

Suicide in French prisons: trend, level and risk factors

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Short abstract

The frequency of suicide has long been used as an indicator of tensions and problems in society. In French prisons, the number of suicides has increased rapidly over the last fifty years and the rate is currently 5 to 6 times higher than that of the non-imprisoned male population aged 15-59. In the beginning of the 2000s, the prison suicide rate in France is even the highest recorded in the EU-15 countries. Many factors are associated with suicide in prison, such as the role of concomitant events relating to the family (marital breakdown, loss of contact with children) or the prison environment. The individual characteristics of the detainee must also be taken into account (age, sex, family situation) and last, those of society (suicide rates in the general population, degree of social condemnation of the offence committed, management of mental health problems). The causes of suicide are thus multiple, stemming from an accumulation of negative social factors and of psychological tensions. After a methodological part devoted to measurement issue of the suicide rate and comparison with general population and other European countries, we analyse data from a study of the entire French prison population over the last three years taking account of social and demographic characteristics, judicial proceeding (gravity of offence, detention status) and prison regime (conditions of imprisonment, type of prison establishment). This analysis aims to identify risk factors of suicide in prison in France.

Extended abstract

Suicide in prison in France: situation and measurement issue

Trends and levels of suicide in prison in France

The prison suicide rate has been increasing in metropolitan France over the last 50 years, rising from 4 per 10,000 prisoners in 1960 to 19 in 2008 (Figure 1a). Several peaks were recorded in the mid-1970s and the late 1990s, and the highest level was reached in 1996 with 26 suicides per 10,000 prisoners. After a decrease in recent years, 2008 was marked by a new upturn. This pattern can be compared with that of suicides of men aged 15-59 in the general population (Figure 1b), since 93% of the prison population are men aged under 60. For men in the general population, the suicide rate is much lower and more stable, although it rose at the end of the post-war boom decades. The uptrend in prison suicides is not reflected in society as a whole and appears to be specific to the prison population.

The suicide rate of a population is influenced by its age-sex composition: in general, men commit suicide more than women and the frequency of suicide increases with age. The sex composition of the French population has barely changed since 1960. It comprises practically equal numbers of men and women, but the average age has increased. Limiting the general population to men aged 15-59 improves comparability with the prison population. In prison,

the proportion of women remains small (below 4%) and has been stable since 1960, but notably due to longer duration of sentence, the mean age of prisoners has risen from 30 to 35 years.

After computing all available historical data for population in prison, a standardized suicide rate will be proposed in this paper for a better comparison over time of the prisoners and general population.

European comparison

With an annual rate of 20 suicides per 10,000 prisoners in 2002-2006, France has the highest prison suicide rate in EU-15, well ahead of Denmark (13 per 10,000). The lowest rate is recorded in Greece (4 per 10,000) (Figure 2). European comparisons are difficult, however, because suicide is defined differently from one country to another, and prison populations are not strictly comparable.

In France, the suicides counted by the penal administration include all deaths of prisoners, either in detention (in prison under the responsibility of the penal administration) or not (registered as a prisoner but not in a prison at the time of death). Certain countries do not count suicides that occur outside prison, nor even those where the prisoner dies in hospital. This difference limits the utility of European comparisons. For the year 2005, for example, only five countries in EU-15 – Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Sweden – had a definition similar to that of France (Council of Europe, 2006).

The suicide rates are obtained by relating the number of suicides in the year to the mean population of registered prisoners over the same period, representing the prison population on any particular day of that year. However, this average only imperfectly reflects the number of persons who entered prison at least once over the year. The many prisoners who spend a short time in prison – from a few weeks to a few months – may be left out of the count. One way of including them is to calculate the annual number of entries, i.e. the number of individuals registered as a prisoner at least once in the year, whatever their period of detention. Persons who enter prison several times in the year are thus counted several times. At the European level, the comparison of suicide rates between countries is improved by taking account of the number of entries (Aubusson de Cavarlay, 2009). Rates decrease everywhere when they are calculated in relation to the number of entries, and the country rankings also change. With a rate close to that of Portugal, France nonetheless maintains a very high ranking (Duthé *et al.*, 2009).

Suicide in prison in France: risk factors (in progress)

Many factors are associated with suicide in prison, such as the role of concomitant events relating to the family (marital breakdown, loss of contact with children) or the prison environment (Bourgoin, 1993). The individual characteristics of the detainee must also be taken into account (age, sex, family situation) and last, those of society (suicide rates in the general population, degree of social condemnation of the offence committed, management of mental health problems). The causes of suicide are thus multiple, stemming from an accumulation of negative social factors and of psychological tensions. In-depth statistical studies are needed to capture simultaneously all dimensions of suicide in prison.

Data analysis

A compilation of data from the entire French prison population over the last three years has been done. Database is in construction for multivariate analysis. Unfortunately, information on health of prisoners are not available, but many characteristics will be considered such as

demographic ones (age, sex, marital status, nationality, literacy...), judicial proceeding (gravity of offence, detention status, prison sentence), and prison regime (conditions of imprisonment, type of prison establishment).

Some expected results

- Demographic characteristics

- Prison regime

The conditions of imprisonment are often blamed for this situation. Although inadequate living space and overcrowding are contrary to human dignity, they are not the only factors involved: half of all prisoners who commit suicide are alone in their cell. Indeed, being in a one-man cell is even considered by some as an important suicide risk factor (Fazel *et al.*, 2008). Further analysis is needed, however, by type of prison establishment. In long-term prisons, for example practically all inmates live in individual cells. In these establishments, the prisoners' propensity to commit suicide and their characteristics (detention status, length of imprisonment, type of offence) are very different.

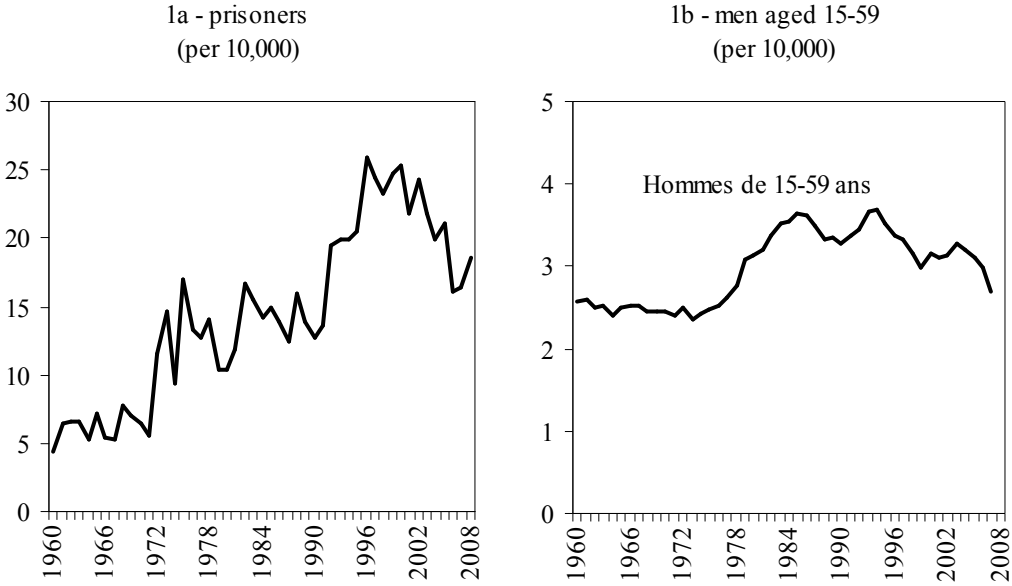
- Judicial proceeding

In France, most suicides occur in the first weeks or months of imprisonment. A quarter of suicides take place within two months, and half within six months, for a mean period in detention of 8 months over the period 1998-2008. And among prisoners, pre-trial detainees – more recently imprisoned and still awaiting trial – commit suicide twice as often as sentenced prisoners. These higher suicide rates remain relatively stable over time (Figure 3), though pre-trial detainees are generally younger than sentenced prisoners (33 years versus 35 years in 1999-2008) and include slightly more women (5% versus 3%). Their more frequent suicide may be due to the psychological shock of imprisonment, the difficulty of facing up to the ensuing moral and legal judgements, or it may reflect a selection effect: given that “vulnerable” prisoners commit suicide early on, only the “stronger” ones remain.

The shock of imprisonment may be linked to various factors: the strain of adapting to a highly constrained environment, notably the deprivation of freedom; the difficulty of facing up to public disclosure of one's acts, not only before a judge, but also before the family and the rest of society; ostracism from other prisoners for certain types of offence.

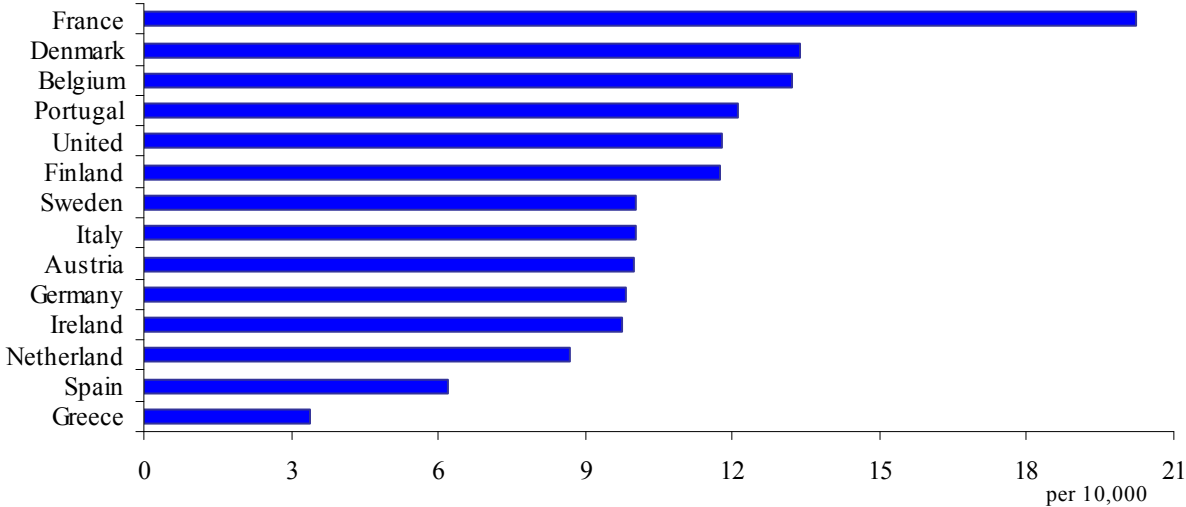
In fact, the suicide rate increases with the gravity of the offence. For the period 2006-2008, 37 suicides per 10,000 prisoners were recorded for persons accused or convicted of murder (Figure 4); 20 among men in prison for rape; half as many among those detained for assault (11) and sexual molestation (10), and much lower rates for other types of offence. These rates are calculated as the ratio of the number of suicides to the number of persons registered as prisoners over the period, to take account of the very uneven flow of detainees by type of offence.

Figure 1 - Crude suicide rates among prisoners and among men aged 15-59 in the general population since 1960



Sources: French Prison Administration and INED.

Figure 2 - Prison suicide rate in EU-15⁽¹⁾, mean 2002-2006⁽²⁾

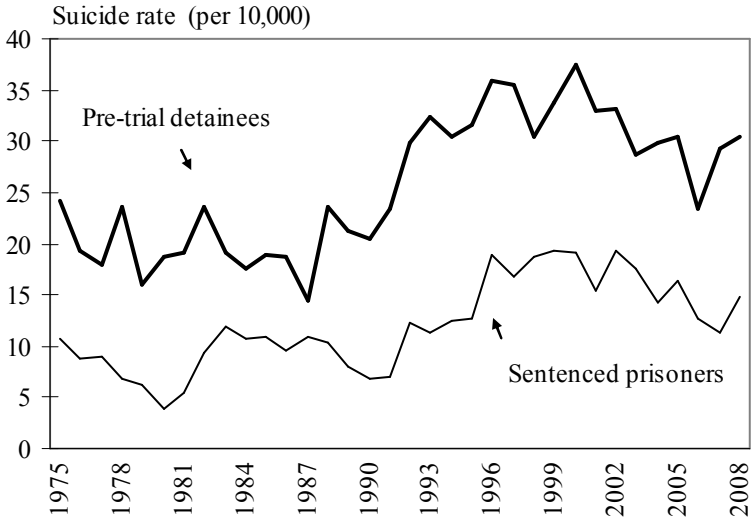


(1) Luxembourg is excluded. Its suicide rate is very high but fluctuates strongly over time, partly because of the small numbers involved.

(2) The average is valid for only part of the period in a few countries, as information is missing for certain years: Austria (2003 and 2004), Belgium (2003), Greece (2003 and 2006), Ireland (2003 to 2005) and Portugal (2003).

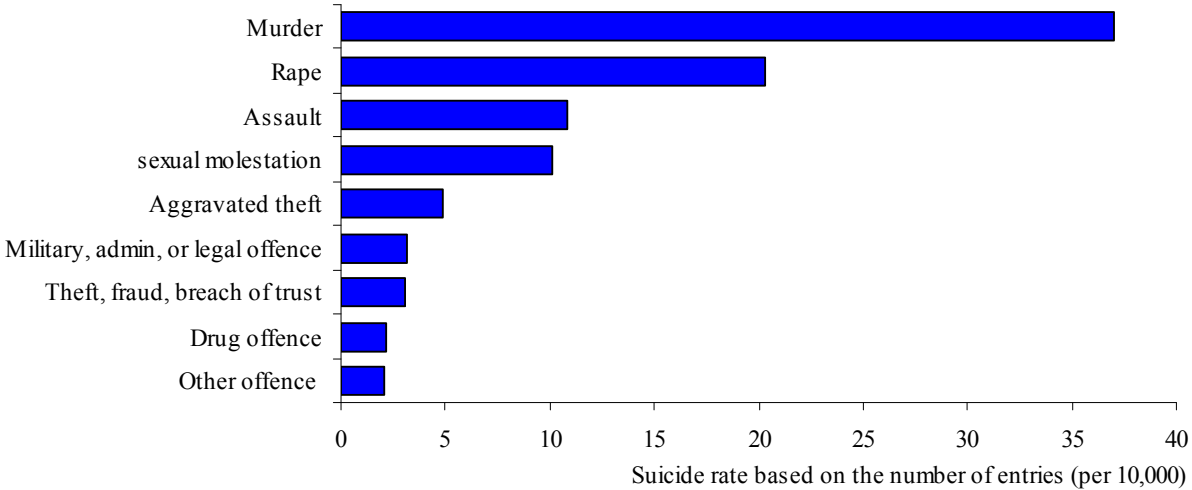
Sources: Council of Europe, 2003-2007.

Figure 3 - Suicide rates of pre-trial detainees and sentenced prisoners since 1975



Source: French Prison Administration

Figure 4 - Suicide rate by type of offence, 2006-2008



Source: French Prison Administration

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