

The Chronicle Herald

Suicide rates climb for young Nova Scotia men

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Newly released government data on suicide rates show an alarming rise in the behaviour in what was already the province's most high-risk demographic. - 123RF stock photo

The suicide rate for Nova Scotian men aged 20 to 44 went up 60 per cent between 2012 and 2018.

Newly released government data on suicide rates show an alarming rise in the behaviour in what was already the province's most high-risk demographic. Women of the same age range were about five times less likely to kill themselves.

The data is compiled into three-year averages by demographic group.

The Chronicle Herald calculated rates of change by comparing the 2010-12 dataset with that for 2016-18 (the most recent available).

Suicide rates increased across most demographics at lower levels.

The rate for women over 60 nearly doubled but the total numbers of suicides (from 3.3 per 100,000 to 6 per 100,000) raises the potential for statistical aberration.

"Access to and use of lethal means, men are reluctant to seek help and are disproportionately more involved with problems to do with drugs and alcohol," said Simon Sherry, a practising clinical psychologist who also works as a professor at Dalhousie University.

"Men are also more reluctant to seek help and are generally more socially isolated."

He pointed out that the Nova Scotia's suicide rate grew faster than any other province's in the decade before 2012 as well.

The social distancing and economic hardship caused by COVID-19 are making the problem worse.

"Nova Scotia is ill-prepared for the suicide crisis that is occurring and will continue to occur owing to the pandemic," said Sherry.

"Our decrepit and under-resourced suicide prevention strategy will not withstand the suicide crisis we are now facing."

It's not just Nova Scotia facing a suicide crisis.

Opinion pieces recently published in academic journals The Lancet and Elsevier warn that social distancing measures being taken to slow COVID-19's spread will result in a sizeable jump in suicides.

"The likely adverse effects of the pandemic on people with mental illness, and on population mental health in general, might be exacerbated by fear, self-isolation, and physical distancing," reads an opinion piece published April 21 in The Lancet.

"Suicide risk might be increased because of stigma towards individuals with COVID-19 and their families. Those with psychiatric disorders might experience worsening symptoms and others might develop new mental health problems, especially

depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (all associated with increased suicide risk)."

Titled *Suicide Mortality and Coronavirus Disease 2019 — A Perfect Storm?*, The Lancet article penned by psychologists at the University of Washington and Florida State, warns that societal changes had already been pushing suicide rates up in the United States for the past two decades.

Contributing factors of decreasing interpersonal interaction, economic stress, opioid and alcohol abuse and the decline of traditional social institutions (regular church-goers are five times less likely to commit suicide) were making us all more alone before the pandemic arrived.

A harsh irony at a time when technology is supposed to be making us more connected.

While we get daily briefings on deaths to COVID-19, we will only learn its full scope in the years to come.

"The Nova Scotia government recognized early on that COVID-19, and the measures undertaken to address its spread, would impact the mental health of Nova Scotians," said Marla Macinnis, spokeswoman for the Department of Health and Wellness.

"This impact has only been amplified by the unimaginable tragedy that occurred in our province on April 1819. What's most important for Nova Scotians to know is that the health system is here for them when and how they need it."

She said the department is seeking to address the immediate mental health needs of those directly affected by the recent mass killing.

As well there are resources for those who feel they are in crisis — directions to which are included in this article.

Mental health first aid instructor Laurel Walker says that it is all of our responsibility to look out for one another at this time.

It's a task that doesn't require us to be mental health professionals — just fellow humans who care for each other.

"If you know someone struggles, just check in with them. If you have a feeling in your gut about someone or see them express hopelessness, just have an honest conversation with them," said Walker.

"You can ask them. People sometimes wonder if asking someone if they've contemplated suicide will put the idea in their head. That's not true — it will actually provide relief. Relief that you noticed they are struggling and that you were willing to

have this conversation about a really difficult issue because you care. Relief that they're not alone with their thoughts.”

Mental health supports

- The provincial mental health page has information and links to a variety of resources, including those offered through the health care system and community partners
- If people need to reach out for mental health and addictions services or programs in Nova Scotia, they can call Central Intake at 1-855-922-1122.
- Information on other mental health supports is offered by NSHA, including the Mental Health Crisis Line (1-888-429-8167), available 24-7.
- Information about services and supports for children and youth is offered through the IWK.
- A nationally available online mental health portal Wellness Together Canada.
- For emergencies, people should call 911 or go to their nearest emergency room.