

As Nova Scotia's suicide rate reaches a record high, this psychology professor explains what can be done

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Suicides in Nova Scotia reached a record high in 2021, with new data showing 142 people in the province died by suicide last year.

The spike comes after the number of suicides in the province dropped the year before.

Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychology professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, says the uptick could be attributed to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and all that came after it.

“In the first waves of the pandemic, there was a feeling that Nova Scotians and Canadians were coming together and pulling together against a common

adversity – the need to contain COVID-19 and our pandemic,” said Sherry during an interview with CTV News.

But as the “novelty” wore off, and services provided pre-pandemic started to disappear, Sherry says the number of people dying by suicide went up.

“Our suicide rates have never been higher,” said Sherry. “So if you do a comparison between 2000 and 2022, we are seeing an 89-per-cent increase in death by suicide in our province.”

He says the numbers would suggest that between 2000 and 2012, no province had a higher increase in death by suicide than Nova Scotia.

“It’s vitally important to appreciate that death by suicide is preventable. And it’s definitely preventable in our province. What we need is a government-led initiative to prevent suicide.”

He says the Government of Quebec recently provided an example of what a province can do to help.

“Last week, they dedicated \$65 million in funds, with specific timelines and targeted goals aimed at reducing death by suicide by 10 per cent in the first few years of this initiative.”

Sherry says a key part in trying to reduce suicide rates is “needs reduction.” He says science shows one of the best ways a society can reduce death by suicide is by taking away – from suicidal people – the means by which people die by suicide.

“Examples would be: putting barriers on bridges, dispensing medications in safe ways so people can’t overdose, taking guns out of the hand of those who wish to die by suicide.”

Another strategy Nova Scotia could take to reduce suicide rates, Sherry says, is to support people after they make a suicide attempt.

“When you make a suicide attempt, people are enormously vulnerable. And we should be actively connecting these individuals to psychological interventions or pharmacological interventions that are known and shown to save lives.”

In the wake of the mass shooting at a school in Uvalde, TX, that killed 19 children and two adults, Sherry says it is important to listen and reassure kids.

“Despite awful events like this, there has actually never been a safer time in human history, and we are certainly safer than we would have been 100 or 200 years ago.”

He says horrific events like the tragedy in Uvalde and the 2020 Nova Scotia mass shooting can affect people -- particularly those with personal attachment -- for the rest of their lives.

“Unfortunately we know there is often a very long time-lag, 10 or more years, between being exposed to a traumatic event, like something such as a direct involvement in Portapique, and eventually seeking help.”

If you or someone you know is in crisis, here are some resources that are available:

Crisis Services Canada (1-833-456-4566 or text 45645)

Centre for Suicide Prevention (1-833-456-4566)

Kids Help Phone (1-800-668-6868)

[Nova Scotia Health Crisis Line](https://www.healthscotia.ca/health/crisis-line) (1-888-429-8167)

If you need immediate assistance call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.