

Suicide watch

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Suicide watch is an intensive monitoring process used to ensure that an individual cannot commit suicide. Usually the term is used in reference to inmates in a prison, hospital, psychiatric hospital, or military bases. Individuals are placed on suicide watch when it is believed there is a good chance they will attempt to cause bodily harm to themselves.

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Forms

Various forms of suicide watch exist. These generally involve the subject being under continuous or very frequent watch of a guard, such as a prison officer or orderly, who will intervene if they attempt to harm themselves. The main forms are:

Periodic suicide watch

Periodic suicide watch, known at many facilities simply as *suicide observation* or *suicide watch*, involves the subject being monitored through frequent periodic checks.

Intense suicide watch

Intense suicide watch or observation, involves the subject being observed continually by a person who may be employed in one of several possible capacities, sitting or standing in direct sight or arm's reach of the subject.

Video suicide watch

In some places, *video suicide watches* are performed, in which the subject receives video monitoring via closed circuit television from a remote area of the facility.

Conditions of suicide watch

People under suicide watch are put into an environment where it would be difficult for them to hurt themselves. In many cases, any dangerous items will be removed from the area, such as sharp objects and some furniture, or

they may be placed in a special padded cell, which has nothing outcropping from the walls to provide a place for a ligature to be attached, and with only a drain-grill on the floor. They may be stripped of anything with which they might hurt themselves or use as noose, including shoelaces, belts, neckties,^[1] bras,^[2] socks, suspenders, other clothing, and bed sheets.^[2] Such precautions are taken because suicide may be attempted with those items. In extreme cases the inmate may be undressed entirely.

Controversies

Suicide watch regimes, particularly in prisons, have been criticized for being too restrictive and dismissive of privacy, socially functioning as a form of legal torture rather than being for the good of the detainee.

^[citation needed] Inmates are often placed naked in suicide cells, which are usually bare concrete, often without bedding (to prevent hanging by using bed sheets), and under frequent or continuous observation by guards. Unsanitary conditions are also common since toilet paper, underwear, and tampons (all potential means of choking) are restricted. Being exposed without any way of covering oneself, coupled with being under constant observation can aggravate mental distress, particularly if the inmate has been a victim of sexual abuse in the past. These harsh conditions came to light in 1998 when Elizabeth B., an inmate of Framingham prison in Massachusetts, USA, called a radio talk show to describe how she had been treated while on suicide watch:

I was ... put on eyeball status, stripped of belongings, clothing, placed naked in a room with nothing but a plastic mattress on the floor. Watched 24 hours a day by a man or woman. I was on my period but because of my status not allowed to have tampons or underwear. I was very humiliated, degraded. Being on eyeball status with male officers, my depression intensified. I didn't want to be violated any more than I already was, so I put the mattress up against the window. When I did that I was in violation because they couldn't see me. The door was forced open, I was physically restrained in four point restraints - arms, legs spreadeagled, tied to the floor, naked, helmet on head, men and women in the room.^[3]

Being on suicide watch does not guarantee an individual will not kill themselves. Ashley Smith, a female inmate at a facility in Canada, killed herself while under suicide watch in October of 2007. The circumstances surrounding her death were the subject of the Ashley Smith inquest.

References

- ↑ "Standing Up to Ezra Pound", *New York Times*, September 29, 1991, webpage: NYT-591 (<http://www.nytimes.com/1991/09/29/books/1-standing-up-to-ezra-pound-163591.html>)
- ↑ ^{*a*} ^{*b*} "NYC Board of Corrections - Rules - Variances", NYC.gov, 2011, webpage: Nrul (<http://www.nyc.gov/html/boc/html/rules/variances.shtml>)
- ↑ "Here and Now" program, station WBUR, Boston University, 16 October 1998. Amnesty (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR51/001/1999/en/ab8c7840-e363-11dd-937f-a170d47c4a8d/amr510011999en.html>)

See also

- 5150 (Involuntary psychiatric hold)
- Prisoner suicide

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Categories: Imprisonment and detention | Suicide prevention

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