

Measure Name Responsible media reporting

Definition Encourage responsible media reporting following a train-person collision to reduce the potential for subsequent incidents (e.g., copycat incidents).

Tags

Incident Type	Suicide only
Location	Both station and right-of-way
Intervention Strategy	Education: outreach and messaging
Measure Group	Public communication

Description

Media reporting on a suicide death has the potential to increase copycat suicide attempts for vulnerable individuals (also called suicide contagion or the Werther Effect), especially if reporting is not done responsibly [1][2]. A study released in 2024 about suicide fatalities and attempts on the Toronto Transit system found a 2% increase in subway suicide rate if an article about a Toronto Transit system incident was published in the previous quarter [3]. It is important to share best practices for reporting on suicides with local journalists, rail carrier representatives, first responders, and others who communicate with the media and the public. Media outlets play a particularly important role in shaping the public's understanding of rail safety and suicide, and writers have varying levels of awareness regarding recommendations for responsibly reporting suicide.

Media representatives may gather information from official or unofficial sources such as social media posts by members of the public. It is important that official sources, like rail carrier representatives and first responders, provide accurate, responsible information. It is also important that media representatives understand how to responsibly report on information from unofficial sources, like eyewitness accounts shared on social media.

Recommendations should include what *not* to do, as well as what *to do* in order to reduce contagion, and refrain from focusing solely on what to avoid. Guidelines should also consider reporting on trespass (non-suicide) incidents. The details of trespass and suicide incidents are similar and often reported in a similar fashion; therefore, both events can influence the public in a similar way.

When the media responsibly reports on suicide, a reduction in suicide rates may occur (called the Papegeno Effect). Providing resources where individuals can seek help has the potential to help in reducing suicidal ideation [4]. Telling stories of individuals overcoming suicidal thoughts can inspire hope and resilience in vulnerable individuals. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention encourages using a public voice to promote positive narratives about suicide that emphasize solutions and actions as opposed to presenting suicide as unsolvable [5]. Examples of positive reporting about suicide are available at www.suicidepreventionmessaging.org/examples [5].

There are several national and global organizations that provide recommendations for reporting on suicides, although not rail-specific (see Additional Resources). Examples include:

- Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention [5]

- American Association of Suicidology [6]
- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) [7]
- Reportingonsuicide.org [8]
- World Health Organization (WHO) [9]

Additionally, FRA, the Volpe Center, and Operation Lifesaver Inc. (OLI) collaboratively developed rail-specific media reporting guidelines that are available on the OLI website [10].

Additional search terms: *contagion, copycat, language, news, statement*

Advantages

- It is low cost to provide existing reporting recommendations to members of the media, rail staff, and others that communicate with the media.
 - Railroads may already have personnel with an understanding of how to responsibly report on suicide who can help communicate this information to media members.
 - Including messages of hope and resilience when reporting on suicide incidents can positively influence individuals at risk for suicide, thereby potentially reducing future attempts on the rail system [5].
 - Reporting guidelines benefit the local community by promoting responsible reporting of all suicides, not only those by rail.
-

Drawbacks

- This measure relies on the willingness of third parties (e.g., members of the media) to change the way they publicly communicate about rail incidents.
 - The presence of social media makes it more challenging to influence the type of information published about rail incidents. Even if members of the media adhere to suicide reporting guidelines, members of the public may unintentionally post information that contradicts these important guidelines.
-

Notable Practices

- Discussion of lethality may influence individuals considering suicide, regardless of whether it involves a suicide or trespass (non-suicide) incident. Therefore, guidelines should address reporting both trespass and suicide fatalities [10].
- Consider providing guidelines to rail carrier representatives and first responders who communicate with the media and the public.

- Rail carriers should provide frequent media contacts with guidance about responsible reporting.
- It is important to promote ongoing awareness of recommendations, given that adherence may fade over time, including when media contacts change.
- Tailor resources for different media types. For example, information needs traditional journalists may differ from the needs of independent writers and social media sites.
- Establish an open line of communication with frequent media contacts such that after an incident, rail carriers can directly reach out to help frame messaging to reduce the potential for contagion and increase potential positive effects.

References

[1] Ladwig, K. H., Kunrath, S., Lukaschek, K., & Baumert, J. (2012). The railway suicide death of a famous German football player: impact on the subsequent frequency of railway suicide acts in Germany. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 136(1-2), 194-198. [[PubMed Link](#)]

Abstract: Background: The railway suicide of Robert Enke, an internationally respected German football goal keeper, sent shockwaves throughout the world of football. We analyzed its impact on the frequency of subsequent railway suicide acts (RS).

Methods: Two analytic approaches were performed applying German Railway Event database Safety (EDS) data: first, an inter-year approach comparing the incidence of RS during a predefined “index period” with identical time windows in 2006 to 2008; second, an intra-year approach comparing the number of RS 28 days before and after the incidence. To analyze a possible “compensatory deficit”, the number of RS in the subsequent first quarter of 2010 was compared with the identical time windows in the preceding three years. Incidence ratios with 95% confidence intervals were estimated by Poisson regression. Findings were controlled for temperature.

Findings: Compared to the preceding three years, the incidence ratio (IR) of the number of RS in the index period increased by 1.81 (1.48–2.21; $p < 0.001$), leading to an overall percentage change of 81% (48–121%; $p < 0.001$). Comparing the number of suicides 28 days before and after the incidence revealed an even more pronounced increase of IR (2.2; 1.6–3.0). No modifications of these associations were observed by daytime, by location of the suicide and fatality. No compensatory deficit occurred in the post-acute period.

[2] Niederkrotenthaler, T., & Sonneck, G. (2007). Assessing the impact of media guidelines for reporting on suicides in Austria: interrupted time series analysis. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 41(5), 419-428. [[PubMed Link](#)]

Abstract: Objective: Media guidelines for reporting on suicides are a widely used means of preventing imitative suicides, but scientific accounts of their impact on suicide numbers are sparse. This report provides an evaluation of the Austrian guidelines that were introduced in 1987 as a natural experiment.

Methods: The impact of the guidelines was tested by applying an autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) model and a linear regression model. In addition to a nationwide evaluation, Austria was divided into three areas according to regional differences in coverage rates of the collaborating newspapers and the impact of the intervention was tested for each area separately. Main outcome measures were the overall annual suicide numbers, and the numbers of Viennese subway suicides that were exceptionally newsworthy for the mass media. In order to test intermediate impacts, also

quantitative and qualitative changes in media reporting after the introduction of the guidelines were analysed.

Results: There was some evidence of a nationwide impact of the guidelines, calculated as a significant reduction of 81 suicides (95% confidence interval: -149 to -13; $t = -2.32$, $df = 54$, $p < 0.024$) annually. This effect was particularly due to a significant reduction in the area with the highest coverage rates of the collaborating newspapers. Viennese subway suicides showed a highly significant level shift ($t = -4.44$, $df = 19$, $p < 0.001$) and a highly significant trend change ($t = -4.20$, $df = 19$, $p < 0.001$) after the introduction of the guidelines. These effects corresponded to significant changes in the quality and quantity of media reporting.

Conclusions: The present results clearly support the hypothesis that the media guidelines have had an impact on the quality of reporting as well as on suicidal behaviour in Austria, and stress the importance of collaborating with nationwide, but also with regional media to achieve efficacy. Further research is needed to provide an international insight into this public health issue.

[3] Chow, S., Men, V. Y., Zaheer, R., Schaffer, A., Triggs, C., Spittal, M. J., ... & Sinyor, M. (2024). [Suicide on the Toronto Transit Commission subway system in Canada \(1998–2021\): a time-series analysis](#). *The Lancet Regional Health–Americas*, 34.

Background: The Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) operates the public transit system in Toronto, Canada. From 1954 to 1980, there were 430 suicide deaths/attempts on the TTC subway system. In 2011, TTC implemented Crisis Link, a suicide helpline to connect subway passengers with counsellors. Upstream factors such as media reporting about suicide incidents may also influence suicidal behaviour. Our objectives were to investigate how Crisis Link and media reports about TTC suicide incidents influenced suicide rates.

Methods: Suicide data were obtained from the TTC and Coroner, with Crisis Link data provided by Distress Centres of Greater Toronto (1998–2021). Media articles were identified through a database search of Toronto media publications. Interrupted time-series analysis investigated the association between Crisis Link calls, media articles, and quarterly suicide rates on the subway system.

Findings: There were 302 suicides on TTC's subway system from 1998 to 2021. The introduction of Crisis Link was associated with a large but non-significant decrease in TTC-related suicide rate in the same quarter (IRR = 0.64, 95% CI = 0.36–1.12). Each subsequent post-Crisis-Link quarter experienced an average 2% increase in suicide rate (IRR = 1.02, 95% CI = 1.004–1.04). Furthermore, for each TTC-related media article in the previous quarter, the suicide rate on the TTC increased by 2% (IRR = 1.02, 95% CI = 1.004–1.04).

Interpretation: The Crisis Link helpline was associated with a large but non-significant short-term decrease in suicide rates. However, this outcome was not sustained; this may, in part, be attributable to media reporting which was associated with increased suicides. This should inform suicide prevention policies in Canada and worldwide.

[4] Niederkrotenthaler, T., Voracek, M., Herberth, A., Till, B., Strauss, M., Etzersdorfer, E., & Sonneck, G. (2010). [Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther v. Papageno effects](#). *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 197(3), 234-243.

Abstract: Background: Media reporting of suicide has repeatedly been shown to trigger suicidal behaviour. Few studies have investigated the associations between specific media content and suicide rates. Even less is known about the possible preventive effects of suicide-related media content.

Aims: To test the hypotheses that certain media content is associated with an increase in suicide, suggesting a so-called Werther effect, and that other content is associated with a decrease in suicide, conceptualised as a Papageno effect. Further, to identify classes of media articles with similar reporting profiles and to test for associations between these classes and suicide.

Method: Content analysis and latent class analysis (LCA) of 497 suicide-related print media reports published in Austria between 1 January and 30 June 2005. Ecological study to identify associations between media item content and short-term changes in suicide rates.

Results: Repetitive reporting of the same suicide and the reporting of suicide myths were positively associated with suicide rates. Coverage of individual suicidal ideation not accompanied by suicidal behaviour was negatively associated with suicide rates. The LCA yielded four classes of media reports, of which the mastery of crisis class (articles on individuals who adopted coping strategies other than suicidal behaviour in adverse circumstances) was negatively associated with suicide, whereas the expert opinion class and the epidemiological facts class were positively associated with suicide.

Conclusions: The impact of suicide reporting may not be restricted to harmful effects; rather, coverage of positive coping in adverse circumstances, as covered in media items about suicidal ideation, may have protective effects.

[5] Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. (2024) [Framework for Successful Messaging](#).

Description: The Framework for Successful Messaging is a resource to help people messaging about suicide to develop messages that are strategic, safe, positive, and make use of relevant guidelines and best practices. Certain types of public messaging about suicide can increase risk among vulnerable individuals. Conversely, communications can be a powerful tool to promote resiliency, encourage help-seeking, publicize prevention successes, and encourage actions that help prevent suicide. It addresses “public messaging”: any communications released into the public domain. From posters, PSAs, and social media to websites, newsletters, fundraising appeals, event publicity, press interactions, public talks, and advocacy efforts, each contributes to the public’s perceptions about suicide and suicide prevention.

[6] American Association of Suicidology. (2018). [Suicide Reporting Recommendations](#).

Document Excerpt: These guidelines provide updates from previously published national and international suicide reporting guidelines, along with updated recommendations for reporting on suicide using social media. They are not intended to limit press freedom but rather serve as an evidence-based resource for effective reporting on suicide. They are grounded in the principles of journalism ethics (3,4) and suicide prevention. (2) The goals of these guidelines are to support journalists in creating effective news stories that inform the public and increase awareness about suicide and its complexities, while reducing risk of additional suicides. Ideally, these stories will also provide resources and a sense of hope to those experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Adoption of these guidelines will reduce the risk of suicide for those vulnerable to suicide contagion and allow journalists the freedom to tell stories that make a difference. (5,6,7) Suicide reporting guidelines should be provided to all journalists, news editors, website providers, bloggers, virtual communities, and users of social media to ensure widespread adoption. People reporting on suicide have the power to change public perspectives, reduce prejudice and discrimination around suicide, and save lives with the implementation of these guidelines.

[7] American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (n.d.). [For Journalists](#).

Description: Website describing suicide contagion that includes guidance for talking about suicide in the media.

[8] Reportingonsuicide.org. (n.d.) [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide](#).

Document Excerpt: The Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide were developed by leading experts in suicide prevention and in collaboration with several international suicide prevention and public health organizations, schools of journalism, media organizations and key journalists as well as Internet safety experts. The recommendations are based on more than 50 international studies on suicide contagion.

[9] World Health Organization. (2008). [Preventing Suicide A Resource for Media Professionals](#).

Document Excerpt: reporting of suicide, and, using this evidence, provides a resource for media professionals about how to report on suicide. It encourages caution in reporting suicide. It recognizes that there are times when a suicide will need to be reported on the grounds of its newsworthiness. It makes suggestions about how best to ensure that such reporting is accurate, responsible and ethical. The resource acknowledges that reporting of suicide differs within and across countries. There are cultural differences in terms of what is appropriate to report and how information about a given suicide is accessed. This resource is designed to provide general guidance, but media professionals are encouraged to work with their own suicide prevention community and to draw on local guidelines wherever possible.

[10] Operation Lifesaver, Inc. (n.d.) [Safe and Effective Messaging on Rail Incidents: Useful Tips for Effective Reporting on Rail Suicide](#).

Description: Recommendations for reporting specifically on rail incidents developed by the FRA, Volpe Center and OLI.

Additional Resources

Gabree, S. & Mejia, B. (2017). [The Reporting of Suicide and Trespass Incidents by Online Media in the United States](#). Technical Report No. DOT/FRA/ORD-17/09. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Railroad Administration.

Abstract: The reporting of a suicide death in the media has the potential to increase imitative suicide attempts for vulnerable individuals who read the article, a phenomenon known as suicide contagion or the “Werther effect.” Organizations around the world have developed recommendations for how to responsibly report on suicide incidents in a way less likely to result in contagion. For this research, 1,173 articles on FRA-reported suicide and trespass incidents were collected and analyzed for content. While media outlets often followed many of the suicide reporting recommendations, none were consistently followed in every article analyzed and a few key recommendations were often never applied. For example, the term “suicide” was often included in the title of articles, details about the location where the suicide took place and the actions preceding impact were often provided, while help-seeking information was only rarely included. In general, railway suicide incidents tended to be reported in a similar way to trespass incidents, rather than as a suicide by another means. The development of railway-specific recommendations could help to encourage responsible reporting practices regarding railway trespass and suicide incidents.

Greenstein, L. (2018, June 15). [Why Suicide Reporting Guidelines Matter](#). National Alliance on Mental Illness.

Description: Website describing suicide contagion that includes guidance for talking about suicide in the media.

Related Measures

- Identify funding opportunities
- Incident cost estimation
- Strategy for publishing data