

Suicide in/as Politics

An interdisciplinary and qualitative analysis of the policy and politics of suicide and suicide prevention in the UK. Our research is creating new conversations between academics, policy makers and practitioners.

University of Lincoln research has:

- Investigated the ways that suicide is constructed in policy documents and within political debates
- Highlighted the problems and potential future possibilities of UK Suicide Prevention Strategies
- Explored how diverse communities respond to and make sense of policy and political constructions and meanings of suicide, by running arts-based research workshops

Quotes from some of our workshop participants, talking about suicide prevention:

“Why is suicide prevention only focusing on a crisis and not focussing on preventing it getting to that point?”

“Whatever we call mental health problems, they’re just signs of distress and you don’t fix them in the person, you fix them in the context in which that person is.”

“As adults, the onus is on you to be resilient, not for the world to be a bit kinder.”

“Politicians are never brave enough when they talk about any of these things [suicide prevention].”

“We know what makes the difference, we’re just not really doing it.”

Suicide in/as Politics is a Leverhulme Trust funded project led by Dr Ana Jordan (University of Lincoln) and Dr Amy Chandler (University of Edinburgh) with Dr Alex Oaten (University of Lincoln) and Dr Hazel Marzetti (University of Edinburgh). The ‘Suicide in/as Politics’ study is a three-year, interdisciplinary, and qualitative research project, which examines the ways in which suicide is constructed within public and political discourses.

The aims of the project are to:

- Generate new knowledge about the ways in which suicide is both constructed and drawn on in political discourse in the UK.
- Analyse the construction and contestation of suicide in UK politics and policy.

Recognising the ‘politics’ of suicide

Suicide is political: both individual acts of suicide, and suicide rates, are influenced by political and social contexts, policies, and discourses. It is vital to examine how specific policy regimes impact on the lives and deaths of our fellow citizens.

For example, activists and scholars have suggested that recent austerity policies in the UK have led to increased suicide within economically marginalised groups. Other communities are also more vulnerable to suicide because of specific policy or political contexts (for example people in prison are at increased vulnerability to death by suicide).

However, most policy and research concerning suicide tends to frame the practice as exclusively about mental ill-health, presenting suicide as a problem of individual pathology and thus downplaying the political, economic, social and cultural contexts in which suicides occur. There is, therefore, an increasing and pressing need for different forms of knowledge about suicide, along with more interdisciplinary ways of approaching its study.

By recognising the politics of suicide, we are highlighting how political and policy contexts are relevant to understanding suicide deaths. Through this recognition, our project is changing conversations around suicide prevention.

We have collected data from:

- 10 years of UK suicide prevention policies
- 10 years of legislative political debates on suicide and suicide prevention
- 9 campaigns (political and third sector)
- Running collaborative arts-based workshops with different communities

From ‘prevention’ to creating ‘liveable lives’

Suicide prevention policies tend to focus exclusively on the immediate specific prevention of the ‘death’ of those people who are in ‘crisis’.

Our research suggests that rather than just focusing on ‘death prevention’ we need policies that create liveable lives; by embracing opportunities for a holistic approach to addressing suicide. This means engaging with a multitude of different policy regimes (from welfare to criminal justice to equality).

We are working with policy makers and practitioners to challenge current thinking around the concept of ‘prevention’; by highlighting the complex temporality of suicides and moving the focus away from ‘prevention’ as a single moment in time. By recognising the politics of suicide, we are stressing the potential (and the responsibility) that government policies have to create and sustain liveable lives and thus reduce suicides.

IMPACT ON POLICY

Our research has highlighted some of the problems that exist in the ways that suicide is framed in suicide prevention policies, by policy makers and by politicians. It is changing conversations around prevention and stressing the importance of creating ‘liveable lives’ through policy. It has also given diverse communities a chance to have their voices heard and to ‘speak back’ to policy makers.

Our research has been shared with:

- NHS England
- NHS Scotland
- Local Authorities
- Charitable and Third Sector Organisations (such as the Samaritans)

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