

Recent Australian Suicide Trends for Males and Females at the National Level: Has the Rate of Decline Differed?

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Executive Summary:

Introduction

- In 1995 the Australian Federal Government introduced the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (NYSPS), followed by the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) in 1999.
- The fall in overall suicide rates in Australia since the late 1990's has been interpreted as evidence that increased attention to suicide prevention has begun to influence the occurrence of suicide.
- Little research has evaluated whether Australian trends in suicide have differed between genders since the peak in suicides in 1997.
- A national benchmark for suicide trends by gender, against which suicide patterns among select subgroups can be contrasted, would enable clearer identification of prevention priorities.
- The Australian situation also provides a natural quasi-experimental design whereby method restriction (firearms legislation) versus generalised intervention can be examined.

Method

- Suicide incidence by method data were obtained for the period 1997-2005.
- 1997 was chosen as the starting point because it represented the epoch at which suicides were at their highest, and the point from which the overall decline in suicides has become apparent.
- Trends in suicide rates between males and females were compared.

Results

- Both male and female suicide rates have undergone downwards trends since 1997.
- Male suicides fell at a faster rate than female suicides.
- Male nonfirearm suicide fell significantly faster than either male firearm suicide or female nonfirearm suicide.

Conclusions

- At the national level, it appears that males – an 'at risk' group overall - are benefiting from national suicide prevention strategies. Awareness raising campaigns directed towards males are likely to have had positive influences.
- However, it is also possible that males are affected by external factors (risk and/or protective) to a greater extent than females.
- Economic variables may contribute substantially to Australian male suicide, but less so to female suicide. This has implications for gender-specific public health policy and suicide prevention campaigns.
- Male nonfirearm suicides fell more quickly than male firearm suicides, contrary to the prediction that restricting legal access to firearms would lead to faster declines in firearm suicide relative to nonfirearm suicide.
- Social and economic change, coupled with prevention strategies emphasising detection and early intervention, may play a more influential role than method restriction in reducing suicide rates in Australia.
- It is recommended that greater consideration be given to female suicide risk factors such as intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and substance dependence.