



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

## Prison escape by suicide

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It has been several days since an inmate was found dead in his cell at MCI Concord. Suicide is typically the explanation for such occurrences, yet, according to Department of Correction officials, it will take a while longer before the investigation into the cause of death is completed.

Although there remains some doubt, at least officially, on whether 51-year-old Leo Savard, who was discovered with a ligature wrapped around his neck's death, was indeed a suicide victim, there is little doubt that problem of suicide remains especially acute within the state's correctional system. Already this year, even before the latest death of still undetermined cause, four inmates had died by their own hand.

When it comes to crime statistics, it is important not to make too much about short-term changes, especially sudden spikes that are inevitable in almost any measure that fluctuates over time. Last week, for example, I cautioned against jumping to any quick conclusion about the sudden surge in domestic homicides by revealing how the occasional aberrations in the figures have dissolved into the long-term stability.

This was my first thought in reading about the recent spike in suicides within Massachusetts correctional facilities—that it too was an unexplainable and unpredictable aberration. But then I looked at the figures going back a full decade (shown in the table below), and even earlier.

Year	Suicides
2000	2
2001	2
2002	1
2003	0

2004	1
2005	4
2006	7
2007	4
2008	1
2009	5
2010	4*

\* Only part-year; excludes latest suspicious death

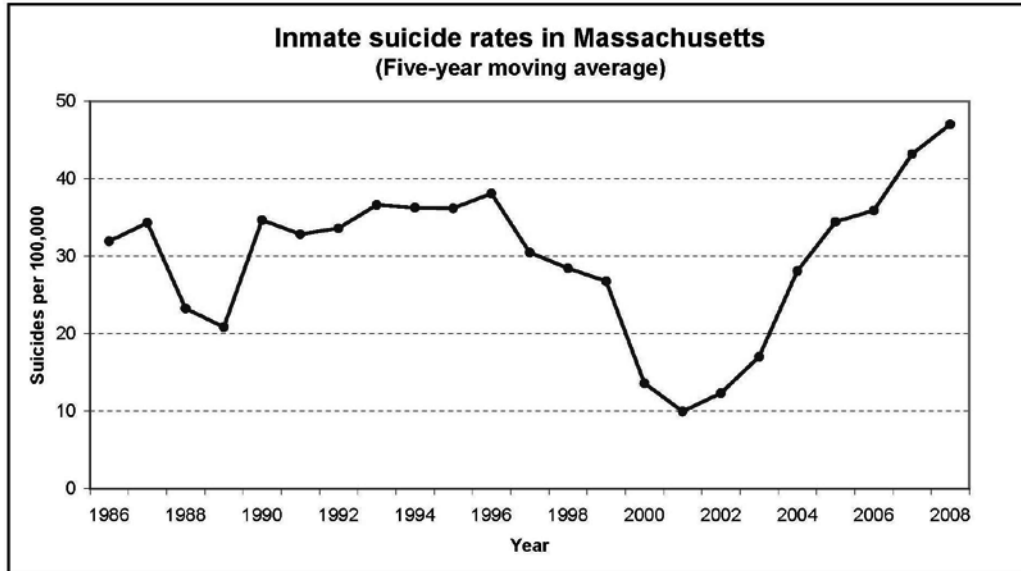
Generally, one should approach trends in counts of such low frequency with a grain of salt—maybe the whole shaker. Yet, with the exception of 2008, the recent incidence of suicide among Massachusetts prisoners is rather alarming (and not apparently just a short-term phenomenon).

The 25 suicides since 2005 translate into an annualized rate of about 47 per 100,000 inmates, compared to the rate of 12 per 100,000 inmates for the years 2000-2004, a fourfold increase.

Unfortunately, comparative figures for the nation are only available through 2006. Nationally, the rate of prison suicide increased steadily but slowly from 14 per 100,000 in 2001 to 17 per 100,000 in 2006. Of course, these rates, being based on a larger pool of cases, are not as volatile as is the rate for Massachusetts. Still, the recent flurry of self-induced killings in our state prisons is troubling whatever benchmark is used.

In late 2007, the Globe's Spotlight Team prepared a superb, in-depth analysis of the 15 suicides that had occurred behind the walls of Massachusetts facilities in the previous three years. The report suggested that at least part of the cause was the closing of state psychiatric hospitals in the 1980s. Since then, the prisons have housed increasing numbers of mentally unstable men and women.

However, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the suicide rate in Massachusetts prisons, although not quite as elevated as it is currently, was much higher than in the early part of this decade (see chart below). Apparently, something was being done a decade ago to lower the risk of inmate suicide; but whatever it was may no longer be in place.



It is possible that the recent jump in suicides stems from cuts in mental health services and personnel in these tight economic times. And part of the problem may reflect the trend toward making prison life more punitive.

Although some inmate suicides involve newly admitted prisoners who cannot adjust to life behind bars and others involve drug-addicted convicts who cannot tolerate the effects of withdrawal, most are prisoners suffering from sensory deprivation and despair while being held in solitary confinement. They apparently choose leaving in a pine box over staying in "the hole,"

Of course, there are some folks who may not find the issue of inmate suicide a particularly compelling one--those who consider prisoners to be nothing more than animals unworthy of redemption and who prefer they would just rot in their cells. Regardless of whether one feels compassion or contempt, by virtue of the fact that inmates remain involuntarily under control of the state, we have a special duty to reduce the number who choose death as the ultimate escape from prison.

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"The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilisation of any country. A calm and dispassionate recognition of the rights of the accused against the state, and even of convicted criminals against the state, a constant heart-searching by all charged with the duty of punishment, a desire and eagerness to rehabilitate in the world of industry all those who have paid their dues in the hard coinage of punishment, tireless efforts towards the discovery of curative and regenerating processes, and an unflinching faith that there is a treasure, if you can only find it, in the heart of every man these are the symbols which in the treatment of crime and criminals mark and measure the stored-up strength of a nation, and are the sign and proof of the living virtue in it."

*Sir Winston Churchill*  
*July 20, 1910*