



SUICIDAL DEATHS IN CUSTODY: 13 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE STUDY

Forensic Medicine

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ABSTRACT

Background: Many studies had done in past worldwide and have shown that if prison specific characteristics of prison sample are controlled, rates of suicidal deaths in prison seem to be considerably higher than those in general population.

Aim: To study and evaluate trends and demographic parameters of suicide in custody in Pune region.

Material and methods: Retrospective data collected from all available records of deaths in custody brought for postmortem examination during study period.

Results: A total 276 custodial deaths of which 23 cases of suicide were sent for autopsy during study period. Mean age was 32.2 years with only one female amongst them. Out of 23 cases 11 were deaths in police custody, 12 were deaths in prison/jail. Majority of them were from age group 27-35 years and Hanging was most common method of committing suicide followed by jump from height.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION:

Suicide in custody is a well established problem. Studies conducted in several countries have found an increase in suicide rates in custody over the last five decades.¹ In few countries, where it has been studied, suicide rates in prisoners have been found to be substantially higher than the general population.²

However unlike other countries, we in India do not have any specific study to compare suicide rates in general population with that in custody. Also very few publications have been reported so far to throw light on demography of suicide in custody in India, majority being case reports. It is surprising to note that in India, there is no any single qualitative study done in this subject till date.

Deliberate self harm and suicide attempts among custodial inmates, grouped together under the term self injurious behaviour are a serious problem for penal authorities.³

It is reported that some of the suicide excess seen among prisoners may relate to characteristics before imprisonment, such as psychiatric illness and substance abuse.⁴

Suicide or deliberate self harm is one such activity which is preventable if high risk groups or individuals are identified earlier, which highlights need of an updated data and more of such studies in future.

MATERIALS AND METHODS:

The present study was conducted at Department of Forensic Medicine, B. J. Government Medical College and Sassoon General Hospital, Pune. The study is retrospective, descriptive and analytical type of study. Data for study was retrieved from all available files of inquest papers, autopsy reports, toxicological analysis reports, histopathology reports, and case papers into the death of people in custody brought for postmortem examination to this department during the period of 1st January 2006 to 31st December 2018.

A standard proforma to collect the information like age, sex, time and place of incidence etc. was designed to ensure consistency for the whole sample. Only deaths where manner of death was suicide,

confirmed after investigation and evaluation of circumstances, were included in the study.

RESULTS:

During the study period total 276 cases of custodial deaths were brought for post-mortem examination at this centre. Out of 276 cases in 23 (8.33%) cases manner of death was suicide. The year wise and manner of death wise distribution of the custodial deaths and suicide is presented in Table 1. Out of 23 cases of custodial suicides, only one victim was female. Majority of them were from age group 27-35 years (n = 8, 36.37%) followed by 18-26 (n = 7, 31.8%) years and mean age as 32.3 years (Figure 1). As far as type of custody is considered 12 cases were of police custody and 11 were of deaths in prison. Amongst prisoners 10 out of 11 were convicted and one was under trial prisoner while amongst police custody majority were those arrested for offences (Table 2). Majority of deaths occurred during 12 pm to 6 pm considering all types of custody (n = 10, 43.47%), and all suicides in police custody occurred during first 24 hours of arrest (Table 3). Hanging was most common method of committing suicide considering all types of custodial suicides (n = 14, 60.87%) followed by jumping from height (n = 6, 26.08%). (Table 4) Nylon rope was the most commonly used ligature material in cases of hanging (n = 5, 35.71%). (Table 5) As far as the place of occurrence was considered majority of deaths occurred in isolation rooms/lock ups [Police custody - 5 (n=12, 41.66%); Prison/Jail - 6 (n=11, 54.54%)] followed by toilets. (Table 6)

DISCUSSION:

Suicide rate in general population has increased from 6.4 in 1982 to 10.5 in 2002.⁵ Crime in India statistics report published by National Crime Record Bureau, India has reported percentages of suicide in custody as 29.03, 35.05 and 41.30 for years 2014, 2015 and 2016 respectively, which is alarming and rising every year. Same report has reported suicide rates within custody of Maharashtra state as 31.57 and 50 for years 2015 and 2016 respectively.^{6,7,8}

Present study shows only one female inmate suicide incidence with majority being males which is consistent with another Indian study.¹ However in another study of suicide in female prisoners in England, 83 deaths were reported in 25 year study duration; which is much higher as compared to this study.⁴ Reason of lower incidence in females in

Indian population is attribute to fact that females are less involved in criminal activities and hence are less in number of inmate population.

Majority of inmates were from age group 27-35 years followed by 18-26 years. Mean age of inmates was 32.3 years in present study, consistent with finding of another Indian study.¹ Maryland study has reported that prisoners between ages 15 to 34 are at twice the risk of suicide as the general population of same age. Older inmates have a lower suicide rate relative to younger inmates and general population,⁹ which can be seen in present study as well. Coffey C et al¹⁰ has reported social adversity as the main cause behind involvement of younger population. Unfortunately in present study we did not get data on their socio economic status, criminal background, literacy, past and present psychiatric illness, substance misuse and self harming behaviours in past.

As far as type of custody is considered 12 cases were of within police custody and 11 were of deaths in prison. Hence in present study it is not possible to comment on which type of custody is more unsafe unlike study by Bardale et al¹ which reports higher incidence of deaths in police custody questioning their safety value. However in present study all the inmates of police custody have committed suicide within first 24 hours of incarceration as compared to 35.71% deaths reported earlier.¹ Reasons as reported are sense of isolation, helplessness and despair often experience by new inmate.¹¹

Amongst prisoners 10 out of 11 were convicted and one was under trial prisoner while amongst police custody majority were those arrested for offences. This shows that convicted prisoners are at higher risk. But we could not find any study to compare this data.

Hanging was most common method of committing suicide considering all types of custodial suicides accounting for 60.87% deaths followed by jumping from height. While considering hanging as most common cause of death it is consistent with other studies on custodial deaths^{1,9,12,13} and on general population.^{5,14}

Nylon rope was the most commonly used ligature material in cases of hanging and as far as the place of occurrence was considered, majority of deaths occurred in isolation rooms/lock ups followed by toilets. As

Tables, Charts and diagrams:

Table 1: Year wise and manner of death wise distribution of cases of custodial deaths.

Manner of death	Year														Total
	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018		
Suicide	02	04	01	00	03	01	01	02	02	00	04	00	03	23	
Mean age in years	29	37.25	26	--	35.33	42	35	23	31	--	30.25	--	27.33	32.3	
Other than Suicide	29	24	20	18	23	17	17	21	18	18	17	22	09	253	
Total	31	28	21	18	26	18	18	23	20	18	21	22	12	276	

Figure 1: Age and sex wise distribution of cases

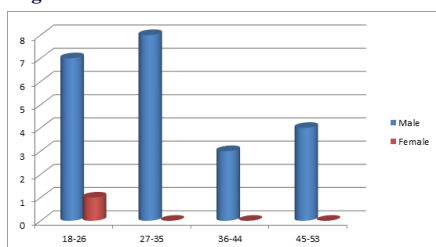


Table 2: Distribution of custodial deaths according to type of custody

Sr. No	Type of Custody	Subtype	No of case
01	Prison/jail	Temporary	00
		Under trial	01
		Convicted	10
		Total	11
02	Police	Arrested for offences	10
		Arrested for interrogation	2
		Total	12

Table 3: Distribution of deaths according to time of occurrence.

Sr. No.	Time of death	Police Custody	Jail/Prison	Total
01	12 am – 06 am	00	00	00
02	06 am – 12 pm	04	03	07
03	12 pm – 06 pm	04	06	10
04	06 pm – 12 am	03	03	06
				23

observed in previous studies, suicidal hanging is facilitated by the bar construction of cells. These bars were utilized by the inmates to tie the ligature material. Elimination of bar type of construction and redesigning of the cell would further reduce the available means of suicide.¹¹ Studies have demanded vigilance on high risk inmates and use of close circuit vigilance system and also recommended to appoint people with specializing police custody exclusively for this purpose.¹

The present study has its own limitations of small population size and incomplete demographic data which has made it difficult to determine crude suicide rate and to compare it with other studies. However we have few suggestions and recommendations as follows, -

1. Time duration between Judgment of conviction and commission of suicide should be obtained in further studies.
2. As convicted prisoners are high risk patients, close watch and regular psychological check up should be done.
3. Isolated places like lock ups are most common places of occurrence, hence strict vigilance is needed to avoid such circumstances.
4. Further studies should be conducted to find out any association and correlation with nature/type of offence committed, past psychiatric illness, previous suicidal attempts.
5. Psychological autopsies should be conducted in all such deaths as a routine practice to probe exact causative factors behind suicidal tendency. Such autopsies will also generate qualitative data for further analysis.
6. Multivariate analytical studies to be conducted; however this will need creation of nationwide uniform database for such cases.

CONCLUSION:

Suicide in custody is a serious issue but more importantly it is preventable if screening of high risk patients can be done at an earlier stage. However to identify high risk patients critical vigilance of inmates is necessary. It is also important to find out causes, which are easily avoidable, for such incidences, which need more studies in future.

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Conflict of interest: Nil

Ethical approval: Obtained.

01	12 am – 06 am	00	00	00
02	06 am – 12 pm	04	03	07
03	12 pm – 06 pm	04	06	10
04	06 pm – 12 am	03	03	06
				23

Table 4: Distribution of cases according to cause of death.

Sr. No.	Cause of Death	Police Custody	Jail/prison	Total
01	Hanging	08	06	14
02	Consumption of Poisonous substance	00	02	02
03	Injuries sustained due to fall from height	03	03	06
04	Electrocution	00	01	01
				23

Table 5: Type of ligature material used in hanging deaths.

Sr. no	Ligature material used in hanging	Number of cases
01	Belt	1
02	Nylon rope	5
03	Nadi/lace of pant	1
04	Towel	2
05	Sari	1

06	Pant	1
07	Jute rope	1
08	Shawl	1
09	Guaze bandage	1
	Total	14

Table 6: Distribution of deaths according to place of occurrence.

Sr. No	Type of custody	Place of incidence	Number of cases
01	Police	Toilet	2
		Godoun	1
		Enquiry room	1
		Lock up/isolation rooms	5
		Over Bridge (during transport)	1
		Roof top	2
02	Prison/Jail	Lockup/isolation rooms	6
		Open barrack	1
		Roof top	1
		Tree	1
		Toilet	2

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