

The Melancholy Truth of Jailhouse Suicide

By

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Jeffrey Epstein and Aaron Hernandez remain the two most high profile jailhouse suicides in decades. In each instance, deplorable conditions of incarceration contributed to the deaths. In the case of Epstein, sleeping guards failed to make rounds, there was a breakdown within the institution's safety and security protocol allowing time for a suicide. In the matter of Hernandez, guards failed to make rounds, and more importantly, a culture of violence, drugs, and administrative indifference contributed to the former pro-football player and convicted murderer's death. In each case, there remains a crisis of arrest and detention leaving these victims to kill themselves.

More than three-hundred people commit suicide each year in American jails, twenty-five percent within the first 24 hours of incarceration and half within two weeks. About a third of deaths inside jails are caused by suicide, partly because people are reacting to the shock of incarceration.

People awaiting trial or serving short sentences are housed in jails, while convicts are held in prisons.

Modern American prisons are bleak places where technology has created a sterile hopelessness. I have witnessed the result of such despair. I've lived among inmates contemplating suicide. Lived and observed inmates who endure suicide watch: naked inmates locked in cells with no more than a metal frame for a bed and a "turtle suit", a polyester wrap-around smock.

Too often prisoners facing the brutal unknown of detention make threats to "kill themselves!" These threats are taken seriously triggering suicide watch.

Suicide watch may last twenty-four hours, or longer. Many inmates who attempt suicide, or merely threaten it, find themselves forever labeled in a mental health folder. This mental health "jacket" follows prisoners throughout their prison experience. Classification decisions are made based upon whether an inmate has attempted suicide or threatened it. Often, it is this determination by mental health officials that decide where inmates likely to hurt themselves end up. There are prisons and jails in every state where prisoners prone to hurting themselves do their time.

The dirty secret of detention remains a mystery to all but those who suffer through it. Modern American jails in particular, are designed to enhance misery and desperation - prosecutors use this tedious horror to exact plea agreements and swiftly end cases. The painful suffering of fighting a case can be so cruel most accused inmates take the first deal they get. In the case of Jeffrey Epstein, there would be no deal. For Epstein, suicide was his escape.

The unspoken truth of prison life is suicide remains an option for any inmate who desires to end the misery and uncertainty of their circumstances. Too many correction centers foster a culture of indifference - like the staff misconduct that allowed for the death of Epstein and Hernandez, for example.

Portrayed as a coward's way out, suicide is condemned among many behind bars as unmanly. There is a deeply entrenched "convict code" that holds suicide as a weakness. The hardship of prison life is something to be endured at all cost. Today's prison culture, however, is evolving. Suicide and attitudes about taking one's life, are no longer governed by the values of Spartan endurance which held among prisoners of these dark dangerous institutions. Today, suicide is considered

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the result of mental illness. Even among hardened convicts, there's an acceptance; a tacit acceptance suicide is both a shallow weakness and a mental illness. This modern ambivalence among prisoners is a dangerous trend that increases the likelihood of suicide as an option - when in the past it would have been met with condemnation.

The gruesome examples of Epstein and Hernandez allow the public a spectacular view of deplorable conditions of confinement facing anyone entering America's jails and prisons. The public was given an unvarnished glimpse into the callous disregard for life held by prison officials tasked with the welfare of prisoners.

The melancholy truth of jailhouse suicide is not the lonely result, but the circumstances that inexplicably drive the decision to take one's life in a grim squalid jailcell. It is said, society is judged by its treatment of prisoners; a suicide behind bars must haunt our collective conscious.

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Author Charles N. Diorio is currently serving a prison sentence at MCI-Concord. Please visit www.inmateauthorproject.org for more information about the work of Charles Diorio. Also, please visit RUN CHARLIE RUN and BREACH OF SECURITY on AMAZON.com, Barnes&Noble.com and GooglePlay.com.

Charles Diorio did serve on the same cellblock with Aaron Hernandez at the maximum security Souza-Baranowski C.C., his non-fiction memoir: **HARD TIME WITH AARON HERNANDEZ** is currently seeking a home, and literary agents are encouraged to enquire.

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