

8 June 2015

EMBARGOED: NOT FOR USE UNTIL 00:01, TUESDAY, 9 JUNE 2015

**OMBUDSMAN CALLS FOR SEGREGATION TO BE USED MORE
SPARINGLY FOR PRISONERS AT RISK OF SELF-HARM**

Prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm should only be kept in segregation units in exceptional circumstances, yet the number of prisoners who killed themselves in these austere settings is at its highest level for nearly a decade, said Nigel Newcomen, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman (PPO). Today he published a bulletin on the lessons that can be learned from PPO investigations into self-inflicted deaths of prisoners being held in segregation.

Segregation involves a prisoner being removed from association with other prisoners. This can be for reasons of good order and discipline, when prison managers consider that keeping a prisoner on a standard prison wing would be disruptive, difficult to manage or unsafe for others. A prisoner might also be segregated for their own protection and safety when there may be a threat from other prisoners. Additionally, a prisoner may be segregated as a punishment after being found guilty of a disciplinary offence, or in the period between an alleged offence and an initial hearing.

There are clear rules about segregating prisoners which prison staff are required to follow. Staff must also consider rules on safer custody which recognise that segregation can be potentially damaging for prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm. As a result, segregating prisoners in crisis should be an exceptional measure, once all other options have been discounted. When staff do not know these rules or do not put them into practice appropriately, prisoner safety can be compromised with potentially fatal consequences.

The lessons from the bulletin are that:

- staff responsible for the care of prisoners in segregation units should fully understand and follow the mandatory procedures for safeguarding segregated prisoners set out in PSO 1700, Segregation, and PSI 64/2011, Safer Custody;
- special accommodation and protective clothing should only be used if absolutely necessary and plans should be made to return the prisoner to standard accommodation and normal clothing as soon as possible;
- segregated prisoners should be provided with the means to occupy themselves, at minimum reading material and a radio;
- during an initial health screen and ensuing reviews, staff should base decisions about fitness for segregation on the prisoner's full mental health history and other relevant factors that could potentially compromise their ability to cope;
- lengthy periods of segregation are to be avoided and, when unavoidable, should be regularly reviewed so that a care plan can be developed to help prevent deterioration in mental health; and
- exceptional circumstances to justify the segregation of a prisoner subject to suicide and self-harm prevention procedures (ACCT) should actually be exceptional.

Nigel Newcomen said:

“Segregation is an extreme and isolating form of custody used for prisoners who have misbehaved or who cannot be kept safely in normal prison accommodation. It inherently reduces protective factors against suicide and self-harm, such as activity and interaction with others, and should only be used in exceptional circumstances for those known to be at risk of taking their own life.

“Worryingly, in 2013/14, eight prisoners killed themselves in prison segregation units, four of whom had been assessed as at risk of suicide and self-harm. This is the highest number of deaths in these settings since 2004/05. The Prison Service's own instructions

recognise the potentially damaging effect of segregation on those who may be at risk of suicide and self-harm and I have previously raised concerns about the number of deaths of prisoners who were known by staff to be vulnerable and at risk of harming themselves, yet were still held in segregation conditions. This bulletin explores these concerns further and is intended to ultimately contribute to the prevention of future deaths.”

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. A copy of the report can be found on the PPO website. Visit www.ppo.gov.uk.
2. The PPO investigates deaths that occur in prison, secure training centres, immigration detention or among the residents of probation approved premises. The PPO also investigates complaints from prisoners, young people in secure training centres, those on probation and those held in immigration removal centres.
3. Most prisons have a dedicated segregation unit which allows prisoners to be moved to a location completely separate from the main residential wings. In segregation units, prisoners will generally spend most of the time alone in their cell, leaving only to shower, use the telephone and exercise. They will not usually have much personal property with them. Segregated conditions are also sometimes applied outside of dedicated segregation units. Prisoners can be kept on the wing but locked in their cells for most of the day and taken to shower and exercise separately from other prisoners on the wing.
4. **Contact us:** Please contact Jane Parsons, PPO Press Office, on 020 3681 2775 or 07880 787452 if you would like more information, or email mail@ppo.gsi.gov.uk.