

Suicide in Egyptian Prisons

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ABSTRACT

This study comprises 32 cases of suicide collected from the Egyptian prisons' files from the year 1931 to 1980 in an attempt to study rate and circumstances contributing to suicide in Egyptian prisons.

Results emphasized that despite the decline of suicide rate over 50 years, yet it is much higher than that of the general population.

Majority of cases were married young males of low socio-economic class according to their occupation and level of education. They were convicted for crimes of violence and they were sentenced for more than three years. They committed suicide by hanging, falling from a height and burning, more commonly during the first year of imprisonment. Emotional problems, bereavement, disruption of social relationship were important determining factors for suicide.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide, like all forms of crime, is becoming more and more precocious (Rohn et al., 1977). Suicide reflects severe motivational determinants: death is considered as a release from despair, pain or a sense of a gloomy future. It is also a sign of severe pathology; certainly the suicide rate is one criterion of mental illness (Laufer, 1973).

Just as every death represents much sickness in the population at large, so does every suicide in prison represent much bodily and mental suffering (Tepp, 1979).

The prison population is clearly not representative of the population at large; it differs in age distribution and in social morbidity (Roth, 1972). Okasha and Sadek (1975) reached a similar conclusion that those in prisons represent different characteristics from those of the general population. They found that schizophrenia, depression and epilepsy were over represented in the prison population.

Goring (1913) and Topp (1979) studied suicide in British prisons; they found that the rate of suicide in their prisons was more than three times that of the general population. They attributed this difference to the tendency for violent crime and they had previous experience of penal institutions. Topp (1979) added that the deaths occurred partly as a result of a demonstrative attention seeking behaviour and that psychiatric morbidity was an important determinant of suicidal behaviour.

Suicide in prison is a perplexing phenomenon which unfortunately has not been widely investigated especially in Egypt, hence the aim of this paper is to study this problem.

METHODOLOGY

Data concerning suicide in prisons, clinical and social circumstances contributing to the acts were obtained from :

- 1) Official figures in the annual reports from 1931 to 1980.
- 2) Records held by the home office and prison department for all prisoners who had certainly or probably committed suicide during these years.

In most cases the prison records were detailed and it was beneficial for eliciting the following data : age, sex, marital status, type of crime, length of time in custody, stresses prior to the act, methods of suicide and the possible psychiatric morbidity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

How common is suicidal behaviour in Egyptian prisons? How many prisoners committed suicide? What are the circumstances that preceded the suicidal acts? And what about the psychiatric morbidity?

Answers to questions like these often suffer from generally relying on official statistics of questionable accuracy.

There were difficulties in obtaining data from relatives of prisoners because of the length of time between the suicide and the time of research. The psychiatrist did not examine the prisoners prior to the act, but information gathered depended mainly on what was written in the prisoner's files by unqualified persons.

In spite of these problems, it was necessary to explore the phenomenon of suicide in Egyptian prisons through this preliminary study as an invitation to design a suicide prevention program among prisoners.

(A) Suicide Rate in Prisons:

Suicide cases collected in this study comprise 32 cases from the year 1931 up to 1980 (Table 1).

TABLE I
Suicide Rate in Prisons

Years	Number of Prisoners	Number of Suicides	Suicide Rate in Prison/100,000
1931—1935	63153	4	6.33
1936—1940	71131	7	9.84
1941—1945	80432	1	1.24
1946—1950	89083	1	1.12
1951—1955	100513	4	3.98
1956—1960	121576	5	4.11
1961—1965	114601	5	4.36
1966—1970	109951	3	2.73
1971—1975	93643	1	1.07
1976—1980	106468	1	0.94
TOTAL	950551	32	3.36

The table shows the following :

1 - The mean suicide rate in Egyptian prisons over the period from 1931 to 1980 is (3.36/100,000).

2 - Suicide rate as a whole in the thirties was higher than other decades. It was 6.433/100,000 from 1931 to 1935, however the highest rate of suicide lies between 1936 and 1940 being 9.84/100,000, which could be attributed to :

a - The stage of the crisis of economic depression from which the country suffered since the beginning of the thirties and was stronger during the World War II.

b - The presence of a large number of political prisoners who felt great misfortune and maladjustment when they tried to defend their cases.

These reasons might lead the prisoners to reach the conclusion that death is the only possible solution to life's problem.

3 - The rate of suicide in the forties was comparatively low being 1.24, 1.12/100,000 during the period from 1941 to 1945, and 1946 to 1950 respectively. These data could be explained by the Palestinian war of 1948 which was a national war against Israeli occupation and probably the period of general violence was accompanied by a decrease in suicide rate which is considered violence against self.

4 - Suicide rate in prison began to rise from the early fifties to the mid sixties being 3.98, 4.11, 4.36/100,000 in the following periods respectively from 1951 to 1955, 1956 to 1960 and 1961 to 1965. This rise in suicide rate again may be due to the beginning of the revolution of July 1952 and the presence of political unrest and increased detention for political reasons, then the one party system which did not allow the Egyptian individual to express himself.

5 - Suicide rate began to decline from 2.73 in 1966 to 1970 to be 1.07/100,000 in 1971 to 1975 and being the least 0.94/100,000

in 1976 to 1980. This decline in suicide rate in Egyptian prisons could be attributed to:

- a - The war of 1967 then the change in the political system which provided more individual freedom.
- b - The war of 1973 which brought back the individual confidence.
- c - The major changes inside prisons which respect humanity. Now they teach prisoners religion, skills and they engage them in work and outings. They give them leaves to visit their families and they treat them in a more humane way.

(B) Suicide Rate in Prisons Versus General Population :

TABLE II

Suicide Rate in Prisons Versus General Population

Years	Suicide Rate in Prison/100,000	Suicide Rate in General Population/100,000
1931—1935	6.33	1.41
1936—1940	9.84	1.08
1941—1945	1.24	0.87
1946—1950	1.12	0.78
1951—1955	3.98	0.79
1956—1960	4.11	0.86
1961—1965	4.36	0.78
1966—1970	2.73	0.43
1971—1975	1.07	0.22
1976—1980	0.94	0.12
MEAN	3.36	0.73

Table (2) shows that suicide rate in prisons as a whole is about five times more than that in the general population.

(C) Socio-Demographic Data :

Sex and age

30 males and only one female committed suicide in our prisons, but this finding bears little statistical significance because the total number of male and female prisoners was not available to calculate the percentage of suicide rate in each group, therefore comparison was not done.

As shown in Table (3) the highest incidence of suicide was in the age group (25 — 34 y) followed by the age group (35 — 44 y) then others. There is a tendency for suicide to be among the younger and middle age group but this does not reflect that suicide is less common in the older age group; probably the life span of Egyptian prisoners is shorter than 60, and the vast majority of the prison population lies in the young and middle age group. Our results confirmed different studies which pointed out that suicide in prison is commoner among the younger age group (Topp, 1979).

Marital Status

Broken homes is one of the major causes that creates abnormal behaviour (Crow and Crow, 1956). These types of pathological families are associated with breaking of emotional bonds and loss of unity of family ideals and the prevalence of antisocial behaviour and suicide (Davis, 1975). Okasha and Lotaief (1979) found that even attempted suicide is more common among the single, but the present study revealed that married prisoners showed the highest rate of suicide (75%), while 22% were single and 3% were divorced (Table 4). These findings were not similar to Topp's results who found that 79% were single, separated and divorced. Early marriage in Egypt and cultural differences may explain these discrepancies.

TABLE III**Ages at Time of Committing Suicide**

Ages (years)	No. of Cases	%
15 — 24	6	18.75
25 — 34	10	31.28
35 — 44	9	28.12
45 — 59	4	12.50
60 — 64	1	3.12
65 — 74	1	3.12
more than 74	1	3.12

TABLE IV**Marital Status**

Marital Status	No. of Cases	%
Single	7	21.87
Married	24	75
Widowed	—	—
Divorced	1	3.12

Residence before imprisonment

It was observed in our study that approximately an equal number of those who committed suicide were from upper, lower and capital of Egypt, 31%, 34% and 35% respectively, but no information about mobility was available.

Economic state and literacy

Data had been accumulated on the incidence of deviance and social pathology among the poor (Pearl, 1969). The majority of our cases belonged to the lower socio-economic classes according to their occupation. 62% received education but none of them had completed the secondary schools, while 38% were illiterate. Most of them were engaged before imprisonment in full- or part-time jobs (96%). This

might be a contributing factor for their decision to end their lives as they became inactive and worthless.

(D) Type of Crime and Duration of Custody :

Our study revealed that suicide occurs most frequently among those who anticipated a sentence for more than three years and those who were imprisoned for crimes of violence. 35% of our cases were convicted for homicide and were sentenced to life imprisonment and 65% were convicted for theft, robbery and other crimes.

These findings support those of Goring (1913) and Topp (1979) who found that a sentence of more than 18 months imprisonment may increase the propensity to suicide, and prisoners convicted of crimes of impulsive violence of crimes against morality were those prone to suicide.

16% of our cases killed themselves within the first month in custody, 41% during the first year, and thereafter there was a decline in the rate to 16%, 15% and 12% among those who remained in custody less than 5 years, 10 years and 20 years respectively. However, Topp (1979) found that 41% of his cases committed suicide during the first week and 53% during the first year. The decline of suicide rate with the prolonged time spent in prison may be attributed to the adaptation of prisoners to the prison subculture.

(E) Stresses Prior to Suicide :

The relation between bereavement and subsequent suicide is important from its relevance to one of the most basic philosophical conflicts in psychiatry (Brown, 1966). This was as long ago as the publication of Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia" in 1917.

Our study showed that bereavement was a very important stress prior to suicide. 62% of cases had parted with their beloved persons due to imprisonment which they could not adjust to.

Emotional relations with their families were disrupted to the extent that most of them were not visited by their family members, thus there were disruptions of both freedom and social relationship which made them vulnerable to dispense with their lives.

(F) Methods of Suicide :

It was found that 56% of cases committed suicide by hanging and strangulation, 38% by jumping or falling from a height, while 16% by burning and corrosives. However, 90% of Topp's (1979) cases killed themselves by hanging and the rest by other methods.

(G) Psychiatric Morbidity :

Unfortunately, data concerning previous psychiatric morbidity before imprisonment, consultation of psychiatrist during custody, admission to the prison hospital, or previous suicidal attempts were scarce. So, we evaluated the psychiatric morbidity in our cases by the help of reports which assessed the general behaviour prior to the suicidal act, such as sleep disturbance, lack of interest, preference for loneliness, refusal of food, abuse of drugs, disturbed behaviour, agitation, excessive worry, crying, ... etc.

Granted the difficulties we faced in making psychiatric diagnoses based on some heterogenous non-systematized information, we could assess that about 80% suffered from depressive disorders, 13% from drug addiction, while it was very difficult in 7% of cases to reach a probable diagnosis.

CONCLUSION

Over fifty years duration from 1931—1980 suicide rate in prison was 3.36/100,000. It showed a peak during (1936 — 1940) and a wane during (1965—1980).

Suicide rate was five times more common among prisoners than in the general population because suicide was conceptualized by this deviant group as a sort of inverted murder; the criminal tendency was turned inward.

The highest incidence of suicide was in the age group 25—44 years which is probably the peak age of prison population.

Despite that suicide rates in the general population for single people are twice that of married (Seiden, 1969), yet surprisingly married prisoners showed the highest rate of suicide which may be due to worries about their families and parting from the family members, so they felt unwanted or neglected by their family members due to the infrequency of visits.

The majority belonged to the lower socio-economic class according to their level of education and occupation, an observation which is also noticed in the general population. MacMahon et al. (1963) found that the suicide rates of unskilled labourers and agricultural workers were significantly greater than the national average.

Suicide occurred most frequently among those who were convicted for violent crime and who anticipated a long sentence which was a strong motive for killing themselves.

More than half of our cases committed suicide during the first year of imprisonment because they were not yet integrated into the main stream of prison population. They perceived life as an extreme situation with lack of future plans; they felt unable to cope; their pessimistic attitude rendered them likely to escape from the unpleasant reality into less painful but also less adaptive behaviour.

Emotional problems, loneliness and bereavement were main factors antecedent to suicidal behaviour. They might feel disruption of both freedom and social relation. Undoubtedly, anomic or loss of integration into a social matrix and feeling of isolation might lead them to loose interest in life and retreat to what is called by Durkheim "Anomic Suicide" (Henslin, 1971).

Psychiatric morbidity, especially depression, obviously increases the suicide risk. This is particularly true in our sample who showed signs suggestive of depression prior to their acts.

This preliminary study of suicide in Egyptian prisons may invite new researchers to work in this field aiming to prepare a suicide prevention program in prison.

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الموجز

الانتحار في السجون المصرية

تشمل هذه الدراسة ٣٢ حالة انتحار تم جمعها من سجلات السجون المصرية خلال الفترة من ١٩٣١ حتى ١٩٨٠ في محاولة لدراسة معدل وظروف الانتحار في السجون المصرية . وتشير النتائج الى انه بالرغم من اضمحلال المعدل عبر هذه الفترة الا انه مازال اكبر بكثير من معدل الانتحار في السكان المصريين بصفة عامة .

ولقد كانت اغلب الحالات لشباب من الرجال ، متزوجين ، ومن الطبقة الاجتماعية الاقتصادية الفقيرة وذلك حسب مهنتهم ودرجة تعليمهم . ولقد تم عقابهم في جرائم عنف ، لمدد أكثر من ثلاث سنوات . وارتكب الانتحار بالشنق أو بالسقوط من أعلى ، أو بالحرق ، بمعدل اكبر في خلال السنة الأولى لوضعهم في السجون . وكانت المشاكل العاطفية وحالات الحرمان وانهيار العلاقات الاجتماعية من العوامل الهامة المحددة للانتحار .

ABSTRAIT

Les Suicide dans les Prisons Egyptiennes

Cette étude comprend 32 cas de suicide, collectionnés des dossiers des prisons Egyptiennes, durant la période de 1931 jusqu' à 1980, danz le but d)étudier le pourcentage et les circonstances amenant au suicide dans les prisons Egyptiennes. Les résultats soutiennent que malgré le declin du pourcentage du suicide à travers 50 ans, il est déjà malgré le declin du pourcentage du suicide à travers 50 ans, il est déjà beaucoup plus élevé que celui de la population générale.

La majorité des cas étaient de jeunes mâles, mariés, de classe socioéconomique basse, d'après leur occupation et leur niveau d'éducation. Ils étaient condamnés à cause des crimes de violence, pour une période de plus de trois ans. Ils ont commis le suicide par pendaison, chute de haut, et brûlure, plus fréquemment durant la première année d'emprisonnement. Les problèmes émotionels, la rupture des relations sociales, et le deuil, ont été des agents importants dans la détermination le suicide.