The direct route from child sex charges to suicide
By Jim Rankin
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The morning after he’d been publicly identified as one of 57 men charged in an international child exploitation investigation, Richard Dyde waited for his wife to leave the house.

Shamed and humiliated, Dyde chose to do what a growing number of others who face child exploitation charges — considered among the most repugnant of crimes — have done.

The York University scientist and author left his Leaside home on a bicycle on the morning of Dec. 9. It was cold and clear. He pedalled the short distance to the Woodbine Bridge on O’Connor Drive.

Dyde had achieved much in his 47 years. He’d earned a Ph.D. in neuroscience in the U.K., where he had grew up. In 2001, he’d moved to Toronto to join York University’s Centre for Vision Research. An unpublished book turned into a full biography of aviation pioneer George Cayley.

He’d even hammed it up on camera in a zero-gravity experiment for the CBC’s The Rick Mercer Report. He has been described as gregarious and outgoing, and had many friends.

Around 10:30 that morning, Dyde parked his bike and climbed the railing on the Woodbine Bridge and jumped. He landed about 30 metres below on his back, on a paved walkway in Taylor Creek Park. Death was quick.

He’d earlier discussed with his lawyer his intention to fight the accusations he faced. He had been charged on Dec. 1 with making child pornography available, possession of child pornography and of making child pornography, which can refer to transferring the offending material from one medium to another.

Police allege Dyde and the other accused were involved in on-line trading of child sexual abuse images and videos. The investigation, dubbed Project Sanctuary, involved police from Canada, the U.S. and Europe. A total of 25 children were removed from abusive relationships.

There is no suggestion Dyde had direct contact with a child victim.

On Dec. 8, the day he would make bail, Dyde did not appear suicidal, his lawyer, Heather Pringle, said in an interview. “He spoke of his wish to fight these charges at trial.”

He was released on a $10,000 surety, posted by his wife.

Waiting for him outside court was the media. His name, face and biographical details made the evening news, the Internet and the morning papers.

This “outing” seemed the tipping point.
“There’s a tremendous sense of loss and shame,” says Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University, Chicago, and co-author of “New Defendants, New Responsibilities: Preventing Suicide among Alleged Sex Offenders in the Federal Pretrial System.”

For the most part, child pornography offenders are white, male and educated, and have had no previous contact with the criminal justice system. They are less likely than other sex offenders to be psychopathic and appear to be at a higher risk for suicide, according to the 2009 report co-written by Lurigio.

The men, he says, are also in a “position of prominence or trust, whose activities utterly belie their public reputation, and are invested in their public reputation, and who have spent time cultivating it, and feel a great deal of shame and hopelessness about their future.”

Child exploitation charges are one of the fastest growing criminal offences in the U.S., and the conviction rates are high. In Canada, 1,600 child pornography offences were reported by police in 2009, up 13 per cent from a year earlier.

As laws are toughened and police beef up efforts to track down offenders, more people are being caught.

Musician Pete Townsend, after admitting to looking at child pornography in 2002, said the public shame triggered thoughts of suicide. “If I had had a gun I would have shot myself,” he later told a reporter. “And if I had shot myself it would have been awful because it would have confirmed what everybody thought.” Townsend was cleared of criminal charges.

Guilty or not, the public “outing” by police and the media of those accused of child pornography crimes increases the suicide risk, says Lurigio.

“It’s a worse public shame than the public square when people were put in pillories,” he says. “The people in the community would see you in the stocks and realize what you’ve done, and public shaming used to be a primary way of sanctioning people during the Colonial Period.

“So, what we have now is akin to that, except that the community is CNN. It’s worldwide, which makes it even more difficult for them to contemplate an escape (from) the shame that they rightly deserve to feel, and that is certainly perfectly well-placed.”

While there has been little study of the suicide phenomenon, it impacts the accused and their families — and law enforcement.

A 2010 U.S. study co-authored by FBI behavioural analysts, a Harvard doctor and a psychologist notes that police are not trained nor required to assess the suicide risk of those they charge with child sex offences. Awareness of the issue, the report concludes, might help reduce the risk.

Lois Powers of the John Howard Society of Toronto had a client who faced child exploitation charges relating to his granddaughter. He took his own life. “He was a man in his 60s who suddenly had no family at all,” she says.

Restorative justice programs, rather than the traditional criminal justice system, offer the best supports, Powers says.
The health and safety of inmates is the responsibility of correctional institutions, which monitor for suicidal behaviour. However, those held in pre-trial custody have access to fewer supports than those convicted and serving time.

There is nothing to suggest Dyde expressed suicidal thoughts while in custody. But his lawyer, Pringle, said in an email to the Star that, in general, the “state in which the presumed innocent are held in pretrial custody is an abomination.

“This includes — but is not confined to — access to meaningful counselling. The government fails to fund the detention centres properly because taking care of prisoners is not a politically popular cause.”

Pringle believes Dyde was overwhelmed by the “outing,” and that this led to the suicide.

“I do feel that police should be cognizant of the risk in publicly releasing information that an individual faces this type of charge, along with personal details about that person’s life and occupation,” she said. “Increased media attention into every aspect of the accused’s personal life exacerbates the stigma inherent in facing that type of charge.”

There are many who, disgusted by the nature of the crimes and helplessness of the victims, could not care less about the stigma and suicide risk of those who are charged.

As one media outlet put it in an on-line headline following Dyde’s death: “Accused pervert escapes prosecution.”