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Suicide and Homicide in State Prisons and Local Jails

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STATE PRISON HOMICIDE RATES DOWN 93 PERCENT JAIL SUICIDE RATES 64 PERCENT LOWER THAN IN EARLY 1980s

WASHINGTON - The suicide rate in local jails fell from 129 per 100,000 inmates in 1983 to 47 per 100,000 in 2002, the Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) announced today. The findings are from the first BJS report on inmate deaths mandated by the Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2002 (Public Law 106-297).

Suicides had been the leading cause of jail inmate deaths in 1983, but the death rate from illnesses and natural causes (69 per 100,000 inmates) was higher in 2002. State prison suicide rates, which have historically been much lower than the rate in jails, also dropped sharply, from 34 per 100,000 state prisoners to 14 per 100,000 in 2002.

The homicide rate in state prisons fell from 54 per 100,000 prisoners in 1980 to 4 per 100,000 in 2002. Local jail inmate homicide rates fell slightly, from 5 per 100,000 in 1983 to 3 per 100,000 in 2002.

During 2002, the latest year for which such data are available, there were 978 jail inmate deaths and 2,946 state prisoner deaths from all causes. During the same year, suicides accounted for 314 jail inmate deaths and 168 state prisoner deaths. Fewer than 50 deaths in either local jails (20) or state prisons (48) were homicides.

During 2002, the nation's smallest jails (fewer than 50 inmates) had a suicide rate five times higher than the largest jails (2,000 or more inmates).

During the three-year period from 2000 through 2002, white jail inmates were six times more likely to commit suicide than black inmates and more than three times more likely than Hispanic inmates. The male suicide rate in local jails (50 per 100,000 inmates) was more than 50 percent higher than that of female inmates (32 per 100,000). Violent offenders had a suicide rate (92 per 100,000) triple that of non-violent offenders (31 per 100,000).

Almost half of the jail suicides during the three-year period occurred during the inmate's first week in custody. Suicides in state prisons were much less concentrated in the period close to admission, with only 7 percent of the suicides occurring during the first month. About 80 percent of the jail and prison suicides occurred in the inmate's cell, but the time of day did not appear to be a factor.

Most states had no prisoner homicides during the course of a year. Thirty-one states reported none during 2001. Twenty-nine states reported none during 2002. During the two-year period from 2001 through 2002, three states reported 43 percent of all prison murders -- California, 21; Texas, 10 and six in Maryland.

During 2002, there was a higher homicide rate among the U.S. resident population (6 per 100,000) than either in state prisons (4 per 100,000) or in local jails (3 per 100,000). The rate of suicide in the resident population (11 per 100,000) was lower than in state prisons (14 per 100,000) and considerably lower than in local jails, which was 47 per 100,000 (average daily inmate population).

The report, "*Suicide and Homicide in State Prisons and Local Jails*" (*NCJ-210036*), was written by BJS policy analyst Christopher J. Mumola. Following publication, the document can be accessed at: https://bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=1126.

Additional information about BJS statistical reports and programs is available from the BJS website at https://bjs.gov/.

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