



## Pathology/Biology Section - 2016

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### H107 Custodial Suicides: A Review of Suicides of Incarcerated Persons Investigated by the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences Over a Ten-Year Period

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the demographic characteristics, circumstances of incarceration, scene findings, and autopsy findings in cases of people who commit suicide while incarcerated. Attendees will also become familiar with recommendations for postmortem examination of persons who die in custody.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a set of data that includes detailed characteristics of custodial suicides which may be useful in developing prevention recommendations for these types of in-custody deaths.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, suicides account for approximately 30% of the deaths occurring in local jails and 5%-7% of deaths occurring in state prisons, with more than 6,000 people committing suicide while in local jails and state prisons in the United States from 2001-2012.<sup>1</sup> The rate of suicides in detention facilities is estimated to be approximately three times greater than that of the general population, with custodial suicides potentially having a significant negative financial impact on the detention facility in addition to the devastating emotional impact on the family of the inmate.<sup>2</sup> Various demographic, institutional, and clinical risk factors have been demonstrated to be associated with custodial suicides.<sup>3</sup> From 2005-2015, the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences investigated approximately 30 deaths of people incarcerated in jails, prisons, and holding facilities which were subsequently classified as suicides. As expected, hanging was the cause of death in the overwhelming majority of these decedents. Only one death, in which the decedent intentionally ingested prescription medications he had been stockpiling during his incarceration, was due to a cause other than hanging. The demographic characteristics of the decedents, scene and investigative findings including how the hangings were accomplished and types of ligatures used, and the circumstances of incarceration including type of facility and cell, duration of incarceration, and offense for which the decedent was arrested will be discussed.

Because many of these in-custody deaths understandably raise concerns of foul play and may be scrutinized by various investigative agencies, the postmortem examination must be exceptionally thorough, carefully documented, and performed by an independent agency to eliminate/reduce the appearance of bias. Special recommendations for postmortem examination of in-custody deaths and documentation thereof will be reviewed in detail.

#### Reference(s):

1. Noonan M.E. and Ginder S. Mortality in Local Jails and State Prisons, 2000-2012 – Statistical Tables. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. October 2014
  2. Thigpen M.L. et al. National Study of Jail Suicide, 20 Years Later. *U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Corrections*. April 2010. NIC Accession Number 024308
  3. Daniel A.E. Preventing Suicide in Prison: A Collaborative Responsibility of Administrative, Custodial, and Clinical Staff. *J Am Acad Psychiatry Law* 34:2:165-175(June 2006)
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#### Custodial Deaths, Suicide, Hangings