

# Public health and suicide

Suicide in Canada is an ongoing public health crisis. While it continues to be a high-ranking cause of death (which the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen), mental health and public health initiatives can help prevent it.

## What is public health?

Public health is concerned with protecting and improving people's health at the population level. Examples include the detection, prevention, and control of infectious disease as well as health promotion, health protection, and research into preventing disease and injuries (Rutty & Sullivan, 2010; CDC Foundation, 2021).



## Defining levels of public health disease & injury



1

**Epidemic.** The occurrence of more cases of disease, injury, or other health conditions than expected in a given area or among a specific group of persons during a particular period.

2

**Outbreak.** The occurrence of more cases of disease, injury, or other health conditions than expected in a given area or among a specific group of persons during a specific period. Distinguished from an epidemic by being more localized or limited to a smaller geographical area.

3

**Pandemic.** An epidemic occurring over a widespread area (multiple countries or continents) and usually affecting a substantial proportion of the population. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012).

4

**Public health emergency/crisis.** An urgent or imminent temporary threat that seriously endangers the lives, health, and safety of a population. It generally requires a governing body to declare a state of public health emergency, which prompts action beyond normal procedures, to prevent or limit health consequences to the affected population (Canadian Medical Protective Association, 2020).

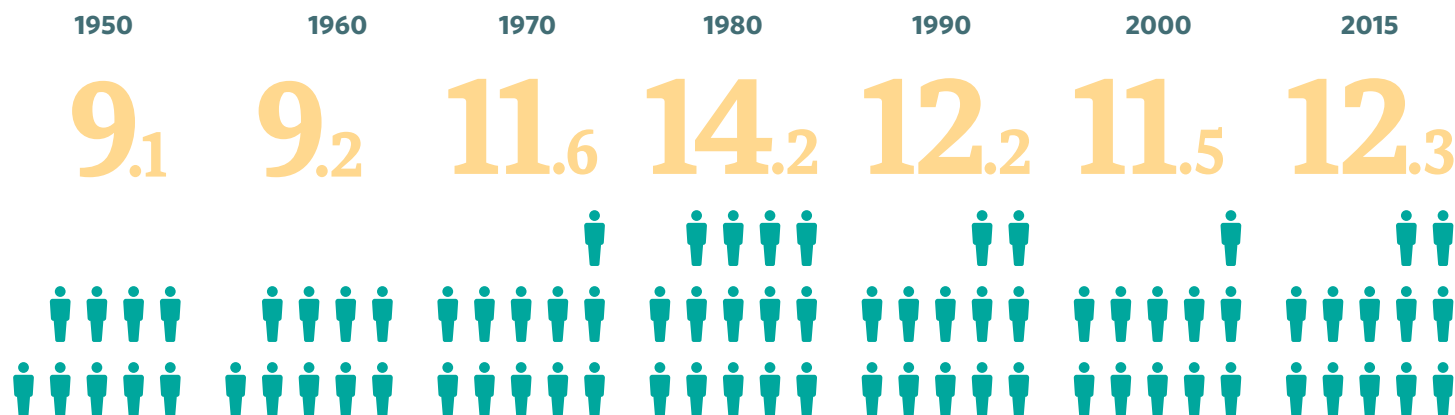
## Timeline of major public health crises

Year(s)	Health Crisis	Deaths – Canada	Deaths – World
1918–1920	Spanish flu pandemic	55,000 <i>mostly in 20–40 year-olds</i>	20–50m
1957–1959	Asian flu pandemic	7,000	1–2m
1968	Hong Kong flu pandemic	4,000	1–4m
2003	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak	44	800
2009–2010	H1N1 pandemic	428	18,000
2016–2021	Opioid crisis	22,828 <i>(2016– March 2021)</i>	
2019–2021	COVID-19 pandemic	2,769 <i>(April 28, 2020)</i>	214,645 <i>(April 28, 2020)</i>

(Parks Canada, 2020; Dickin et al., n.d.; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2021; Worldometer, 2020)

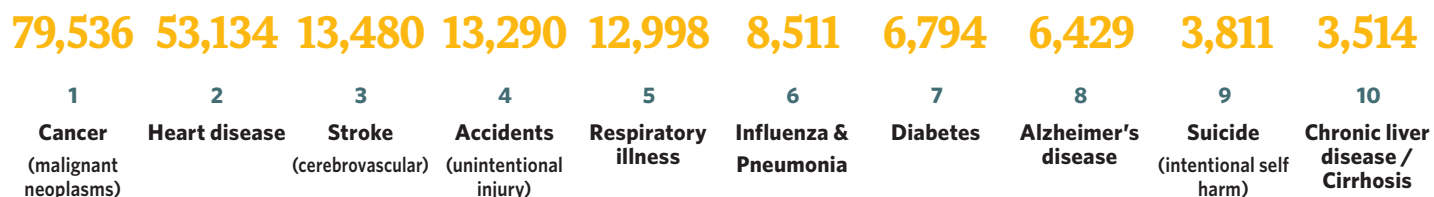
## Suicide Rates In Canada (per 100,000)

(Navaneelan, 2012)



## Leading Causes Of Death In Canada For All Ages (2018)

(Statistics Canada, 2018)



## Leading Causes Of Death In Canada For Youth Ages 15-25 (2018)

(Statistics Canada, 2018)



## Suicide as a public health emergency

Suicide is a continuing societal crisis. Its prevention requires both mental health and public health approaches. Mental health approaches are specifically aimed toward individuals, whereas public health approaches concern an entire population and are most evident through the action of large organizations (e.g. governments, media outlets) (Cramer et al., 2017; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

Public health initiatives can effectively prevent suicide if they are multi-faceted; for example, initiatives that affect society, smaller communities, as well as individual people and their relationships. Initiatives that boost people's resilience and protect them from thoughts of suicide may involve direct support (e.g. crisis lines, the construction of bridge barriers) and indirect support (e.g. housing programs) (Gunnell et al., 2020).

Approach	Initiative	Individuals	Relationships	Community	Society
<b>Mental Health</b>	<b>Mental health care access</b>	✓			
	<b>Crisis-line supports</b>	✓			
<b>Public Health</b>	<b>Government supports that target areas affecting suicidal behaviours: housing, domestic violence, problematic alcohol use &amp; addiction</b>	✓	✓	✓	
	<b>Means restriction</b>			✓	✓
	<b>Responsible media reporting guidelines</b>				✓
	<b>Public awareness campaigns</b>	✓			✓
	<b>Access to suicide prevention education and training</b>	✓			✓





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## Are public health approaches to suicide prevention compatible with COVID-19 measures?

As a result of the pandemic, public health measures like physical distancing are being used. While such measures are expected to slow the spread of COVID-19 and prevent the healthcare system from being overburdened, experts predict that they may negatively affect mental health and increase thoughts of suicide and other suicidal behaviours. One prediction is that

physical distancing measures could mean 49,000 additional suicide deaths throughout the world due to the effects of social isolation and financial strain caused by unemployment and economic uncertainty (Weems et al., 2020).



### Risk Factors

#### Potential public health risk factors for suicide related to COVID-19

- Economic and financial stressors, including loss of employment
- Social isolation
- Decreased access to community and religious support
- Barriers to mental health treatment
- Illness/medical problems and reluctance to seek treatment
- Increased cases of domestic violence and a reluctance or lack of opportunity to seek help
- Increased alcohol and drug consumption

(Reger et al., 2020; Gunnell et al., 2020).



### Prevention Opportunities

#### COVID-19 suicide prevention opportunities

- Messaging that emphasizes the need for physical distancing and the positive societal benefits it brings – instills belongingness on a societal scale
- Access to tele-mental health services, including assessments and interventions (phone, online chat, and text message)
- Distance-based suicide prevention education
- Evidence-based online resources and suicide prevention education that is freely available
- Adherence to media reporting guidelines
- Means restriction

(Reger et al., 2020)

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### ABOUT THE CENTRE FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

**Anyone** can learn to identify someone at risk of suicide and get them help.

#### Call us.

We are the Centre for Suicide Prevention. For 40 years we've been equipping Canadians with knowledge and skills to respond to people considering suicide. We can equip you too. We educate for life.

### ABOUT THE MENTAL HEALTH COMMISSION OF CANADA

The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC) is a catalyst for improving the mental health system and changing the attitudes and behaviours of Canadians around mental health issues.



If you are in crisis, call 1.833.456.4566.  
First Nations people and Inuit can also call 1.855.242.3310

[hopeforwellness.ca](https://hopeforwellness.ca)  
[suicideprevention.ca/need-help](https://suicideprevention.ca/need-help)

VISIT [SUICIDEINFO.CA](https://SUICIDEINFO.CA) FOR MORE RESOURCES



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