

COVID-19 and risk factors of suicidal behavior in UK: A content analysis of online newspaper

Abstract

Background: Suicide is a serious global burden of disease. Recent COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with increased psychological distress among general population in UK and suicide is one of them. This research aimed to look into the suicide metrics in UK by analyzing the online news portals, retrospectively.

Methods: Six UK online news portals were selected purposively to include in the study and news of suicides were searched retrospectively. Search was conducted by the term “suicide news”. News portals were initially searched with the search term retrospectively. After removal of the repetitions data is inputted into software.

Results: Since 2020 January to November 2020, eighty-nine reports were scrutinized. Mean age was 37.91 (\pm 19.940) years ranging from 10-95 years. About 57.3% of the reported cases were less than 40 years of age, 58.4% were male, 41.6% were female, 40.4% of the respondents had mental health issues, covid-19 lockdown and restrictions accounts for 26.96% of suicides, 14.6% had health issues and 3.4% ongoing family issues. Previous suicide attempts were reported in 12.4% reports. Multiple number of persons involved in the suicidal acts in about 13.4% of the respondents. Highest suicide rate was reported in November 2020 with 21.34% of suicides.

Conclusions: Early adult and male gender are more vulnerable. Mental health issues, covid-19 lockdown and restrictions, and health issues drew attention as risk factors. Suicide rate was higher in November 2020.

Keywords: *Suicide, COVID-19, Content analysis, UK, Newspaper*

Introduction

Suicide is a serious global burden of disease. According to the report of World Health Organization (WHO), every year suicide accounts for 800,000 deaths approximately around the world[1]. Suicide is responsible for 1.4% of premature deaths worldwide and is the second leading cause of death in adolescents and young adults[2]. In recent years one of the major new public health challenges is social disconnection and the United Kingdom created a ministry of loneliness [3]. Suicide prevention is a crucial public health priority [4]. Major risk factors associated with suicidal behavior are sociodemographic characteristics (age, gender and employment), unhealthy behaviors (alcohol consumption and drug use) and some common psychological disorders (depression, anxiety and schizophrenia). Moreover, various physical health conditions also found to be associated with suicide [5]. There were more than 6,500 deaths by suicide in the year 2018 in United Kingdom [6] and identified that physical conditions are strongly associated with attempted or completed suicide in the country, so urgently needed to help establish prevention strategies. According to a recent study alongside COVID-19 pandemic, it is causing a prolonged and unique challenge to public mental health with major implications towards suicide and suicide prevention[7]. Suicide is the most extreme outcome of a mental health crisis and therefore need to be informed by research that is specific as possible to the current situation. There are few researches on health conditions and passive suicidal ideation in the survey of health, ageing and retirement in Europe[8] and suicide risk in primary care patients with major physical diseases [9]. To the best of our knowledge there is no research conducted previously exploring the demography and risk factors of suicide in the United Kingdom. The aim of this study is to look into the suicides in UK by analyzing the online news portals retrospectively focusing on demography and risk factors associated with suicide.

Methods

Data collection

Six online news portals of UK were selected purposively to include in the study and news of suicides were searched retrospectively. Only English online news portals were selected as English is the standard language of the country. Before starting the study, authors conducted a background search for selecting the portals. Authors focused on the circularity of the portals and based on the observations from that search, authors purposively selected most circulated portals. Search was conducted by the term “suicide news”. News portals were metro, the sun, daily mail, daily mirror, I newspaper and the guardian. News portals were initially searched with the search term retrospectively. Online portals were selected because the contents have been readily available and also more feasible for retrospective analysis of the suicide reports. Repetitions were identified using the name, age, place of suicide, occupation and such identifying variables. Reports of the same suicide in different portals were considered as duplications. That was mostly identified in case of celebrities and/or famous persons. After removal of repetitions final data is inputted into software. A total of 89 reports were assessed and analyzed by Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 26 and Microsoft Excel version 2018 software.

Inclusion of news

News of those were clearly indicated as suicides, suicidal news of UK citizens and suicidal news bounded by the geographic area of UK were considered as inclusion criteria.

Variables

Age, gender, date published, reason for suicide (if known), any health issues, mental health issues, previous suicide attempts, ongoing family issue, job loss due to covid-19, location of suicide, covid-19 lockdown and restrictions, and number of persons involved are considered as variables of the study.

Permission

As the data includes only online available previously published information, no formal ethical clearance was considered.

Results

A total of 89 reports were found from 2020 January to November 2020 in the assigned news portals. The mean age of the respondents was 37.91 (± 19.940) years which ranges from 10-95 years. Out of the 89 reports 57.3% reported cases were less than 40 years of age, 58.4% were male and 41.6% were female (Table 1). Among the six online news portals screened, the sun reported 61.8% of suicide cases followed by daily mail (16.9%), the metro (12.4%) and daily mirror (9.0%). About 40.4% of the respondents had mental health issues, covid-19 lockdown and restrictions accounts for 26.96% of suicides, 14.6% had health issues and 3.4% ongoing family issues (Table 2). Previous suicide attempts were reported in 12.4% reports. Multiple number of persons involved in the suicidal acts in about 13.4% of the respondents. From 2020 January to November 2020 suicide reports, the highest suicide rate was reported in November 2020 with 21.34% of suicides (Figure.1).

Table 1. Distribution of demographic variables of the respondents mentioned in 6 UK online news portal (n=89)

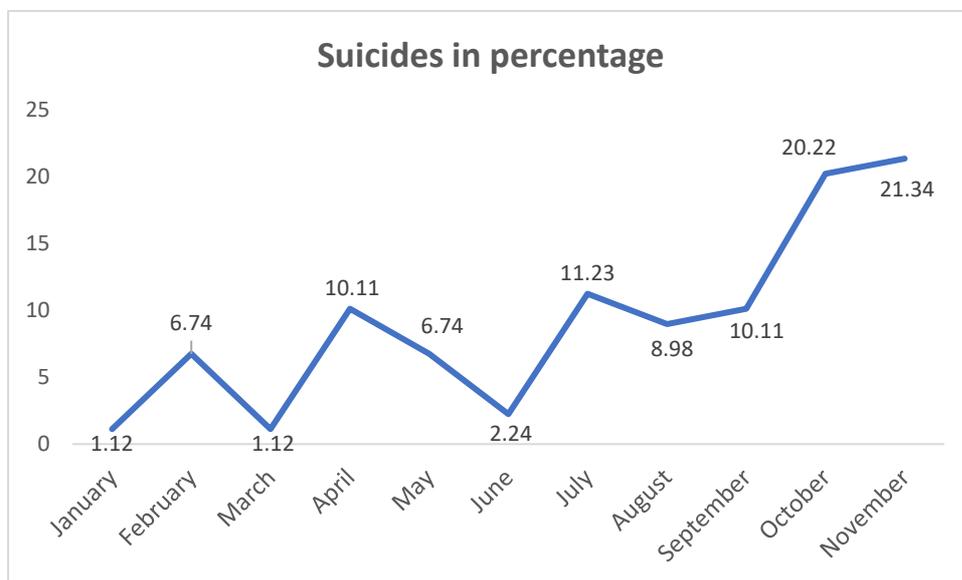
Demographic variables	Frequency	Percentage
Age in years		
Under 20	25	28.1
20 - 40	26	29.2
Over 40	38	42.7
Sex		
Male	52	58.4
Female	37	41.6

Table 2. Distribution of suicide variables of the respondents (n=89)

Suicide variable	Frequency	Percentage
Risk factors		
Mental health issues	36	40.4
Covid-19 lockdown and restrictions	24	26.96
Any health issues	13	14.6
Job loss due to covid-19	04	4.49
Ongoing family issues	03	3.4

Previous suicide attempts	11	12.4
Number of persons involved		
1	77	86.51
2	10	11.2
3	1	1.12
4	1	1.12

Figure I. Trend of suicide rates



Discussion

As suicide is an underexplored problem we aimed to look into suicide variables during covid-19 based on online news portal reports retrospectively. The study revealed the mean age of the respondents was 37.91 (\pm 19.940) years ranging from 10-95 years which indicates the suicides in marginal ages and about 5.7 out of 10 suicides happened before the age of forty which shows early loss of lives. Recent researches stated that male suicides are more reported about 56.76% and the mean age of the victims was 16.6 \pm 2.7 years. About two-thirds of the

suicides are from three countries named India, United Kingdom and the USA. Most common risk factors of suicide include mental sufferings, online schooling or overwhelming academic distress [10]. According to the data published by the ONS [11] suicide rates among men is highest since 2000 in England and Wales, although suicide in young people is rare, rates have been rising in 10-24 years old since 2010 [12]. Whereas the adverse effects of the pandemic exacerbated the risk factors of suicide and tackling known risk factors is crucial. Another research identified risk factors as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, hopelessness, feeling of entrapment and burdensomeness, substance misuse, loneliness, domestic violence, child neglect or abuse, unemployment and other financial insecurity [13].

Suicide is a serious global burden of disease. Males are more vulnerable in the UK as few studies and national statistics revealed more males are committing suicides than females [12]. Self-harm, suicidal thoughts and abuse are already concern problems in UK [14] and this study reported that 18% experienced suicide thoughts or self-harm in the first month of lockdown, 5% reported harming themselves at least once since the start of UK's lockdown. Another research conducted on mental health and well-being during the covid-19 pandemic reveals that mental health and well-being of the UK adult population appears to have been affected in the initial phase of the covid-19 pandemic, suicidal thoughts are across waves with increasing rates especially among young adults are concerning [15].

As only six online news portals were scrutinized from January 2020 to November 2020, the findings of the study may provide a still picture of suicide variables in news reporting aspects but to the best knowledge of authors it is the first online news analysis on suicide during covid-19 in UK. Data were collected up to November 2020 which may proportionate the more suicides in November which is an artifact. The source of data is not strictly scientific as authors scrutinized the published online news portals. Further wide range studies would help to fill up the huge information gap on suicide research in UK.

Conclusion

Suicide is yet to draw attention in UK during covid-19. Early adult and male gender are more vulnerable persons for suicide. Mental health issues, covid-19 lockdown and restrictions, and health issues drew attention as risk factors which need to be dealt with cautions. Suicide rate looks relatively increasing from January 2020 to November 2020 with highest rate in November 2020. The covid-19 is not only the unprecedented global challenge but also mental

health care. People in suicidal crisis require special attention. Appropriate services must be made available for people in crisis and those with new or existing mental health problems, safety nets must be put in place or strengthened for people facing financial hardship, along with active labor market policies to help people who are unemployed obtain work.

Responsible media reporting can also play a role in promoting the importance of mental health support, signposting sources of help, reporting stories of hope and recovery, and avoiding alarmist and speculative headlines that may heighten risk of suicide.

Suicide is a preventable public health challenge and action should be taken to protect people's mental health. Wide range of studies would necessary to assess the problem properly as well as taking necessary steps to prevent it.

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