

SIEC Alert #30, June 1998

Trends in Canadian Suicide

The Canadian population has more than doubled from 1950 to 1995 while the number of suicide deaths has increased threefold from 1,067 in 1950 to 3,970 in 1995. A significant amount of the increase occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s and the increases have been smaller in recent years resulting in an overall increase in the rate per 100,000 of 72.4% between 1950 and 1995.

Suicide Rates by Gender

In Canada, suicide rates for males have been at least three times higher than for females since the 1950s, with the difference increasing to four times higher by the 1990s. In 1996, there were 3,093 male and 848 female suicide deaths in Canada, a ratio of 3.6:1. Males are most likely to use hanging and firearms in their suicide attempts and there are fewer opportunities to prevent death with these irreversible methods. Females are more likely to use drugs, poison and gases in their suicide attempts and there is a better chance to prevent death with effective medical intervention. Females are showing some tendency to utilize more lethal and less reversible methods in recent years. Females are more likely to take advantage of community suicide prevention services and to ask for help even after initiating a suicide attempt. Males are less likely to ask for help from any source. The suicide rates for Canadian males increased steadily from the 1950s to the 1960s and then took a sharp increase in the 1970s. A further steady increase to a rate of 21 per 100,000, was evident in the 1980s, followed by a slight decrease to 20.4 in the early 1990s. The male suicide rate was 11.9 per 100,000 in 1950 and increased to 21.5 by 1995. Female suicide rates were at 3.3 per 100,000 in the 1950s and increased to a high of 6.9 in the 1970s. There has been a steady decline to 5.3 by the early 1990s. The female suicide rate in 1950 was 5.5 and in 1995 it was 5.4 per 100,000.

Observations on Provincial Suicide Trends: 1950s to 1990s

Newfoundland - A continuous increase from decade to decade with an overall increase from 2.4 to 8.8 - an increase of 261%. Still the lowest rate in Canada.

Prince Edward Island - An overall increase of 132% from the 50s to the 90s, with a small drop during the 80s.

Nova Scotia - Significant increases in the 60s and 70s and a leveling off since. An increase of 120% since the 1950s.

New Brunswick - Steady increases throughout the 60s, 70s, and 80s with a slower increase in the 90s. Increased by 206% since the 1950s.

Quebec - Large increases throughout the time span. Increase of 280% from one of the lowest rates in the 50s to the highest rate among the provinces in the 90s.

Ontario - One of the few provinces, along with Manitoba and BC, which has shown a steady decrease in suicide rates in recent decades. Ontario remained above the national rate in the 50s, 60s and 70s but has shown a significant reduction in the 80s and 90s to well below the Canadian rate and only 10.6% above the rate of the 50s.

Manitoba - Another good news story with reductions in the 80s, and 90s. Currently only 33.4% above the 50s and below the Canadian rate.

Saskatchewan - From higher than the Canadian rate in the 50s there was steady escalation in the 60s, 70s, and 80s with a small reduction in the early 90s to just above the Canadian rate.

Alberta - One of the highest rates in the 50s, Alberta has recorded increased rates in each decade. Currently 80% above the rate of the 50s and the second highest rate among provinces.

British Columbia - BC had the highest provincial suicide rate in the 50s and was only exceeded by the Yukon Territory. The rate remained high throughout the decades with a very high rate in the 70s. There have been significant reductions in the 80s and 90s. The 1990s have shown an actual decrease of 8% from the 1950s.

Yukon Territory - From the highest rates in Canada in the 50s there was a steady increase in the 60s and 70s and a small decrease in the 80s. The 90s have shown a major decrease, but considering this is based on only five year data this may not reflect the true trend due to the wide variation from year to year which results from a few additional suicides in a small population. Currently at almost exactly the same rate as the 60s.

Northwest Territories - From a rate lower than several provinces in the 1950s and 60s, there has been a very large and steady increase in each decade to a high of 33.33 per 100,000 population in the 90s. The small population of the Territories results in large increases in the suicide rates with the increase of a few suicide deaths. In 1996, there were 3,941 suicide deaths in Canada and 23 of these were in the NWT. Total suicide deaths peaked at 32 deaths in 1989 & 1993 in the NWT.

Canadian Suicide Data by Age Groups

Suicide Rates Ages 10-29

The 10-19 age group had been consistently below the Canadian overall rate until the early 1990s when the 15-19 age group approached the Canadian rate. The 10-14 age group has experienced significant increases in recent years, but is still below 5 per 100,000. The 20-29 age group has been above the Canadian rate since the mid-1960s.

Suicide Rates Ages 30 - 49

The rates of these age groups have been consistently above the Canadian rate through all decades and show little indication of a reduction in the 1990s. The 40-49 age group were well above the Canadian rate until the mid-1980s when a slight reduction and rising rates in the 30-39 group brought all close to the same rate. The 30-49 age group has been the only group to show a steady increase in the 1990s.

Suicide Rates Ages 50 - 64

The rates of these age groups have been significantly higher than the Canadian rate until the late 1980s when their rates started to decrease but they remain above the Canadian rate.

Suicide Rates Ages 65+

Suicide rates for older Canadians were consistently well above the Canadian rate until the late 1980s when their rates started to decrease. In the early 1990s, elderly rates have been slightly below the Canadian rate.

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SIEC Resources*

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NEW AT SIEC:

National Strategies for the Prevention of Suicide: Presentation Guide

Prepared by SIEC for Health Canada in May 1998, this document reports on the current Canadian situation. Statistics from 1950 to 1996 illustrate the changes in provincial suicide rates, total number of deaths, rates by gender & data by age groups. Canadian and provincial suicide initiatives are explained along with the reasons why Canada should implement a national strategy. A historical look at the development of the United Nations Suicide Prevention Guidelines from 1987 to 1998 is included. This presentation guide containing colourful overhead transparencies & speaker's notes is available from the Centre for Suicide Prevention for \$100. A CD-ROM version (IBM or MAC) is available for \$50.00.

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*References Revised to APA Format 5th Ed. June, 2004



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