

Improving Surveillance and Monitoring of Self-harm in Irish Prisons

Project Scope Document

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1 - Background to Project

The prison population is an extremely vulnerable one and is more likely to exhibit characteristics associated with self-harm than the general population. Self-harm in prison is not only a risk factor for prison suicide, it can be a major problem for the prison and impact on (staff and inmate) morale within the institution. In addition, risk factors for self-harm among those in custody will be different to those of the general population.

An essential component of suicide prevention in prisons is having a surveillance system in place to monitor the incidence of self-harm and suicide attempts. Such a system will provide robust information relating to the incidence and profile of self-harm within prison settings, identify individual- and context-specific risk factors relating to self-harm and examine patterns of repeat self-harm (both non-fatal and fatal). Such information can be used to inform the identification and management of those in custody, engaging in and at-risk of self-harm and to develop effective prevention initiatives.

As part of [Connecting for Life, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020](#) (CfL), the Irish Prison Service (IPS) has committed to, inter alia, reviewing, analysing and identifying learning for each episode of self-harm within the prison estate.

The NSRF have expertise in the development and maintenance of self-harm surveillance systems. Since 2002, the NSRF has operated the National Self-Harm Registry, a national system which records all presentations as a result of self-harm to Irish hospital emergency departments. The NSRF is also a WHO collaborating centre for surveillance and research in suicide prevention.

To this end, since the IPS has undertaken a programme of work to ensure the availability of more meaningful, robust data on self-harm to help inform policy and practice. There were a number of stages to this work including:

1. Conceptualising and defining self-harm

The prison environment is unique, and the reasons individuals in prison self-harm are wide and varied. There is not necessarily a relationship between “intent” and the “lethality” of the method used. Time was given to surfacing a shared understanding of self-harm within prisons, and an agreed upon definition was surfaced.

The IPS definition is: *Self-harm is (non-accidental) self-poisoning or self-injury, irrespective of the apparent purpose of the act.* This definition is in line with the NICE guidelines, and with the National Self-Harm Registry Ireland.

2. Development of a Suicide/Self-Harm Matrix

Tasked with developing a more robust process to review episodes of self-harm/suicide, a matrix was developed to enable easy analysis of the outcome of an incident. Using the matrix, all incidents of self-harm and suicide are graded according to the severity (rated along the continuum of care from the lowest level of care i.e. no treatment required to hospitalisation and ultimately loss of life). The intent scale is based on the *Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation* (ranging for no/low intent to high level of intent). In order to gain an understanding of the possible influencing/motivating factors of each incident, primary and secondary contributing factors are recorded under the following domains, environmental, relational, personal and mental health/medical. Demographic information relating to the individual is also recorded (e.g. gender, accommodation, legal status, length of sentence), as well as details relating to the self-harm act (e.g. method).

3. In line with best practice, the Suicide/Self-Harm Matrix is completed by a collaborative, multiagency and multidisciplinary team i.e. the Local Suicide & Self-Harm Prevention Group in each institution. These groups are chaired by the Governors and include representatives from the various services, including prison staff, psychology, primary health care, psychiatry and other relevant service providers involved with the person in custody.

4. Testing the Matrix

The Matrix evolved over time as it was tested across different institutions and edited/amended accordingly.

5. Reporting to the IPS National Suicide and Harm Prevention Steering Group.

2 - Project Aim and Purpose

The aim of the project is two-fold:

1. Firstly to collate, enter and analyse data from the IPS's Self-Harm/Suicide Surveillance & Monitoring System. The NSRF will lead out on this component of the project. A phased approach has been taken to the roll-out of the monitoring system, across Irish prisons. As of January 2017 all prison Suicide Prevention Groups are using the Matrix. Data for the year (2017) will be the subject of the analysis.
2. Secondly, to undertake a case-study to understand and document the design and implementation of the Self-Harm/Suicide Surveillance and Monitoring system. NOSP will lead out on this component of the project.

3 - Project Deliverables

- **Interim and summary reports:** Analysis of the Self-Harm/Suicide Surveillance & Monitoring System will be disseminated in two formats. Two Interim reports will be produced, in September 2017 and March 2018. Finalised data for 2017 will be published in a summary report (June 2018).
- **In-depth Analysis:** The summary report will include the following themes:
 - Analysis of self-harm acts by prison
 - Profile of those persons in custody who engage in self-harm
 - Identification of risk factors associated with self-harm in prisons
 - Identify short-term trends
 - Recommendations re: strengthening the data collection system.
- A **case study analysis** of the design and implementation of the surveillance & monitoring system (for inclusion in Connecting for Life's – mid-term Evaluation Report June 2018).
- In addition publication of findings via a **peer-reviewed article** will be explored.

4 - Benefits Identification

- For the most part, IPS has had to rely on (often contradictory) UK and US research as an empirical base from which to develop policies and practices regarding the management of self-harm in prison. The cultural differences between how people work, operate and live in prisons are enormous. This project **will provide usable actionable data for the IPS and individual prisons** to inform and drive change in practice.
 - It will facilitate comparisons across prisons; highlighting where there may be problems, and/or providing evidence of where there are no problems.
- The project will help ensure that all key stakeholders are aware of how the IPS are reporting and managing self-harm and suicide prevention within prisons; and how they are **using evidence to drive policy and practice.**
- The project will **strengthen and support a culture of collaborative working** within and across the prison system. A thorough analysis will show that data are collected for a purpose, and will help all relevant stakeholders understand the benefits of and need to share relevant (health) information, in the best interest of the individual.
- The project will **help build the evaluation capacity of the IPS** and help facilitate data drive decision-making.
- The project will also **build support for research within the prison system.**
- The project will **enable NOSP to monitor and publish trends in suicide and self-harm rates amongst prisoners in Ireland**, who are listed as a priority group within Cfl.