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Project showcase event report

UKRI funded SAFESOC project:

*'Prison Regulation, for Safer Societies:
Participatory, Effective, Efficient?'*

School of Sociology & Social Policy

University of Nottingham

21 March 2024

This work was supported by: UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship
MR/T019085/1 (2020-24)

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UK Research
and Innovation

prison **DEATH**

DEATHS IN PRISON WORLDWIDE

On 14 March 2024 the UKRI funded SAFESOC Team hosted a dissemination event at the School of Sociology and Social Policy (SSP) at University of Nottingham to showcase the project’s outputs and impact as it entered its last six months. This four year study aimed to reconceptualise prison regulation for safer societies and project outputs can be viewed on the website (currently www.safesoc.co.uk/).

The event was held in person and attended by SSP staff and PGR students as well as the UKRI team, LUNG, a mother bereaved by prison suicide and third sector professionals.

Why do unsafe prisons = unsafe societies?

Criminal reoffending costs > **£18 billion** annually (*Newton et al 2019*)

Lower reoffending rates correlate with:

- higher **quality of prison life** (*Auty and Lieblich 2019*)
- prisoner **health** (*Link et al 2019*)

England and Wales’ prisons:

- became **less safe than ever**
- 2016’s **record suicide numbers** drained ~**£385 million** from public funds



Principal Investigator Professor Philippa Tomczak opened the event with an overview of the study’s conception, aims and significance: [unsafe prisons mean unsafe societies](#). The prison population is growing globally and so too are the number who die whilst incarcerated. Prison suicides have a catastrophic impact on prison wellbeing, safety and increase the likelihood of further deaths. Prison regulation, including by people with lived experience of detention, holds potential to reduce harms including preventable prison deaths. Philippa argued that prison regulatory

bodies e.g. the Prison and Probation Ombudsman overlook the systemic hazards that often contribute to prison deaths.

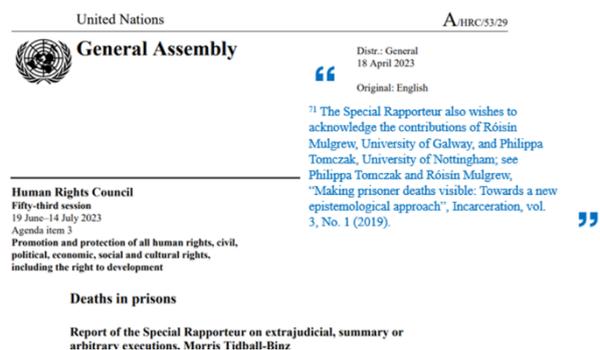
Philippa highlighted the outputs and impact that the study has achieved thus far: a total of 14 journal articles have been published with a further two under review, two policy briefs and a verbatim film.

Dr Rebecca Banwell-Moore then presented the findings of one of the study’s publications on the [unacknowledged harms of prison suicide](#). The presentation argued that prison death (specifically suicide) and subsequent investigations have a significant impact on prison staff and PPO death investigators, causing a number of harms e.g. prolonged and complicated grief, burn-out, fear (of being blamed and further deaths), anxiety, and over-use of punitive measures.

PhD student Sara Hyde then gave a presentation on her PhD, which explored prison healthcare staff experiences of prisoner suicide and self-harm. One key finding is how some staff *do not* become dehumanised during their work. She argued the importance of ‘bearing witness’ to the awful things

Supporting international impact

UN thematic report presented at Human Rights Council (July 2023)
Tomczak & Mulgrew (2023, Making prisoner deaths visible, *Incarceration*), was explicitly incorporated into Section D of the first United Nations ‘Deaths in Prisons’ thematic report, emphasising that ‘the number of prisoners who die globally and their causes of death are unknown’.



that prison healthcare staff experience, which enables staff to have their experiences acknowledged and validated, reducing the likelihood of dehumanisation of staff, thereby improving their care of prisoners.



Study Co-Investigator, Dr Gill Buck (University of Chester) then examined prison regulation from the perspective of lived experience, in particular prisoners and their families. Gill discussed how those with lived experience can influence and shape prison regulation e.g. [through the Woolf Inquiry](#). However, as she demonstrated, too often lived experience is written out of reports e.g. the Corston Report. Gill detailed the importance of co-production in the study, developing novel methods to collaboratively produce journal articles and a verbatim film. The co-created verbatim film WOODHILL, produced by LUNG Theatre and a bereaved parent (whose son was imprisoned at HMP Woodhill) was shown. LUNG film producers and Janet (the bereaved mother) were in attendance. Following the film screening, a question and answer session allowed space to discuss the challenges and successes of producing and disseminating the film, including the film screening at UKRI's event at the House of Lords in October 2023.

Dr Tom Kemp concluded the event with a 'provocation' discussion on 'what now'? He asked a series of provoking questions, including 'what does regulation try to do?' specifically regarding regulatory oversight bodies: does it conform with rules and best practice, or does it try to understand social and personal impacts? Does it attempt to remake the prison institution for social good/change, or does it produce and reproduce social harms? Does it ask whether prison actually works? Tom questioned how prison regulatory bodies could potentially come together collectively to influence prison policy.

Professor Steve Farrell brought the event to a close with a question and answer session.