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Prison Suicide: What Happens Afterwards?

P. Tomczak. Bristol: Bristol University Press (2018) 180pp. £45.00 hb ISBN 978-1529203585

Suicides in prison have, for many years, attracted considerable academic attention across a range of disciplines. Much of this research has focused on understanding why people take their own lives in prison custody by examining the individual characteristics and institutional factors that may contribute to suicide incidence in prisons. However, less is known about the investigatory processes that occur after prison suicides and what these investigations achieve. In this timely book, Philippa Tomczak seeks to address this gap by shifting focus to these post-suicide investigations. To achieve this, she analyses the operation of prison suicide investigations in England and Wales and explores stakeholders' experiences of these multifarious processes.

The book opens with an overview of existing research on prison suicide and the definitional challenges presented by suicides in prisons. Here, Tomczak deftly draws together previous research on the causes of prison suicide and its prevention with her own work to explore the topics of stigma, institutional apathy, and the 'vicious cycles of suicidogenic discourses and practices' (p. 17) that may be triggered among prison staff following individual suicides. The opening chapter also establishes the 'post-death vantage point' (p. 3) as the focus for Tomczak's analysis. Post-death investigations have received limited attention in research and practice. This is despite acknowledgement of their potential value in improving suicide prevention, the growing recognition of the post-incident traumas experienced by staff, prisoners and bereaved families, and the national variability in the scope and nature of these investigations. The consequences of the suicide of a person in prison for their family, other prisoners, and prison staff are also briefly covered, setting the scene for deeper analysis in Chapter 3.

This book draws on interviews with stakeholders as well as analysis of Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) fatal incident reports and Coroners' Reports to Prevent Future Deaths (PFD). Tomczak conducted interviews with a small group of stakeholders, including varying public and voluntary sector monitoring bodies and bereaved families. These interviews offer rich insights into the views and experiences of those in Tomczak's sample. The context of Tomczak's work is stark, with data collected during a period of rising suicides in prisons in England and Wales. From 2012 suicides continued to rise, peaking in 2016 when a record high number of self-inflicted prisoner deaths was recorded. Tomczak's research is very much rooted in this period, with the PPO reports sample containing deaths from 2012-2017 and the interviews undertaken during 2016-2017. Although this likely shaped the discussion and conclusions presented in this book, it also expands the contribution of Tomczak's analysis, offering welcome insight into investigative outcomes and experiences during a period of acute crisis.

Chapter 2 focuses on the operation of prison suicide investigations in England and Wales. This is preceded by a useful overview of the investigative obligations arising from Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The nature and scope each investigation encompasses is described in turn, including the police, Ombudsman and Coroner investigations that usually form the Article 2-compliant investigation. Tomczak then moves to consider the value and limitations of these investigations, using a suicide cluster at HMP Woodhill as a case study. The depth of analysis here is commendable; complex timelines are skilfully handled and the problems at Woodhill are later contextualised within the political and policy landscape.

Taken together, these investigations offer a great deal of critical information and analysis. Recent years have seen increased emphasis on the need to learn lessons from the

findings of these investigations. Tomczak challenges this discourse of lesson learning, arguing that Article 2 does not require lessons to be learnt and does not appropriately direct accountability to those with the capacity to implement change. Moreover, the increased focus on whether and how lessons are learnt following investigations risks failing to recognise that some problems that precede or contribute to prison suicides may have been evident prior to a person's death, such as staff shortages. As Tomczak contends, 'it manufactures mystery around too often entirely manifest problems' (p. 80). Importantly, it also risks obscuring the role of political decisions made by those in government in creating or exacerbating these observable issues.

It is in Chapter 3 that the richness of Tomczak's interview data becomes most apparent. This chapter explores prison staff and bereaved families' experiences of post-suicide investigations. While the investigations mainly operate separately, Tomczak acknowledges that for families and staff, 'the sequence of investigations that follow prison suicides can be a complicated and extended ordeal' (p. 86). Staff were anxious about potential accountability stemming from Ombudsman investigations, while families may invest time and resources in participating with the Ombudsman process and still not find satisfaction. Inquests were difficult for both staff and bereaved families. As interview participant Stella's contributions demonstrate, bereaved families faced many obstacles to their participation in the coronial process, such as difficulties obtaining legal aid, unfamiliarity with procedures, and not receiving support information. Tomczak highlights that Stella's experiences underscore that more needs to be done to support bereaved families through these post-death investigations.

The focus on bereaved families' experiences of investigations is a particularly valuable contribution of this book, with clear policy and practice implications. Although Stella is identified as a bereaved family member, there were other points in the book where it would have been useful to contextualise other participants' contributions to their positions within the investigative arena. It may have been possible to do this in a broad way while still ensuring protection of participant confidentiality.

Tomczak returns to her point from the previous chapter about the need for accountability of political decision makers. While individual staff and governors have some scope to make practical and cultural changes within their institutions, their agency remains limited, and the extent to which they are scrutinised during post-suicide investigations should take this into account. Importantly, the scrutiny that individual staff experience does not match what Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, Ministers and Secretaries of State receive. As Tomczak puts it, 'receiving a letter is in no way comparable to being cross-examined under oath in court' (p. 111).

The final chapter of the book considers what post-suicide investigations achieve. The focus here is broader, with Tomczak exploring the implications of her work in the context of prison oversight more generally. She uses the three elements of oversight mechanisms (directors, detectors, and effectors) to structure her analysis, concluding that there are too many directors and detectors who identify what has gone wrong and what needs to change. Conversely, there are very limited effectors to implement recommendations arising from a post-suicide investigation, with prison staff penalised for elements that are largely beyond their control. This discussion adds further weight to Tomczak's argument that investigatory bodies and other prison oversight mechanisms have a responsibility to direct accountability to politicians and target government 'succinctly, repeatedly and vigorously' (p. 136).

The book concludes by considering the deaths of Dean Saunders and Sarah Reed, who Tomczak argues were both 'marooned' (p. 142) in prison. Post-suicide investigations can illuminate the circumstances and causes of an individual's self-inflicted death in prison and make recommendations for operational and cultural change, but Tomczak urges us to

recognise that cases such as these are far from rare and arguably foreseeable. She closes by reiterating that prison remains an unsuitable environment for people with mental ill health, calling for greater action on creating a system that sends fewer people with mental ill health to prison.

In addition to being of interest to researchers and students of punishment and penal policy, this book offers vital insights for practitioners and policymakers, particularly those in director, detector and effector roles. By engaging with the conduct and outcomes of post-suicide investigations, Tomczak puts forward some strong proposals for the operation of these investigations and, importantly, the direction of accountability. Overall, this book offers an important contribution to this under-researched and urgent topic, while also highlighting the considerable work that is still greatly needed in this area.

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