

Section A		
Institution: Durham University		
Unit of Assessment: 4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience		
Title of case study: Saving lives; reducing prisoner suicides		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Between February 2014 and July 2015		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Graham Towl	Professor of Forensic Psychology	2008 to present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: February 2014 to present		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No.		
Section B		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Against a long-term trend of rising suicide rates amongst the prisoner population in England and Wales, research from Durham University's Department of Psychology has contributed to a marked decrease in Self-Inflicted Deaths (SIDs) - from a long term peak of 122 in 2016 to 70 in 2017 – and has sustainably halted the previous upward trend (2018: 92 suicides, 2019: 84 suicides) (E3). This is the most significant reduction in prisoner suicides since records began and equates to at least 52 lives saved in 2017 alone. The mechanism of this sustained, life-saving change has been the application of research findings directly to changes in policy and hence informing the design of staff training on both national and local levels.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Professor Towl was a member of the influential Harris Review (R3) and he took the lead role (E1) on the quantitative research required for the review. In so doing he directed the analytics team at the Home Office on the most comprehensive ever (both internationally and historically) case record based study, specifying precisely what variables to focus upon, into prisoner suicide. He ensured that the findings were accurately presented to capture the key, and unique set of findings. This provided the substantive evidence base for the Harris Review in terms of the empirical data to inform the review team. Although the remit set by government was primarily focussed upon 18-24 year olds, Professor Towl and his team identified a need to look at Self Inflicted Deaths for all ages so that comparison could be undertaken between all age groups. This was especially important in view of the original research questions around whether or not those within the age group of 18-24 year olds were at an inflated risk of suicide in comparison with older prisoners. This provided a central part of the evidence base underpinning the Harris Review. This research used data from all of the 2,039 suicides recorded as occurring in custody in England and Wales between 1978 (when records began) and 2014 to create the most comprehensive database ever used internationally in any such published study. Results were presented in the Harris Report itself, and in subsequent books by Professor Towl (R1 to R3).</p>		

Key findings from the research were:

- **There is a marked gender difference in age-related risk of suicide.**

In contrast to government expectations, the data showed that overall, as prisoners get older (up to aged 59) the rates of suicide increase. However, when the dataset was viewed through the lens of gender it was noted (for the first time) that age is *negatively* correlated with rates of suicide amongst women prisoners. Conversely, the extent of age as an indicator of risk amongst male prisoners is greater than previously thought (R1, R2).

- **Current interventions during the early period of incarceration are, in fact, effective at reducing the percentage of suicides accounted for during this period.**

The period of highest risk of suicide is during the first few days and weeks of custody (in absolute terms, and also in any new location the prisoner is moved to). This is one of the most robust findings from this and previous work historically and internationally. However, what is new in this research is that it is evident that the percentage of self-inflicted deaths accounted for during the earliest periods of custody has steadily dropped over the years. Importantly, this indicates that some existing policies; e.g. the focus on local prisons, have been successful, despite the overall growth in absolute numbers and rates, which has masked these Prison Service successes (R3).

- **A new and improved understanding of offence-related variables in relation to suicide risk.**

The research confirmed previous work, which has comprehensively shown that those serving sentences (or on remand awaiting a court appearance) for violent or sexual crimes, are at an inflated risk of suicide in terms of both rates and frequencies (there are comparatively large numbers of imprisoned violent and sexual offenders). However, a critical new finding from this research is that arsonists are at a markedly inflated risk of suicide relative to incarcerated numbers (R3).

- **That once prisoners are identified as being at risk there is no evidence of ethnic bias in the results of their care.**

Racism in prison and the wider justice system has been recognised as a problem since the murder of Zahid Mubarek at Feltham Young Offender Institution in 2000. Whilst the rate of incarceration of black men is higher than that of white men, their suicide risk has been noted internationally as being lower. Examination of the Assessment Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) documentation during this research found that once identified as being at high risk there was no difference in the outcomes between black and white men. This indicates that while there may or may not be discrepancies in who is (or is identified as) at-risk, there is no empirical evidence for racial bias in the care provided by the prison service to individuals once that risk has been identified (R1).

3. References to the research

R1. Towl, G.J. & Crighton, D.A. (2017). *Suicide in Prisons: Prisoners' Lives Matter*. Waterside Press. Chapter 9 directly includes the new research findings.

R2. Walker, T. & Towl, G.J. (2016). *Preventing Self-injury and Suicide in Women's Prisons*. Waterside Press. This book addresses the issues of gender and the related areas of suicide and self harm.

R3. The Harris Review (2015) *Changing Prisons, Saving Lives*; Report of the Independent Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18-24 year olds, OGL, Crown copyright.

Evidence of quality: When assessing the underpinning research quality for inclusion in an ICS the department noted that the Harris Report itself was externally peer reviewed as four star in research quality, while Walker & Towl (2016) won the British Psychological Society book prize in 2017.

4. Details of the impact

Against a background of austerity and reductions in the levels of prison staff, the research was used to improve the training materials used with prison staff. Additionally, the act of undertaking and disseminating the research may very well have contributed positively to a Hawthorne effect in that the organisation increased its focus of activity on suicide prevention. Following directly from the government's response (E2) to the Harris Review, the numbers of suicides fell from 2016 to 2017 and this downward change in the numbers of suicides has been sustained (2018: 92 suicides, 2019: 84 suicides; E3). This impact was achieved in the following ways:

The Harris Review, the quantitative research for which was led by Professor Towl (E1) was published in July 2015 and the government's response to this research **informed a new programme of national training for frontline staff**. This training programme was shaped not only by the report itself but also through a meeting between Professor Towl and Chris Barnett-Page of the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the operational national lead with responsibility for reducing prisoner suicides.

The Safer Custody Group at HM Prisons Service HQ led on the design of the new programme informed by the research findings. The new prison officer training is 25% longer than previously and includes a focus on spotting factors which "*might indicate an increase in suicide risk*". (E2 p15) This training was rolled out throughout England and Wales over the second half of 2016 and into 2017. The new course was aimed primarily at new staff, but used as a refresher for those prison officers who had not attended recent training. More locally, Prof Towl himself organised and ran training at HMP Durham for prison officers and their managers, including the executive leadership team (E5).

The national and local training taught attendees to use the results of the research to perform research informed individual risk assessments allowing for an improved assessment of potential for suicide when used in their home institutions. Specifically, the training:

- Flagged the findings about **gender differences in the age-related risk of suicide** to raise awareness of the increased risk associated with young women [R2].
- Emphasised aspects of good practice in suicide prevention which should be continued and used more extensively in the **early days of custody** [R1] to reduce overall risk.
- Flagged the finding that **prisoners who are imprisoned for arson offences are at an increased risk** [R3].

In the year following the roll out of this training the suicide rate dropped from 122 deaths in 2016 to 70 in 2017, a decrease of 42% (E3). This was **the greatest reduction in absolute numbers of prisoner suicides ever recorded** (records began in 1978). Subsequent to this, in spite of our research showing turnover (i.e. prisoner movement) to increase risk due to relocation, there was a policy change to move prisoners more rapidly through the system increasing effective turnover. Despite this, the rates of suicide remained below the 2016 maximum, likely due to continued adherence to the other recommendations of the report.

The importance of Professor Towl's research in this success was noted by Mr Alan Tallentire, the Director of HM Prisons for Tees and Wear: "*I know that you led the quantitative research for the Harris Review – a report which has been hugely influential for HMPPS, and the research you led informed the design of the national training for prison staff that rolled out in late 2016 and 2017.*"(E4) Similarly, Professor Towl (along with the Chair of the Prisons and Offender Research Health team) wrote to the Chief Executive of HM Prison and Probation Service about practices identified in the quantitative research that were revealed to have the potential to contribute to a reduction in prisoner suicides. The response indicated that the ideas had been incorporated in informing national strategic policy on addressing suicide prevention (E6). For example, Mr Michael Spurr, CEO, HMPPS (dated June, 2017) wrote, "*many of your suggestions are reflected in the work that we are taking forward as part of the refreshed suicide and self-harm reduction strategy that is a key part of the prison safety and reform programme*".

As discussed above, subsequent to the highly successful ministerial and HMPPS dissemination and application of some of the key findings from the research, Professor Towl was approached to assist with staff training at HMP Durham. HMP Durham is a pilot 'allocations' prison which means that it has dangerously high levels of prisoner turnover rates, with many prisoners only staying for very short periods of time before being 'allocated' to other prisons. As noted our evidence is clear that such an environment will be associated with very high levels of suicide and indeed the policy of increasing transfers in 2018 had such an effect. In early 2020, Professor Towl therefore trained over 50 staff at the prison and is working with prison staff on using quality control approaches to improve individual support plans for those prisoners identified at being at a markedly inflated rate of risk of suicide. This has increased staff confidence in addressing this challenging area of prison work (E4, E5). Indeed the Prisons Group Director has recognised and favourably acknowledged the impact of this research dissemination: "*Your visits to the prison and engagement with staff and prisoners have been very supportive. In particular the staff training and support for the prison's leadership team is already making a tangible difference at HMP Durham. I remain grateful to you for helping us with ensuring that our work on suicide prevention is evidence informed drawing from the most comprehensive research to date*"(E4).

In sum, by sharpening our understanding of the factors associated with an increased risk of suicide, and through effective communication with both policy makers and prison staff, **this highly influential research has changed national policy on prison officer education which, in turn, saved the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in society across the UK.**

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Evidence item

E1. Letter from Chair of the Independent Advisory Panel on Deaths in Custody

E2. Government response to the Harris Review into self-inflicted deaths in National Offender Management Service custody of 18-24 year olds

E3 Government statistics into deaths in custody

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/safety-in-custody-statistics> accessed 29/8/20

E4 Letter from the Regional Director of HM Prisons Tees and Wear on the impact of the research on developing policy and practice at HMP Durham

E5 Letter of support from the Governor HMP Durham

E6 Letter from CEO HMPPS acknowledging that the research has informed national policy on suicide prevention.