

# ATLAS SAFETY & SECURITY DESIGN, INC.

## Architecture and Death

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by David Nickell

Every time Randy Atlas walks into a jail cell, he's looking for trouble: a protruding vent, a sturdy towel rack, a metal bed, anything suitable to drape a noose over. He's not often disappointed.

Atlas has an unusual background and an odd job. He holds a doctorate in criminology from Florida State University and a master's degree in architecture from the University of Illinois. He is part sleuth and part architect, frequently called upon as a consultant to spot design flaws in jails and prisons. In addition to running his own architectural firm in Miami, he teaches criminology at FIU and advises the National Institute of Corrections in Boulder, Colorado.

In June juvenile court authorities asked Atlas, who is 35 years old, to turn his trained eye on the holding cells at the Dade County Juvenile Detention Center, scene of a suicide hanging by a 15-year-old boy only a few days earlier. The boy, Ronald Louis, had slung a bed sheet over the corner of an air vent in his cell.

Atlas recently made his findings public. He discovered that the boy's cell was the only one in the admission and orientation section that had a protruding vent. All other vents were flush with the wall, the way they were supposed to be. But Atlas found much more.

That wasn't the only place he could have done it, says the architect. "I found ample opportunities that if someone wanted to hang themselves, they could." Atlas spotted the same objects that any teenager bent on suicide would quickly notice: metal towel racks, ventilation grilles with wide openings, bed frames made of tubular metal, bed posts, mattress frames with wide openings, and loose door jambs. All, he says, are potentially lethal. Each object would accommodate a bed sheet or a piece of clothing used in desperation as a rope. "It only takes ten pounds of pressure to cut off the carotid artery," Atlas says. "It only takes four minutes for brain damage." And in the case of Ronald Louis, it only took three-eighths of an inch. That's how far the vent stuck out from the wall.

In his report to authorities, Atlas also lambasted the juvenile center for design features that inhibit surveillance. For example, in the orientation and admission section where Louis hanged himself, the cells form a long corridor. Supervisors must walk up to each door to see inside. Between ten minute checks, Atlas says, any suicidal teenager could easily hang himself. In the isolation cells, designated for the most troublesome or violent inmates, Atlas found no night lights, meaning that those inside could be seen only by waking them up with bright light. Under such circumstances, Atlas says, "The architecture makes contact between staff and juveniles antagonistic."

As one of several specialists asked to study the juvenile center's safety, Atlas submitted recommendations to Charles Edelstein, a juvenile court administrator and law professor at the University of Miami. Edelstein prepared a final report for Juvenile Court Judge Seymour Gelber.

Many of Atlas's suggestions involve simple modifications: replacing fixed towel racks, for example, with a collapsible brace attached to a ball joint. He also recommends that the long corridor of cells be used for juvenile residents who require less supervision; the orientation and admission section should be relocated to a block of cells that form a semicircle and have transparent doors of unbreakable plastic, a move that would provide easy monitoring of juveniles most prone to suicide - those still under emotional stress upon entering the facility.

In a summary of his findings, Atlas wrote, "There are currently many opportunities with the grills, the beds, and the towel racks to commit and succeed with self-destruction. A thorough inventory, room by room, is the first action step needed to make physical plant changes systematically."

Since the report, no changes have been made. John Farie, the new district administrator of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, which operates the center, planned to meet early this week with juvenile court. Mike Powers, an HRS spokesman, says Farie has studied the report carefully and wants to meet with

the judges "to determine how best to implement whatever changes are needed." Of the report, Powers says, "We took it seriously. It's a good report."

Shortly after the suicide, U.S. Attorney Dexter Lehtinen asked the FBI to investigate the circumstances. But last week FBI spokesman Paul Miller said, "That matter has been closed. It was determined initially that there was no violation. There was no allegation of any criminal wrongdoing." However, Mare Linowitz, a private attorney retained by the dead boy's family, says he intends to file a civil suit against HRS. But because of a Florida statute restricting conditions under which the state may be sued, Linowitz must wait three more months for HRS to respond to his notification of intent.

Louis hanged himself 30 minutes after being returned to his cell from a detention hearing. He was arrested on charges of assaulting a police officer and resisting arrest, the latest of thirteen felony charges in the past two years. He had previously told authorities that he had tried twenty times to kill himself, and earlier in the same day that he actually did kill himself, he had made another attempt. The judge who sent Louis to the juvenile center never saw the reports that declared him suicidal.

Louis's suicide prompted Gelber, the chief juvenile court judge, to order the study that contains Atlas's findings. The study cites statistics indicating that circumstances in Louis's suicide were not unique. Suicide, for example, accounts for all deaths of juveniles in jail, according to the report. And of all adult males in custody, 94 percent kill themselves by hanging.

A large part of Atlas's job is to curtail the opportunity for suicide behind bars. He says he furnishes advice to Government officials throughout the nation about how to improve security in correctional facilities. He also helped design the Dade County Stockade now under construction near Miami International Airport. "My recommendation would be the same for any jail," he says. "there are no excuses accepted for incompetence, for not doing it right.... Suicides are absolutely, positively preventable.

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