

No. 126

Suicide in Prison 1980 to 1998: National Overview

Vicki Dalton

There have been 367 suicides in Australian prisons since 1980. Examination of the data collected by the Australian Institute of Criminology confirms that suicide is the leading cause of death in Australia's correctional institutions, accounting for almost half of all deaths in prisons. In more than 90 per cent of all suicide deaths the method employed was found to be hanging.

This paper contains preliminary analysis of suicide in Australia's prisons over the past 19 years. Further detailed analysis will expand on some of these findings, specifically attempting to explain the complexities of apparent motives leading to prisoner suicide. Policies and procedures in place for the identification and management of inmates perceived to be "at risk" of suicide and/or self-harm is also a critical issue for further examination.

Two additional reports by Vicki Dalton will follow later in 1999. One will examine Aboriginal suicide in prison, and the other will be a more comprehensive report in the AIC's Research and Public Policy series. This latter report will update and draw together broad data holdings, and in addition will provide further detailed analysis.

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This report is based on 19 years' data from the Australian Institute of Criminology's (AIC) data base (which incorporates data collected by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody). The National Deaths in Custody data base currently includes a total of 1262 cases; 787 in prison custody, 461 in police custody or custody-related police operations and 14 in juvenile detention. Of the 787 prison deaths, 367 were as a result of suicide. A detailed breakdown of these suicides in prison is the focus of this report.

- During the period 1980–98 a total of 787 people died in prison custody in Australia; 367 (or 46.6 per cent) of these deaths were as a result of suicide. The number and rate of these deaths, and suicides specifically, varied between Australia's eight States and Territories, with all jurisdictions reporting suicides during the 19-year period.
- The annual number of deaths from all causes, and those resulting from suicide, increased over the 19-year period. The increase in both these totals was greater than can be explained by an increase in the population at risk—the number of prisoners in custody.
- Nationally, over the last 19 years, Australia's average daily prison population has increased by 94 per cent (from a daily average of 9746 prisoners in 1980 to an average of 18,923 in 1998).
- The number of prison deaths fluctuated over the period, from as few as 17 deaths in 1986 to a maximum of 75 in 1997. For the

Table 1: Australian Prison Deaths and Suicides by Year, 1980–98

Year	Prison Deaths		Prison Suicides		Suicides as a Percentage of Total Deaths
	No.	Rate per 100,000	No.	Rate per 100,000	
1980	30	307.8	10	102.6	33.3
1981	28	287.0	15	153.8	53.6
1982	25	256.5	8	82.1	32.0
1983	31	310.0	17	170.0	54.8
1984	31	319.3	17	175.1	54.8
1985	26	247.5	11	104.7	42.3
1986	17	153.4	7	63.2	41.2
1987	53	456.3	23	198.0	43.4
1988	42	358.7	18	153.7	42.9
1989	40	326.6	22	179.6	55.0
1990	33	248.5	18	135.5	54.5
1991	39	278.0	17	121.2	43.6
1992	36	252.8	20	140.4	55.6
1993	49	335.9	23	157.7	46.9
1994	53	344.9	22	143.2	41.5
1995	59	371.9	28	176.5	47.5
1996	52	312.5	23	138.2	44.2
1997	75	424.7	34	192.5	45.3
1998	68	359.4	34	179.7	50.0
Annual Average	41.4	313.3	19.3	145.7	46.6
Total	787		367		46.6

Definition of Suicide and Self-inflicted Death

For the purposes of this study, and all reports from the AIC’s National Deaths in Custody Monitoring and Research Program, a suicide or self-inflicted death will fall into one of the following four categories:

1. Self-inflicted—intentional;
2. Self-inflicted—not intentional;
3. Self-inflicted—intention not stated or unable to be determined by Coroner;
4. Accidental hanging—where the Coroner has found the self-inflicted hanging death to be accidental or through misadventure.

The Incidence of Prison Death and Suicide

19-year period, however, there was a 127 per cent increase in the total number of deaths (from 30 in 1980 to 68 in 1998).

- The pattern for suicide deaths specifically was more pronounced, with a 240 per cent increase in the number of suicides from 1980 (n = 10) to the highest figures recorded in both 1997 and 1998 (n = 34).

- Any comparison between suicide rates in prison and in the general population should be treated with caution. However, it is estimated that the rate of suicide in the community increased by approximately 38.5 per cent, while the suicide death rate in prison increased by approximately 75 per cent, over the entire period.

Table 1 and Figure 1 display the upward trend in the total incidence of death and deaths resulting from suicide over the 19-year period 1980–98.

- The average annual number of deaths over the 19-year period was 41.4; the peak was 75 deaths in 1997.
- Suicide deaths have risen from 10 to 34 per annum; the average annual number of

Figure 1: Australia 1980–98, Prison Deaths and Suicides (Number)

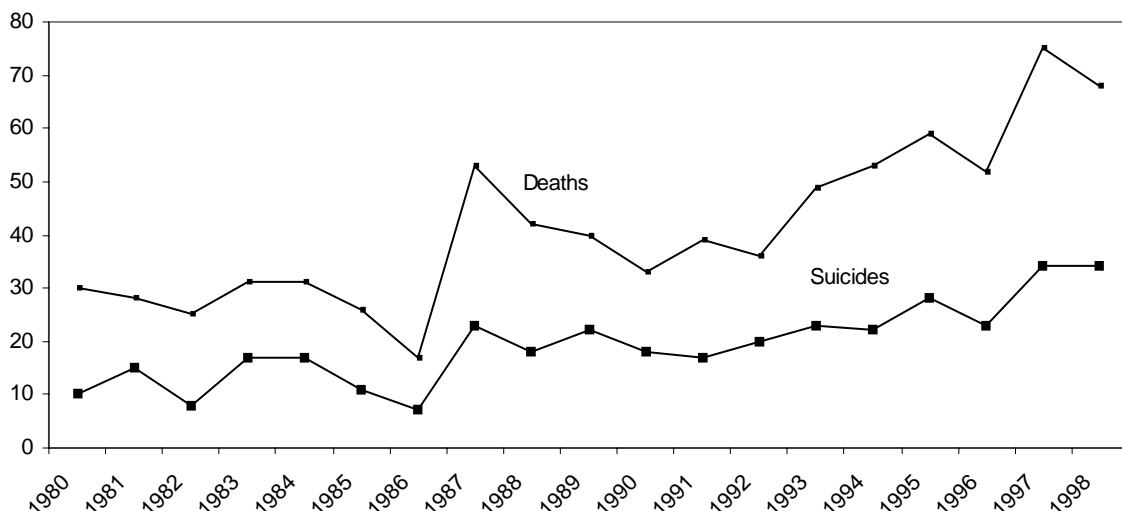


Figure 2: Australia 1980–98, Prison Deaths and Suicides (Rate per 100,00 Prison Population)

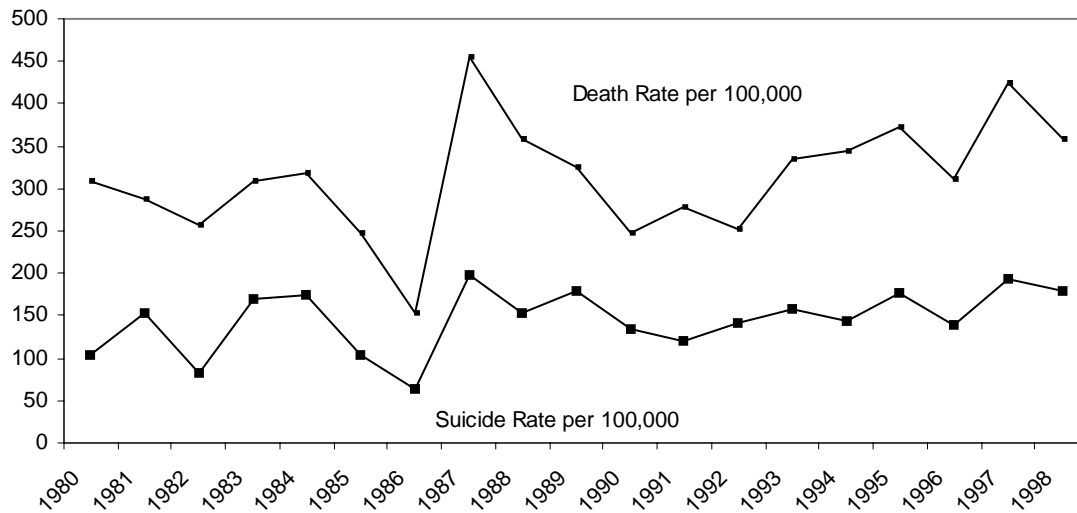
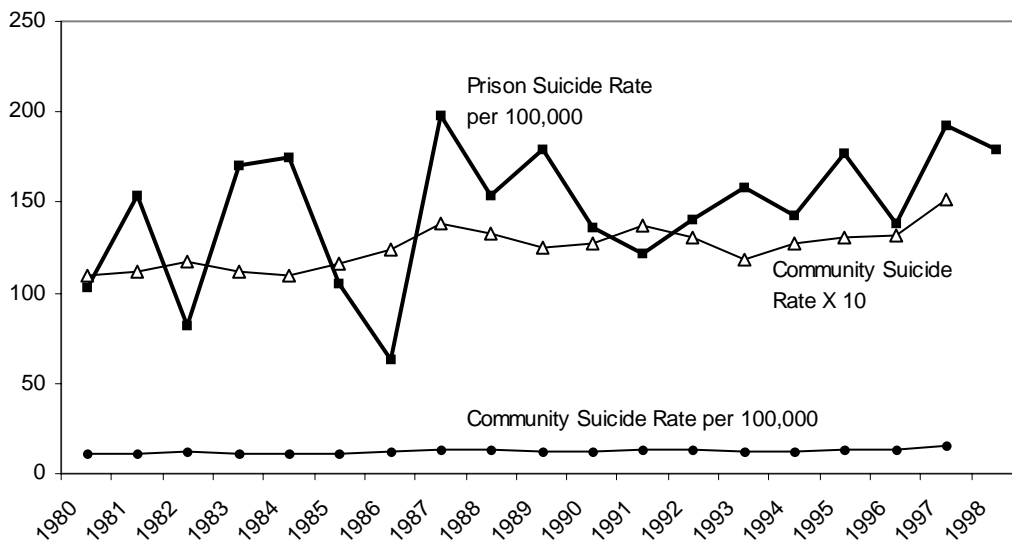


Figure 3: Australia 1980–98, Suicide in Prison and in the Community (Rates per 100,00 Prison and Community Populations)



suicide deaths over the 19-year period was 19.3.

- Attention is drawn towards two years in particular—1987 and 1997. In the 12 months immediately preceding both these years the number of both deaths and suicides fell dramatically, only to rise even more dramatically in both 1987 and 1997.
- During 1998 the overall number of prison deaths did fall, however the number of suicide deaths remained constant.

Rates of Prison Death and Suicide

Table 1 and Figure 2 display information on the rates of deaths, and suicides specifically, for the 19-year period 1980 to 1998. These calculations are based on the daily average prisoner populations for each year of the entire period (ABS 1999). While there has been considerable debate on the issue of the most appropriate way to calculate prison death rates (McArthur, Camilleri & Webb 1999), the rates calculated in this report will be based on daily average prisoner populations.

- The annual average rate of death over the 19-year

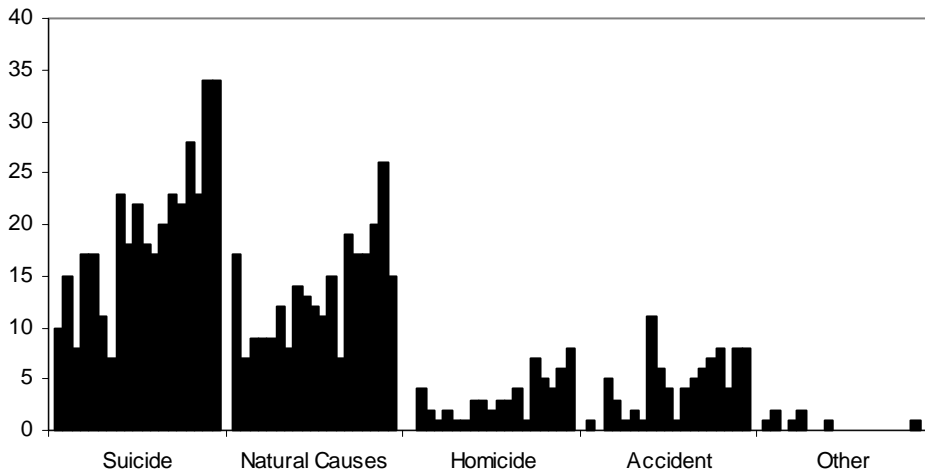
period was 313.3 per 100,000 prisoners per year.

- The annual average rate of death by suicide was 145.7 per 100,000 prisoners per year.
- The suicide death rate ranged from 102.6 per 100,000 prisoners in 1980 to 179.7 per 100,000 prisoners in 1998. The lowest suicide rate was observed in 1986 (63.2), the highest in 1987 (198.0), and the second highest in 1997 (192.5).

Suicide in the Community

Do people in prison die at a significantly greater rate than

Figure 4: Deaths in Prison Custody 1980–98, Manner of Death by Year



those in the community? It has been well documented that any comparison of rates between suicides in prison and those in the community should be treated with caution. Two of the main reasons are firstly, the often small number of cases, and secondly, the method employed for calculating the rates (e.g. receptions, daily averages and average time served in custody). Bearing in mind these limitations, Figure 3 provides an approximate representation of the comparative rates. It must be emphasised that these calculations are based on daily average prisoner population.

The rate of suicide among young males in the general population has been increasing over the last 25 years and we are now faced with the reality that suicide has taken over as the leading cause of death for males in the 15–19 year age group (Hassan 1996). Analysis of suicide trends in the community has also highlighted the high suicide rates

for citizens aged 75 years and older (Hassan 1996). By contrast, female suicide rates have been declining over the last 25 years, the exception here being for females in the 15–19 year age group.

The figures for rates of death from suicide in the community are based on data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1998). The results of these calculations are presented graphically in Figure 3.

- Between 1980 and 1997 (the latest data available) the suicide rate in the community rose 38.5 per cent, from 10.9 deaths per 100,000 to 15.1 deaths per 100,000.
- The suicide rate in prison fluctuated more noticeably over the period, from 102.6 per 100,000 prisoners in 1980 to 179.7 per 100,000 in 1998, an increase of approximately 75% per cent.

Manner and Causes of Prison Deaths

Table 2 displays the causes of all deaths in prison custody during the period under review.

- Suicide represents over 46 per cent of all prison deaths, followed by death from natural causes (nearly 33 per cent), accidental deaths (e.g. drugs) (nearly 11 per cent) and homicide (nearly 8 per cent).

Figure 4 presents trend information on the number of deaths for each discrete category of death over the period, on a year-by-year basis.

- The number of suicides peaked in the last two years (34 deaths in both 1997 and 1998). Deaths from natural causes, on the other hand, peaked during 1997 (n = 26). More homicide deaths occurred during 1998 (n = 8). Accidental deaths (primarily

Table 2: Deaths in Prison Custody 1980–98, Manner of Death

Manner	Total	%
Suicide/Self-inflicted	367	46.6
Natural Causes	257	32.7
Homicide	60	7.6
Accident (e.g. drugs)	85	10.8
Other	8	1.0
Not Known	10	1.3
Total	787	100.0

Table 3: Prison Suicide: 1 January 1980 to 31 December 1998 by Method

Method	No.	%
Hanging	332	93.8
Self-inflicted stabbing/ slashing/wounds	6	1.7
Suffocation (e.g. plastic bag)	5	1.4
Drugs	7	2.0
Other/Multiple	4	1.1
Missing	13	n/a
Total	367	100.0

Figure 5: Australia 1980–98, Prison Suicides as a Percentage of Total Prison Deaths

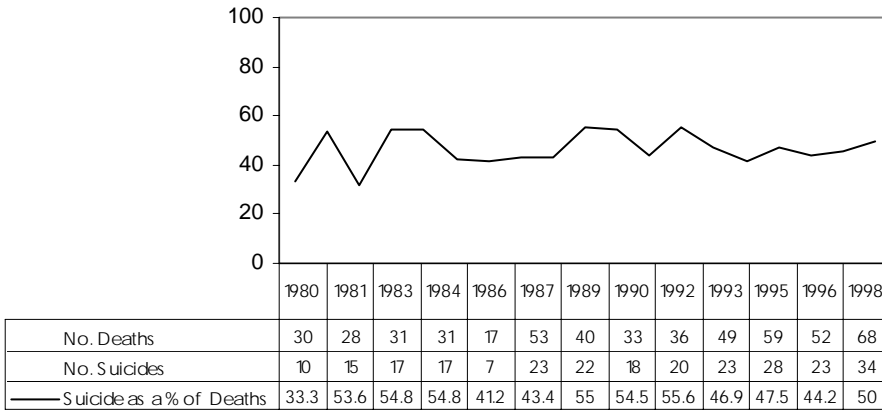
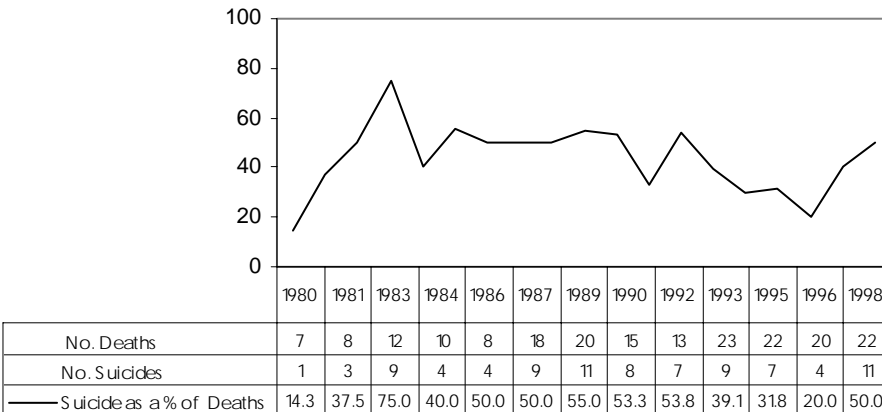
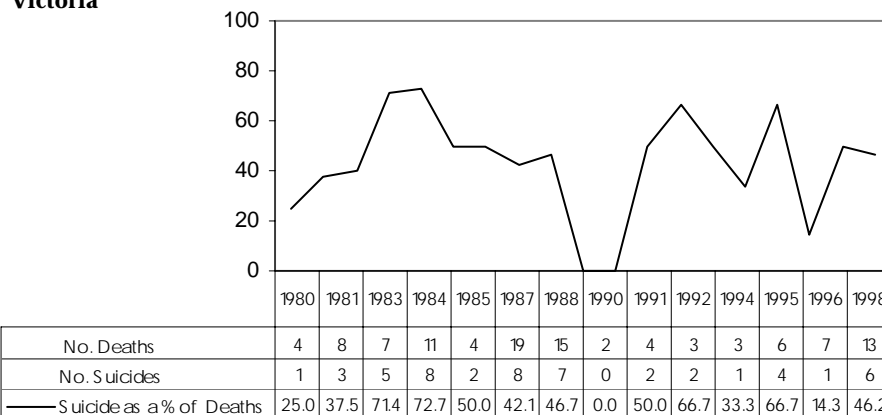


Figure 6: Australia 1980–98, Prison Suicides as a Percentage of Total Prison Deaths, by Jurisdiction

New South Wales



Victoria



Tasmania

	1980	1981	1983	1984	1985	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998
No. Deaths	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
No. Suicides	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	2	0	1	1
Suicide as a % of Deaths	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	50.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	100.0	100.0

Northern Territory

	1980	1981	1983	1984	1985	1986	1988	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1998
No. Deaths	1	0	0	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0
No. Suicides	1	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Suicide as a % of Deaths	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

drug-related) have remained fairly constant in recent years.

Table 3 provides information on the method employed by those 367 inmates who died as a result of suicide. It can be seen that in more than 93 per cent of cases, the cause of death was by hanging.

The Incidence of Prison Suicide: National Overview and State Comparisons

Table 1 displays information on the total number of deaths and suicides occurring in Australian prisons, on a year-by-year basis, for the entire 19-year period. Death and suicide rates have also been calculated for each year. Suicide deaths as a proportion of total deaths for each year are shown in the final column and displayed graphically at Figure 5. Figure 6 displays information on a State-by-State basis.

- With the exception of 1980 and 1982, the proportion of suicide deaths occurring each year has remained relatively constant. In 1998 the proportion of all deaths resulting from suicide was 50 per cent, slightly higher than the 19-year average of 46.6 per cent.

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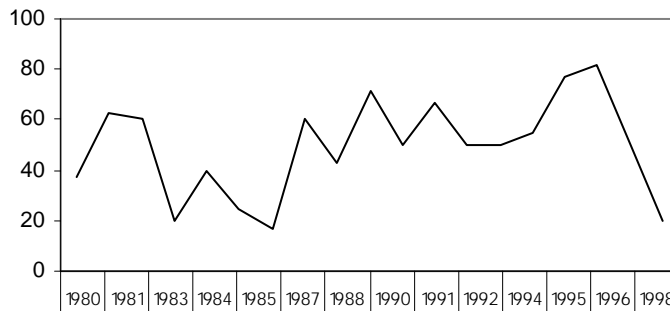
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Figure 6 cont.: Australia 1980–98, Prison Suicides as a Percentage of Total Prison Deaths, by Jurisdiction

Queensland



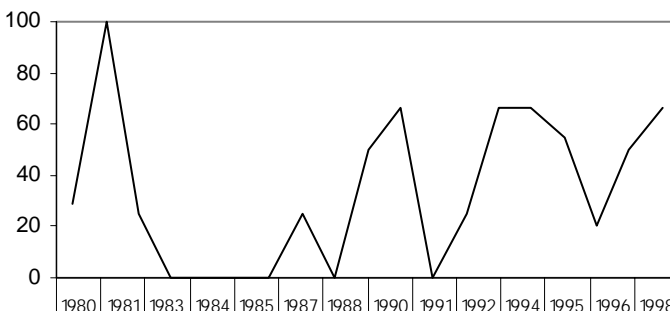
Total No. Deaths	8	8	5	5	8	5	7	8	6	10	11	13	11	15
No. Suicides	3	5	1	2	2	3	3	4	4	5	6	10	9	3
— Suicide as a % of Deaths	37.5	62.5	20.0	40.0	25.0	60.0	42.9	50.0	66.7	50.0	54.5	76.9	81.8	20.0

Western Australia



No. Deaths	3	2	5	5	1	4	5	3	8	3	6	5	6	13
No. Suicides	2	2	2	3	0	0	2	2	4	3	3	1	6	10
— Suicide as a % of Deaths	66.7	100.0	40.0	60.0	0.0	0.0	40.0	66.7	50.0	100.0	50.0	20.0	100.0	76.9

South Australia



No. Deaths	7	2	2	0	2	4	1	3	4	4	3	11	5	3
No. Suicides	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	6	1	2
— Suicide as a % of Deaths	28.6	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	25.0	0.0	66.7	0.0	25.0	66.7	54.5	20.0	66.7

Australian Capital Territory

There have been 3 deaths, 2 of these suicides, in the ACT's Belconnen Remand Centre. These deaths occurred in 1987, 1996 and 1998.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to acknowledge, with thanks, the assistance provided by Mr Lance Smith in compiling the data.

Demographic Findings from Prison Suicide Deaths

Vicki Dalton's forthcoming report *Suicide in Australia's Prisons* will explore in detail some of the demographic findings resulting from this preliminary analysis, specifically in relation to the following variables:

Gender: 96.5 per cent of those who suicided in prison were males;

Aboriginality: 14.4 per cent were Indigenous;

Mean age: 29 years at time of suicide;

17–19 year olds: 80 per cent of deaths for this age group from suicide;

Day of week: Sunday more likely;

Month of year: January and November higher numbers;

Time discovered: Fairly evenly spread over 24-hour period;

Location: 85 per cent in cell;

Offence: 20 per cent sentenced for homicide, 14.8 per cent for assault;

Legal status: 48 per cent were on remand.

Analysis of other variables, for example the length of time spent in custody before suicide, and the length of sentence imposed, will also help to provide a more complete picture of the inmate most at risk of suicide.

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