

Prison suicides in Italy in 1996–1997

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The suicide risk among prisoners is higher than among general population. The main risk factors identified are: mental disorders [1]; previous suicide attempts [2]; first period detention [3]; drug-addiction [4]; and, isolation [5]. In Italian prisons during 1996, 45 suicides occurred (43 males and two females), corresponding to a suicide rate of 93.5 per 100,000 inmates/year. The total inmates were 48,528 (46,441 males and 2,087 females), of which 39,155 were Italians and 9,373 non-Italians. Among the latter, there occurred 16 suicides with a rate of 170.7 per 100,000 foreign inmates/year, 42.8% of them occurring in isolation. In 1997, 55 suicides occurred (52 males and three females), with a suicide rate of 112 per 100,000 inmates/year. The total number of inmates was 49,306 (47,724 males and 2,032 females), of which 38,481 were Italians and 10,825 were non-Italians. Eight of the latter committed suicide with a suicide rate of 73.9 per 100,000 foreign inmates/year, 42.9% of them occurring in isolation. Moreover, from the analysis of our data we have identified some risk factors that coincide with the results of previous studies on the same topic in the literature (*table I*).

Despite the great majority of the suicides occurring in males, the suicide rate was higher in females in both years considered, with respectively a M/F ratio of 1:1.1 and 1:1.4. In the general population the ratio is about 3 for the age-group considered. Consequently, whereas the relative risk for suicide in male inmates is about ten times more than that of general population, the same risk rises to about 30 for females inmates. The data concern the anonymous records on prison suicides provided by the 2nd Statistical Division, Office for Legislation Automation Research Study, Prison Administra-

tion Department, Ministry of Justice. The data were elaborated according to statistical-epidemiological criteria using WHO Epi 6 program.

Although the risk factors identified on the basis of the data available need to be confirmed by further research (a case-control study is currently being carried-out), a reduction of prison suicides could possible through the following preventive measures: 1) environmental measures to reduce inactivity and affective isolation, to separate drug-addicts from other inmates, to minimize detachment from the outside world, to improve surveillance; 2) diagnostic-identificative measures: objective and multispecialistic assessment of suicide risk (psychopathological and psychosocial) with scrupulous examination of anamnesis and psycho-behavioral aspects using reliable psychometric scales; and, 3) therapeutic measures involving prison staff psychoeducational involvement, psycho-social and/or psychiatric treatment of any disorder or problem identified.

Table I. Incidence suicide risk factors among prisoners who committed suicide in Italy.

Suicide risk factors	1996 %	1997 %
Mental disorders (diagnosis based on ICD 9)	69	78.3
Drug-addiction	55	60
Previous incarceration	60	70.5
'Convicted' legal status*	57.8	61.8
First month of imprisonment	24.4	23.5
Subjective assessment on suicide risk**	100	100
Foreign prisoners isolation	42.8	42.9

* Prisoners awaiting sentence presented a higher risk during the first 15 days of incarceration; ** Assessment of the suicide risk was extremely unreliable because based only on subjective impressions and carried out by operators with poor experience of studying suicide.

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