

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/preventing-suicide-and-self-harm-in-jail>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Suicide is the leading cause of death in jails across the country. At a time when the public is paying closer attention to local jails and their primary role in mass incarceration, it is critical to shine light on the problem of jail suicide and the steps jails can take to prevent future deaths. This report is the second from Vera that frames suicide and self-harm in correctional facilities as sentinel events that signal a breakdown in underlying systems of care.

Vera's first report provided practical guidance on how to conduct a sentinel event review: an all-stakeholder, nonblaming, and forward-looking examination of the error in the aftermath of a suicide in custody. In this report, Vera shares lessons learned from an in-depth study of how four county jail systems review and respond to incidents of suicide and self-harm and the feasibility of integrating sentinel event reviews into those jails' regular practices.

Jails that adopt sentinel event reviews will not only demonstrate leadership and commitment to advancing the field of suicide and self-harm prevention, but will also help instill a new culture in their facilities: one that promotes the safety and well-being of the people in their custody and those who work there.

At their core, sentinel event reviews require a culture that is committed to addressing system weaknesses in order to prevent future adverse outcomes, instead of a culture of blame that is fixated on identifying bad apples.

Strong collaboration and effective communication are vital to create the conditions that prevent incidents of suicide and self-harm and can also foster space for sentinel event reviews and corrective action when an event occurs.

Vera's key recommendations are for these jurisdictions to develop suicide prevention plans that are consistent with national standards, seek out guidance on conducting robust reviews, and consistently review incidents of nonlethal self-harm.

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