

Suicide trends in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic: an interrupted time-series analysis of preliminary data from 21 countries

Overview: This research offers a cautionary tale against assuming the general expectation that suicide rates have spiked during COVID. The data the authors reviewed found this not to be the case in high- and middle-income countries. Suicide data often lags behind real time; these authors looked at media and real time reports to better assess the number of suicides occurring in 21 countries.

Key Points:

- While there were many initial self-reports of increased depression, anxiety and suicidal thinking, this did not translate into higher suicide rates.
- There may have been a protective effect during stay-at-home periods that “we’re all in this together,” which led to a beneficial outcome. Likewise, many countries increased resources and relaxed restrictions to access counseling and support via telehealth.
- While these results are positive, caution should be taken now that stay-at-home periods are lifting when may see a reduction in counseling access and a delayed response to the cumulative stress and loss many experienced.
- They were unable to look at more detailed data related to age, gender, and suicide method. These sub-populations may have shown differences that were not examined.

From the Article:

- “Between Sept 1 and Nov 1, 2020, we searched the official websites of these countries’ ministries of health, police agencies, and government-run statistics agencies or equivalents, using the translated search terms “suicide” and “cause of death”, before broadening the search in an attempt to identify data through other public sources.” (p.1).
- “showed no evidence of a significant increase in risk of suicide since the pandemic began in any country or area.” (p.1).
- “Policy responses to prevent the spread of COVID-19 need to balance the benefits of physical distancing, school and workplace closures, and other restrictions against the possible adverse impact of these measures

on population mental health and suicide.” (p.2).

- “Our early findings provide some reassurance (at least for high-income and upper-middle-income countries) that COVID-19 risk mitigation measures have not led to population-level increases in suicide rates.” (p.2).
- “There are some concerning signals that the pandemic might be adversely affecting suicide rates in low-income and lower-middle-income countries, although data are only available in a small minority of these countries and tend to be of suboptimal quality.” (p.2).
- “Other studies have used official suicide statistics for the months since the pandemic began but have made comparisons to equivalent periods without accounting for underlying trends.” (p. 2).
- “In general, based on the primary analysis, there does not appear to have been an increase in risk of suicide during the pandemic’s early months in the 21 countries for which we had data, and a number of countries or areas appear to have seen fewer suicides relative to the expected number. ” (p. 7).
- “The lack of increase in suicides since the pandemic began could be attributed to various factors. First, there was an early emphasis on the potential adverse effects of stay-at-home orders, school closures, and business shut downs. Empirical evidence began to emerge from some countries that self-reported levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking were heightened during the initial stay-at-home periods,¹ but this does not appear to have translated into increases in suicides, at least in the countries in our study.” (p. 7).
- “In some countries, governments responded rapidly to the threat to mental health, implementing recommended approaches such as bolstering mental health services. Maintaining this emphasis on accessible, high-quality mental health care is crucial.” (p. 7).
- “Second, certain protective factors might have been operating in the pandemic’s early months. Communities might have actively tried to support at-risk individuals, people might have connected in new ways, and some relationships might have been strengthened by households spending more time with each other.” (p. 7).