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Correspondence

A decline in Australian suicide during COVID-19? A reflection on the 2020 cause of death statistics in the context of long-term trends



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ABSTRACT

This correspondence considers the overall decline in suicide in 2020 in the context of longer-term sex and age-specific trends over the period 1907–2020. When considering suicide rates from the beginning of the 20th century, the decrease in the total suicide rate from 2019 to 2020 is less noteworthy.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics released Cause of Death data for 2020 on 29 September (2021), and there has been much interest in the early impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on cause-specific mortality. For Australian suicide, it appears that, compared to 2019, overall rates declined during 2020 for males and females (Fig. 1A), similar to other high-income countries (Pirkis et al., 2021). This was unexpected because evidence from previous economic crises (Chang et al., 2013) and pandemics (Chang et al., 2020) suggested that the extensive social and economic disruption associated with the necessary public health response to COVID-19 could have led to an increase in suicide.

While the 2020 suicide rate was lower than the 2019 rate, this overlooks important long-term patterns by sex and age-group that perhaps have more relevance to ongoing suicide prevention priorities than just the impacts of COVID-19. The ABS reports suicide rates over the past ten years, a period where the suicide rates for both males and females were similar to previous historical periods, and much lower than others. For example, higher suicide rates were evident during the male ‘youth suicide epidemic’ of the 1980s and 1990s (Fig. 1B); following the impact of the availability of sedatives during the 1960s (Oliver and Hetzel, 1972), particularly for females (Fig. 1C); and following the impact of the Great Depression in 1930 on male suicide rates. Suicide rates fluctuate year-to-year due to their low base rate, and changes based on single year comparisons can be over-interpreted. When considering suicide rates from the beginning of the 20th century, the decrease in the total suicide rate from 2019 to 2020 is less noteworthy.

What is perhaps of greater importance are the emerging trends for specific age-cohorts in the population. There has been a sustained increase from 2010, including into 2020, among those aged 15–24 in males (from 14 to 21 per 100,000) and females (from 5 to 7 per 100,000). The highest suicide rates in Australia remain among middle-

and older-aged men, also with a sustained increase from 2005 to 2019 among those aged 50–74 years from 16 to 23 per 100,000 in 2019, before a decline in 2020.

Government financial support packages implemented in 2020 (such as ‘Jobkeeper’ which provided some wage support) were likely important initiatives that prevented suicides among those of working age, and particularly men - the group associated with the majority of suicide burden in the Australian population. This again highlights the importance of the social determinants of suicidal behavior as targets for suicide prevention, and in particular for this age-group, employment (Milner et al., 2014a), the workplace (Milner et al., 2014b), and positive transitions from employment to retirement (Page et al., 2021). Additional national and state-level investments in suicide prevention, such as the Towards Zero Suicides (NSW Health, 2021) and Lifespan initiatives (Shand et al., 2020) may also be important. However, these initiatives have focussed on specific geographic areas or mental health service settings, and implementation has yet to be fully realised, and would unlikely have substantial impacts on national trends.

An overall decline in Australian suicide rates is a welcome outcome but it should be considered in the context of broader long-term trends. Importantly, there is an ongoing need for developing and evaluating evidence-based approaches to suicide prevention across the life-course and one year better than the last should not detract from that.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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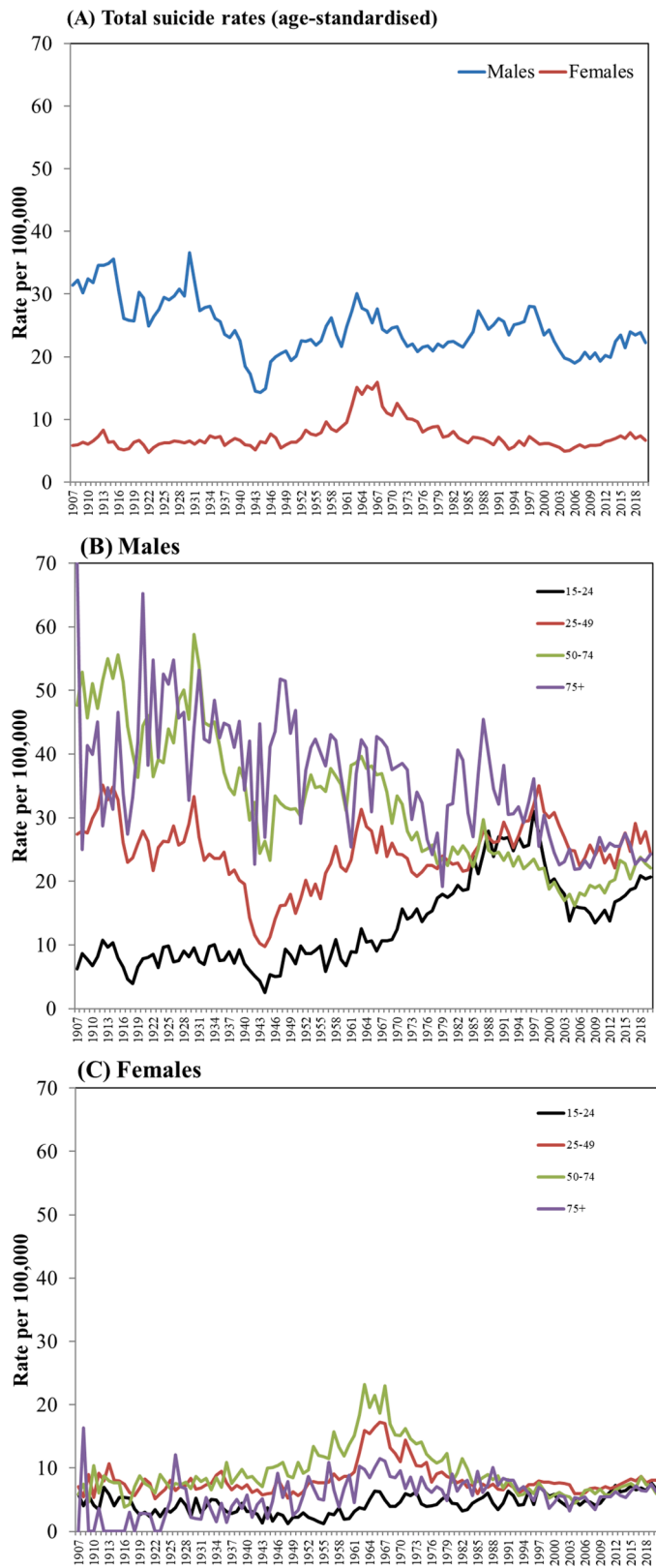


Fig. 1. Australian suicide rates, 1907–2020
 Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021). 3303.0 Causes of Death, Australia, 2020. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release>.

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