



# Mass. has a troubled record on prison suicides

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By [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [Milton J. Valencia](#)

GLOBE STAFF APRIL 19, 2017

Massachusetts prisons for years have had a troubled track record when it comes to suicides by inmates.

The latest data from the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics show that there were 32 suicides per

100,000 state and federal prisoners in Massachusetts between 2001 and 2014 — the fourth-highest such rate in the country and about twice the national average.

In what appears to be the most recent case of inmate suicide, former New England Patriots star Aaron Hernandez was found dead, hanging in his cell at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center in Shirley, early Wednesday morning.

Between 2005 and 2006, a dozen inmate suicides were reported at Massachusetts prisons — including two at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center — prompting intense scrutiny of the state Department of Correction.

Most of the suicides were committed in segregation units by inmates with histories of mental illness and attempted suicides.



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Advocacy groups sued the department in 2007 alleging civil rights violations, just as a [Globe Spotlight series](#) revealed deepening mental illness and misery behind the walls of the state's prisons.

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## **Aaron Hernandez kills himself in prison**

The former Patriots star committed suicide in his cell Wednesday morning, the Department of Correction said. Hernandez's lawyer said he will conduct his own investigation.

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**Complete Hernandez coverage**

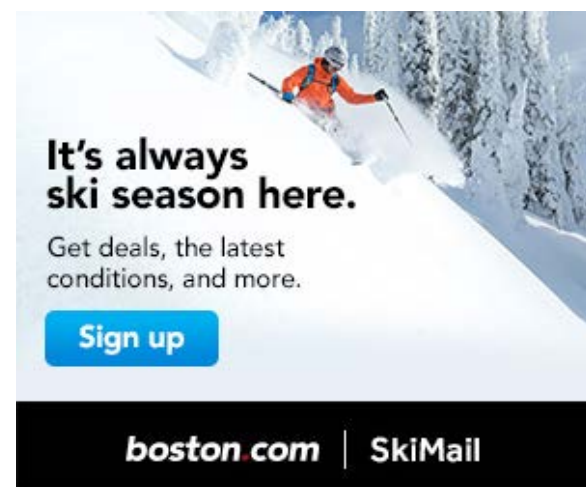
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That series also identified numerous problems, including botched background screenings on suicidal inmates, missing mental health records, and skipped security rounds by officers.

The correction department hired a consultant, made several improvements to the segregation unit system, and attempted to reach a deal on the lawsuit.

However, those negotiations failed, and plans for change were shelved because of the state's fiscal crisis.

The department then saw [another sharp increase](#) in



suicides, with 13 prisoners killing themselves between 2009 and 2010, including three at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center.

In response to an outcry from inmate advocates, the state rehired the consultant who had conducted the [2007 review](#).

The consultant said his [subsequent review](#) of the prisons, released in 2011, found that the Correction Department had once again made reforms, including increased training and new protocols for assessing inmates' mental illnesses.

The department also created new alternatives to the segregation unit. [In 2012](#), as part of a settlement of the advocates' lawsuit, a federal judge ordered the department to maintain those alternatives.

But suicides have continued in recent years at state prisons, including six in 2014; one of those cases was at the Souza-Baranowski Correctional Center and was the most recent inmate suicide at that facility until Hernandez' this week.

And [in recent months](#), prisoner advocacy groups have said the state is unlawfully placing prisoners with serious mental illness in solitary confinement despite that settlement.

And a recent [Globe Spotlight series](#) on the state's failed mental health care system highlighted the often-inadequate care provided in prisons, where at least 30 percent of inmates suffer from mental illness.

The [Spotlight Team reported](#) on one case in which an inmate diagnosed with a serious mental illness was sent to segregation at MCI-Cedar Junction at Walpole with tragic consequences: Joseph Vyce, a 35-year-old with bipolar disorder, hanged himself in 2014 after months in the isolation ward known as the Department Disciplinary Unit, where inmates are locked in 23 hours a day.

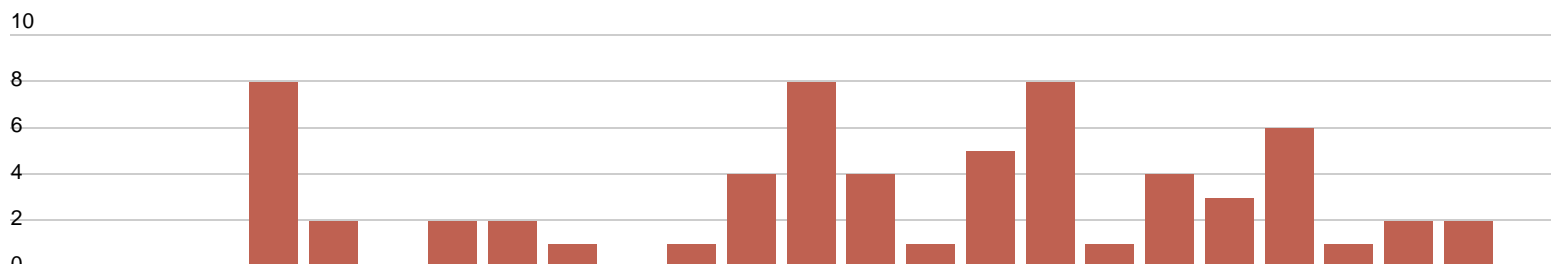
Nationwide, and in Massachusetts, illness — including cancer and heart, liver, and lung diseases — is by far the most common cause of death for state and federal prisoners, federal statistics show.

Suicide is the next most common cause, followed by homicides and drug and alcohol poisoning.

*If you or someone you know is having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.*

### Suicides in Massachusetts prisons

The figure for 2017 includes Hernandez' suicide.



1997

2017

SOURCES: Massachusetts Department of Correction  
MATT ROCHELEAU/GLOBE STAFF

### Prison suicide rate, by state, 2001-2014

Figures reflect both state and federal prisoners in each state. (One asterisk (\*) denotes that that in that state, prisons and jails form one integrated system and the rates are based on total jail and prison populations. Two asterisks (\*\*) denotes that the figure should be interpreted with caution because there were too few cases to provide a reliable rate.)

State	Suicide rate per 100,000 inmates, 2001-2014
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Rhode Island*	45
Utah	44
Montana	34
<b>Massachusetts</b>	<b>32</b>
Alaska*	31
New Hampshire**	30
Hawaii*	29
Idaho	28
South Dakota	28
Delaware*	26
Vermont* & **	26
Connecticut*	24
New Mexico	23
Nebraska	21
New York	21
California	20
Iowa	20
Maryland	20
Oklahoma	19
Wisconsin	19
Colorado	18
Minnesota	18
Wyoming**	18
Arizona	17
Arkansas	17
Nevada	17
Illinois	16
Indiana	16
Michigan	16
Oregon	16
Pennsylvania	16
Texas	16
Tennessee	15
Kansas	14

Mississippi	13
New Jersey	13
Ohio	13
South Carolina	13
Washington	13
Missouri	12
Maine**	11
Georgia	10
Virginia	10
Kentucky	9
Louisiana	9
Florida	8
West Virginia**	8
North Carolina	7
Alabama	6
North Dakota**	5

SOURCE: Bureau of Justice Statistics

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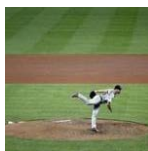
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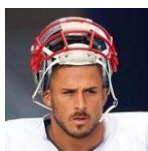
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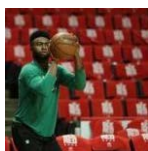
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