

Why Suicide Keeps Rising for Middle-Aged Men

Originally published in Suicide Prevention Resource Centre's newsletter, The Weekly Spark, the following article examines the rates, risks, and reasons that middle-aged American men experience higher suicide rates than the general population. Added to the article are Canadian stats for comparison.



Suicide rates in the U.S. continue to rise, and working-age adults – particularly men – make up the largest increase, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Middle-aged men in the 45 to 60 range experienced a 43 percent increase in suicide deaths from 1997 to 2014, and the rise has been even sharper since 2005. Untreated mental illness, the Great Recession, work-related issues and men's reluctance to reach out for help converge to put them at greater risk for taking their own lives. And because men are more likely than women to use a gun, their suicide attempts are more often fatal.

Similarly, in Canada, the male rate of suicide is three times higher than that of women, and of the men who take their lives, the 40 – 59 age bracket has the highest rates, as seen below in this Stats Can chart:

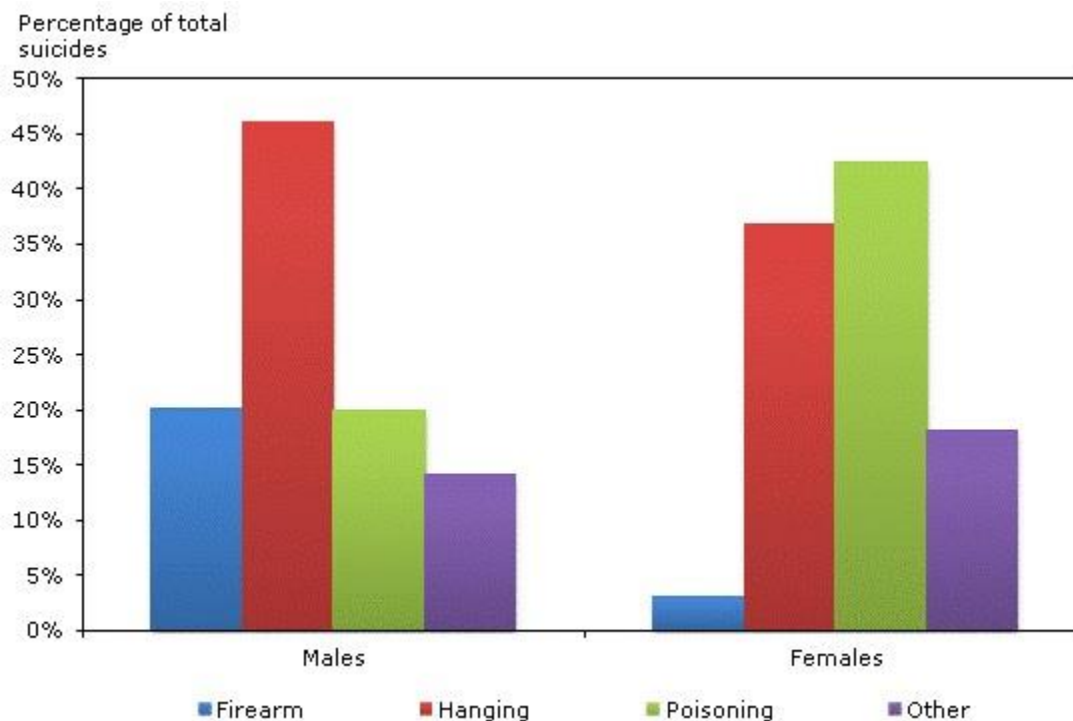
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
40 - 44	27.4	27.0	22.2	23.1	24.9
45 - 49	24.4	26.8	28.9	23.8	24.8
50 - 54	24.7	28.4	26.9	25.3	25.9
55 - 59	22.2	26.0	24.5	25.2	26.7

Suicide rate per 100,000 population. Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM, table 102-0551.

Dr. Alex Crosby, surveillance branch chief in the CDC's Division of Violence Prevention, told journalists that male suicide rates are about four times higher in males than in females, but when the attempts are not fatal, the balance changes, with two to three times more females than males trying to take their own lives.

"In about half of the suicides in the United States, the mechanism or the method was a firearm," Crosby says. Males are more likely to use firearms, while poison is more common for females. However, he notes, "When you look at suicide in the military, females choose firearms almost as much as men."

In Canada, we know that men choose more lethal methods and the numbers are similar, apart from firearms which are not as prevalent:



Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Vital Statistics Death Database.

Clinical depression in individuals and economic depression (and recession) in society are tied to suicide risk. "The highest rates of suicide we ever had in the United States was in the 1930s," Crosby says. The Great Depression made a tragic impact. Since 2005, even before the Great Recession was "official," the then-worsening economy was tied to a rise, although less dramatic, in suicide rates.

Contributing Factors

Mental illness – particularly untreated mental illness – makes people much more vulnerable to suicide.

"Bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety disorder – any of the mood disorders – are the key contributors" in terms of diagnoses, says Dr. Dan Reidenberg, executive director of SAVE – Suicide Awareness Voices of Education – and managing director of the National Council for Suicide Prevention. Schizophrenia and eating disorders – in men and women – are related, although less frequent, diagnoses. "For some, especially males, especially under high-stress situations, the opioid epidemic and overdose has become a significant contributing factor to [suicide]," he says.

Stats Can research indicates mental illness as the most important risk factor for suicide, with more than 90 percent of people who commit suicide having a mental or addictive disorder. About 60 percent of people who take their own lives suffer from depression, the most common illness among those who take their own lives. However, the Canadian source states that there is no single determinant that will cause suicide, rather, suicide often results from a combination of many factors including mental illness, marital problems, financial hardship, deteriorating health, or lack of social supports.

Midlife Stress

Can a loss of hope for the future and fresh beginnings contribute to vulnerable middle-aged men taking their lives?

"We know that as people become adults and they face these stressors – some that they can't get through; they can't overcome – it does increase their risk of suicide," Reidenberg says. "It weighs heavily on their brain that they've either been downsized and out of a job or they can't provide for their family. Or in recent times with the economic crisis, they've lost their retirement; they've lost their future."

Certain occupational groups – notably farming, fishing and forestry, followed by construction and extraction – have the highest suicide rates, according to a CDC report released in July. Work is inextricably tied to feelings of self-worth and identity – possibly more so for men.

"We need to, in our workplaces in particular, do much more to engage in conversations and make it okay to talk about suicide," Reidenberg says. "So that when these situations come up for men – and that's where it's happening mostly, is men in the middle ages at work– that they are okay saying, 'Something is wrong. I need help.'"

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