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**‘Death in Prisons’ Conference
Report
Oxford, England
2nd/3rd November 2022**



UK Research
and Innovation

*prison***DEATH**
DEATHS IN PRISON WORLDWIDE

Dr Gillian Buck and Dr Tom Kemp

Twitter hashtag **#deathinprison**

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St Luke's Chapel, Oxford; Welcome slide; Conference delegates.

Introduction

The *Death in Prison* conference took place at the University of Oxford from 2nd – 3rd of November 2022. The conference aimed to work collaboratively on ways to visibilise and prevent prisoner deaths, with a focus on historical and international contexts. The event was attended by the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, international NGOs, international academic researchers, arts campaigners, people who have been personally impacted by deaths in prison, and prison regulation actors.

Summary of conference content

Dr Philippa Tomczak (University of Nottingham), Triona Lenihan and Adriana Pou (Penal Reform International) opened the conference, explaining the importance of an (inter)national focus on the often-overlooked problem of death in prison.

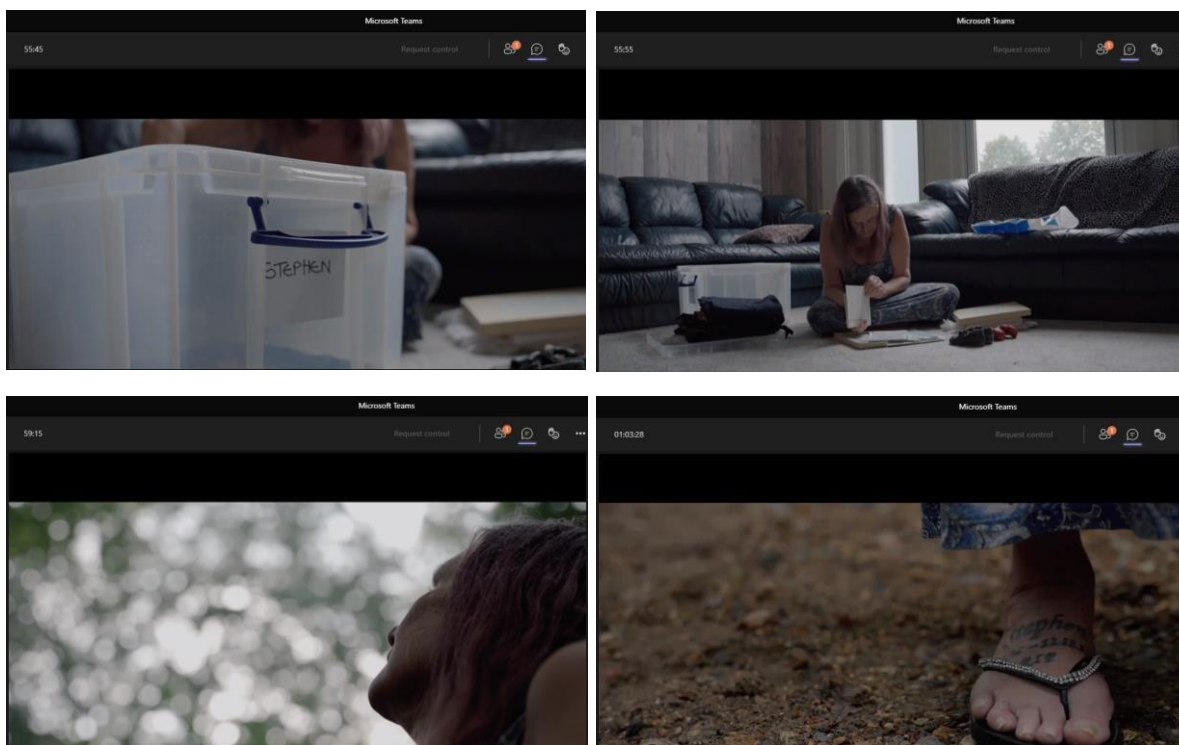
Session one focused on making prisoner deaths visible. Dr Philippa Tomczak, proposed a new epistemological approach to inform accurate measurement. Based on work with Dr Roisin Mulgrew, Philippa highlighted obfuscations and agglomerations in existing datasets that are based on poor definitions, reductive statistics and constrained medico-legal categorisations. She advocated for the scale and breadth of prisoner deaths and the characteristics of deceased prisoners be made more visible. This would enable states to prevent prisoner deaths more effectively, potentially saving lives, reducing costs, and increasing safety in prisons worldwide.

The preprint is available here:

Tomczak P and Mulgrew R (2022) Making prisoner deaths visible: Towards a new epistemological approach. Preprint DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.36095.07844](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.36095.07844). Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/365427889_Making_prisoner_deaths_visible_Towards_a_new_epistemological_approach

Dr Rohan Borschmann, University of Oxford, focused on preventing deaths in custody drawing on studies in Senegal. His presentation underlined the ways that international methods of recording deaths in prisons masks the scale and nature of death in prison. Dr Morris Tidball-Binz, Special Rapporteur, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions then discussed the papers and argued that these were crucial policy interventions that the UN could act upon.

Session two screened the moving film: “WOODHILL”, produced by [Lung Theatre](#) and featuring Janet Farrar, whose son Stephen, died in prison in 2013. The families of prisoners can be powerful regulators, working with others to responsabilise the state to bring qualitative changes in prisons (Tomczak, 2021). Collaborative film offers a powerful tool to capture lived experiences and influence understanding. The following screenshots depict Janet remembering Stephen and talking about how he walks with her as she moves forward.



Images from WOODHILL (LUNG Theatre, 2021)

Following the film, Janet and Matt Woodhead (who made the film) answered audience questions. Matt explained the verbatim film approach, drawing on interviews and co-creation. Both noted the importance of respect and relationships to building trust and gaining understanding. Janet explained her motivation to raise awareness of how people suffer and die in prisons and the resulting impact on families. Dr Rachel Condry, University of Oxford, closed the session as discussant, noting how the film valuably reminds audiences that there are human beings behind statistics and whilst families are often marginalised and responsabilised within criminal justice

systems, they can play a crucial role in preventing deaths: spotting declines in mental health, meeting loved ones' emotional and practical needs and fighting for changes and accountability within systems.

Session three focused on reducing preventable prisoner deaths with a focus on structural, societal and environmental factors. We heard from Dr Roisin Mulgrew, University of Galway (Ireland) and Professor Bronwyn Naylor, RMIT University (Australia) who argued that prisoner deaths cannot be prevented without understanding the full range of factors contributing to fatalities in the custodial context. Drawing on findings and recommendations from oversight bodies, Roisin highlighted levels of situational, structural, societal and environmental factors that have contributed to prisoner deaths and advocated evidence and rights-based prisoner death prevention strategies. Dr Mary Rogan, acting as discussant, suggested that a public health narrative that countered discourses of criminalisation could be an important starting point for thinking holistically about deaths in prison.

Session four focused on the rise of 'Death in Prison sentences'. Dr Catherine Appleton Norwegian University of Science and Technology (Norway) presented research on the global rise of Life Without Parole sentences. Dr Chris Seeds University of California Irvine (USA) focused on the rise of death-in-prison sentences in the US and gave an ethnographical account of prison hospices and the lived realities of aging prison populations and the ways people die in prison. Discussant Professor Dirk van Zyl Smit noted the importance of focus on (international) policy trends and the disregard and indignity that can result for growing populations of prisoners.

Session five focused on understanding prisoner deaths and investigations worldwide. Triona Lenihan and Adriana Pou from Penal Reform International (PRI) focused on Deaths in prisons worldwide, problematising available data sets and introducing work on global guidance for death investigations. Anne-Sophie Bonnet, from the CGLPL (Contrôleur Général des lieux de privation de liberté) focused on prisoner death investigations in France, highlighting disproportionality high rates of suicide in prisons and the nature of prison monitoring, including field visits and public reports. Discussant Louise Finer drew themes from the international focus, including the potential to share learning about how to prevent deaths, the need to consider resources, capacity, ideology and the (un)willingness of institutions and states to act on identified problems.

In summary, the conference showed how the predominant methods of documenting prisoner deaths mask the scale and nature of death in prison and how it is important to understand the immediate causes of prisoner deaths in terms of failures of process and resource. These are plentiful and important: ***overuse of imprisonment in general and remand/ pretrial detention in particular, lack of mental health expertise and resources in prisons, the failure of prison***

administrations to adhere to legal guidelines and standards, the restrictions of clemency and release and the relative impotence of death investigations and oversight bodies to tackle systemic issues. However, the conference also highlighted how technical means alone will not solve these issues. Criminalisation and imprisonment are inherently ‘processes and practices of disregard’ – dehumanising processes which control, disempower, stigmatise, and devalue life.

To read more about death in prisons, visit: <https://www.safesoc.co.uk/prisoner-death/>

Conference feedback

What impact did watching the film WOODHILL have on you as a viewer?

I've never seen a piece of work that so succinctly sums up the experience of death in custody. So vital that lived experience is placed front and centre of these narratives.

It was moving and visually compelling, very raw emotion and grief beautifully articulated.

It was extremely impactful; it takes an issue and a 'voice' that is really looking/ given time.

Shocked but also inspired at the strength and advocacy of Janet and other families.

Incredibly powerful film. Such sadness after watching it, but it needs to be watched.

What emotions did you experience whilst watching the film and why?

Sadness, rage, upset and some moments of uplift; Sadness and admiration; Upset, anger, disbelief; Sorrow, empathy; Sadness, so much sadness; Anger at the system's failure; A sense that something needs to be done about this.

Will you do anything differently in your future work as a result of watching the film, and if so, what?

I will remember Janet and her story; Encourage others to understand the personal stories about people in prison; Even more empathy.

Continue to consult families in a meaningful way in all my work; really think about how the work in this area should be underpinned by/ not lose sight of families.

Include and remember the importance of the voices.

Comments from attendees

“The Conference was impeccably well prepared and organized, and it proved to be an invaluable opportunity to learn about leading academic research and advocacy on deaths in prisons, an invisible global tragedy which urgently requires visibilisation and preventive action. The Conference should kickstart a process for bringing together a like-minded researchers and

activists on the issue of deaths in custody” (Dr Morris Tidball-Binz, UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions).

“The work that is happening at the University of Nottingham is vital. This work will bring about some really special and much needed change for the prison system” (Matt Woodhead, Artistic Director, Lung Theatre).

“Congratulations Philippa and team on a great conference. I learnt a lot, and met many interesting people with whom I look forward to talking further” (Professor Bronwyn Naylor, RMIT University).

Were there other topics that you would have liked to be included?

- More activists working to highlight/reduce deaths in prison.
- Deaths of unborn babies in custody, mothers losing their children whilst pregnant.
- More input from bereaved families.
- Death in custody challenges and best practices.

More photographs from the event



Sara Hyde introduces Philippa Tomczak in panel one; Triona Lenihan speaking in day two; Dirk van Zyl Smit summarising the Death in Prison Sentences Panel.



Janet Farrar and Matt Woodhead answering questions about the film; Morris Tidball-Binz summarising the UN focus; Conference delegates.

AGENDA: Death in Prisons Conference

2-3 November 2022. Oxford, England

Day 1 – Wednesday 2 November 2022 - 13.15- 17.00

	Time	Title & Speaker
Welcome & Introduction to the conference	13.15 - 13.25	Dr Philippa Tomczak, University of Nottingham Triona Lenihan and Adriana Pou, Penal Reform International
Session 1: 13.25 - 14.25 Making prisoner deaths visible: Towards a new epistemological approach Chair: Sara Hyde, University of Nottingham		
Presentation 1	13.25 -13.40	Making prisoner deaths visible: Towards a new epistemological approach (abstract attached) Dr Philippa Tomczak, University of Nottingham
Presentation 2	13.40 -13.50	Preventing deaths in custody (and beyond) in diverse settings: What gets counted gets done Dr Rohan Borschmann, University of Oxford
Discussant	13.50 - 14.00	Dr Morris Tidball-Binz, Special Rapporteur, United Nations
General discussion	14.00 -14.25	All attendees
<i>Break: 14.25 - 14.40 (refreshments)</i>		
Session 2: 14.40 -15.50 Screening of WOODHILL film Chair: Dr Rebecca Banwell-Moore, University of Nottingham		
Introduction	14.40 -14.45	Dr Gill Buck, University of Chester
Screening of the film & initial questions	14.45 -15.15	Matt Woodhead and Janet Farrar, LUNG Theatre
Discussant	15.15 -15.25	Professor Rachel Condry, University of Oxford
Questions for Matt and Janet, General discussion	15.25 - 15.50	All attendees
<i>Break: 15.50- 16.00 (comfort break)</i>		
Session 3: 16.00 - 17.00 Reducing preventable prisoner deaths: the impact of structural, societal and environmental factors Chair: Dr Tom Kemp, University of Nottingham		
Presentation 1	16.00 - 16.15	Reducing preventable prisoner deaths: the impact of structural, societal and environmental factors (abstract attached) Dr Roisin Mulgrew, University of Galway
Presentation 2	16.15 - 16.25	<i>Title TBC</i> Professor Bronwyn Naylor, RMIT University, Melbourne
Discussant	16.25 - 16.35	Dr Mary Rogan, Trinity College Dublin
General discussion	16.35 - 16.55	All attendees
Introduction to Day 2	16.55 - 17.00	Dr Catherine Appleton, Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Day 2 – 3 November 2022 - 9.00 - 13.00

	Time	Title & Speaker
Arrival and Coffee	9.00 - 9.10	
Session 4: 9.10-10.25 Death-in-Prison sentences Chair: Dr Gill Buck, University of Chester		
Presentation 1	9.10 - 9.20	Death-in-Prison sentencing: A brief introduction Dr Catherine Appleton, Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Presentation 2	9.20 - 9.40	Disregard and Indignity: Where Death-in-Prison Sentencing Comes From and How It Ends (abstract attached) Dr Chris Seeds, University of California
Discussant	9.40 - 9.55	Professor Dirk Van Zyl Smit, University of Nottingham
General discussion	9.55 - 10.25	All attendees
<i>Break (10.25- 10.45) (refreshments)</i>		
Session 5: 10.45 - 11.50 Towards understanding prisoner deaths and investigations worldwide Chair: Dr Rebecca Banwell-Moore, University of Nottingham		
Presentation 1	10.45 - 11.00	Deaths in prisons worldwide – developing global guidance on investigations Triona Lenihan & Adriana Pou, Penal Reform International (PRI)
Presentation 2	11.00 - 11.15	Prisoner death investigations in France Anne-Sophie Bonnet, CGLPL (Contrôleur général des lieux de privation de liberté)
Discussant	11.15 - 11.20	Louise Finer, Independent Consultant
General discussion	11.20 - 11.50	All attendees
<i>Break: 11.50 - 12.00 (comfort)</i>		
Final session: 12.00 - 13.00 Looking forwards Chair: Sara Hyde, University of Nottingham		
Round up of sessions	12.00 - 12.25	Professor Bronwyn Naylor, RMIT University (Day 1 sessions) Dr Tom Kemp, University of Nottingham (Day 2 sessions)
UN Thematic report	12.25 - 12.40	Dr Morris Tidball-Binz, United Nations
Future research and implementation agendas	12.40 - 13.00	Triona Lenihan, Penal Reform International & Dr Philippa Tomczak, University of Nottingham