

Written evidence submitted by Dr Hazel Marzetti, suicide and suicide prevention researcher, University of Edinburgh.

## Introduction

1. I am a suicide and suicide prevention researcher, with specialism in young people's self-harm, suicide and suicide prevention; suicide prevention policy; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ+) self-harm, suicide and suicide prevention. I am writing in a personal capacity, drawing on my professional expertise relating to suicide and self-harm.

## Summary

2. I am writing with regard to the Criminal Justice Bill, Sections 11&12, primarily motivated by a concern that without further clarification and nuance, Sections 11&12 may accidentally curb access to self-harm support, including harm reduction practices and peer support, and in doing so hamper broader movements toward suicide prevention made by the government.

## Evidence:

3. The relationship between self-harm and suicide is extremely complicated and nuanced.
4. Research has identified a relationship between self-harm and suicide; with self-harm, for many, preceding a suicide attempt and therefore it is understood by some as a risk factor for suicide<sup>i</sup>.
5. Although this temporal relationship may be taken to mean that self-harm increases the risk of suicide, this is not as clear as might be assumed with some work suggesting that self-harm can be used to manage suicidal feelings and de-escalate distress. In such instances, self-harm may be used to regulate one's emotions<sup>ii</sup>, as a method for self-soothing<sup>iii</sup>, grounding<sup>iv</sup>, or self-care<sup>v</sup>. Indeed, in my own research exploring suicidal thoughts and attempts amongst LGBTQ+ young people aged 16-24 in Scotland, the relationship between suicide and self-harm was extremely complicated, with some young people discussing the ways in which they used self-harm practices during time of suicidal crisis to manage and de-escalate over-whelming suicidal feelings<sup>vi</sup>. Consequently, self-harm can not be simply thought of as something that we as a society want to blanket ban encouraging or assisting, when for some, such practices can be life sustaining.
6. This said, I thoroughly support the banning of any malicious encouragement toward or assistance with self-harm, which I believe is the spirit, but not the current meaning, of this Bill. However, I am concerned that in its current form the Bill may accidentally risk criminalising community-based and online groups, organisations and services that seek to help people using self-harm in ways that keep them safe from suicide, as well as providing advice to try and mitigate other forms of harms, such as infections. It is imperative that such groups, services and organisations, whether professionally or peer-led, that provide advice on how to self-harm more safely (e.g. self-cutting in ways that are less likely to be life threatening) and how to engage in wound care practices, are supported to continue to do their vital work without worries that they will be criminalised.

7. I am further concerned that without clarification, this Bill may make it harder services, organisations, and groups to facilitate discussions of and support for suicide and self-harm. I am concerned that this could also put people off talking about self-harm and suicide *with* services and organisations due to concerns about how they might respond. We know that it can already be incredibly difficult to disclose experience of distress, self-harm and suicidal feelings<sup>viiiviii</sup>, and so I implore the Government to consider the wording of this Bill carefully before taking any actions that might have inadvertent harmful consequences.

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<sup>i</sup> Janis Whitlock et al., “Nonsuicidal Self-Injury as a Gateway to Suicide in Young Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 52, no. 4 (2013): 486–92, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.09.010>.

<sup>ii</sup> Elise Paul et al., “Frequency and Functions of Non-Suicidal Self-Injury: Associations with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors,” *Psychiatry Research* 225, no. 3 (2015): 276–82, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2014.12.026>.

<sup>iii</sup> Amy Chandler, “Shame as Affective Injustice Qualitative , Sociological Explorations of Self-Harm , Suicide and Socioeconomic Inequalities,” in *Suicide and Social Justice New Perspectives on the Politics of Suicide and Suicide Prevention*, ed. Mark E. Button and Ian Marsh (New York: Routledge, 2019), 32–49.

<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429460494-3/shame-affective-injustice-amy-chandler>

<sup>iv</sup> Quintin A. Hunt, Quinlyn J. Morrow, and Jenifer K. McGuire, “Experiences of Suicide in Transgender Youth: A Qualitative, Community-Based Study,” *Archives of Suicide Research* 24, no. sup2 (2020): S340–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2019.1610677>.

<sup>v</sup> Amy Chandler and Z Simopoulou, “Self-Harm as an Attempt at Self-Care,” *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy* 10 (2020): 110–20. <https://ejqrp.org/index.php/ejgrp/article/view/101>

<sup>vi</sup> Hazel Marzetti, Lisa McDaid, and Rory O’Connor, “A Qualitative Study of Young People’s Lived Experiences of Suicide and Self-harm: Intentionality, Rationality and Authenticity,” *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 28, no. 4 (November 2023): 504–11, <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12641>.

<sup>vii</sup> Lynne Gilmour, Nicola Ring, and Margaret Maxwell, “Review: The Views and Experiences of Suicidal Children and Young People of Mental Health Support Services: A Meta-Ethnography,” *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12328>.

<sup>viii</sup> Marzetti, McDaid, and O’Connor, “A Qualitative Study of Young People’s Lived Experiences of Suicide and Self-harm.”