

More women commit suicide and self-harm in prison than men

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Dr Tammi Walker. Credit: University of Huddersfield

Female prisoners - often anguished at being parted from their children - are more likely to commit acts of self-harm than their male counterparts. A University of Huddersfield researcher has been researching the issue

for more than a decade and is now co-author of an award-winning book that sets out strategies to tackle the problem.

Dr Tammi Walker, who has joined the University as Reader in Forensic Psychology, wrote [Preventing Self-Injury and Suicide in Women's Prisons](#) alongside her collaborator Professor Graham Towl, of Durham University. In the latest British Psychological Society Book Awards, it has been named as winner of the Practitioner Text category 2017.

A reviewer describes it as "fascinating, easy to read and carefully structured, making it accessible to psychological practitioners at every stage of training".

Women prisoners - who make up five per cent of the English and Welsh jail population - engage in self harm at proportionately higher rates than men, who are more prone to suicide.

"Some people would argue that they are on the same continuum. But not everybody who self-harms wants to die," says Dr Walker. "A lot of women in prison engage in it as a method of coping with being in there and separated from their children, because normally they are the main carer.

"The [self-harm](#) could be a form of self-punishment, or might be a way of dealing with your emotions, or cleansing yourself. It's very complex."

[Preventing Self-Injury and Suicide in Women's Prisons](#) is designed to give an overview of good practice and intervention strategies, said Dr Walker.

"We try and identify a range of preventions - strategies from the research that they can draw on. It might require staff training on how to communicate with the women and get them to talk about their feelings.

Or it might be a question of giving women something to do, to stop them dwelling on things, particularly when they are behind cell doors late at night."

Financial cutbacks, meaning fewer officers, have resulted in prisoners spending longer periods locked in their cells. Also, fewer psychologists are employed in prisons.

Dr Walker praises the vision shown by certain prisons - such as New Hall, near Huddersfield, which is to engage a trauma-informed psychologist - but she criticises the lack of a national strategy to address the issue of self-harm and suicide among prisoners.

Although male prisoners are more prone to suicide, in 2016 there were 22 deaths in women's prisons in England and Wales - the highest number of female prison deaths since 1990. Psychological intervention could reverse the trend. "There might be the occasional [suicide](#) who hasn't first self-harmed, but self-harm is normally a predictor," said Dr Walker.

In addition to her psychology degrees and qualifications, including a University of Huddersfield doctorate on women who self-harm, Dr Walker is also a qualified mental health nurse who worked with male sex offenders at HMP Wakefield before switching to academic research and lecturing.

She is now developing new Master's programmes in [forensic psychology](#) and secure mental health, supervises PhD students and teaches on the Psychology with Criminology degree course at Huddersfield.

She continues to research psychological interventions for [women](#) in [prison](#), but also plans to examine issues around male prisoners who self-harm.

Provided by University of Huddersfield

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