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Rethinking Suicide Research & Prevention

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All members of the Organizing Committee are from the Suicide Research Centre at Vilnius University. More details: <https://www.fsf.vu.lt/en/institute-of-psychology/centre-for-suicidology>

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Working in Prison: Does Exposure to Suicidal Behavior Matter?

Laurinavičius, Alfredas; **Dadašev, Said**; Cimalanskaitė-Kazlauskienė, Violeta;
Klimukienė, Virginija; Bagdonaitė-Jankauskienė, Sandra; Gailienė, Danutė

Vilnius University, Lithuania

Correctional work is widely recognized as one of the most stressful and demanding occupational environments. Among numerous stressors, exposure to suicidal and self-harming behavior is particularly concerning. Such exposure is expected to have both short- and long-term consequences for prison staff; however, most existing studies are qualitative in nature (Fontao et al., 2024). This quantitative study aims to evaluate the relationships between exposure to suicidal and self-harming behavior and indicators of prison staff's psychological functioning.

A convenience sample of 252 prison staff members who directly interact with inmates across all Lithuanian prisons participated. Respondents completed anonymous questionnaires in their work environment. The sample consisted of 85 men and 163 women, with a mean age of 41.5 years ($SD = 9.98$). Within the past year, 132 participants reported at least one suicide in their prison, 153 reported suicide attempts, and 209 reported incidents of self-harm. Measures included well-being, stress, depression, anxiety, coping strategies, work engagement, burnout, and related constructs.

Self-harm was identified as the most impactful event (21% of staff), followed by suicide (15.9%) and suicide attempts (7.9%). One-way ANOVA revealed significantly higher levels of depression, stress, and exhaustion among staff who witnessed suicidal behavior compared to those who had not, with effect sizes ranging from medium to large (up to $\eta^2 = .17$). Distress attributed to suicidal or self-harm events, measured by IES-R, was associated with other mental health indicators and explained up to 13% of variance in anxiety.

While prison work involves numerous stressors, exposure to suicidal or self-harming behavior represents an important risk factor for staff well-being. Recognizing the impact of these potentially traumatic experiences is essential for developing targeted interventions to support mental health and resilience among correctional personnel.

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