

## **'You just get on with the job': Prison officers' experiences of deaths in custody in the Irish Prison Service**

BARRY, Colette

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<http://shura.shu.ac.uk/21409/>

---

This document is the author deposited version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

### **Published version**

BARRY, Colette (2017). 'You just get on with the job': Prison officers' experiences of deaths in custody in the Irish Prison Service. *Prison Service Journal*, 230, 53-60.

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

# 'You just get on with the job': Prison officers' experiences of deaths in custody in the Irish Prison Service

Colette Barry is a PhD Candidate at Dublin Institute of Technology.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

**Throughout their careers, prison officers encounter a variety of incidents, ranging from those that are quickly resolvable to major disturbances requiring a coordinated response. Among the most serious events to occur inside a prison is the death of a prisoner. When a prisoner dies in custody, prison officers will usually be first on the scene, and play a central role in the immediate response to the death. Officers also remain enduringly connected to the incident beyond the immediate aftermath; their contributions are often of critical importance to the various investigations convened following a prisoner's death. While recent decades have seen the expansion in understanding of prison officers, as researchers turn their attention to the working lives and cultures of prison staff, studies of officers' experiences of deaths in custody remain scant. Moreover, the few existing examinations of officers' accounts of prisoner deaths have tended to focus on self-inflicted deaths only, leaving very little known about officers' encounters with other causes of death.**

Though limited in scope and focus, a review of the existing literature reveals distress, anxiety and feelings of loss as prominent themes in officers' responses to deaths in custody. Crawley describes the sadness and distress experienced by officers following a suicide, noting that many are often reticent to discuss these

feelings with colleagues and support staff.<sup>2</sup> The traumatic effects of experiencing a self-inflicted death in custody are enduring; many officers experience flashbacks and resurgences of distress,<sup>3</sup> and may report symptoms of traumatic stress and stress-related illnesses.<sup>4</sup> Prison officers may also experience feelings of loss and bereavement in the aftermath of a self-inflicted death.<sup>5</sup> The nature of an officer's relationship with the deceased is significant in this context, with feelings of loss and grief most common among officers who maintained positive relationships with the deceased.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of a death in custody can continue long after the immediate aftermath of the event. Lengthy investigative processes can prove problematic in this context, particularly as many officers are called upon to contribute written reports to subsequent internal and external investigations into the death. Officers are also frequently called to give oral evidence at coroners' inquests. Liebling observes that participation in the inquest process can be particularly distressing for officers, with staff participants in her study of prison suicide reporting feelings of fear, isolation and anxiety during their attendance at inquests.<sup>7</sup> Liebling additionally identifies guilt as a common feeling for prison staff at inquests, reporting that many officers experienced guilt when they saw the family of the deceased prisoner at an inquest hearing.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Borrill et al. highlight the experience of answering questions at an inquest in the presence of the prisoner's family as a particular source of discomfort and anxiety for many officers.<sup>9</sup>

1. The research presented in this article is funded by the Irish Research Council, as part of the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship Scheme. The author is especially grateful to Dr Mary Rogan, Dublin Institute of Technology for her valuable comments on a draft of this article.
2. Crawley, E. (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The Public and Private Lives of Prison Officers*. Devon: Willan.
3. Borrill, J. and Hall, J. (2006) Responding to self-inflicted death in custody: Support services and postvention. In Dear, G. E. (ed.) *Preventing suicide and self-harm in prison*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
4. Wright, L., Borrill, J., Teers, R. and Cassidy, T. (2006) The mental health consequences of dealing with a self-inflicted death in custody. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 19: 165–180.
5. Lancaster, D. (2001) Suicide and self-harm among women and girls in HMP Holloway. *Prison Service Journal*, 138: 19–21; and Snow, L. and McHugh, M. (2002) The aftermath of a death in prison custody. In Towl, G., Snow, L. and McHugh, M. (eds.) *Suicide in prisons*. Oxford: BPS Blackwell.
6. Crawley (2004) see n.2.
7. Liebling, A. (1992) *Suicides in Prisons*. London: Routledge.
8. Ibid.
9. Borrill, J., Teers, R., Paton, J., Regan, E. and Cassidy, T. (2004) The impact on staff of a self-inflicted death in custody. *Prison Service Journal*, 151: 2–6.

Anxiety may also be focused on the possibility of future fatalities. While discussing how prison staff deal with serious incidents, including deaths in custody, Arnold observes that officers worry that their response to future incidents will be inadequate.<sup>10</sup> Previous experiences were considered unhelpful for dealing with future incidents, as the nature of future events were viewed as unpredictable. Officers may attempt to neutralise uncertainty and fear about potential deaths by striving to maintain a 'high level of psychological preparedness' for any future incidents.<sup>11</sup>

The distress and anxiety that can be caused by a death in custody can be problematic for prison officers, interfering with their ability to perform regular job tasks and their reputation among colleagues. Collective humour and joking affords officers a culturally acceptable medium through which they can neutralise any distress and anxiety caused by a death in custody.<sup>12</sup> Crawley observes that officers may sometimes joke when responding to the death of a prisoner.<sup>13</sup> The humour employed by officers in the aftermath of a death in custody is strikingly similar to the humour used by police and emergency services personnel when dealing with death; it 'lightens the air' and boosts camaraderie after a potentially emotionally exhausting situation.<sup>14</sup> Humour exchanged between colleagues in the aftermath of a death in custody also helps officers to cope with their experiences, reframing their interpretations of the event and allowing them to 'get it out there and feel better about it' with minimal risk to their image.<sup>15</sup>

While the existing scholarship offers useful insights on a small number of relevant topics, it fails to present a complete picture of prison officers' experiences dealing with deaths in custody. The current article attempts to bolster the extant literature, shedding light on this little-explored area in the sociology of prison

## Humour exchanged between colleagues in the aftermath of a death in custody also helps officers to cope with their experiences ...

work. It will report selected findings from a broader study of Irish prison officers' experiences of deaths in custody. Adopting a phenomenological approach, this research explores officers' stories of their encounters with deaths in custody, their emotional responses to their experiences, and their perspectives on support and coping in the aftermath. This research encompasses the entire process, from the discovery of a prisoner's death to officers' efforts to cope and move on in the aftermath.

Moreover, this article also offers insight into prison staff culture in Ireland, an area in which academic interest has remained almost non-existent for many years. The extant literature on Irish prison staff is currently constituted by a handful of descriptive

accounts of prison work disseminated in the 1980s and 1990s<sup>16</sup> and a small number of published insights of retired prison staff,<sup>17</sup> resulting in a paucity of contemporary explorations of Irish prison officer culture that has persisted for many years. Recent years however have seen attention begin to turn to the cultures and experiences of Irish officers. In early 2015 the Inspector of Prisons commenced a review of the Irish Prison Service, focused

on assessing the current culture within the organisation with a particular focus on the roles and responsibilities of staff.<sup>18</sup> In announcing this review, the Inspector acknowledged that while positive developments that have taken place in the Irish Prison System in recent years, including the reduction in prisoner numbers and improvements in physical conditions, any structural changes and new initiatives should be reinforced by a positive staff culture throughout all levels of the Irish Prison Service. Additionally, the broader culture of the Department of Justice and Equality, within which the Irish Prison Service operates as an executive agency, was also recently assessed by an independent review group,

10. Arnold, H. (2005) The Effects of Prison Work. In Liebling, A. and Maruna, S. (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Devon: Willan.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

12. Crawley, E. (2004) Emotion and performance: Prison officers and the presentation of self in prisons. *Punishment & Society*, 6: 411–27.

13. Crawley (2004) see n.2.

14. Scott, T. (2007) Expression of humour by emergency personnel involved in sudden deathwork. *Mortality*, 12: 350–364, p. 351; and Young, M. (1995) Black humour: Making light of death. *Policing and Society*, 5: 151–167.

15. Tracy, S. J., Myers, K. K. and Scott, C. W. (2006) Cracking Jokes and Crafting Selves: Sensemaking and Identity Management Among Human Service Workers. *Communication Monographs*, 73: 283–308, p. 300.

16. McGowan, J. (1980) The role of the prison officer in the Irish Prison Service, *Administration* 28(3): 259–274; and O'Donnell, F. (1999) The prison officers, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 88: 175–180. Brief references to prison staff can also be found in extant research on Irish prisoners and the Irish prison system.

17. See Bray, P. (2008) *Inside Man*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan; and Lonergan, J. (2010) *The Governor*. Dublin: Penguin Ireland.

18. Prof Andrew Coyle, Emeritus Professor of Prison Studies, University of London will join the Inspector in conducting this review. See Inspector of Prisons (2015) *Announcement by the Inspector of Prisons of a review of the Irish Prison Service*. Press release, 16 February 2015.

wherein a programme for 'fundamental and sustained organisational and cultural change and renewal' was recommended.<sup>19</sup>

This article will commence with an examination of the process of responding to deaths in custody, focusing on officers' approaches to dealing with these incidents. It will then move to explore the performance of emotion within the officer group in the immediate aftermath of a death in custody, highlighting the cultural and professional rules governing officers' emotional display. Following this, a discussion of the impact of officers' experiences of deaths in custody both at work and in their personal lives will be presented. Finally, the significance of the journey between work and home in maintaining boundaries and facilitating coping in the aftermath of a death in custody will be considered.

### Methodology

Data was collected through a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews. Participants were prison officers in the Irish Prison Service and who had experience of dealing with a death in custody in their course of their duties as an officer. Retired officers and individuals who had progressed from officer grades to governor grades were eligible to participate also. Officers with experiences of any cause of death were welcome to participate. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the Irish Prison Service and the Prison Officers' Association, the trade union for prison officers in Ireland. In addition to these channels, snowball sampling was also employed with participants. Unlike other jurisdictions, prison officer research has not yet begun to flourish in Ireland and it was hoped that this approach might bolster efforts to engage with a population who were perhaps less familiar with being the subject of research than their peers in other countries.

Fourteen participants were interviewed. The participant cohort had experience of a range of causes of death, including self-inflicted deaths, homicides, drug-related deaths and deaths by natural causes. Ten participants had encountered multiple deaths in

custody, with the remaining four reporting a single incident during their careers. The majority of participants had worked for the Irish Prison Service for over twenty years; the length of service ranged from five years to thirty-four years, with an average of 23.86 years. Twelve participants were currently working in the Irish Prison Service and two had retired, both within the past ten years. The participant cohort included a variety of grades, ranging from governor to prison officer. Ten participants worked in officer grades (including five prison officers, four assistant chief officers and one chief officer) and four in governor grades.<sup>20</sup>

Interviews took place outside the prison environment, which facilitated lengthy, in-depth conversations with participants. The interviews explored three headline areas: participants' experiences of dealing with a death in custody; their emotional responses to a prisoner's death; and engagement with support and coping in the aftermath of their encounter with a death. Emergent topics were explored as they arose. Interview data was transcribed and imported into qualitative analysis software for coding, employing the thematic analysis approach. Findings from early analysis are presented below.

### Findings

#### Responding to deaths in custody

##### *'Working on autopilot'*

Participants overwhelmingly characterised their actions during the response to a prisoner's death as automatic and instinctive. The capacity to respond to incidents in this intuitive manner was linked to practical experience and knowledge; participants saw it as skill to be honed while *'on the beat'*, rather than a competency that could be taught at induction training. Many participants emphasised the automatic nature of their actions during the interviews. As one participant with more than twenty years of service explained, *'it's intuition, we know what to do, we kick into a higher gear, and we do it almost without thinking'*. A number of participants described themselves as *'working on*

The participant cohort had experience of a range of causes of death, including self-inflicted deaths, homicides, drug-related deaths and deaths by natural causes.

19. Independent Review Group on the Department of Justice and Equality (2014) *Report of the Independent Review Group on the Department of Justice and Equality* [online]. Available at: <<http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/PB14000204>> [accessed 5 June 2015], p. 2.

20. Each of these participants occupied officer grades prior to their progression to governor grades. All had dealt with multiple deaths in custody during their careers, and recounted experiences from their time working as both officers and governors.

*autopilot*' when dealing with a death in custody, and many others stressed the automatic nature of their response:

*The adrenaline would just kick in and it just takes over and you don't say 'oh god, what's my next step'. Automatically, your mind automatically does it and your body automatically does it.*

*Well you see, you don't realise what you're doing at the time ... because you know it's like everything just happens so fast and so quickly and the adrenaline kicks in and takes over and you do things automatically without thinking.*

Automatic response to an alarm or sign of trouble is a significant cornerstone of officer culture,<sup>21</sup> and the expectation to respond to incidents facilitated participants' ability to 'kick into gear': 'when someone shouts *'there's a swinger!'* you run in the direction of that sound'; 'like how firefighters run into burning buildings while people run out, we have to run into it, its our job'. The ability to respond automatically to deaths in custody becomes second nature with each experience: 'people that have been through one before, the second one its even more automatic for them, the third one is, and the fourth one and the fifth one'. In contrast with the officers in Arnold's study,<sup>22</sup> participants felt confident about the possibility of dealing with future incidents, believing that their previous experiences helped to hone their instincts, thus improving their performance when responding to deaths in custody.

Participants emphasised that the ability to go into 'autopilot' or 'response mode' during major incidents was of critical importance in prison officer work ...

Even during their first encounter with a death in custody, many participants reported that they were able to work in this automatic and intuitive manner. Second-hand accounts and colleagues' stories were invaluable in this context, as participants were able to acquaint themselves with the appropriate processes. One participant recalled piecing together how deaths in custody should be handled from a small number of stories of self-inflicted deaths that had happened previously or elsewhere in the prison. Participants indicated a strong preference for this approach to acquiring knowledge about responding to deaths in custody over structured training. All participants reported receiving limited preparation for responding to deaths in custody during their induction period.

Training was typically brief, focusing on ligature removal. A handful of participants also received supplementary training on suicide prevention as part of a new programme developed in recent years.<sup>23</sup> Participants emphasised that the ability to go into 'autopilot' or 'response mode' during major incidents was of critical importance in prison officer work, and many therefore viewed their first experience of a death in custody as an important test of whether they had the necessary mettle and instincts for the job.

*'Getting on with it'*

In the immediate aftermath of a death in custody, staff attentions turn to getting the prison 'back to business'. Once emergency response procedures had concluded, most participants reported making a quick return to their daily duties. When recounting this swift transition from the incident to their regular tasks, participants spoke of the importance of resuming their routines as soon as possible following a death in custody. Phrases such as 'getting on with the job',

21. Kauffman, K. (1988) *Prison Officers and Their World*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press; and Liebling, A., Price, D. and Shefer, G. (2011) *The Prison Officer*. Devon: Willan.

22. Arnold (2005) see n.10.

23. The Suicide Training Overview for Prisons (STOP) programme was introduced across the Irish Prison Service in 2012, following a number of years in development and phased implementation. The STOP programme aims to instruct prison officers in the identification and management of self-harm and suicide in Irish prisons. See Health Service Executive (2011) *Minister Kathleen Lynch TD launches HSE STOP suicide prevention and mental health training for prison services staff*. Press release, 14 December 2011. While an initial evaluation of the STOP programme showed improvements in officers' suicide prevention knowledge, the majority of currently serving participants had not yet undertaken the STOP programme. Ireland's progress in this area lags behind other jurisdictions, such as Canada and Western Australia, where suicide and self-harm awareness and prevention training programmes have been in place for several decades, providing standardised approaches to suicide prevention and continuing development of skills through regular refresher training. See Correctional Service Canada (2015) *Annual Report on Deaths in Custody 2013/2014*. Correctional Service Canada, Ontario; and Western Australia Department of Corrective Services (2014) *Annual Report 2013–2014*. Department of Corrective Services, Perth.



'getting back on the horse' and 'getting back on track' were peppered throughout most participants' discussions of the aftermath of a prisoner's death.

This approach to work was seen as an operational necessity. Many staff underlined the nature of prison work and their responsibility with regard to custody and care of all prisoners as factors obliging a speedy return to their routines. While staff are responding to a death in custody, the prison must remain as close to fully operational as possible. Participants were acutely aware of the importance of operational continuity in the aftermath of fatality: 'we have to keep the systems working when we're dealing with the incident'; 'the priority is to keep this prison from not getting pulled down around our ears'. As one participant, with multiple experiences of deaths in custody, explained:

*Everything has to keep going, yeah. It's one of those services where things can't stop. So even if that [death] had happened in the middle of us feeding the prison, we'd have to continue the main operation ... We can't just stop. At that time there was almost eight hundred in [the prison]. So we can't put the lives of eight hundred people on hold ... We have to isolate, contain and control that, while at the same time managing the rest of the prison.*

In this context, participants were particularly mindful of the impact of the death on the prisoner population, both practically and emotionally. A death in custody was described as having an immediate transformative effect on the mood and relationships in the prison, often heightening tensions and vulnerabilities among prisoners. Prisons were particularly unsettled after self-inflicted deaths and homicides, with some participants characterising the atmosphere as 'eerie', 'bleak', 'dark', and 'weird'. The majority of participants reported a heightened awareness of prisoners' emotions and vulnerabilities

in the aftermath of a death in custody. Staff often feared further incidents might occur, particularly following unnatural deaths, and believed a quick restoration of normality in the prison would neutralise a potentially precarious atmosphere. While this process did not always run smoothly, participants were largely able to ease the prison back towards everyday life within a week or two: 'it was back to business maybe after a week'; 'the whole prison moved on quite quickly'; 'there was an air around the place but it remained just for a few days afterwards'.

### Keeping up appearances

In addition to facilitating continuity in the operation of the prison, responding automatically to a death and ensuring a prompt resumption of the daily routine in the aftermath also afforded officers an opportunity to project a resilient and capable image. Participants were keenly aware of their appearance in this context, both in the eyes of their colleagues and among the prisoners in their charge. Much like the officers in studies by Crawley<sup>24</sup> and Nylander et al.,<sup>25</sup> participants were conscious of institutional and professional 'feeling rules'<sup>26</sup> that governed the expression and performance of emotion in the aftermath of a

Prisons were particularly unsettled after self-inflicted deaths and homicides, with some participants characterising the atmosphere as 'eerie', 'bleak', 'dark', and 'weird'.

prisoner's death. Vocalisations or displays of sadness, distress or loss were off limits. Many participants reflected upon an obligation to appear resilient and stoic in the aftermath of a death: 'you can't fall apart in this job'; 'let's put it this way, there's no way you'd be crying and whimpering about it, they'd think you were mad'; 'you wouldn't be getting upset afterwards, it just wouldn't be the done thing'. These feeling rules were accepted by participants, and were described by some as deeply embedded in the organisational culture of the Irish Prison Service. Masculine cultural expectations, which often militate against the acknowledgement of emotion in the prison setting<sup>27</sup> and place a high value on bravado in the aftermath of

24. Crawley, (2004) see n.2; and Crawley (2004) see n.12.

25. Nylander, P.-Å. K., Lindberg, O. and Bruhn, A. (2011) Emotional labour and emotional strain among Swedish prison officers. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6): 469–483.

26. In an occupational setting, 'feeling rules' are socially shared norms regarding the appropriate, acceptable and expected emotions in the work environment. See Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

27. Crawley (2004) see n.2.

a death in custody,<sup>28</sup> were also highlighted by some participants. Those who bought into these 'feeling rules' expected their colleagues to do so also. The idea of a colleague expressing or speaking about feelings such as sadness or grief within the officer group following a death in custody was unthinkable for some, particularly those who had been in the job for longer periods: *'to be honest with you I'd think they were winding me up. That's the way the group we work in is'; 'they could be perceived like 'is he for the birds or what? He's in the Prison Service'.*

While expressing sadness or loss in the aftermath of a death in custody was considered a transgression of prison work norms, displays of empathy did not appear to go too far beyond the pale for staff. Empathy was rationalised as a *'human reaction'* to death generally, and was thus perceived as more acceptable. One participant, who reported experiencing multiple deaths by various causes, remarked:

*There would be something wrong with you if you didn't have some degree of empathy for the loss of life in certain circumstances, no matter who they were.*

Although permissible, there were limits to the extent of displays of empathy. Officers must be careful not to go overboard or be too effusive in their vocalisations of compassion for the deceased with their colleagues. Participants who spoke about empathy indicated that brief and neutral statements were preferred, void of personal sentiment. Those who appeared overzealous in their commiserations would be viewed with suspicion, and risked expulsion from the officer group: *'they'd brand the officer as a lag lover and that'd be it'.*

With expressions of sadness and grief off limits and displays of empathy restricted, officers look to humour as a safe way to talk about a death in custody in the aftermath. Described by some participants as *'banter'*, this type of humour mirrors the dark humour seen in previous research,<sup>29</sup> and was characterised in the interviews as *'dark'*, *'black'*, *'dry'*, and *'perverse'*. It was viewed as an occupational necessity, affording an opportunity to collectively decompress after responding to a death in custody:

With expressions of sadness and grief off limits and displays of empathy restricted, officers look to humour as a safe way to talk about a death in custody in the aftermath.

*It's a way of just dealing with what's going on. Laughing and joking. Be it morally or ethically incorrect as it is, it happens and it helps to deal with the situation.*

*It's a defence mechanism, a coping mechanism that we all developed.*

More importantly, engaging in humorous exchanges and observations about the incident allows officers to project a resilient and capable image to their colleagues. As major incidents such as deaths in custody typically require a collective staff response, it was important for participants to know that they could rely on their colleagues during a crisis, and that their colleagues thought the same of them. An officer who is involved in *'lively banter'* after a death in custody is viewed as better able to deal with a future incident than one who becomes upset or agitated.

While this humour acts as a *'social proof'* and *'improves camaraderie'* among the officer group, participants were acutely aware of how this humour could be perceived negatively by *'outsiders'*. A number of participants were hesitant to describe examples of jokes and banter to the author, citing concern about appearances. In his ethnographic study of prison life, Crewe observes that joking and derogatory exchanges between staff about prisoners typically take place in *'backstage areas'*, out of earshot of prisoners.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, those participants who spoke about humour indicated that the humorous talk and joking among staff in the aftermath of a prisoner's death always took place in *'small groups'*, in *'private'* and *'staff only'* areas in the prison.

### **The impact of experiencing a death in custody**

While participants projected a resilient image when responding to a death in custody and relating their experiences to their colleagues, many acknowledged that their encounters with prisoners' deaths had altered their perspectives or behaviour in

28. Snow and McHugh (2002) see n.5.

29. Nielsen, M.M. (2011) On humour in prison. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6): 500–514; and Crawley (2004) see n.12.

30. Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 61.

some way. Self-inflicted deaths had a particularly transformative effect on participants' approach to their work. Thirteen participants reported experiencing self-inflicted deaths, with some participants encountering multiple self-inflicted deaths during their career. The majority of these incidents occurred during the night. Crawley observes that prisons have a 'different feel' about them at night; the activity of the day is replaced by a 'deathly quiet' as prisoners are locked away in their cells and fewer staff roam the landings.<sup>31</sup> Nights were universally acknowledged as a high-risk period for suicide and suicide attempts, and some participants indicated that they had contemplated the possibility of encountering a self-inflicted death during a night prior to their experience. Following their encounter with a self-inflicted death, many participants described a change in their attitude to night shifts. One participant recalled feeling hesitant about working nights for a lengthy period following the death. Another participant reported that he now checks that the ligature knife is in the appropriate place before commencing every night shift, describing this small task as something that he now does 'without thinking'.

Participants also forged new associations with certain places in the prison following their encounter with a death in custody, typically the location where the incident occurred. For some participants, passing by or checking a cell where a prisoner had died evoked memories of their experiences. In this context, a participant who had dealt with a drug overdose recounted how he would be reminded of the incident when passing the cell in which it occurred, explaining:

*When I'd see the door I'd say 'ah, that's where such and such took an overdose. You'd always have that little mindfulness of that ... You'd always have a connection with a particular place if it was a bad or a negative thing that happened.*

Faced with limited avenues through which to express their emotional responses to deaths in custody while at work, some participants disclosed that their experiences had 'bled into' their personal lives.

Participants' experiences of deaths in custody also affected their lives outside the prison. Events in the prison can often 'spill over into the home'<sup>32</sup>, altering officers' perspectives and behaviour in their personal lives.<sup>33</sup> Faced with limited avenues through which to express their emotional responses to deaths in custody while at work, some participants disclosed that their experiences had 'bled into' their personal lives. In their study of the impact of self-inflicted deaths on prison staff, Borrill et al. observe 'persistent visual images' of the death to be a problem for a number of their cohort.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, many participants in the current study who had dealt with a self-inflicted death described having trouble with images or representations of this cause of death. Films and television programmes that depicted suicide were a common source of distress and discomfort: 'I don't like seeing somebody hanging on a telly'; 'it'd upset me a little bit now when suicide is on the television'; 'I'd be inclined now to look away from a film that showed a person hanging'. Actions and materials associated with self-inflicted deaths were also problematic in this context. A participant who had dealt with one death during his career, a self-inflicted death by hanging, described the enduring effect of his experience in his personal life. He disclosed that he had become highly cautious about objects around necks following his involvement in responding to the prisoner's death, particularly with his children: 'you can ask the children at home, nothing goes around their necks now, nothing ... I don't even like scarves on their necks'.

### Moving between two worlds

Over time, prison officers learn to maintain boundaries between their work and home environments, hoping to diminish the impact of events in the prison on their personal lives.<sup>35</sup> Crawley highlights the officer uniform as the threshold between officers' work and home lives, describing the ritual of removing the uniform upon the completion of a shift as 'a cleansing process' that prepares prison staff for re-entry into their personal

31. Crawley, (2004) see n.2.

32. Crawley, E. (2002) Bringing it all back home? The impact of prison officers' work on their families. *Probation Journal*, 49: 277–286, p. 278.

33. Kauffman (1988) see n.16.

34. Borrill et al. (2004) see n.9.

35. Crawley, (2004) see n.2.



lives.<sup>36</sup> While participants in the current study strived to avoid any possible contamination of their personal lives arising from their encounters with deaths in custody, the routine of removing the officer uniform did not emerge as significant in this context. Instead, the realms of work and home were demarcated by the passage between them. The journey from work to home was transformative; the experience of the death in custody was *'left behind'* and participants began to prepare themselves to return to their personal lives. A number of participants identified landmarks along their route home as the boundaries between the two worlds, places where they felt their thoughts shifting from the incident to their personal lives. One participant, with experience of several deaths during her time in the Prison Service, explained:

*'Once I get to the roundabout off the [motorway] I stop thinking about what's just happened in work that day and start to think about whether or not I need to stop into the supermarket for milk or something for the dinner on the way home, that sort of thing'.*

This process 'leaving work behind' on the journey home was acknowledged as helpful in coping and moving on in the aftermath of a death in custody. Many participants pointed to their capacity to maintain a firm separation between their experiences at work and their home lives as an important factor in reducing the impact of their encounter with a death in custody. One participant, who regularly cycled home, remarked that his journey home after a shift during which he responded to a self-inflicted death in custody was *'as much a therapy as an exercise'*, explaining that *'the sadness of [the prison] was left behind because the bike looked after it'*.

This division between participants' work lives and personal lives established their homes as protected spaces, separate worlds where their encounters with deaths in custody should not intrude. While participants' involvement in the response to a death in custody often sparked concern and curiosity in family members, particularly spouses, many were determined

not to discuss their experiences of prisoners' deaths while at home, believing that their families should not be contaminated or burdened by these incidents: *'I don't want to be bringing it home on [my wife]. I don't want to putting my problems at work on her shoulders'; 'no way is this gonna come in here. No way is this going to affect my kids'*. Some participants invoked military language to reinforce this separation between their two worlds; life outside the prison was frequently referred to as *'civilian life'*, a place where the experiences of prison work did not belong.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that, while the death of a prisoner impacts the routine operations of the prison, it is more than simply an emergency that must be handled and controlled. A death in custody calls upon officers not only to manage the incident, but also their own reactions to it. In addition to appearing professionally competent in their responses to a prisoner's death, officers must also ensure that they project an image of emotional resilience in the face of death. While prison life quickly returns to normal in the aftermath of a death in custody, the impact of the incident on officers can be enduring, sometimes blurring the boundaries between officers' experiences at work and their personal lives.

In addition to shedding light on prison officers' experiences of deaths in custody, the findings of the research presented in this article also resonate with the broader scholarship on prison work. As prison officer research continues to flourish, this article provides insight into areas that have remained on the periphery of this literature, including officers' approaches to dealing with serious incidents and the impact of officers' experiences at work on their personal lives. It is clear that research on deaths and other major incidents in prison work not only opens a window into officers' experiences of these particular events, but also strengthens understandings of prison officer work more generally.

---

36. Ibid p. 245.