

Suicides Surge by 12% in UK, But They Can Be Prevented



By Alex Berezow, PhD — September 3, 2019



Credit: THOR/Wikipedia [1]

The news out of the United Kingdom hasn't been rosy as of late. Brexit has plunged the country into political chaos. Now, the latest report feels like rubbing salt in the wound.

According to multiple news outlets, the UK's Office of National Statistics says that the number of suicides in 2018 surged nearly 12% over the previous year. (No, it has nothing to do with Brexit. Data can be found [here](#) [2].) Overall, the suicide rate was calculated as 11.2 per 100,000. By sex, the rates were 17.2 and 5.4 per 100,000 among men and women, respectively.

(To put those numbers into perspective, the [latest available data](#) [3] (which is from 2017) for the United States shows that the overall suicide rate was 14.0 per 100,000. By sex, the rates were 22.4 and 6.1 per 100,000 among men and women, respectively.)

Just like in the U.S., the cause for the spike in the UK is unknown. The news site Al Jazeera [notes](#) [4] that the UK changed the way it tabulates suicides by lowering the standard of proof that coroners use to make such a determination. But that is unlikely to explain the increase entirely.

Suicides Are Preventable

Contrary to popular myth, suicides are preventable. The reason is because suicide is often a spur-of-the-moment decision. While suicidal people may contemplate it for months or years, the act is often done on an impulse. Therefore, if that impulse can be interrupted, there is a good chance that the person's life can be saved.

A [fairly dramatic example](#) [5] of this occurred in the UK several decades ago. During the 1950s and 1960s, a popular method of suicide was carbon monoxide poisoning. All a person needed to do

was stick his head in the oven and turn on the gas. During this time, the UK began changing the sources of domestic gas supplies. The end result was domestic gas with very little carbon monoxide, and lo and behold, the suicide rate fell. While it is true that many people chose suicide by other means, the overall suicide rate was lower.

This isn't the only example. [Suicide rates fell](#) [6] in Sri Lanka and Samoa when access to pesticides was restricted. The point is that if an easy way to commit suicide is eliminated, there is a good chance that the number of suicides will decrease. This logic serves as the rationale for bridge barriers and nets.

Today in the UK, most suicides are performed by hanging (or strangulation or suffocation) or poisoning. In the U.S., [just over 50% of suicides](#) [7] are committed with guns. Perhaps the lessons of the past can help inform policymakers of the present on how to prevent such tragedies.

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Union_Jack#/media/File:Union_Flag_and_St_Georges_Cross.jpg

[2]

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/datasets/suicidesintheunited>

[3] https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/suicide/rates_1999_2017.pdf

[4] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/uk-suicide-rates-surge-118-single-year-190903140500264.html>

[5] <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC478945/?page=2>

[6] <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/saves-lives/>

[7] <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml>