

Suicide rates in men (Monday, 3rd February 2003)

Young male suicide up over the past 50 years

Research has shown that, since World War II, successive post-war generations of men seem to be at increased risk of suicide and that this risk is carried into middle-age. While there have been recent falls in suicide rates in England and Wales, if this risk were to be carried into late middle and old age, the suicide rate among men would rise. Currently, in England each year, around 1,300 young men commit suicide.

A research team led by Dr David Gunnell from the University of Bristol carried out a study to determine whether, among groups of people born at the same time, those at increased risk of suicide carried forward this risk as they got older.

Their results showed that, between 1950 and 1999, suicide rates doubled in men aged from 15 to 44, although, apart from those in the 25 to 34 age group, they began to fall in the 1990s. In every five-year age band up to age 30 to 34, suicide rates were higher in each successive birth group.

The UK is not the only country in which the suicide risk among men has increased. Research carried out in the US, Canada, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden and Belgium has also found that suicide rates have increased in men in the post-war years.

The researchers say this increase could be due to several factors, such as:

- Influences on mental health caused by factors such as parents splitting up, substance abuse, or more mothers going out to work
- Unrealistic expectations of life, possibly linked to the mismatch between lifestyles portrayed on TV and in advertising and those that are achievable in reality
- The media portraying suicide as a relatively common and acceptable occurrence.

The authors comment that, if these trends continue into middle and old age, there will be a significant increase in overall male suicide rates.

Full review:

According to UK researchers, successive post-war generations of men appear to have an increased risk of suicide, which they carry with them into middle-age. Writing in the British Journal of Psychiatry, the authors point out that, if these trends continue into middle- and old-age, there will be an overall increase in male suicide rates.

Previous research has shown that over the past 50 years there has been a significant increase in young male suicides. This latest study, led by Dr David Gunnell at Bristol University's Department of Social Medicine, was carried out to assess whether birth cohorts could carry their increased predisposition to suicide with them as they age. The research team analysed mortality and population data produced by the Office for National Statistics to investigate evidence for cohort effects on suicide between 1950 and 1999.

The study showed that:

- Between 1950 and 1999, suicide rates in men aged 15-44 years doubled, with the exception of 25-34-year-olds, which began to decline in the 1990s
- In older men, and women of all age groups, except those aged 15-24 years, suicide rates have declined since the 1960s

- In every five-year age band, up to 30-34 years, suicide rates were higher in each successive birth cohort. The authors believe these year-on-year rises in young male suicides are likely to be cohort effects, or reflect the change in risk factors for suicide, which have varying effects on different age and gender groups.

Discussing their findings, the researchers point out that similar studies of suicide in other countries have also shown that rates have increased in successive male cohorts in the post-war years. They suggest several possible explanations for these observations, including:

- The long-term impact of changing levels of exposure in childhood or early adulthood to certain environmental influences, such as increasing levels of parental separation, substance misuse, and more women going out to work
- Increasing media portrayals of idealised lifestyle on TV or in advertising, which lead to young people having unrealistic expectations of life - the mismatch between these portrayals and reality could increase the risk of suicide
- Media portrayal of suicide as relatively commonplace and acceptable could encourage young people to see it as normal in their culture and increase the likelihood of them committing suicide in times of crisis
- Changes in the popularity of more lethal methods of suicide in successive generations.

The researchers concluded, 'if younger birth cohorts carry their increased suicide rates through into later life, then the recent falls in suicide rates in England and Wales will be reversed. Possible explanations for these changing patterns of suicide are needed if prevention is to be tackled effectively.'

REF: Gunnell D et al. Influence of cohort effects on patterns of suicide in England and Wales, 1950-1999. Br J Psychiatry 2003; 182: 164-70

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