



# A Review of Suicide in the Correctional System

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## INTRODUCTION

- In the United States of America, **suicide is the leading cause of death in jails and the second highest in prisons**, with inmates being nine times more likely to die by suicide than the general population (Awenat et al., 2017; Bonner, 2000).
- Within prisons, **the suicide rate has risen 30%** from 2013 to 2014 and American jails have reported **the highest suicide rate since data recording began in 2001** (Noonan, 2016) (*Figure 1*)
- **It is a consistent finding worldwide** that suicide rates in custody exceed those in the general population (Fruhwald & Frottier, 2005).
- Contributory factors have been suggested, such as **the deinstitutionalization of mental health treatment facilities, and the establishment of correctional liability** for inmate suicide through case law.
- **A thorough review is necessary** to assess these factors and showcase the issue's development over time.

## AIMS

This literature review seeks to:

- Outline the current issue of correctional suicide
- Trace the issue's history in the United States.
- Present possible perpetuating factors.

## METHODS

- Databases: PsycInfo, PubMed & Google Scholar
- Key search terms: 'Suicide' AND 'Prison'; 'Jail'; 'Incarceration' OR 'Correctional'
- Emphasis given to results given within the last 20 years. 36 articles on prisons, 8 on jails.

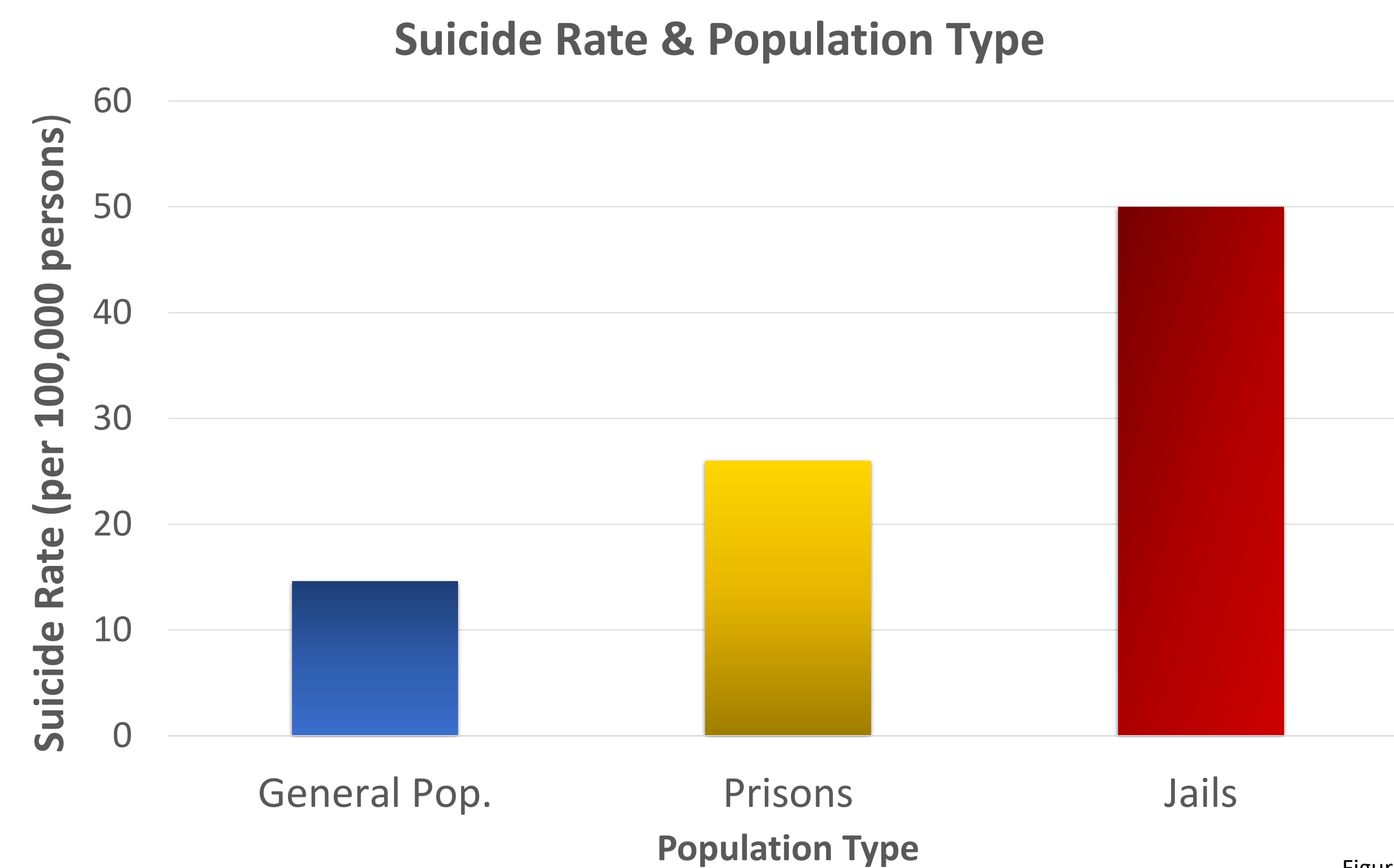


Figure 1



Figure 2

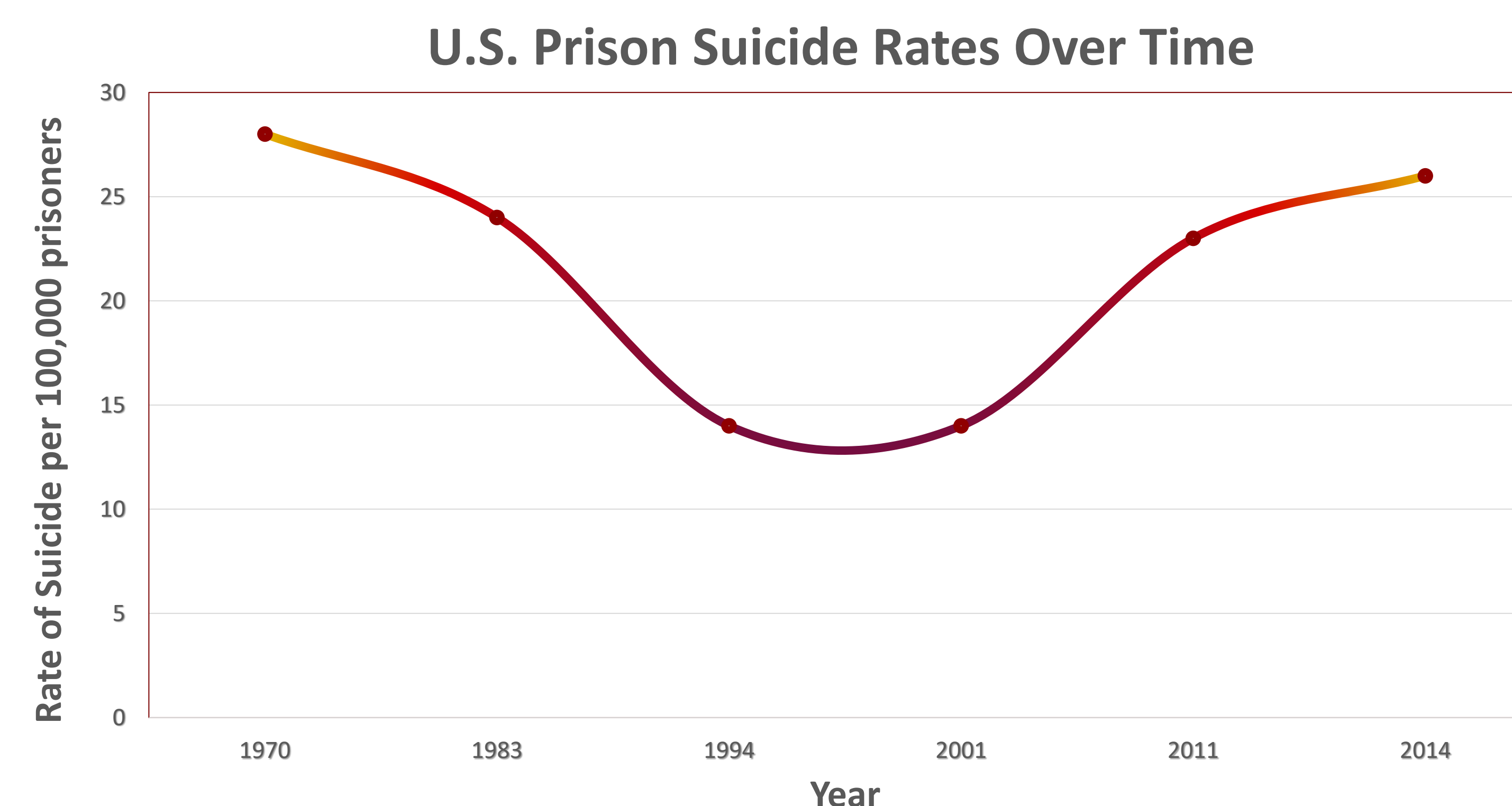


Figure 3

## RESULTS

- **Time-sensitive trends begin to emerge: (*Figure 3*)**
  - In the 1950s-1970s, the **deinstitutionalization of mental health facilities** resulted in an **all-time peak in correctional suicide**. (Torrey et al., 2014)
  - **In the 1980s-1990s, correctional liability was established in case law (*Williams v. Mehra*)**. In addition, **landmark research and policy commissions** brought forth a five-component system for standardizing suicidal treatment and intervention, including biannual audits through the Federal Bureau of Prisons. This system brought change which helped to curb the correctional suicide rate, carrying over into the next decade (Hayes, 1995; Lamb & Weinberger, 1998)
- However, recent years have seen a resurgence in the rate of correctional suicide – almost equal to rate in the 70s (Noonan, 2016).
- A complex web of factors have contributed to this dramatic increase, such as:
  - **Overcrowding** (Torrey et al., 2014)
  - **Increased resource demand** (*Annual Cost, Figure 2*),
  - **The compartmentalization of correctional facilities**
  - **Negative staff-prisoner relationships**
  - **Lack of comprehensive policy** (Fazel, Ramesh & Hawton, 2017)
  - **A disproportionate rate of mental illness in the correctional system.** (Goss et al., 2002)

## DISCUSSION

- Rates of correctional suicide have been shown to respond to increased research and policy efforts. **Both are going to be needed to fix our ballooning suicide rate**
- **Communication between correctional systems will likely be key.** Intervention policies and procedures differ from facility to facility and can quickly become outdated. There is a need for an effective 'channel' for new suicide research to be put into practice for facilities.
- **Clinicians should seek to emphasize long-term treatment of underlying disorders for inmates.**
- Future research should develop evaluative criteria to reliably assess suicide prevention within correctional facilities – **identifying target areas for research and policy efforts.** The next step towards addressing this issue would be to evaluate whether rising rates of suicide can be connected to gaps in suicide prevention policy currently in place, or if there are issues with the implementation of these policies.