



Wednesday 20 November 2024

New research to understand Victoria's suicide rate

The Coroners Court of Victoria has partnered with the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health at the University of Melbourne to carry out new research into Victoria's suicide rate – to identify potential trends and inform public health responses.

This research was initiated in response to the Court's concern that suicides appear to be occurring more often, and that the increase in suicides may be exceeding the growth in Victoria's population.

The Court's latest data report released today – *Coroners Court Monthly Suicide Data Report – September 2024 Update* – shows that from 1 January – 30 September 2024, 598 Victorian's have died by suicide. This is compared to 569 in 2023, 556 in 2022, 488 in 2021 and 503 in 2020 for the same time period.

In Victoria, the number of suicides can vary quite substantially from week to week and from month to month. This variation is not unique to Victoria and is a feature of suicide data in Australia and internationally.

Due to this variability, specialised analysis is required to detect if changes in suicide rates are the result of random fluctuation or systematic changes. These systematic changes could include a sudden short-term increase in suicide, a sustained period when the suicide rate is elevated, or a change to the underlying or baseline suicide rate itself.

University of Melbourne Professor, Matthew Spittal, in partnership with the Court, has commenced a long-term analysis of suicide data from 1 January 2012 onwards, to understand if Victoria's suicide rate has increased in recent years.

This research, which is in the early stages, is the first of its kind to be conducted in Victoria and will aim to develop new statistical-based tools and methods to identify and interpret trends in the state's suicide data.

The preliminary analysis of data from January 2012 to September 2024, presented in the monthly suicide report released today, utilises two statistical methods to inform the Court's understanding of Victoria's suicide rate.

Monthly annualised suicide rate

In the first phase of the analysis, Prof Spittal's research team examined the annualised monthly suicide rate in Victoria per 100,000 population for the period from 1 January 2012 to 30 September 2024. The annualised monthly suicide rate is a measure used to detect sudden changes in the rate where the suicide rate is briefly much higher (or lower) than would be usually expected. The analysis showed:

- across the period January 2012 to September 2024, the annualised monthly suicide rate fluctuated quite substantially from month to month, however each month it remained within the normal expected range – centred at between 10 and 11 suicides per 100,000 people.

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- in the most recent two years analysed, the annualised monthly suicide rate was particularly variable, ranging between approximately 15 suicides per 100,000 people (October 2023) and 8 suicides per 100,000 people (May 2024). However, at all times the rate still remained within the normal expected range.

Trend in the annualised monthly rate over time

In the second phase of the analysis, Prof Spittal's research team examined the trend in the annualised monthly rate over time. The trend was calculated through 'smoothing': a process whereby the annualised monthly rate for each month was averaged with reference to the months on either side of it, to remove extreme variability and make any underlying patterns (or trends) more noticeable and detectable. The second phase showed:

- the trend in the annualised monthly suicide rate was consistently between 10 and 11 suicides per 100,000 population during the period from 2012 to 2019 – with the exception of the period around the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019 when it temporarily rose to nearly 12 suicides per 100,000 population.
- in 2020 and 2021 the trend appeared to become lower for a time, at around 10 suicides per 100,000 population with very little variability.
- commencing in mid-2022 the trend in the annualised monthly suicide rate rose steadily to around 12 suicides per 100,000 population, and has since fluctuated at between 11 and 12 suicides per 100,000 population.
- in the first months of 2024 the trend in the rate reached nearly 13 suicides per 100,000 population annualised, and the trend line crossed the statistical threshold for detection of significant increase, indicating we could be reasonably confident that the observed rate at that time was higher than what would normally be expected.
- the trend in the annualised monthly suicide rate has since decreased back to within the expected range.

Overall, the preliminary analysis shows that while there have been two periods of elevated suicides observed in mid-2022 and at the start of 2024, the current suicide rate is within the expected range.

The partnership project to analyse the suicide rates is continuing, and at present Prof Spittal's research team are focusing on analytical approaches and measures to test for longer-term trends in Victoria's suicide rate, including detection of possible changes in the underlying or base rate itself.

In Victoria all suspected suicides must be reported to the Court for investigation.

In addition to investigating individual deaths, the Court monitors and regularly shares data with State and Commonwealth governments to inform their work in suicide prevention.

This data is sourced from the Victorian Suicide Register (VSR). Maintained by the Court, the VSR is the state's most accurate real-time database on suicides - with newly reported deaths reviewed daily to identify and record those occurring in circumstances consistent with suicide.

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Quotes attributable to Victorian State Coroner, Judge John Cain

“While our early research suggests that Victoria’s suicide rate has not increased overall, it is troubling that we continue to see no sustained reduction in lives lost.”

“It is not enough for us to aim to maintain the same suicide rate as we have for over a decade – we need to do more to reduce these preventable deaths and continue to improve supports for Victorians who are at risk of suicide.”

“This is why coronial data is so important – it provides vital insights into the health and wellbeing of Victorians, to help inform and drive positive change to prevent similar deaths.”

A copy of the report can be accessed here:

[Coroners Court Monthly Suicide Data Report - September 2024 Update](#)

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