

munity populations, but such data are not available.

The higher rates of inmate suicide remain a priority concern for Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). The suicide rate in federal prisons varies from year to year but is showing an overall downward trend (Fig. 1). CSC has recently adopted a new policy to ensure a comprehensive strategy for prevention, management and response regarding suicides. In addition, an awareness and prevention workshop is being made available to all inmates.

The authors did not contact our office for information or to discuss the interpretation of their findings. If they had, we would have informed them of these activities.

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Contrary to the Ontario data shown in Table 2 of Wendy Wobeser and colleagues' article,¹ the suicide rate in provincial prisons in Quebec seems higher than that in federal penitentiaries. In fact, a special Quebec coroner's inquiry² showed that the suicide rate in provincial institutions in Quebec was 339.8 per 100 000 between 1992 and 1996. For the same period, provincial institutions in Ontario had a much lower rate (44.3 per 100 000), and for all provincial institutions in Canada, the mean was 101.2 (range 0 to 339.8).² For a comparable period (fiscal year 1993/94), the rate in Canadian penitentiaries was 185 per 100 000, but again, the range has been large (the extremes being 246 in 1982/83 and 88 in 1989/90).² This range of data shows that we must be cautious in analyzing these relatively small numbers of events, which must effectively be estimated on a population basis (per 100 000).

It is true that the rate of violent deaths is high among incarcerated people, particularly men. Ideally, these rates should be compared with rates in

equivalent populations, for example, men from 24 to 49 years of age, as Wobeser and associates¹ did. But we should go one step further and compare rates among incarcerated delinquents and non-incarcerated delinquents. This is not easy to do, but Pritchard and colleagues,³ for example, showed that the rate of violent deaths among people on probation was 10 times higher than in the general population. For those aged 35 to 54, the rate was 35 times higher. Other researchers^{4,5} have shown that characteristics such as these reflect the delinquent population, rather than the correctional system. This is not to say that institutions have no responsibilities in addressing the problem. On the contrary, we should take full advantage of the opportunity to help these people while they are available for care in a correctional institution.

In closing, let me reiterate that correctional facilities are not necessarily the best places to treat people. Diversion programs, such as the ones being implemented now in Quebec⁶ and elsewhere, are much better alternatives, at least for those with serious mental health problems.

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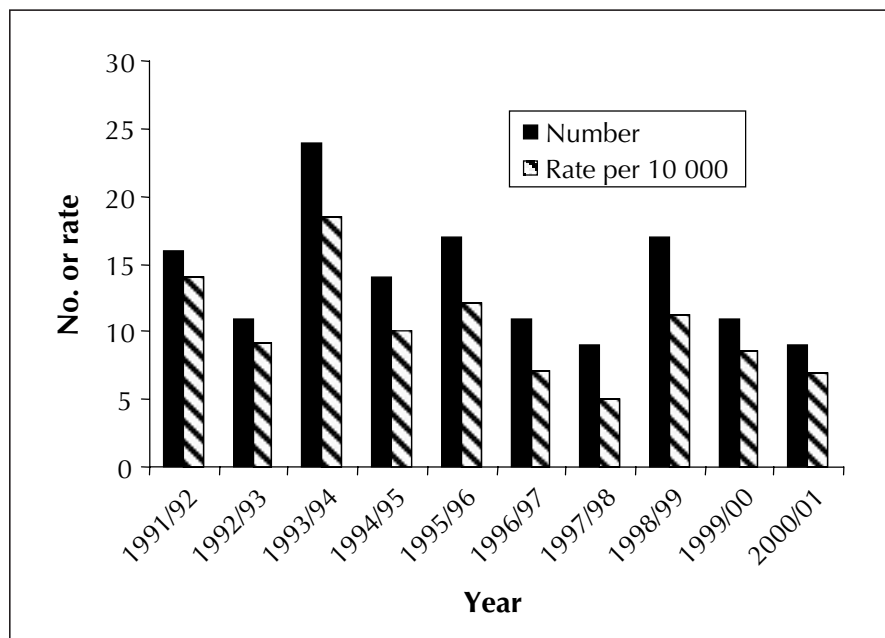


Fig. 1: Number and rate of suicides in federal prisons, 1991/92 to 2000/01.