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# Exploring Student Attitudes to Suicide in the Community and in Prison

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**Abstract.** *Objective:* While there is increased research exploring public opinions of suicide, investigating attitudes towards prison suicide is scarce. Increased understanding is pertinent due to public opinions influencing, legitimising, or inhibiting suicide, prevention efforts and policy decisions. *Method:* The current study recruited five female and five male students, five were white British and five black or ethnic minority to explore attitudes to community and prison suicide. Semi-structured interviews were utilised, and the qualitative analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. *Results:* There were four main findings: students were more punitive towards suicide in prison than the community; attitudes towards suicidal offenders changed significantly depending on the offence committed but not on the offender's age or gender; participants supported prison support and prevention measures; there were no participant gender differences in the acceptance of suicide. *Conclusions:* While participants supported prison provision and prevention efforts for suicide, they were still particularly more punitive towards offenders compared with members of the public, showing increased negativity towards sexual offenders (SOs), specifically child sexual offenders (CSOs). There is therefore a need to not exacerbate the stigma associated with SOs to increase efforts of support and encouragement towards rehabilitation and reintegration to prevent re-offending and inspire them to become contributing members of society, in turn assisting in the reduction of suicidal tendencies within these groups.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Prison, Community, Attitudes.

## Introduction

### **The prevalence of suicide**

Suicide is a significant public health concern (Naghavi, 2019). Worldwide, different legal, religious, cultural and historical factors have shaped the understanding of suicide, leading to a wide range of community factors that influence suicide risk (World Health Organization [WHO], 2013) with over 700,000 individuals dying by suicide annually (WHO, 2021). Modern sociological theories discussing suicide propose that increased rates are a result of complex social arrangements in our globalised society (Nuttman-Shwartz et al., 2010). The suicide rate in the general population in the United Kingdom (UK) is rising in 2006 there were 4,482 suicides which increased to 5,277 in 2020, with the male suicide rate being three times higher than the female rate (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022). Worldwide, different legal, religious, cultural, and historical factors have shaped the understanding of suicide, leading to a wide range of community factors that influence suicide risk (WHO, 2023).

The risk of suicide disproportionately impacts the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of society, such as offenders (Fazel & Runeson, 2020). Imprisonment has grown worldwide with suicide acknowledged as the prevailing cause of death in prison globally (Slade & Forrester, 2015). Data suggests rates of suicide are higher in prisoners compared to the general population (McTernan et al., 2023) representing a significant problem of mortality in prisons worldwide (Favril et al., 2020). In 2021 in England and Wales there were 86 self-inflicted deaths compared to 67 in 2020 and 16 in 1978 (Ministry of Justice [MoJ], 2023). Suicide rates in offending populations are consistently shown to be significantly higher in comparison to those recorded in the general population (Favril et al., 2020; Fazel et al., 2011). With individuals on probation also being 8.7 times more likely to die by suicide than those in the general population (Phillips et al., 2019).

### ***Suicidal risk factors in prison***

The risk of suicide is determined by complex factors, prison-specific stressors may exacerbate this risk, consequently researchers have identified several factors unique to prisoner suicide (Favril et al., 2020). Marzano et al., (2016) suggests prison suicide is likely the result of numerous factors, and not solely the result of the prison environment. Firstly, many prison suicides in adult males occur at the earlier stages of a prison sentence (Kucmanic and Gilson, 2016), with many prisoners experiencing shock when entering prison and showing higher distress than experienced prisoners (MoJ, 2015). Secondly, prison life has been noted to be being dramatically different from life in the community (Liebling & Ludlow, 2016). Thirdly, prisoners can be adversely affected by a change in location (Moran et al., 2022), a lack of meaningful activity (Stephenson et al., 2021), bullying (Marzano et al., 2016; Rivlin et al., 2013) overcrowding (van

Ginneken et al., 2017), isolation and single cell occupancy (Favril et al., 2018), no social visits (Zhong, 2021) isolation (Favril et al., 2018) refusal of parole, segregation, and sentencing (Rivlin et al., 2013). Fourthly, prisoners are noted as having higher levels of hopelessness, impulsivity, and aggression (Rivlin et al., 2013), lower levels of self-esteem, resilience and psychological wellbeing (Bruce & Larweh, 2017; Desai & Yadav, 2022) and childhood victimisation and neglect (Tripodi et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2023). Lastly, discrimination against subgroups within the population can lead to stigmatisation, rejection and violence that may cause suicidal behaviour, such as those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (Hughto et al., 2022), those affected by bullying (Marzano et al., 2016). Consequently, the suicidal process in prisoners is a complex interplay of background factors, mental health and psychological problems, adverse life events, cognitive processes and biological, social, environmental and cultural factors.

### ***Factors influencing public attitudes***

Factors have now been identified that affect and influence opinions and attitudes. Nathan and Nathan (2020) discuss stereotypes regarding suicide, including emotional weakness, attention-seeking and selfishness, such as those who attempt or die by suicide being perceived as betraying family through cowardly acts (Sheehan et al., 2016). Studies report variations of attitudes towards suicide dependant on the age, gender (Calear et al., 2023), education level (Tong & Phillips, 2018) personal experience of suicide (Lee et al., 2022), religion and economic status (Lee et al., 2023) of the participant. This promotes the idea that public attitudes toward suicide may differ if the victim is imprisoned. Furthermore, research has consistently shown traditional gender role expectations to be a significant predictor of attitudes, behaviour and beliefs (Xia & Li, 2023). These stereotypes generally view males as being more powerful and dominant and females more passive and weaker (Bareket & Fiske, 2023). Research shows that male victims are expected to be strong physically and emotionally (Rawcliffe, 2023), which may explain to some extent why males fail to seek help for suicide, as this is viewed as a weakness (Marzano et al., 2012), consequently resulting in higher suicide rates. A number of studies find statistically significant gender differences that demonstrate males display more tolerant and accepting attitudes towards suicide than females (Arnautovska & Grad, 2010; Park et al., 2015; Yousuf et al., 2013).

### ***The media's influence on suicide***

Furthermore, media and the internet, including social media also influence public attitudes as these are the most common sources of information regarding suicide which can incite and facilitate suicidal behaviour and enhance or weaken suicide prevention efforts (Engelson et al., 2023; WHO, 2023). The internet is a primary source of information for suicide which can inappropriately portray suicide, including sensationalised

reporting and reporting bias (McTernan et al., 2018; Westerlund et al., 2012). Media reporting recommendations have been recognised by organisations (WHO, 2017). It has been suggested that media coverage of suicide can have the potential to normalise suicide in society, as inappropriate media reporting can sensationalise and glamorise suicide, producing familiarity with the idea of suicide as an acceptable resolution for life struggles (Wu et al., 2022) with media stories reporting the methods of celebrities' suicide deaths resulting in individuals imitating suicide behaviours (Fink et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2022; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2020). Research by Nathan and Nathan (2022) found media glorifies death by suicide. The media has a clear influence on the public and their attitudes and consequently can play a predominant role in fluctuating suicide rates (Wu et al., 2022).

### ***Importance of public attitudes and opinions***

Attitudes are the key concept in explaining and predicting human behaviour and social construction of the world around us and are defined as lasting cognitive, emotional, and active predispositions towards a certain object, situation, or person (Rus, 1997). The public's opinion of suicide is pertinent when considering fluctuating suicide rates in the community (Kim & Park, 2014; Wang et al., 2022), the stigma of suicide can prevent individuals from seeking help (Calear et al., 2023). Public attitudes can influence suicide rates and suicide prevention efforts by legitimising or inhibiting suicide (Kim & Park, 2014; Kim et al., 2022). Indeed, populations with greater acceptance of suicide may have higher suicide rates (Eskin et al., 2011), with Kim et al. (2022) finding the more permissive the attitude, the more frequent the suicidal behaviours, though Colucci and Minas (2013) established that students across Italy, India and Australia portraying negative attitudes were correlated with higher suicide rates. This may be explained by fewer individuals seeking help in communities that are less condoning of suicide.

Public opinion has played an important role in the development of suicide prevention policies (Kim et al., 2022), penal policy, actions taken within the prison system and decisions made by the government (Koon-Magnin, 2015). Furthermore, public opinion plays a central role in decision making in society, influencing social and political dynamics and in turn political choices, policy support and social movements (Gadzali et al., 2023). Additionally, researchers' state politicians and government frequently consider public opinion when formulating policies and cite public opinion as their justification for using custody to a greater extent and further restricting prisoner amenities (Cafferata et al., 2023; Walgrave & Soontjens, 2023). This may subsequently affect prisoners' mental and psychological wellbeing, resulting in increased suicidal behaviour in the prison population. Yet exploring public attitudes to suicide in prison is particularly under-researched.

The current study will undertake a qualitative approach using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to obtain a thorough and deeper understanding into students' attitudes towards suicide in prisons and in the community and to see if there is any difference in opinions between these two groups. Although previous research on attitudes to suicide has used samples primarily consisting of university students, research has not explored students' views on suicide in prisons with the research questions being:

1. Are students more punitive towards suicide in prison than in the community?
2. Are students supportive of improving suicide prevention efforts in prison?
3. Are males or females more accepting towards suicide in general?
4. Are student attitudes towards suicide in prison dependant on offenders' crime, gender or age?

### **Methodology**

The participant sample consisted of five females and five males recruited from Birmingham City University, Curzon Campus using opportunistic sampling. Qualitative design using in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions was utilised to produce descriptive data and prompt a detailed rich response, which would elicit personal opinions and attitudes to make meaning of how participants respond to and perceive specific questions and topics under investigation. It has been suggested that this method produces extensive and in-depth detail from participants, which is not achievable using questionnaires or structured interviews (Osbourne et al., 2021). Interviews were conducted one-on-one, face-to-face and audio-recorded, audio-recording for listening back and for full transcription is standard practice for these interviews (Osbourne et al., 2021). A further rationale for using a qualitative design is outlined by Hendren et al. (2023) referring to a qualitative approach being utilised to answer questions that go beyond numerical representations of relationships and trends, allowing questions to be effective at evoking openness, vital to qualitative research. It further allows for participant experiences and perspectives to provide a more in-depth representation and allows for understanding surface contradictions and further analysis of inconsistencies. Many suicidal attitude scales have been identified, including The Attitudes Towards Suicide Questionnaire (Renberg & Jacobsson, 2003) and The Suicide Opinion Questionnaire (Domino et al., 1982), however there is no standardised approach that is recognised to study suicide related attitudes given the diverse dimensions of attitudes and a lack of consensus with each questionnaire (Ghasemi et al., 2015). Consequently, the interview schedule developed for this study consisted of 25 open-ended questions, which were designed around previous literature in the area (Colucci & Minas, 2013; Kim & Park, 2014), with items under these main themes, suicide as a right, justifiability, relational cause, mental illness, sympathy, attitudes about suicide that explore themes of acceptability, stigma, preventability and

supporting suicidal individuals. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was undertaken in private rooms in Birmingham City's University Curzon Building library.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Interviews were analysed using a theoretical thematic analysis to draw meaning out of qualitative data, by following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis followed Creswell and Poth's (2016) three baseline analytic steps for qualitative data, firstly, coding the data by organising it into meaningful segments and assigning names, combining the codes into broader themes, and displaying and making comparisons. The first stage involved transcribing the interviews, these were compared against the audio recordings to ensure accurateness. Stage two involved generating the primary codes that were developed by systematically going through the entire transcript on a line-by-line basis and were based on the explicit meaning of each extract. Stage three consisted of segmenting the coded extracts into potential themes. The theoretical framework was based on arranging the key issues identified in the data that revealed significance to the research questions, which were consequently put into themes.

Five main themes were identified: Tolerance of Suicide, Suicidal Motivations, Sympathy towards Suicidal Individuals, Support in Prison and Suicide Prevention in Prison.

### **Tolerance of Suicide**

This theme conveyed participant's acceptance of suicide with mixed opinions expressed for whether an individual has the right to take their own life. Many participants were accepting of this proposition, *'It's your life at the end of the day, it's up to you what you want to do with it'*. Research conducted by Nathan and Nathan (2020) finding 72.85% believed it is a person's right to die by suicide, furthermore Tony and Phillips (2018) indicates cultures overall are shifting towards tolerance of suicide. Comparable with this recent research, the attitudes explored in the current study evidenced high levels of suicidal acceptance, this was more apparent for those within the community, rather than prisoners, which elicited more punitive views which will be discussed subsequently. Potential gender differences in attitudes were also investigated. Although some research has found higher acceptability of suicide among females (Godi et al., 2023; Poreddi et al., 2016), this is antithetical to the current research findings which corresponds with literature establishing males are more tolerant. Studies by Phillips and Luth (2020) are also comparable, finding males are more likely to find suicide acceptable than their female counterparts. This research ratifies previous research reinforcing that males tend to be more accepting of suicide.

The adverse effects on the family and friends of suicide victims were a focal topic that emerged when considering an individual's right to commit

suicide, specifically for females. This is in consensus with previous research; Kodaka et al. (2013) found participants considered suicide as the worst thing to do to relatives. Nearly all participants conveyed negative appraisal of suicide when considering the wider implications for family and friends of the victim. This was expressed through several comments associating suicide with being inequitable and selfish, *'It's leaving the family behind which is selfish'*. Although more females considered the adverse effects of suicide on family members and associated it with being selfish, they were nevertheless generally acceptant of one's own right to commit suicide, *'Despite the possible wider implications for family and friends, it is still a decision about your own life and therefore it's your right to do it'*. Though traditional opinions have opposed suicide (Pritchard, 1995; Zibelman, 1999) and were only decriminalised in 1961 (Levine & Pyke, 1999), it is currently evident from this study and other research (Lee et al., 2023) that public attitudes to suicide are becoming more tolerant, predominantly among males, while females are more likely to reject the idea of suicide based on the negative implications for the family.

There was only one situation highlighted by all participants that had acceptable grounds for suicide which was terminal illness; other seemingly major life events such as bankruptcy (Phillips & Luth, 2020) or being a victim of a serious crime were not considered or contemplated by any participants. These findings validate further research conducted by Phillips and Luth (2020) finding individuals attitudes were most tolerant towards suicide in response to physical illness, specifically an incurable illness. This is in congruence with Senf et al., (2022) research, in which participants reported that they understood why a cancer patient would commit suicide, the highest scoring reason being pain and physical impairments. These sustained findings suggest that public views on this issue are strong and static; authenticating that suicide is viewed as understandable among those suffering with a terminal illness. On the other hand, these findings are conflicting with those found by Kodaka et al. (2013) and Grimholt et al. (2014) conducted in Hong Kong and Norway, in which participants demonstrated negative attitudes towards suicide and did not view an incurable disease as an acceptable reason to commit suicide. Opposing research finds that participants view suicide more positively for those with health problems rather than other stresses such as financial problems (Winterrowd et al., 2017). Deviations in findings may be explained by the countries or cultures in which the research was conducted.

Consequently, when comparing research exploring attitudes to suicide from different countries or cultures it must be taken with caution. Furthermore, differences have also been established in rural and non-rural areas. Li and Phillips (2010) found that attitudes to suicide are most restrictive among rural residents, resulting in higher suicide rates and attitudes were most accepting among university students, who had the lowest suicide rates. Li and Phillips propose those within a city have better access to services and consequently suicide rates are lower. This may

explain to some degree the current research findings, as participants were recruited from a university which is situated within a city. Consequently, similarities between different locations within the same country cannot be assumed without exploration, highlighting the need for further culturally specific research.

Prisoners' right to commit suicide did elicit punitive views. The majority of participants expressed that suicide for prisoners is a means of escape and an easy way out and suggested prisoners should, in accordance with Domino et al. (1980) have to complete their sentence, stating, *'They've committed the crime so they should have to do the sentence and not have an easy way out'*. Explicit negative views were expressed towards CSOs, with participants stating they should not be allowed to commit suicide, "I don't think people in for terrible crimes should be allowed to take their own lives, they need to live with the crime and guilt that they've caused, especially paedophiles. They should in no way be allowed an easy way out and should have to live with the disgust that's their own fault", evidencing opinions that CSOs should live the rest of their lives in guilt and self-hate. The clear negativity expressed towards this group of offenders will be discussed later in this paper. Despite these comments many students felt prisoners should be given the right to end their own life if they wish.

A number of factors may have influenced these findings, firstly age, older individuals have been found to be more disapproving and intolerant toward the right to suicide (Battermann et al., 2013; Park et al., 2015). This may elucidate why this study and previous research has found younger age groups to hold more accepting attitudes towards suicide (Gagnon & Hasking, 2012). Secondly, education has been found to influence attitudes towards suicide (Tong and Phillips, 2018; VanSickle et al., 2016). All current participants were at a university level of education which may explain tolerant attitudes, as previous research has found more accepting attitudes of suicide among those with a higher education (Jahan et al., 2023; Li & Phillips, 2010). Another major factor found by previous research to affect attitudes towards suicide is personal experience with suicide (Kodaka et al., 2013; Miklin et al., 2019; Pitman et al., 2017). Miklin et al. (2019) found those who have been personally exposed to suicide, tend to be more tolerant towards suicide and increases the risk of suicidality.

### **Suicidal Motivations**

This theme presents the participants views of what issues internally and externally contribute to a prisoner and someone from the community to feel suicidal. Suicidal motivations identified by participants for those in the community were somewhat different to those recognised for prisoners but similar in terms of emotions. The family, partner and friends of suicide victims were mentioned as a main cause of suicidal intentions within prison; however, this was not considered as such a significant issue in the community. Several participants discussed the absence or problems with family contact within prison and the likelihood this may have on increasing



a prisoner's risk of suicide. In conjunction with previous research, the presence of a supportive family network has been found to protect against suicide, while divorce or absence of these relationships are linked to increased risk of suicide (Rezaei et al., 2023). This may be due to feelings of abandonment and isolation. The students in this study did not however consider family relationships as an important risk factor in the community, however much research has identified this as increasing suicidal risk (Xing et al., 2010).

Substance use was recognised as grounds for suicide for those in the community, yet this was not mentioned for prisoners, even though substance use in prison is high (Bohnert et al., 2014; Rezaei et al., 2023). Previous research has found attitudes towards suicide tend to be more negative towards individuals who substance misuse (Grimholt et al., 2014). Substance use in relation to attitudes to prison suicide did not surface in this study and may be beneficial for future research to explore what factors influence suicidal attitudes.

The main suicidal motivation identified as similar for prisoners and those in the community was the state of hopelessness and loneliness; this coincides with previous research (O'Connor & Nock, 2014; Rivlin et al., 2013). Participants broadly agreed that reasons why prisoners and those in the community commit suicide are that they feel they have nothing to live for and are hopeless. Most students recognised the state of hopelessness and entrapment that every suicidal individual must experience. Many participants stated prisoners feel they have nothing to live for, *'They've lost everything in their life and got nothing more to live for'*. The entrapment theory (Williams et al., 2005) proposes that suicide happens when individuals experience situations perceived as humiliation or defeat, which they feel unable to escape. This may explain why suicide rates are higher for prisoners convicted of SOs (Gullotta et al., 2021). SOs are approximately 3 to 5 times more likely to attempt/commit suicide in comparison to the general offender population (King et al., 2015; Zhong et al., 2021). Furthermore, those who self-disclosed a sexual attraction to minors, many of whom had not offended, almost 40% endorsed chronic suicidal ideation (Cohen et al., 2020). Participants acknowledged factors previously identified by researchers as causing elevated suicide risk in the prison environment such as bullying (Rivlin et al., 2013), with comments such as *'If they're getting bullied in prison their probably more likely to want to kill themselves'*. The Analytical Summary carried out by HMPPS specifically reports that many offenders face threats and that bullying, and harassment was considered normal for SOs (Nicholls & Webster, 2018). Bullying was not acknowledged for those in the community, as has previously been documented (Geoffroy et al., 2023). In addition, no students seemed to be aware of the problems within the CJS that may raise suicide risk such as, segregation, awaiting trial and refusal of parole (Rivlin et al., 2013). Several comments advocated that prisoners may be feeling

guilty for the offence they have committed which may subsequently lead to suicide, corresponding with prior research (Eyoom et al., 2023).

Many participants equated mental illness with suicide, although participants appear to be well informed of suicidal motivations and the role mental health plays in the community, this was not as prominent for prisoners. Although participants when asked, decided mental health would contribute to prisoners' suicidal intentions, students did not of their own accord identify this as a cause. Nevertheless, there is a high level of mental health problems in individuals within the CJS (Brådvik, 2018) however, the participants appeared to be less knowledgeable of this, and consequently awareness efforts should currently aim at increasing the public's knowledge of the prominence of mental health issues within prison.

### **Sympathy towards Suicidal Individuals**

All participants demonstrated very sympathetic attitudes towards suicidal individuals in the community and did not express negative attitudes or stigma towards the act of suicide itself as previously reported by research, proposing those who attempt or threaten to commit suicide do not really want to die or are trying to gain sympathy (Kodaka et al., 2013; Nathan and Nathan, 2020). All participants displayed genuine compassion for individuals World Health Organisation feel suicidal in the community and levels of sympathy did not appear to be dependent on any additional factors.

Sympathy altered significantly when prisoners were considered and responses were typically more punitive, *'I don't feel sympathetic at all, no way'*. The negative attitudes that public foster towards SOs is well established in the literature (Kerr et al., 2018). In accord with past research participants express a strong visceral reaction to SOs, which is consistently more negative than towards other types of offences (Harper & Hicks, 2022; Kerr et al., 2018), in this study participants made remarks that indicated SOs would be better off dead, *'I would let them kill themselves'*. The public's negative attitudes towards SOs may also limit the effectiveness of suicidal support and treatment in prison. Most participant attitudes in this study were dependant on the type of crime, referring to theft as a mitigating crime, being viewed as desperate; consequently, more sympathy was attributed to offenders convicted of robbery. Mitigation and thus more sympathy was also given for manslaughter, a pre-meditated offence was seen as more serious than an unplanned offence on the grounds of offender culpability. In support, other research has reported attitudes as significantly more positive and less blameworthy when the offender was alleged to have acted spontaneously as opposed to premeditating their crime (Mannheimer, 2011; Roberts, 2008).

This research established more severe crimes provoked the strongest responses; with punitive attitudes triggered by crimes such as rape, CSOs and murder. CSOs triggered the least sympathetic responses *"if a murderer killed a paedophile, I'd be sympathetic"*, suggesting CSOs are below those of other offenders, and if someone were to kill a CSO, they would

essentially be doing society a favour. With another participant stating, *'For rapists I think they need to live with the consequences, don't feel sympathetic at all, I think it's disgusting'*. With other explicit opinions such as, *'Raped or they've been a paedophile then if they want to take their own life...then yeah, I'd do it for them'*. In support of the current findings most previous research strongly suggests that attitudes towards SOs are generally punitive (Harper et al., 2024; Veggi et al., 2023). With Rotherwell et al. (2021) finding attitudes towards CSOs were viewed more negatively than those who victimised against adults. Students' negative attitudes towards SOs specifically CSOs' was the most prominent finding in this research. A comment made by one participant in relation to sympathy towards suicide was *"my opinion might change if they're a paedophile or something because they've bought it on themselves"*. Researchers have attributed these opinions to the stigma held by the public, a result of stereotypical views and myths that do not coincide with real characteristics (Brown, Deakin, & Spencer, 2008; Olver & Barlow, 2010). The stigma and social misconceptions of SOs has been argued a result of media misreporting and distortion (Ben-Atar et al., 2024).

### ***The influence of the media***

The media represents one of the primary sources of public information about sexual offending and consequently has the ability to shape public opinion (Malinen, et al., 2014). Research finds many use the media as their most valuable resource for information about SOs (Malinen et al., 2014) and public attitudes mirror those in the media (Brown et al., 2008). Zatzkin et al. (2021) describes how media coverage of sexual crimes perpetuates institutional myths about SOs. Although the media presents crime as social and political concerns, they also present them as entertainment (Fishman & Cavender, 1998). Specifically, sexual offences receive vast amounts of coverage, suggesting the more unusual and disturbing the offence, the more entertaining the media consider it (Jewkes, 2015). Consequently, the media continues to sensationalise sexual offences focusing on exceptionally rare cases, with stranger and sexual violence receiving disproportionate attention, with most content focusing on child victims (Krinsky 2016; Mejia et al., 2012; Zatzkin et al., 2021), contributing to an inaccurate representation of SOs. In support DiBennardo (2018) found that news articles use child victims as a tool to emphasise the predatory nature of offenders, resulting in negative opinions (Malinen et al., 2014). This may explain within the current research, why individuals held more negative views, specifically towards CSOs, which reflected in their answers regarding suicide, such as wanting them to essentially kill themselves due to their offence or that they should be forced to live through the consequences. An informative media approach could have a positive effect on changing explicit attitudes (Malinen et al., 2014).

### ***Sexual offender stereotypes***

Given the way the media presents SOs, it is said that stereotypes are also perpetuated by media coverage, by focusing on the same type of violent serial offender (Galeste et al., 2012). Research by Zatkin et al. (2021) highlights the homogeneity myth held by the public, suggesting that all SOs are the same, violent males who prey on children. In agreement, Brown and Kloess (2022) note SOs are often grouped together, without the offence type being stipulated, creating the assumption that SOs are a homogenous group. Rotherwell et al. (2021) found that attitudes towards CSOs are viewed less favourably than SOs overall, suggesting that offence type is a critical factor when considering attitudes. Being labelled a SO can leave individuals victim to such stereotypes. Research by Nicholls and Webster (2018) found being labelled a SO impacted on their sense of identity, alongside stigmatisation from other prisoners, staff, and media accounts of SOs, they felt it would impact them for the rest of their lives. Harris and Socia (2016) found participants who saw the term “sex offender” in comparison to “person who has committed a sexual crime” were more likely to strongly agree for support of restrictive offender policies. The continuation of the SO stereotype is perpetuated by persistent media coverage focused on violent CSOs, which solidifies the public’s belief that all SOs present a high safety risk (Pickett et al., 2013). These labels and stereotypes evidently impact upon public opinions and attitudes towards SOs, demonstrated by the negative opinions evidenced in this research, which will impact inevitably upon punishment, re-integration and ultimately mental health and suicide.

### ***Sexual offenders and suicide***

This negative view of SOs when considering suicide could be problematic as suicide risk has already been found to be elevated amongst this offender group (Gullotta et al., 2021; Zhong et al., 2021). One explanation for the increased risk of suicide in SOs may be the high prevalence of mental illness (Favril et al., 2020), in addition to being detested and threatened by fellow prisoners, and lastly sexual crimes have long term consequences which puts CSOs at particularly high risk of suicide (Webb et al., 2012). Research has found that many individuals investigated for CSO charges, experience high levels of fear, anxiety, shame, depression and helplessness (Brennan et al., 2018; Levenson et al., 2017). Elements such as their offence becoming public knowledge, the tainted opinions of family and friends, shame and lifelong damage to their reputation are considered major contributory factors linked to their suicide (Bowen et al., 2016; Hoffer et al., 2012). Hoffer and Shelton (2013) analysed suicide notes in CSOs, the common themes were feelings of burdensomeness, shame, and self-blame, resulting from a lack of belonging. This experience and these feeling are likely to increase the risk of suicide, as they are less able to confide and seek support from their support network due to the nature of the offence and the stigma attached to this, reducing the ability for this to

act as a protective factor against suicide (Key et al., 2021). These negative and punitive public attitudes to these offenders, specifically CSOs may further increase their risk of suicide as past research has shown discrimination against imprisoned offenders within the population can lead to stigmatisation, rejection and violence that may cause suicidal behaviour (Fazel et al., 2011). Additionally, these stigmatised attitudes can amplify the risk of seclusion, found to be a risk factor for continued sexual crime and suicide (Bhaskaran, 2024). As a result of the public's negative attitudes to SOs there is also apparent and ongoing stigmatisation and victimisation of SOs disseminating in the prison estate, consequently SOs are offered Rule 45 status, enabling the segregation of individuals considered vulnerable from the mainstream population (HMPSS, 2018). Research by HMPPS (2018) attempted to understand the accommodation policy for SOs by exploring their experiences. There was evidence that SOs themselves stigmatise CSOs, resulting in bullying towards CSOs still occurring in SO only locations, adding to the significant concept that hatred is specifically directed towards this group. Participants within this research acknowledged bullying in their answers, '*Could get bullied, by prisoners and the officers*'. Consequently, public attitudes, including those within the prison population may increase the risk of suicide in certain offender groups.

### ***The influence of demographics***

Offenders' age and gender did not play a significant role in altering levels of sympathy. Although a minority of participants felt more sympathy towards younger prisoners as they have longer to live, the majority were very largely of the opinion that the offender's age and gender had no impact on their sympathy whatsoever; with many suggesting that it is predominately dependent on the type of offence committed. Contrary to previous research by Clow et al. (2013) establishing a defendant's age and gender impacts public's perceptions. This demonstrates that there is either no stigmatisation towards suicide or typical gender stereotypical attitudes and roles are becoming less prominent, for example sympathy was still attributed to males regardless of being stereotypically viewed as the more dominant and unemotional gender (Amin et al., 2018; Way et al., 2014).

Several studies have reported that women typically view SOs more negatively than men (Beck & Travis, 2004; Brown et al., 2008). Yet, other studies have found women viewed SOs more positively (Ferguson & Ireland, 2006) or with no particular gender differences (Olver & Barlow, 2010; Rogers et al., 2011). This study found no gender differences in terms of punitiveness towards suicidal SOs. Studies have also found that higher education levels may influence attitudes to SOs (Harper, 2012). Researchers have established that those with higher educational levels tend to hold more positive attitudes towards SOs (Höing et al., 2016; Shackley et al., 2014; Willis et al., 2013). Findings from this research were not in accordance with these studies, but comparable with Harper's (2012) findings that report the educated youth in Britain continue to hold punitive attitudes to SOs.

### Support in Prison

While the type of offending was of paramount importance for the participants when considering sympathy, there was a threshold over which it appeared to lose its significance when it came to support. While participants tended to consider offence seriousness when determining the amount of sympathy to attribute, most did not see offence type as relevant to the amount of support given. This does not support past studies that have found limited support from the public for SOs in terms of rehabilitation (Mancini & Budd, 2016). The majority of participants believed all prisoners should receive an equal amount of support for suicidal feelings regardless of their crime, many argued as a point of principle that prisoners are still human beings and are equals, *'I think all should get help, everyone is equal in a way'*. However, a minority argued those convicted of murder or sexual offences should not receive equal amounts of support, if any at all, *'People that have done bad things and are bad people shouldn't be given the support'*. The stigma towards these offenders may decrease the amount of support provided, increasing the likelihood of suicide.

These attitudes along with participant's initial negative views towards these offenders, specifically SOs may influence legislative decision making and the forming of legal policies (Zatkin et al., 2022). Research advocates that policies focused upon SOs are tailored to appease the public (Zatkin et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that the public believe that SOs should be punished more harshly than other types of offenders (Rogers & Ferguson, 2011), this corresponds with some of the comments made by participants. Literature also advocates this may be due to the public holding significant amounts of fear for SOs, explaining that fear is a fundamental predictor of negative attitudes, resulting in public demands for political action for restrictive and punitive SO policies (Kerr et al., 2018; King & Roberts 2017; Malinen et al., 2014; Meloy et al., 2013). Current legislation to protect the public, includes restrictions upon movement and community notifications (Bedarf, 2019). The public are of the view that such legislation is an effective approach at reducing risk and preventing sexual crimes even when they were informed there is no scientific evidence to support their effectiveness (Koon-Magnin, 2015; Shackley et al., 2014). Research has found no support for these strategies in reducing reoffending (Himmen et al., 2023). Consequently, the public may be inadvertently increasing the risk they want to reduce by demanding implementation of strategies that are primarily influenced by attitudes (Willis et al., 2010). Progressive initiatives such as community-based Circles of Support have a comparatively strong evidence base (Höing et al., 2017), however, seeking volunteers to work with SOs is difficult (Lowe et al., 2019). Evidently, negative community attitudes can justify punitive legal proceedings and policies which may create barriers to community re-integration and support, which in turn can lead to suicidal thoughts and behaviour in specific offending groups.

### ***The impact upon rehabilitation of sexual offenders***

Discrimination within society towards SOs is likely to occur during the process of re-integration following release from prison or following sentence (Henson & Lievesley, 2023; Wakefield, 2023), which can reduce opportunities following conviction (Rade et al., 2016). In support Porter et al. (2022) found the public were negatively biased towards SOs. This can result in landlords being reluctant to house SOs and housing restrictions (Rolfe et al., 2018; Rydberg, 2018), and being faced with considerable discrimination by potential employers (Carson et al., 2021; Wooldridge and Bailey 2023). Employability is a protective factor known to reduce reoffending (Coupland & Olver, 2020). However, the public are less willing to provide employment opportunities to SOs, finding that most are uncomfortable working with a SO (Porter et al., 2022). Subsequently, SOs are less likely to receive employment opportunities, despite links to reduced offending (Blomberg et al., 2011). As a result of current restrictive SO policies and negative and stigmatised views towards SOs in society it can prove difficult to find social support, jobs, and housing, creating barriers to community re-entry (Wakefield, 2023). These factors are well established protective factors that contribute to desistance (Coupland & Olver, 2020; De Vries Robbé et al., 2015) and the absence of them is associated with an increased risk of reoffending (Simmons et al., 2021; Willis & Johnston, 2012).

However, research finds that the public believe SOs should be kept away from society to prevent them from reoffending (Levenson et al., 2007). Yet reoffending is more likely to occur with offenders who do not have social support (Wakefield, 2023). For example, a comment made within current research was '*People that have done bad things and are bad people shouldn't be given the support*'. The negative attitudes towards SOs may adversely affect approaches that aim to facilitate rehabilitation, community re-integration, and desistance which can be pervasive and damaging to sexual violence prevention efforts (Brown & Kloess, 2022). Consequently, a lack of support within the community may produce environments, that create barriers to effective re-integration, impacting upon re-offending rates and mental health, including being more conducive to suicide and these attitudes towards specific offender groups might endorse or even encourage suicide for some offenders.

### ***Peer support***

Most participants believed peer support would be a successful way of supporting suicidal prisoners. The main theme that emerged when participants discussed peer support was the prisoners' ability to relate to the other offenders in terms of experience, in which a professional would not. This corresponds with evidence from several studies indicating that peer support is preferred to professional support, as prisoners demonstrate empathy due to lived experiences, being trusted by prisoners and being non-

judgemental (Nixon, 2023; Schinkel, 2012). In addition, one participant proposed supporting another prisoner would also be rewarding, further evidence shows that being a peer worker and being trained as Listeners or Befrienders results in increased self-worth, self-esteem and confidence, which is associated with having positive effects on their mental health (Bagnall et al., 2015; Thekkumkara et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, a number of participants did advocate that there may be disadvantages to peer support services such as ending up in disputes and discussing unlawful matters. A couple of students stressed their concerns that only a particular type of prisoner should be allowed to talk and give advice, this was dependant again on their index offence. Despite these comments, peer support services within prison can contribute to achieving a positive effect, practically and emotionally (Bagnall et al., 2015) and decreases the prevalence of suicide (Daigle et al., 2007; Janetius & Govindarajan, 2017). Overall, participants were encouraging of support and peer support services within prison which will only benefit future prevention efforts (WHO, 2013).

### **Suicide Prevention in Prison**

A few students expressed doubts that full prevention in prison is achievable. While some participants suggested prevention may only be achievable under specific conditions such as the amount of support and the individual's mental state, there was a consensus among participants that prevention is possible. Participants did not consider the type of crime or offender in terms of prevention success, given previous research has noted that suicide prevention in SOs may not be a priority due to the nature of the offence (Ayhan et al., 2017). In general participant responses maintain previous literature supporting suicide prevention (Arnautovska & Grad, 2010; Kodaka et al., 2013), contrary to findings that the public are unresponsive (Kim & Park, 2014). Jiao et al., (2014) found beliefs that suicide can be prevented were more common among females than males, the current study showed no significant gender differences. However, funding for prevention was also considered by participants which demonstrated gender differences. A female student supported increasing staff numbers, while more punitive responses were witnessed from male students, stating money should be allocated to better places and no more money should be given to prisons as they are currently funded more than sufficiently by the public. These comments articulate less supportive views for suicide prevention in prison than previously established (Kodaka et al., 2013). In terms of how to prevent suicide, one participant suggested the personal circumstances of the individual offender need to be considered when aiming to prevent suicide. Furthermore, another view was that suicidal individuals may not want to express themselves to individuals they know, consequently the government needs to make additional efforts to offer professional help. Lastly, several participants recommended removing the means of suicide to successfully prevent self-inflicted deaths. It is



important to note those suggestions were made by male participants. This may suggest that males are less aware of the emotional support available and feel physical intervention is more successful. This may highlight underlying attitudes that males view engaging in emotional healthcare as less masculine (O'Brien et al., 2005). Largely, participants appear supportive of suicidal prevention efforts; however more negative views were witnessed from male participants when taxpayers' money was considered.

It is evident from this study and past research that public attitudes play a clear role in suicide prevention efforts and have further evolved as people and communities have altered their beliefs towards suicide (WHO, 2017). The WHO (2013) proposes to create social change, public support, knowledge, and a social strategy is needed to achieve suicide prevention goals and that in all countries the significance of communities' support and suicide prevention cannot be overstated. This reinforces the importance of reducing the stigma associated with SOs if suicide prevention is to be more successful for these individuals.

### ***Stigmatisation of sexual offenders***

From these findings there are a number of potential implications for reducing the stigmatisation attached to SOs. Due to the findings and previous research, it is apparent there is a need to educate society with regards to sexual offending. Several researchers suggest that the public generally lack knowledge and their existing perceptions are incorrect (Burchfield, 2012; Shackley et al., 2014). In support Sanghara and Wilson's (2010) research found experienced professionals endorsed negative stereotypes less, had more positive attitudes towards SOs and expressed more knowledge of CSOs. Research suggests the more knowledge of CSOs, the less stereotypical individuals may be, in turn positively impacting upon levels of bullying and stigmatisation, impacting upon re-integration, mental health and suicidal tendencies. Contrary, Mivshek and Schriver (2023) found treatment providers working in prison more often deemed that SOs should remain imprisoned. Furthermore, Harper (2012) stated that universities do not successfully tackle the stigmatised views towards SOs and suggests education regarding SOs must come from media sources. The media represents the main source through which the public obtain information about the CJS and offending and is primarily 'false information' (Heuer & Glassman, 2024; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020; Shu et al., 2017; Wood, 2008). Furthermore, research suggests the media plays an influential role in influencing and changing public opinion about SOs (Malinen et al., 2013), which in turn can influence the direction of wider social, political, and economic events (Ausat, 2023). Information circulated through social media can lack in accuracy and credibility; with misleading information having a detrimental effect (Fârte & Obadă, 2021). Considering the influence, the public hold in shaping strategies perceived to reduce risk, it has been noted that the area of understanding and changing

the public's attitudes and perceptions has been overlooked (Gakhal & Brown, 2011). Literature on attitudes towards SOs suggest they are not fixed (Rade et al., 2016). Media provides the opportunity to better understand how offenders are represented to the public and the potential ways in which those representations contribute to stereotypes about SOs (Harper & Bartels, 2016). To alter the stigma and negative attitudes towards SOs, the media could engage in a more research led approach, presenting a more educated and realistic portrayal of crime and offenders, aiming to increase knowledge and understanding within the public and in turn reduce stereotyping and negative behaviours and increase support of rehabilitation and suicide prevention efforts.

Existing public awareness campaigns only identify SOs, yet little effort is given regarding informing the public of the myths of SOs and the high levels of suicide amongst this group (Webb et al., 2012; Zatzkin et al., 2022). Research proposes academics and qualified professionals should be encouraged to engage with the media to dispel common misperceptions, in addition to awareness campaigns, educational material and intervention strategies around SOs to reduce negative beliefs around SOs (Karasavva et al., 2023; WHO, 2013); consequently, efforts should be expanded to inform the public about SOs by developing strategies related to increasing social awareness of sexual offending. Secondly, researchers suggest training and educational programmes within the community promote positive attitudes and evade stereotypes and stereotypical thinking regarding SOs (Rotherwell et al., 2021; Ware et al., 2012) as reducing stigmatisation is key in supporting SOs (Parkes et al., 2022). Workshops providing education about SOs can result in improved positive attitudes with less punitiveness (Kleban & Jeglic, 2012). With research finding more positive attitudes with those who have greater contact with SOs (Rade et al., 2016), improving further with training (Ware et al., 2012), which may subsequently reduce suicide rates. However, more recent research by Rotherwell et al. (2021) found whilst education around SO can influence opinions around risk and rehabilitation, it may not be sufficient in tackling the more commonly pervasive stereotypical attitudes around SOs.

The first limitation of this study is that the sample included only students from Birmingham City University, although a representative sample was ensured to some extent by including white British and black or minority ethnic participants. All participants were of similar ages and educations consequently, the generalisability of the results is limited. Secondly, there is the risk of social desirability bias in interviews conducted face to face (Kühne, 2023). It is stated that individuals feel uncomfortable in front of interviewers if their answers do not conform to social expectations (Kaminska & Foulsham, 2013). Due to the subject matter students may have reported more positive attitudes for their answers to seem less severe, or they may have falsely reported their opinions to live up to societal stereotypes and admit to more punitive attitudes to what they essentially hold. To overcome this risk, Audio Computer-Assisted Self-

Interviewing could be utilised, this has been suggested to reduce social desirability bias (Beauclair et al., 2013). Qualitative analysis was utilised for this research which may act as a further limitation, as qualitative analysis is interpretive which involved the codes and themes being created and re-examined by only one researcher. However, this can be interpreted in several different ways by different researchers (Guest, 2012), affecting the reliability; consequently, this study may be influenced by researcher's biases, judgments and standards shaping the analysis (Johnson et al., 2020). To overcome this limitation, several researchers should read and code the data and be in accord on the final themes. To gain greater understanding of student opinions of suicide in prison a significantly larger sample could be utilised using a quantitative method; this would not provide in-depth detail, however it would allow for a wider understanding of public opinions. Lastly, attitudes towards prison and prisoners may have been dependent on current regional issues or events, personal experience with offenders or the CJS, no measure of prior exposure to these variables were taken, which may have influenced the attitudes of participants.

Future research should investigate the following areas; firstly, if comparable results are found in further analyses of public attitudes towards suicide in prison, using participants from diverse geographical locations and demographics. Much research has established the influence public attitudes to suicide have on fluctuating suicide rates in the community; this is yet to be investigated among prison environments. Future research should address this by exploring the influence public's attitudes to suicide in prison have on offenders' suicidal feelings and behaviours. Future research must also concentrate on exploring the relationship between the stigma and punitiveness held by the public towards SOs, specifically CSOs and its impact on their increased risk of suicide. Given the negative attitudes towards suicide, specifically towards CSOs evidenced by this research, another area that would contribute to future research is the understudied nature of the public's perception of suicide in female CSOs and whether this differs to male CSOs, including how this impacts upon re-integration. Research has documented that the public do not perceive females as sexual aggressors (Douglass et al., 2020) but as submissive, nurturing, and innocent (Struckman-Johnson et al., 2020; Waling, 2022) and that the public report significantly greater anger and desire for harsher consequences when the CSO is male (Geddes et al., 2013; Lewandowicz-Machnikowska et al., 2023). Lastly, although attitudes in professionals working with CSOs has been documented (Sanghara & Wilson, 2010), it should be explored further in relation to suicide, given the effect this may have on therapeutic relationships. Therapeutic relationships between practitioners and offenders are imperative in advocating treatment effectiveness and behavioural change (Hachtel et al., 2019). When cognitive distortions that allowed an individual to offend are challenged, this can increase feelings of self-loathing and self-hatred, which may increase suicide risk (Key et al., 2021). Nicholls and Webster (2018) documented

that participants believed that some staff supported the hierarchical system and were suspected of assisting some prisoners in finding out about other prisoner's offences, weakening rehabilitation by legitimising bullying and contributing to stigmatisation. Consequently, it is pertinent to understand current professional opinions of CSOs and how these impact upon their practice and subsequently inhibiting or legitimising suicide in these groups.

The present study was conducted due to the need to understand attitudes towards suicide in prison, given the important role that attitudes play in fluctuating suicide rates and influencing policies. This study has contributed to the growing body of literature exploring public attitudes to suicide, while investigating a new area of research exploring students' attitudes towards suicide in prison. There were four main findings; students appear to be particularly more punitive and less sympathetic towards suicide in prison, these attitudes were explicitly dependent on the offender's crime; age and gender had no significant influence on their opinions. Gender differences were evident; males were more accepting of suicide however neither males nor females appeared to be more punitive towards suicide in prison. Generally, participants agreed with suicidal support and prevention being provided for all prisoners. The main and most prominent finding from this study was the apparent punitiveness towards SOs and in particular, CSOs. These negative attitudes appear to perpetuate throughout society, this societal hatred is likely to result in a detrimental impact upon their re-integration and rehabilitation, which may have a significant effect on suicide. Studying attitudes toward suicide is one of several gateways in developing an understanding of the meanings of suicidal behaviour in different cultures. Future research should aim to explore the affect attitudes to prison suicide has on suicidal behaviour, while future efforts aim to reduce the stigma attached to SOs.

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**Conflict of Interest**

None.

**Informed Consent**

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation (institutional and national) and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

**Authors' contributions**

Both contributed to the drafting and editing of this paper.

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