Self-harm and suicide in young people: Associated risk factors and evidence based interventions

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Professor Ella Arensman
School of Public Health & National Suicide Research Foundation,
WHO Collaborating Centre on Surveillance and Research in Suicide Prevention
University College Cork, Ireland
International Association for Suicide Prevention
Overview

- Extent of suicide and self-harm among adolescents and young adults
- Risk factors associated with self-harm and suicide among adolescents and young adults, and cases
- Psychotherapeutic interventions for self-harm in adolescents and young adults
- Suicide contagion and clustering
Extent of the problem of self-harm in adolescents and young adults
Leading causes of death among young people aged 15-19 years at global level (*WHO, 2017*)

- **Road injury**
- **Interpersonal violence**
- **Suicide**
- **Maternal conditions**
- **Suicide**
- **Road injury**
- **Interpersonal violence**
- **Suicide**

**Number of deaths in 2016**

- **Both sexes**
- **Females**
- **Males**
Rate of suicide among 15-19 year olds in Europe in 2015 per 100,000 of population

*Data unavailable for the following countries: Montenegro, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Albania

Source – Eurostat, 2018

Eve Griffin, Elaine McMahon, Fiona McNicholson, Paul Corcoran, Ivan J. Perry, Ella Arensman

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Abstract
Rates of hospital-treated self-harm are highest among young people. The current study examined trends in rates of self-harm among young people in Ireland over a 10-year period, as well as trends in self-harm methods.

Methods
Data from the National Self-Harm Registry Ireland on presentations to hospital emergency departments (EDs) following self-harm by those aged 10–24 years during the period 2007–2016 were included. We calculated annual self-harm rates per 100,000 by age, gender and method of self-harm. Poisson regression models were used to examine trends in rates of self-harm.

Results
The average person-based rate of self-harm among 10–24-year-olds was 318 per 100,000. Peak rates were observed among 15-19-year-old females (564 per 100,000) and 20-24-year-old males (448 per 100,000). Between 2007 and 2016, rates of self-harm increased by 22%, with increases most pronounced for females and those aged 10–14 years. There were marked increases in specific methods of self-harm, including those associated with high lethality.

Conclusions
The findings indicate that the age of onset of self-harm is decreasing. Increasing rates of self-harm, along with increases in highly lethal methods, indicate that targeted interventions in key transition stages for young people are warranted.

Keywords
Self-harm · Young people · Epidemiology

Self-harm among young people in Ireland, 2007-2016
Risk of repeated self-harm in young people

- Young people with the highest risk for repeated self-harm were 15–19-year-old females and 20–24-year-old males.

- Self-cutting was the method associated with the highest risk of self-harm repetition. Time between first self-harm presentations represents an indicator of subsequent repetition.

- Increased risk of self-harm method escalation among young people in recent years.
Increasing trend of self harm acts involving highly lethal methods among males and females aged 15-29 years
Method of self-harm 10-17 year-olds, 2016

Alcohol was involved in 11% of presentations (15% for boys, 10% for girls)
Case Claire

Claire, aged 13, engaged for the first time in self-cutting early 2017. Claire’s mother discovered the self-cutting in March. With Claire’s agreement an appointment was made with the GP. The GP assessed Claire and concluded Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, and referred her to a counsellor. In May, Claire’s absenteeism from school increased and she told her mother that she didn’t think the sessions with the counsellor were helpful.

In August, Claire engaged in an intentional drug overdose, using paracetamol that she had accessed in the bathroom. Claire’s mother became very concerned and made a request to the GP to arrange a referral to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The GP immediately arranged a referral to CAMHS. However, the waiting time for the first session was 5 weeks.
Case Claire

On 27th August, Claire engaged in a highly lethal act of self-harm and she died the same day.
Risk factors associated with self-harm in adolescents

**Girls**
- Substance abuse, including alcohol and drug abuse
- Self-harm by friends and family members
- Sexual abuse and physical maltreatment
- Problems related to sexuality
- Problems with parents
- Bullying and Cyberbullying
- Difficulties in making – keeping friends
- High levels of depressive symptoms
- Sleep problems

**Boys**
- Substance abuse, including alcohol and drug abuse
- Self-harm by friends and family members
- High levels of anxiety
- High levels of impulsivity
- Problems related to sexuality
- Bullying and Cyberbullying
- Problems with school work
- Sleep problems

In a population survey of 21 year olds, of the 248 participants who had made suicide attempts (6% of the overall sample), almost three quarters reported some kind of suicide-related internet use at some point in their lives.

One in five had accessed sites giving information on how to harm yourself or take your life. In addition, help-sites were accessed as well.

Biddle et al, 2016
Motives related to self-harm by gender among adolescents

Scoliers et al, 2009; Rasmussen et al, 2016
The importance of understanding **Ambivalence**

- A critical feature in working with those who self-harm is to recognise their ambiguity and the fragility and temporality of their decisions about their destiny.

  *Bermans et al, 2009; 2017*

  "I have now lived 16 years past the day I should have died."

  KEVIN HINES - Global Storyteller, Author & Filmmaker

- I said to myself, If somebody comes up to me and says, ‘Are you okay? Is something wrong? Can I help you?’ I was going to tell them my whole life story and they were going to make me safe."

- A suicidal person needs to hear: “That we care about you, your life does matter and that all we want is for you to stay,” he says. “If someone had looked at me on that bridge or that bus and said that to me, I would have begged for help.”

  *Kevin Hines*
Proportion of adolescents with self-harm who receive help from health services, social network or no help by country

Ystgaard et al, 2008
Suicide and medically treated self-harm in adolescents - The tip of the iceberg

*Annual incidence rates per 100,000 among Irish adolescents (McMahon et al., 2014)
School-based and psychotherapeutic and interventions for self-harm in adolescents and young adults
School based mental health awareness programme

- The Youth Aware of Mental Health programme (YAM), a school-based intervention of short duration (5 h in 4 weeks), was significantly more effective in preventing new cases of suicide attempts and severe suicidal ideation, including planning, than no intervention (the control group)

- The reported reduction in incident suicide attempts was more than 50% with YAM than for the control group

- In SEYLE, the YAM not only prevented suicide attempts, but it also reduced new cases of severe suicidal ideation, including suicide planning—all important markers of poor psychological wellbeing

- The design of the YAM, aimed at changing pupils’ negative perceptions and improving their coping skills in the management of adverse life events and stressors, which often are triggers of suicidal behaviour, could account for its significant effects
Young People’s perspectives

School-based individual support

“Show them there is always someone there to help”

School-based mental health education

“More mental health classes”

“Get someone who had a problem to give a talk in school”

Peer discussion groups

“A group where kids can sit and discuss problems freely”

Anonymous support

“Write down problems privately and a teacher can discuss them in front of the class”
Psychotherapeutic interventions for self-harm in adolescents and young adults

- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy - Individual and Group-based psychotherapy
- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy for Adolescents (DBT-A)
- Home-based family therapy
- Brief compliance enhancement
What is known about CBT as a therapeutic intervention for adolescents and young adults

- CBT has resulted in significant reductions in self-harm, depressed mood and trait anxiety among adolescents and young adults (Oldershaw et al, 2012; Taylor et al, 2011; Esposito-Smythers et al, 2011; Brent et al, 2009; Slee et al, 2008; Hawton et al, 2016)

- A risk reduction and relapse prevention approach to treatment, in addition to integrated CBT and DBT techniques has proven effective (Brent et al, 2009)

- A time-limited cognitive–behavioural intervention, has proven efficacy for patients with recurrent and chronic self-harm (Slee et al, 2008)
Self-harm intervention and suicide prevention among young people at national level in Ireland

- National Clinical Programme for the Assessment and Management of Patients Presenting to Emergency Departments following Self-Harm

- Connecting for Life, Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide, 2015-2020
Impact of Pieta House therapeutic approach on client recovery (Conway et al, 2018)

- Survey among clients aged 18 years and older, who completed therapy at Pieta House, using the Recovery Self-Assessment-Revised (RSA-R)

- 24.9% were aged 18-24 years

- The majority of clients indicated:
  - Willingness to ask for help (84.5%)
  - Reliance on others (82.1%)
  - Goal and success orientation (73.6%)
  - No domination of symptoms (66.6%)
  - Personal confidence and hope (46.7%)

- Areas of improvement: service user involvement, peer support and advocacy.
Documentary “My other Life”

https://vimeo.com/293985609

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhwXUyM9V7g
Suicide contagion and clustering in young people
Historical evidence of contagion of suicide

1774: “The Sorrows of Jung Werther” – JW Von Goethe

- Following publication of the novel, indications for imitative suicides among young men in Germany, and in Denmark and Italy – “The Werther Effect”

1962: Marilyn Monroe

- 12% increase in suicide in the month following her death by suicide.

1988: TV film of railway suicide of a 19-year old male student

- A tv film showing the railway suicide of a young men was followed by a 175% increase in railway suicides in young men over 70 days after broadcasting.

Phillips, 1974; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Halgin et al, 2006
Significant increase of railway suicides after the suicide of German goal keeper, Robert Enke on 10\textsuperscript{th} November 2009

In addition to the short term increase in railway suicides, Hegerl et al (2013) identified a long-term effect: 19\% increase in railway suicides in the two years after the suicide by Robert Enke.
Evidence of copycat suicides and suicide attempts/self-harm

Families blame ‘13 Reasons Why’ for the suicides of 2 teens in California (US), April 2017

Netflix drama series blamed for inspiring teens’ suicide and attempted suicide (Austria), May 2017

‘13 Reasons Why’ copycat suicide in Peru, June 2017

Increase in teen suicidal behaviour linked to ‘13 Reasons Why’, Toronto, June 2017
Internet searches for suicide following the release of 13 Reasons Why (Ayers et al, JAMA, 2017)

- Comparison of internet search volumes (31st March - 18th April 2017) with expected search volumes if the series had never been released

- Suicide-related searches were 15-44% higher than expected, 12-19 days after the show’s premiere

- Searches “how to commit suicide” (26%); “commitsuicide” (18%); “howtokillyourself” (9%) were all significantly higher than expected

- Public awareness indicative searches were also elevated.

- Conclusion: 13 Reasons Why elevated suicide awareness, but it is concerning that searches indicating suicidal ideation also increased.
Reasons Why Not

- The graphic nature of reporting and the reporting of specific details of highly lethal methods involved can trigger copycat cases; the effects of exposure on suicidal behaviour and violence are well-documented.

- Revenge suicide is relatively rare; revenge motive is reported by a minority of young people who self-harm.

- Evidence based information on positive mental health promotion and help-seeking for mental health problems, was not taken into account.

- There are elements of glorifying and romanticising suicide, which may further impact on vulnerable people who are considering suicide or self-harm.
Negative impact of certain apps and online games, such as Momo challenge and Blue Whale on children and adolescents

- These games play on the fears and apprehension of some children and many parents.

- Once the user engages with the account, a request is made to the user to complete some challenge.

- The initial challenges may not be harmful, but may grow into threatening and request photographic evidence of completion. Further demands may request users to self-harm or harm others and threaten harm to the user’s family.
Characteristics of people involved in suicide contagion and clusters

Comparing cluster suicides to singleton suicide cases

- Younger age
- More frequent loss of friends/family members through suicide (complicated grief and PTSD)
- More often drugs in toxicology (in particular benzodiazepines)
- More often history of alcohol and drug abuse
- Less frequently left a suicide note
- More often disconnected from parents

(Haw et al, 2012; Larkin & Beautrais, 2012; Malone, 2013; Arensman et al, 2016)
### How to respond to emerging suicide clusters and contagion

There is a gap in evidence-based guidelines detailing appropriate response strategies to suicide clusters and the low-frequency nature of clusters makes it difficult to evaluate strategies.

#### Current best practice guidelines for responding to emerging clusters – the core elements

| • Preparedness - Response team and core response plan should be available as part of a routine procedure |
| • Clarity on leadership/co-ordination of response team |
| • Multidisciplinary response team comprised of qualified representatives of all relevant agencies, incl. mental health services, suicide bereavement support services, social work, police, media |
| • Inter-agency protocols (if available) should be put in place in order to address referral procedures, confidentiality and information sharing |
| • Involvement of specialised staff of suicide prevention agencies and mental health professionals trained in dealing with severe traumatic incidents, post traumatic stress and complicated grief |
| • Response plan needs to address different phases:  |
|   • Immediate aftermath: Up to 1 week  |
|   • Reactive period: 1 week up to 1 month  |
|   • Outreach period: weeks up to years (incl. anniversaries) |
Specific challenges related to self-harm and suicide in young people

- Self-harm more frequently observed among children and adolescents at younger age (e.g. Ireland, US, Japan)

- Shift in use of more highly lethal methods of self-harm at younger age, and method escalation over shorter period of time

- More emphasis on evidence based mental health promotion and programmes addressing positive coping skills at younger age

- Improved access to mental health services for children and adolescents at risk of self-harm and suicide

- More insight required into impact of harmful social media platforms and sites on self-harm and suicide
Suicide Support and Information
Informing and Supporting People Affected by Suicide

www.suicidesupportandinformation.ie

Suicide Support and Information
Informing and Supporting People Affected by Suicide in Ireland

Suicide Support and Information
Developed by the National Suicide Research Foundation and funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) this website provides evidence based information on bereavement following suicide and responding to people at risk of suicide. The information is tailored for people bereaved by suicide and for health professionals, including GPs and mental health professionals, as well as the general public.

The evidence base represents up-to-date information from international systematic reviews and outcomes of a HRB funded study: Psychosocial, psychiatric and work related factors associated with suicide in Ireland: A case-control study (SSIS-ACE).

The Suicide Support and Information website is a timely resource, which meets a key objective of the Irish National Strategy for the Reduction of Suicide, Connecting for Life, 2015-2020: To enhance accessibility, consistency and care pathways of services for people vulnerable to suicidal behaviour.

Edit
Go Raibh Maith Agat!

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