

Researcher investigating high suicide rates of Massachusetts correction officers

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Credit: Northeastern University

Massachusetts correction officers die by suicide at a alarmingly high rate, and the state Department of Correction is concerned. It's gotten to be such a big problem, it has drawn the attention of lawmakers,

compelling the state legislature to form a commission to study the phenomenon.

It also has captured the attention of Natasha Frost, a criminology and criminal justice professor in Northeastern's College of Social Sciences and Humanities, and her research partner, Carlos Monteiro, a Northeastern alumnus who studied criminology and criminal justice policy and now works as an assistant professor at Suffolk University. They are in the midst of a four-year probe into the well-being of officers at the Massachusetts Department of Correction. Frost said it is one of the first-ever studies on [suicide](#) among correctional officers.

"There's clearly growing evidence that people that work in prisons do suffer the effects from working in those environments," said Frost.

The issue gained national attention in 2015, when Fox News broke several stories about the disproportionately high suicide rate among Massachusetts' correctional officers. The subject returned to the fore in 2017 with the high profile suicide of professional football player Aaron Hernandez, though he was an inmate and not a correctional officer.

By that point, Frost and her colleague had already started looking into the source of stress for prison officers and examining the lives of the 19 officers that died by suicide between 2010 and 2015 as well as the impact of their suicide on their family members.

"It's a very high number," Frost said. "Certain professions have higher rates of suicide, but even for the corrective service, the Massachusetts rate at the moment is elevated."

Building on their work, the researchers continue to visit the state's 16 prisons daily to interview officers. Because their project is ongoing and likely won't be completed until the end of next year, the researchers have

been careful not to draw any conclusions yet. But what they've found so far is that the officers who died by suicide were struggling in other areas of their life, not just at work.

Frost and Monteiro are not focusing so much on the why behind officer suicides as much as they are in identifying any tell-tale signs of struggle at work and in their personal lives.

"Our goal is not to say what causes the suicides because that's difficult to say with any degree of certainty," she said. "We're really trying to predict [suicidal ideation](#); things that may be predictive of suicide or suicidal thoughts."

Because this particular area of research is still fairly new, Frost said she'd like to expand her work beyond the borders of Massachusetts to explore how officers in other parts of the country are faring.

In recognition of their [work](#), the Department of Correction recently honored Frost and Monteiro with its Innovations in Public Safety Partnership Award, bestowed to any individual or entity that has made an impact on public safety through efforts that support the department's mission.

The recognition was meaningful for Frost, who has spent her entire career studying the effects of incarceration on individuals, families, communities, and now officers.

Her initial foray into this field was an investigation of whether incarceration prevents or contributes to crime. She said her research suggests that prisons are "problematic" to society in many ways, pointing to their cost and effectiveness imbalance.

"We currently have two million people in prison or jail," she said.

"That's more than anywhere in the world. We would never let any other institution continue to be funded at high levels with such low effectiveness."

Frost said she supports reforms that are less costly and less harmful to inmates and their families and communities.

"I really do feel like incarceration should be a last resort for those that have proven they cannot function in society without causing harm to others," she said.

The good news, she said, is that incarceration rates have been steadily dropping since 2010. Things are looking up in the courts too, she said, citing a trend toward a reduction or elimination of mandatory-minimum sentences, which are instituted by Congress to force federal judges to impose harsh sentences as a way to deter crime.

"The decreases are a positive sign, but it's a very slow process unless we take more drastic measures," she said.

Provided by Northeastern University

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