

Google Searches Correlate with Suicides



By Alex Berezow — January 8, 2018



Google search

One of the key pillars of suicide prevention is identifying those at risk of suicide and getting them the counseling or treatment that they need. Typically, this responsibility falls to family, friends, and therapists.

But what about Dr. Google? The Internet is the go-to source of information on everything from stock prices to toenail fungus cures. As it turns out, people who are contemplating suicide turn to Google, as well.

Vincent Chandler, a professor at St. Mary's University, searched Google Trends for the popularity of suicide-related searches from 2006 to 2014. He included terms such as "suicide kill myself" and "suicide want to die," but excluded terms like "Suicide Squad," a popular comic that was turned into a movie in 2016. Then, he linked these search terms to suicide data provided by the CDC.

Suicide Search

Dr. Chandler's main finding is that there is an association between Google searches and suicide. Specifically, he found that a 1% increase in suicide-related search terms resulted in 54 additional suicides in the United States. Additionally, he found that Googling suicide-related terms was significantly linked to an increase in suicides among men and young people (aged 16-35), but not among women and people older than 35.

Limitations and Implications

There are obvious limitations to the study. First, as an ecological study design, no data were collected on individuals. In other words, there is no way to know if the people who searched for suicide-related terms were the same people who went on to commit suicide. Second, Google

searches for suicide can be done for many reasons, not just because somebody is considering suicide. Third, causation cannot be deduced from this data.

However, there are implications worth pondering. Google searches can be monitored in real-time. If a state or city observes an increase in suicide-related search terms, officials could consider responding, perhaps through a public health campaign.

Though the paper does not discuss this, there is another, far bigger implication: Do search engines like Google or social media outlets like Facebook have any responsibility to monitor the mental health of their users? Google and Facebook both know an awful lot about you. (That's how they are able to tailor ads specifically to your tastes and desires.) If these companies believe that you are contemplating suicide, do they have an ethical obligation to notify the authorities?

Legal disputes have already occurred in this arena. The Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that [threats posted on Facebook may not be real threats](#) [1]. However, with an increased emphasis on preventing cyberbullying, surely this and similar issues like suicide prevention will be confronted for many years to come.

Source [2]: V Chandler. "Google and suicides: what can we learn about the use of internet to prevent suicides?" *Public Health* 154: 144-50. Published online: 12-Dec-2017. DOI: 10.1016/j.puhe.2017.10.016

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Links

[1] <https://www.thedailybeast.com/supreme-court-your-facebook-threats-arent-necessarily-real-threats>

[2] [http://www.publichealthjrn.com/article/S0033-3506\(17\)30351-7/fulltext](http://www.publichealthjrn.com/article/S0033-3506(17)30351-7/fulltext)