

# How to help offenders on probation who are at high risk of suicide

September 8 2017, by Jay-Marie Mackenzie

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An [estimated 800,000 people](#) die by suicide around the world each year, according to the World Health Organisation. This translates to about one person every 40 seconds, and every year on September 10 [World Suicide Prevention Day](#) aims to raise awareness and prevent more loss of life.

In the UK, there has been a particular focus on suicides of people serving time in [prison](#). Figures from the Ministry of Justice showed [119 people died by suicide](#) in prison in England and Wales in 2016 – a record number.

Yet [offenders](#) serving probation sentences often fall under the radar. These people may have been sentenced directly to a community sentence, or have spent some time in prison before being released under the supervision of probation [staff](#). Probationers [have been found](#) to be nine times more likely to die by [suicide](#) than the general population, with 14% of the total deaths of probationers in 2009 due to suicide. In 2012, the Howard League of Penal Reform released a [report](#) highlighting this problem.

Statistics for the number of suicides by those on probation in different areas of the country are available but are not published nationally, making them less publicised. For example, between 2010 and 2013 [there were](#) 28 self-inflicted deaths by those serving probation sentences in London.

Probation staff supervise a range of offenders, including those deemed a

high risk of re-offending and who have just been released from prison back into the community, as well as offenders deemed low to medium risk, who may have been sentenced for a crime such as a driving offence or breach of public peace.

Research [within prisons](#) shows that high-risk offenders are the most at risk of suicide. However, [recent research](#) my colleagues and I published, suggests the opposite – that it is the lower-risk offenders who are most at risk. This may be because these individuals are not observed as often their counterparts in prison, who are checked and monitored by prison staff and because they have easier access to methods of suicide.

## **Someone to listen**

Our research [included](#) interviews with probationers who made suicide attempts while on probation, and with staff that supervised clients who carried out suicidal behaviours or took their own life. We suggest that simple yet effective steps can be taken to support those serving probation sentences who are feeling suicidal or experiencing suicidal thoughts.

We found probationers often want someone to listen to them in a non-judgemental way when they are feeling suicidal. The question is how to tailor support for hard-to-reach groups such as probationers, who often find it difficult to trust others, especially those in authority.

But our interviews did suggest that when trust could be gained between probation staff and probationers, offenders were able to talk about their suicidal feelings and get the support they needed. We found staff who had suicide prevention training reported feeling more confident in talking to their clients about suicide.

## Greater support

Partnerships between charities and local probation offices and hostels can also help, particularly if offenders are given information about these charities and can make contact themselves. The National Probation Service (NPS) London provides its clients with information about the Samaritans charity when probationers arrive in one of its hostels, and NPS Essex has a partnership between one of its hostels and the local Samaritans branch.

Our research [also identified](#) key stages of the probation process when individuals might be at an increased risk of suicide, such as if they were about to be recalled to prison because of a breach of probation conditions or had reached the end of their probation sentence. During these stages probation staff should be more vigilant of their client's risk and consider how to explore any feelings their client might be having about their sentence.

Staff – [who we often found lack confidence](#) in dealing with suicidal offenders – need more consistent suicide prevention training. By talking with more confidence to probationers about their feelings, staff could point them to external sources of support that may help during the stages of their probation process when they may be at a heightened risk of suicide.

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