

SUICIDE IN TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables . . . . .	ii
List of Figures . . . . .	iii
Acknowledgments . . . . .	iv
I . THE PROBLEM . . . . .	2
Concepts, Tools, and Definitions . . . . .	4
Type of Total Institutions . . . . .	9
II. PRESENTATION OF DATA . . . . .	12
Concentration Camps . . . . .	12
Prison and Jails . . . . .	17
Hospitals . . . . .	24
Army . . . . .	34
Schools: College and University . . . . .	43
III. SOCIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE DATA . . . . .	52
IV. METHODOLOGICAL NOTES . . . . .	58
V. REFERENCES . . . . .	70

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1--Suicides and Attempted Suicides of Prisoners . . . . .	22
Table 2--Suicide Rates: U.S. Army Male Personnel (by Rank and Selected Periods) . . . . .	37
Table 3--Sex Differentials in Suicide . . . . .	62
Table 4--Age Differentials in Suicide . . . . .	63
Table 5--Suicide Rates by Color Male N.Y., 1960 . . . . .	64
Table 6--Suicide Rates by Place of Residence and Sex in U.S. 1960 (rates per 100,000) . . . . .	65

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1--Stages of Suicide . . . . . 61

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"The experience of the individual in its exceptional character is the growing point of science, first of all in the recognition of data upon which the older theories break, and second, in the hypothesis which arises in the individual and is tested by the experiment which reconstructs the world."

(Mead, G. H. 1917:207)

## I. THE PROBLEM

As a method for initially defining the problem of this paper, let us consider two very different demographic profiles of persons who have committed suicide. First, in the general U. S. population we find that the typical suicide case involves an over fifty year old white male, living alone, who has recently lost either a significant other or a job. It is quite likely that he has made previous attempts on his own life and that he chose a relatively violent method of self-destruction--use of a firearm, hanging, or jumping from a high place. (Farberow and Schneidmann, 1965:19-47) Second, the typical suicide case in U. S. jails shows the following profile: an under thirty year old black or white male, only recently incarcerated. Jail suicides typically choose hanging as the method of self-destruction. (Danto, 1973:19)

While these profiles suggest certain extreme comparisons possible between suicide cases in "free" society and "confined" society, profiles alone cannot evoke the whole picture. It is, for instance, startling to recognize that rate of suicide among prison inmates is three times the rate of suicide in the population at large; and in the age group twenty to twenty-five, suicide rates for prison inmates are five times the rate for the equivalent age group in "free" society. (Wilson, 1939:162-3)

These outstanding contrasts in suicide rates gave rise to the problem of this paper. If, as students of suicide

from Durkheim (1951) to Henry and Short (1957) to Martin and Gibbs (1964) have argued, suicide is to be explained by referencing the quality of the nexus existing between individuals and society, "something" about the quality of institutional confinement must produce high rates of suicide among persons who are confined. To a remarkable extent, suicide in confinement seems to occur at or very near the beginning of the confinement period. A study by Fully (1965) found that over a ten-year period 70 percent of the suicides among U. S. prisoners occurred within the first month of imprisonment!

As we began to explore the connection suggested by the above data, it gradually became clear that reported suicide rates were markedly higher for inmates of all sorts of total institutions\* than rates for the general population; and the timing of suicide closely paralleled the findings of Fully. Consequently, our first task in this paper was to assemble all published sources on suicide in total institutions. Once assembled, we then sought to fit a sociological interpretation to those data to account not only for the higher suicide rate but also for the timing of suicide as a

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\*We are following the usage of the term total institutions suggested by E. Goffman who wrote, "A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life." (Goffman, E. 1961:1)