

THE STILL ONGOING SUICIDE CRISIS IN THE  
MASSACHUSETTS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTION

A Lifers' Group Inc. Report

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Prisoner suicide again became a topic of fascination when convicted murderer Aaron Hernandez, formerly a star tight-end for the NE Patriots, hanged himself while incarcerated (see sidebar). It should not, however, have taken the suicide of a notorious prisoner to draw attention to prisoner suicides because Massachusetts prisoners have committed suicide at more than double the national rate for over a decade. This unfortunate toll has attracted public censure at least twice, but apparently to little avail. The suicide of eight prisoners in state prisons during 2006 and again in 2010 aroused concern because these deaths occurred at 4 to 5 times the national annual average of 16 prisoner suicides per 100,000 and almost 6 times the rate for nonincarcerated persons. These public concerns plus a 2006 lawsuit led the DOC to hire the same expert consultant in 2007 and 2011 to analyze causes and offer preventative measures. The

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resulting 2007 recom-  
mendations required 17  
million dollars of  
improvements that were

focused on implementing 'suicide-resistant' cells and more staff training. However, by the end of 2010, 14 more prisoners had committed suicide. The ensuing 2011 review emphasized mental health issues and suggested as solutions the use of highly

TABLE

Year	# Suicides	Rate per 100,000 <sup>a</sup>	5-Yr Avg. /100,000 <sup>b</sup>
1993	1	9	--
1994	4	35	--
1995	3	26	--
1996	3	27	--
1997	8	68	34
1998	2	17	36
1999	0	0	28
2000	2	18	26
2001	2	19	24
2002	1	10	12
2003	0	0	9
2004	1	10	11
Subtotal	27	239	
Average	2.25/yr	19.9/yr	
2005	4	41	16
2006	8	77	28
2007	4	37	34
2008	1	9	35
2009	5	45	41
2010	8	72	48
2011	1	9	34
2012	4	35	34
2013	3	27	37
2014	6	54	40
2015	1	9	27
2016	2	19	30
Subtotal	47	434	
Average	3.92/yr	36.2/yr	
Increase	74%	82%	

<sup>a</sup> Differences from prior reports due to updated suicide and custody population data

<sup>b</sup> 5-yr average rates/100,000 = sum of prior 5-yr suicides divided by sum of prior 5-yr population x 100,000

structured, restrictive and at times even coercive environments for suspected 'vulnerable' individuals. Both analyses and reports were based predominantly on reviews of physical facilities and staff interviews. Notably absent was information gathering from friends and families of those committing suicide or from other prisoners. Nevertheless, 16 more suicides occurred during the period between 2012 and 2016, with a peak of 6 during 2014. And, so far in 2017, there have been two additional suicides, with Hernandez the most recent.

The TABLE summarizes the 24 years of available suicide data in Massachusetts state prisons. During the first 12 years there were 27 suicides for an average of 2.25 suicides per year and an average annual rate of 19.9 suicides/100,000 prisoners. During the last 12 years, 2005-2016, suicides increased to 47, averaging

On April 19, 2017 at 3:05 AM Aaron Hernandez, former star tight-end for the NE Patriots, was found hanged in his cell at Souza-Baronowski Correctional Center with 'John 3:16' penned in ink on his forehead. This was only five days after his emotional acquittal in a double murder case and with hopeful appeals pending in his two-year old conviction for a different murder. He had given no indications of depression or suicidal intent, speaking positively with his fiancée, the mother of his daughter, the night before. While in prison, he had multiple run-ins with prisoners and staff, suggesting that he may well have responded forcefully to multiple taunts from those enjoying the 'schadenfreude' of knocking a successful celebrity from his perch, a common prison ploy. Being charged with as many as 78 disciplinary offenses from 12 separate incidents allows speculation that staff as well as prisoners participated in this sport. He had reportedly found solace in the Bible, possibly leading him to seek the escape promised in his chosen scripture "that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

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recreation, and rehabilitative programming and education, whether academic or vocational, remains problematic. Prison pay scales, as low as 75¢ to \$1.50 per day, have remained unchanged for the last 30 years, while commissary prices for essentials and discretionary items continue to increase. This adds ever greater burdens to the families of those prisoners still fortunate enough to have support -- even as, with longer sentences and aging,

that support continues to wither away. The result is prisoners either destitute or with growing guilt about their encumbrance upon family. Additional stress comes from the dismissiveness of medical departments and the unavailability or inadequacy of prison health care leading to debilitation and suffering. Over time, the lengthy sentences, with minimal hope of successful legal appeal and none for the no longer existent commutations or pardons, permeate prisoners with a sense of deep impotence and hopelessness. These feelings inevitably filter from long-termers and lifers to infect even the younger and more recently arrived. The lack of any emotional safe havens further conspires to erode

prisoner self-worth, often leaving only a sense of despondent hopelessness -- and resultant seeds for suicide.

Remedies are unlikely to be found in more solitary confinement in suicide-resistant clothing and cells, or in increased restrictions by prison staff. Far better outcomes are likely to spring from increased quality and availability of prison programming and jobs as well as improving vocational and academic education. Such improvements would also lead to more effective rehabilitation and lower recidivism. Additionally, sentencing reform by the legislature, increasing judges' discretion and providing more rational sentencing structures, could further enhance prison effectiveness and improve public safety by limiting hopelessness and making prisoners more responsive to rehabilitation -- an important consideration because close to 90% of prisoners eventually will be released to re-enter society.

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\*Lifers Group reports accessible at: [www.realcostofprisons.org/writing](http://www.realcostofprisons.org/writing).