

SUICIDE IN MODERN IRELAND
NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW RESPONSES

Suicide & Vulnerable Groups
Saturday Morning 13 November

SUICIDE IN PRISONS

Presented by: **Mr John Lonergan**
Governor, Mountjoy Prison, Dublin

In the Chair: **Dr Abbie Lane**
St John of Gods

Dr Abbie Lane: I just want to say thank you to the organising committee and to Kevin for inviting me here to introduce the session this morning on Suicide in Vulnerable Groups and we have three well known speakers starting with John Lonergan, who probably does not need too much of an introduction to most of you. He tells me he has been in prison in total for 37 years and they have let him out of his job as Governor of Mountjoy this morning to come to this session. He is going to talk about the human stories behind the system. He describes suicide as probably the most traumatic event that can happen in a prison and he also notes that there are many contributing factors. He is going to describe working with this group over the past years in terms of counteracting these problems and increasing awareness. So I will introduce John to you.

John Lonergan: Thank you very much. Firstly, I am very pleased to be here and to share my experience of suicide and all the other issues that contribute to it and result from it. As has been said, I suppose for especially the last 21 years or so while I have been Governor up in Mountjoy. When I took over there first, I inherited or ran into a very black period in the history of Mountjoy because prior to the 80's very few suicides took place in prison at all, which is amazing. So I suppose the 80's was the first time we certainly in prisons were confronted with the many issues that arose and the stigmatisation and the reaction and the public reaction, the political reaction, the media reaction, to suicide in prison. At that stage, there was very little emphasis, if any, on suicide in the community. It is amazing the way the whole thing has moved on since. I suppose I have been there through all those changes.

Prison Figures: Just to give you a few figures first because I think people are interested and should know in the context of what we are talking about.

- There are 3,300 people from 16 years upwards in prison in Ireland on any one day. So it is a relatively small number of people when you think about it out of a population of over 4 million. 3,300 scattered around at the present time 14 different prisons or institutions. With the exception actually of Mountjoy, the numbers are smallish in most other prisons.
- Out of that 3,300, 100 roughly are women, which is another I suppose an amazing thing that there is about 100 women to 3,200 men.
- About 600 of those 3,300 people are not sentenced. They are people in custody awaiting sentence and they are probably the highest risk of all of the 3,300 because of the fact that they are on remand. We have around 2,500/2,600 sentenced people at any one time.

So that just fills in the overall numbers that we're talking about.

In Mountjoy there are

- around 500 men at any one time and
- 100 or less than 100, 80/90 women.

We are talking about vulnerable groups. Of course those who end up in prison have to be classified as a vulnerable group for all sorts of reasons. The first thing is the fact that they are confined, the vast number of them against their will. I never say that everybody is confined against their will because we do come across some very sad situations where people actually almost volunteer to go to prison because of their circumstances outside. I suppose that is sadder if even still, but for the

vast number of people, they are there against their will and that automatically makes them different.

Their Backgrounds: A few things.

- **Age:** Overwhelmingly young people between the late teens and middle thirties. Looking at all the statistics, you find that vast numbers of people commit suicide in that catchment group so the age group as well is another contributing factor.
- **Psychiatric Illness:** The fact that so many people in prison suffer from other things as well as their criminality: psychiatric illness, not that I am saying that there is a direct and ongoing link but certainly it is a factor. About one in four men have a history of being an in-patient in a psychiatric hospital. That is a phenomenally high number of people. There is no community that I know of outside a prison, except in a psychiatric hospital that you would have figures like that - one in four. 40% would have contact with psychiatric services. That is another huge element.
- **Addiction:** A huge number of people who end up in prison carry a lot of baggage around addiction, whether it is alcohol or drugs. But we certainly know in Dublin about heroin and about 67%-70% have a history of heroin addiction, so that obviously increases the risk factor.
- **Stigmatisation:** The stigmatisation that goes with being in prison. When you read some of the high profile cases and you read the media reaction to it, sometimes the judiciary comments on it, sometimes the public reaction, there is no wonder at all and it wouldn't surprise anybody that there is that whole stigmatisation thing, the shame thing. That word I often comment on and say that one of the most cruel words that I know of that applies, or labels that apply in modern Ireland is this word "disgraced". That word is used at every opportunity now. Anybody that does anything wrong, they are immediately given that little label. They are "disgraced". What that means, carrying that label around with you for the rest of your life - the disgraced bishop, the disgraced priest, the disgraced anybody. Sometimes what they have done does not merit it in anyway but in a country like Ireland, you certainly have to question how people have never responded to that and oppose that particular sort of labelling of people. So the whole stigmatisation that attached to it; the shame of it.
- **Hopelessness.** Just think about these people and what they think about, if you were going into prison and serving long sentences. I don't particularly worry too much about short sentences although for individual people even a short sentence can mean the end of the world. We have this perception in Ireland that a life sentence is 7 or 8 years and it is sometimes. Indeed on Joe Duffy and programmes like that, I hear people saying "ah sure they'll be out in 3 or 4 years" but nothing could be further from the truth and nobody likes to contradict it for whatever reason, so the public perception is "ah sure they're out in a few years anyway". But for some people serving very long sentences, indefinite life sentences - we have lots of people in prison that have served 25 and 26 years of a life sentence and they are no nearer getting out and when you hear averages being spoken about in terms of people being released from prison, you are talking about those who have got out in 12 or 14 years, not all the ones that have never got out. So for some people, we would want to think about that as well. What does 25 years mean? We are brilliant at commenting about things like they should serve long sentences, 20 or 30 years, like confetti. But 25 years is a hell of a long time. Look forward 25 years and say what is going to happen. Most people would be gone in 25 years. Look at the changes that will happen in 1 year. Can you imagine looking forward to 25 years or 20 years or whatever it is? That has nothing got to do with whether the person deserves it or not. I am just talking about some of the immediate things that people are confronted with. Hopelessness, what is going to happen to me when I come out? Many years ago, would you believe this, in 1986 I actually said, I wrote this little thing for an article of studies, that it is traumatic for many people going to prison but for a lot of people it is even more traumatic coming out of prison. Where are they going to go to? Who wants them? What futures have they? So there are huge issues.
- **Depression:** Then another issue that is prevalent always in prison is depression. In the women's prison a while ago, I was discussing with the staff why there is such a low pick-up of some of the very wonderful programmes that are available there, a new facility, a new culture, a new opportunity as I see it and still you know we are doing very well to get 25 out of 90 into any educational programme, any. You say look at all the facilities they have, look at all teachers out there. I was raising this issue about the pick-up. How could be motivate people? One member of staff put up her hand she said, "do you realise what the biggest single issue here is?" and I said no. She said, "Well it is depression". She said "our biggest achievement

every day is getting people out of bed in the morning". I suppose they did put me back into reality and put it all into perspective – Depression. You know I am certain that a huge amount of depression exists all the time in an institution like a prison and why wouldn't it?

So there are a huge number of different factors that are all the time just continuing on.

- **Loneliness:** I suppose the loneliness as well, the separation and the loneliness of people as the result of being locked up as well. Spending 16 hours a day in a cell on your own. Think about it. Imagine having to spend 16 hours a day in your bedroom on your own. You would crack up yourself. They're doing that indefinitely. Dining on your own. I've often talked about the importance of dining together. People don't realise that if you're having just a lunch at home, the fact that 4 or 5 people are sitting around a table is the social thing. It is the whole human thing of interaction. Imagine you are doing that for 20 years in your cell on your own. The loneliness of that.
- **Mistrust:** If you have a difficulty, how difficult it is. The dynamic in prison, I've often said this as well, just again to raise awareness around it, I suppose the most powerful dynamic in prison is built around and revolves around mistrust. Why mistrust? Because obviously we don't trust the prisoners. If we did, why would we be putting bars on the window? Why would we be locking the door? Why would we be searching them? Why would we be monitoring even their family visits? So obviously the system does not trust the prisoner and you can be dead sure that the prisoner does not reciprocate trust. He reciprocates mistrust.

It fascinating a few years ago, the National Training and Development Institute came in to do a survey in Mountjoy and the survey was around lots of issues, personal issues. Very little of this is done, by the way, as well which is another amazing thing. Very little of is done of finding out the reality rather than making assumptions. We are brilliant at assumptions. It is like there are people writing books about people and saying "now the full story..." and then you discover that they have never spoken to the person, the very centre of the whole thing. But people are actually arrogant enough to believe that it is the full story and there are lots of people who have said to me in certain positions, "I know every prisoner in the system" but what they mean is I know everyone's file in the system. There is a huge difference between a file and a person. But anyway I said about going back to the whole issue of trying to cope with knowing people and getting to know people. The whole system is the very opposite. But anyway I was telling you about the National Training and Development Institute. They came in to do a survey. For the first time ever they were asking those sort of, amongst other questions, they were asking that particular question like if you had a crisis in your life while you were in prison, who would you go to? In Mountjoy there was about 600 men at the time and there was about 500+ staff as well of all disciplines and professions, doctors, nurses, psychiatrists, psychologists, probation, teachers, prison officers, governors, you name it. We had two sisters, two nuns in the capacity of full time Chaplains. They had 600 between them; they had about 300 each to look after. Imagine having to look after 300 men? When the survey was done the results were amazing really because you know the two nuns, the two sisters won hands down in terms of who the guys would go to. I am not joking you. They were up there a mile ahead of everybody else. There were only two of them. It was just unbelievable that two people...but anyway, the next question was why? Why the nuns? Why the sisters? It was simply two issues and I will share those issues with you because I want to tell you how important they are.

- The first one was being non-judgemental. You know this yourself if you have a problem or a difficulty or if you want to share with anybody, the last thing you want is people to be making judgements about you. Be non-judgemental. So if you want people to talk to you, if you want people to relate to you, if you want people to trust you, I'd say that is there first one.
- The second one of course, not surprisingly, is around confidentiality. I am not telling anybody. When I am talking to parents, I am always saying to parents, you must start off by being absolutely certain and totally committed to one thing and that is confidentiality. Your teenagers, or even when your young child tells you "don't tell anybody else", don't run around telling all the neighbours because once that feedback comes back that you are breaking confidence, people stop telling you.

I do link it in and I do link all this into the whole context of the whole issue of the dynamic of suicide. Being hurt, the judgemental stuff. I want people to think about the judgemental stuff. It has nothing got to do with agreeing or being neutral about the behaviour of somebody. I've always said that to prisoners that if somebody comes in and they have murdered somebody, you wouldn't say "I understand you, you were right". Of course you would condemn the behaviour but that is a

completely different thing to condemning the person. I honestly believe that one of the big difficulties today is that whole thing of the way people respond and demonstrate quite clearly how much they hear people and how neutral they are, how non-judgemental they are, being heard. So if you are in prison or in an institution like that, it is difficult sometimes to have somebody, that you can believe that there is a trust element there and that you can actually talk about your feelings.

You see, institutions are terrible places in many ways. If I am told that somebody is depressed and is thinking about suicide the first thing I am going to do is to react and make sure he does not. By doing that, often it is actually making the whole thing a lot worse. So why would people say anything if there is going to be a negative reaction like putting them into a safe cell, what we call a padded cell, so that they couldn't damage themselves. But of course if you tell somebody something and the end product is that you end up somewhere like that, you are unlikely to repeat it so you suppress your feelings. So stigmatisation, how we react. I am always saying it to parents, it is a culture, it is wider than any one of us. The culture changes on the basis of the way we change. For instance, drink driving. Look at they way over the last 15/20 years and particularly the last decade the way the culture has changed, and rightly so, around drinking and driving. It is almost impossible now to believe that one time it was a laugh somebody drinking and driving. People thought it was a sign of toughness or "he's a wild man", so we can change the culture. One of the things we do, I believe, is that we actually create culture ourselves. It is what we do, what we say, how we respond. What happens in prison just reflects what happens on the outside. So when trends go up on the outside or different things change on the outside, it is inevitable that eventually they will change on the inside as well. So we do reflect and react to what is happening on the outside.

Suicide Figures in Prisons: Just I suppose a few figures. I brought a few figures because over the years again I have found there are all sorts of perceptions. Any time I am ever talking to anybody the first thing they comment on is that we have an awful lot of suicides. I believe one suicide is one too many in a prison or anywhere else. So it is very hard to answer that we're not doing too bad. One is too bad. It is a very sensitive thing. It is somebody's life. The family of a person who has committed suicide in prison, they are as traumatised as a person outside. So you have to be very careful. Prisons and the prison systems and the Department of Justice have not been renowned for responding in a human way to lots of things but I suppose one of the few things that I can say is that over the last 10/14 years, the system has reacted to suicide. From the middle 80's onwards when I remember in a space of a few months we had 6 suicides in Mountjoy which was horrific, but there has been a response. In 1991, the first study was done of suicides and deaths in prison and many recommendations were made and again not all of them, but many of them were implemented. Things like:

- **Window Bars:** All new prisons don't have any bars on windows anymore. That is a huge plus because the bar was something, not alone was it a facilitator but it was an enticement. You looked up and you said "Jesus that is an ideal facility for it". So the bars have all been taken away.
- **Staff Awareness:** There is better awareness around staff which is a huge thing. The numbers of people that are saved in prison are huge. What I mean by saved, they are actually cut down and they are maybe within seconds of being dead. So staff awareness is hugely important.
- **Screening** has massively improved. Simply screening, that going into prison, people are looking out for some of the things that we know for a fact. For instance, if somebody is charged with a very serious high profile or stigmatised offence, that is important. Or somebody who was never in prison before. You can imagine the trauma of that and the stigmatisation, the fear, the anxiety and their vulnerability.
- **Staff training:** I remember one very young prison officer was only in the job about a week in Mountjoy many years ago now, 10 or 12 years ago and he just did recruit training but in recruit training there was just one little session around suicides in prison. The very first night duty he was working then a landing in Mountjoy that had about 55 guys in single cells. He checked this guy around 3 o'clock in the morning and he went on to the end. He was only a young guy, but his instincts alerted him. He took off his shoes and he crept back in his stocking feet and he looked back into this cell, wasn't your man just beginning to tie something onto the window. Without that small little input of training, it would never have crossed his mind. So it is just one little example of how raising awareness and giving people training and some indications of what to look out for, you can actually save peoples' lives.

But some of the numbers.

This year so far we have had 6 deaths in Irish prisons in total and 4 of them are definitely suicides. Last year we had 9 deaths but 2 of them were found to be suicides.

There is difficulty sometimes in relation to prisons and in relation to people dying in prisons and people will understand this is around drug overdoses, whether the drug overdose was deliberate or whether it was an accident. Obviously in some cases they are accidents. In other words people's resistance to heroin has been reduced over a period of time and they get a very powerful or strong heroin fix, that heroin can kill them. They never meant to kill themselves but it could kill them simply because of their resistance being so low. On other occasions equally there is a possibility that the person deliberately took too much, so there is always a bit of confusion so the inquest will usually find that the person died as a result of misadventure but it is very difficult.

In 2002, we had 8 deaths of 4 suicides. 2001 we had 4 deaths with one suicide and the previous year we had 9 with 3. 1999 alone in Mountjoy, we had 6 suicides in Mountjoy but since then we have had 2. So are we making progress? Is it just the clientele?

A few factors that contributed:

- **Reduction in numbers:** going down from 800 to 490. Simply because people have more space, people are known better, staff have more time to identify people, they get to know people. There is a million and one things that contribute
- **Methadone Maintenance:** The introduction of methadone maintenance. I am certain that that has made a contribution. We have 160 to 170 men in Mountjoy and 30 women on methadone maintenance every day. When you move 4 years ago from none on it you can imagine that for a big number of people that is a contributing factor. The same pressure isn't on.
- **Fear Factor:** In prison some of the things that are contributing, the fear factor, the fear, in prison itself. There is sort of an underworld sometimes especially around drugs, as you know. Gangland warfare outside is reflected inside in the context of how prisoners are put under pressure. Sometimes they owe money. Sometimes they're given money to buy drugs and they use them themselves or they rob people outside that are related to people inside. There is a huge dynamic of that all the time. A sort of an underworld current that is there that puts pressure on people.
- **Hopelessness:** Just going back again to the hopelessness. I know a couple of guys that made a series of attempts to commit suicide because they found a spot on their face and some other eejit said to them "Is that AIDS you have?" and they believed them. They said "I am not going to die with AIDS and have a lingering death".

It is amazing the sort of things and the variety that can contribute to it and all the different things. How people react and just going back to outside of prison, my own main emphasis would be about this judgemental stuff. I still say that is the biggest single challenge for us, how we hear people and not react, not condemn, not judge, not stigmatise. How many times do people know of, young people especially, who believe their world is over? Sometimes even with school children the way we react to their behaviour or their failure to measure up.

Expectations: They do something very small. I am not going to mention much about it but I know my own little area at home in Tipperary a few years ago, a very, very sad case where a young boy came home from college and reported himself about the difficulties he got into during the day in college. They were only messing, it was only a minor thing but the father, poor man, over reacted to it and almost lost the plot over it and the next morning he was found hanging in the wardrobe. There is no question in my mind that there was a direct link to how the family reacted to what was only a minor incident. So what I am saying sometimes is that our own expectations and our own standards and a whole lot of stuff are contributing factors.

High achievers: We have a huge thing in modern Ireland about that. I am going to finish off now and if people want to ask anything they can but I've a huge thing myself about the poverty amongst all of us around success. We've been indoctrinated with this of success now. Success is measured in Ireland today very narrowly. There is a very, very narrow interpretation of what success is. It is like the student going to school. "How many A's did you get?" I am always saying this to parents. I just want to share this little thing with you because I was saying it out in Finglas a few weeks ago and a parent gave me one of the best bits of feedback and the proof of what I was talking about. I was talking about that expectation thing and what are expectations

and know your child and be sure to be positive. She said afterwards and she said she was guilty and I said we're all guilty. She said her daughter age 7 or 8yrs came home from school yesterday and announced that she got 19 out of 20 spellings correct today. And do you know what she said? "Which one did you get wrong?" But isn't that in all of us? It certainly was in me when my children came home and said "I got 95 in maths" and I said "Jesus which one did you get wrong?" or "why did you make that mistake?" and she said I actually went and looked for the error. "Stil", is what the little child wrote down. She said, "It was a pity you didn't put in the second l". I think that little incident does illustrate all of us sometimes, how cruel we all are really sometimes and how misguided we are. Expectation and success. This obsession with success. It is linked to materialism and consumerism. Otherwise why are we shopping all the time? Buying up stuff that we don't need at all. Seriously. Wardrobes full of stuff. Coming home with shopping and saying the next morning "I don't like it anyway". Seriously. It is about all that...and rushing, rushing around, no time for anybody. Then the opposite to success is failure. We have no tolerance for failure anymore. Ireland is full of perfect human beings today or at least you would think that, the perfect species and still I have never found one yet.

But seriously I want to finish off on that thing. If we claim as we do, we are suckers for success, if we claim responsibility and credit for success in society, whatever that may be, whether it is economics or social or sporting or whatever. equally I say well then we must also accept our share of the responsibility for failure. If we create the success, we contribute to the failure. We are damn slow at accepting failure. We blame everybody else. It is like the old economy a few years ago when it was going up. Everybody was saying "ah it was this...it was my idea..." we had fights over whose idea was the Celtic Tiger, the booming economy. But a couple of years ago when it was punctured and the backside fell out of it, there wasn't one person I saw standing up and saying I punctured the economy. It is serious. We don't.

My final little point is none of us have a right to point the finger at anybody else. I don't care who we are. None of us have the right to. There is not one of us an inch away from being vulnerable ourselves. Not one of us. We just pay lip service to people who are in difficulty or some of the social issues or some of the human issues like suicide. I am not saying this group; I am saying as a society, we pay lip service to it like we paid lip service to the drug addiction problems in Dublin for years; like we pay lip service to the misfortunate people lying on trolleys now in hospitals. Lip service, we do nothing about it and I have to finish off by saying and I believe this: conferences are no use, a waste of time and space if we don't do something. It is about going out and doing something. I am fed up of people talking. No need to preach your virtues if you live by them. I am going to finish off with a little poem that I came across a while ago which illustrates this. It is about doing it and it says:

*I'd rather see a lesson than to hear one any day.
I'd rather you walk with me than to merely show me the way.
The eye is a better teacher and more willing than the ear
And counsel is confusing but examples always clear.
The best of all the teachers are the ones who live the creed,
To see good put into action is what everybody needs.
I soon can learn to do it if you let me see it done.
I can see your hand in action but your tongue too fast may run
And the counsel you are giving may be very fine and true,
But I'd rather get my lesson by observing what you do*

Thank you.

Dr Abbie Lane: Thank you very much John for that very thought provoking talk.