too many women were being jailed for minor offences while their mental health needs, addiction problems and troubled backgrounds went largely ignored.

“I was commissioned to write my report in 2006 because in two years, 2003 and 2004, a total of 13 women took their own lives in prison,” Lady Corston said. “Now we’ve had 19 in one year which is a scandal.”

The Corston report made 43 recommendations, but much of its impact has been reversed, she said. “In 2003 there were 9,000 women taken into our prisons,” she said. “In 2009, two years after my report, it went down to 5,724.

“Now, at a time of staff cuts, there are 11,000 women going through our prisons this year. We are back to the same old story. Women prisoners, who are 21 times more likely [than average]

to commit suicide, are being sent to prison for ridiculously short times and nothing is achieved. I am very depressed about it all.”

Deborah Coles, director of Inquest, branded the death toll in women’s prisons as unacceptable. “We see the brutal consequences of criminal justice policies that see prison as the default solution and incarcerate some of the most disadvantaged women in prisons that are ill-equipped to keep them safe. These deaths raise the question as to why women were in prison in the first place.”

The rest of the prison system is also experiencing profound problems. Statistics published by the Ministry of Justice show that the death rate in prisons in England and Wales - which includes suicides, natural causes and homicide - has risen to almost one a day.

In the 12 months to the end of June 2016, assaults in men’s prisons rose to a record high at 22,915 - an increase of 69% in only three years. Over the same period there were 36,440 incidents of self-injury - equivalent to 100 per day.

The crisis comes as Truss prepares to make her first major speech as justice secretary this week. She told the *Observer* that prison reform was her priority and that she was committed to making jails safer.

“These statistics demonstrate the serious violence and self-harm in our prisons,” Truss said.

“The consequences are devastating and go far beyond the confines of the prison walls, spilling out into our streets and communities. That is why I have invested an initial £14m at 10 of our most challenging prisons, and shortly I will be publishing a white paper outlining the much needed reform across the prison estate to 2020 and beyond.”

But Crook said the crisis merited a more urgent response. “Legislation will be introduced some time next year, by which time 100 people will have taken their own lives. She [Truss] has to do something now,” she said.

“It’s deeply distressing that this sort of thing is still happening almost 10 years after the Corston inquiry,” said Ben Summerskill, director of the Criminal Justice Alliance, who pointed out that half of all prisoners return to jail after release.

“If we had any other industry in the country where half the products got returned to the factory, ministers would have acted decades ago,” he said.

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