

# Preventing Deaths by Suicide on Public Infrastructure

Public Health & Social Services Committee

January 8, 2018

M. Mustafa Hirji  
Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting)

# Outline

- Contagion
- Statistics on Suicide in Niagara
- Recent Events in Context
- Framework for Suicide Prevention
- Summary of Recommendations

THE INFLUENCE OF SUGGESTION ON SUICIDE:  
SUBSTANTIVE AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS  
OF THE WERTHER EFFECT\*

DAVID P. PHILLIPS

*State University of New York at Stony Brook*

*American Sociological Review* 1974, Vol. 39 (June): 340-54

*This paper shows that suicides increase immediately after a suicide story has been publicized in the newspapers in Britain and in the United States, 1947-1968. The more publicity devoted to a suicide story, the larger the rise in suicides thereafter. The rise in suicides after a story is restricted mainly to the area in which the story was publicized. Alternative explanations of these findings are examined; the evidence indicates that the rise in suicides is due to the influence of suggestion on suicide, an influence not previously demonstrated on the national level of suicides. The substantive, theoretical, and methodological implications of these findings are examined.*

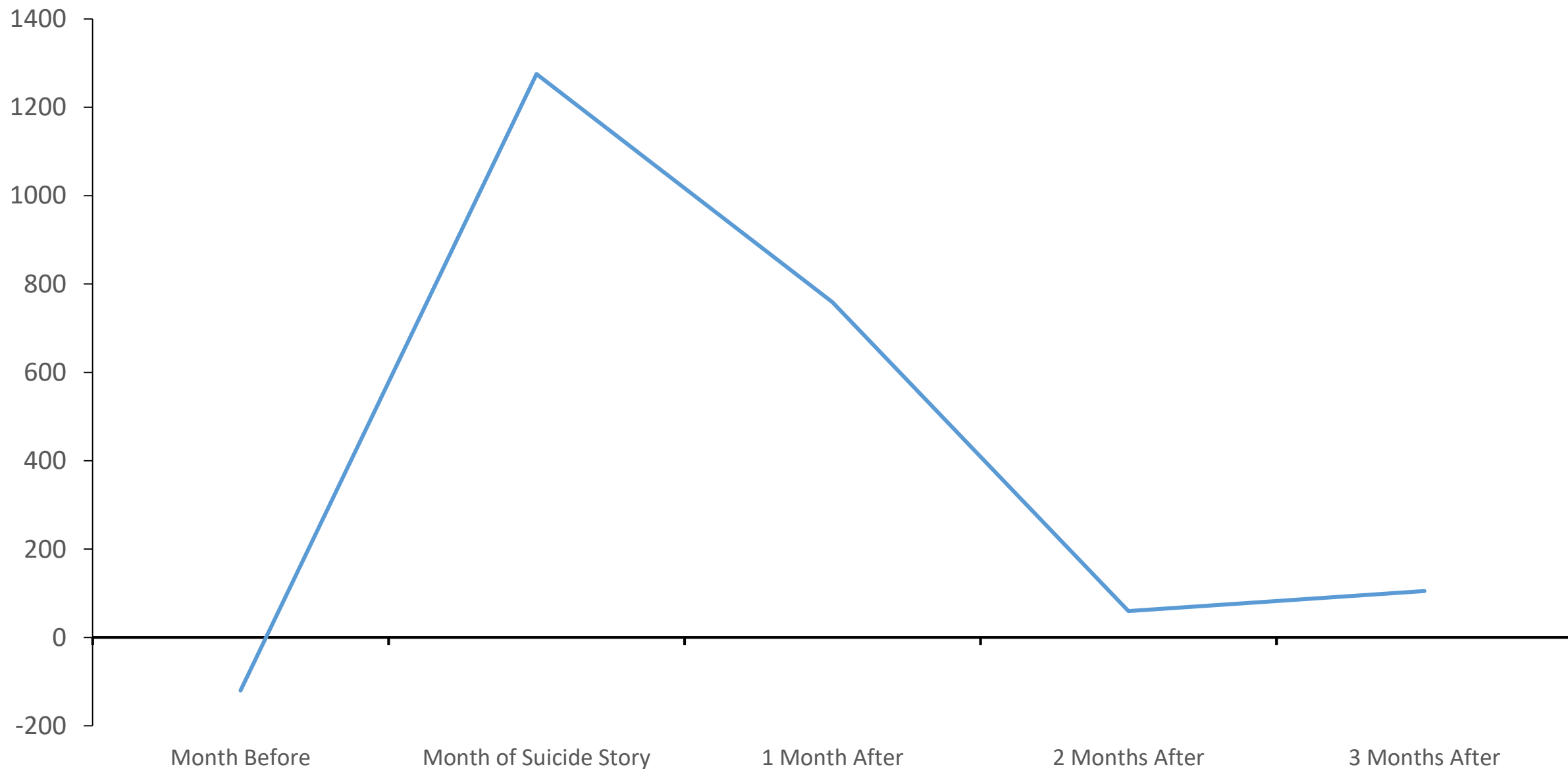
Two hundred years ago, Goethe wrote a novel called *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, in which the hero committed suicide. Goethe's novel was read widely in Europe, and it was said that people in many countries imitated Werther's manner of death. According to Goethe, "My friends. . .thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves; and what occurred at first among a few took place later among the general public. . ." (Goethe, quoted in Rose, 1929:XXIV.) Widespread imitation of Werther's suicide was never conclusively demonstrated, but authorities were sufficiently apprehensive to ban the book in several areas, including Italy (Gray, 1967), Leipzig, and Copenhagen (Rose, 1929).

More than one hundred years after *Werther* was written, Durkheim (1897) reviewed

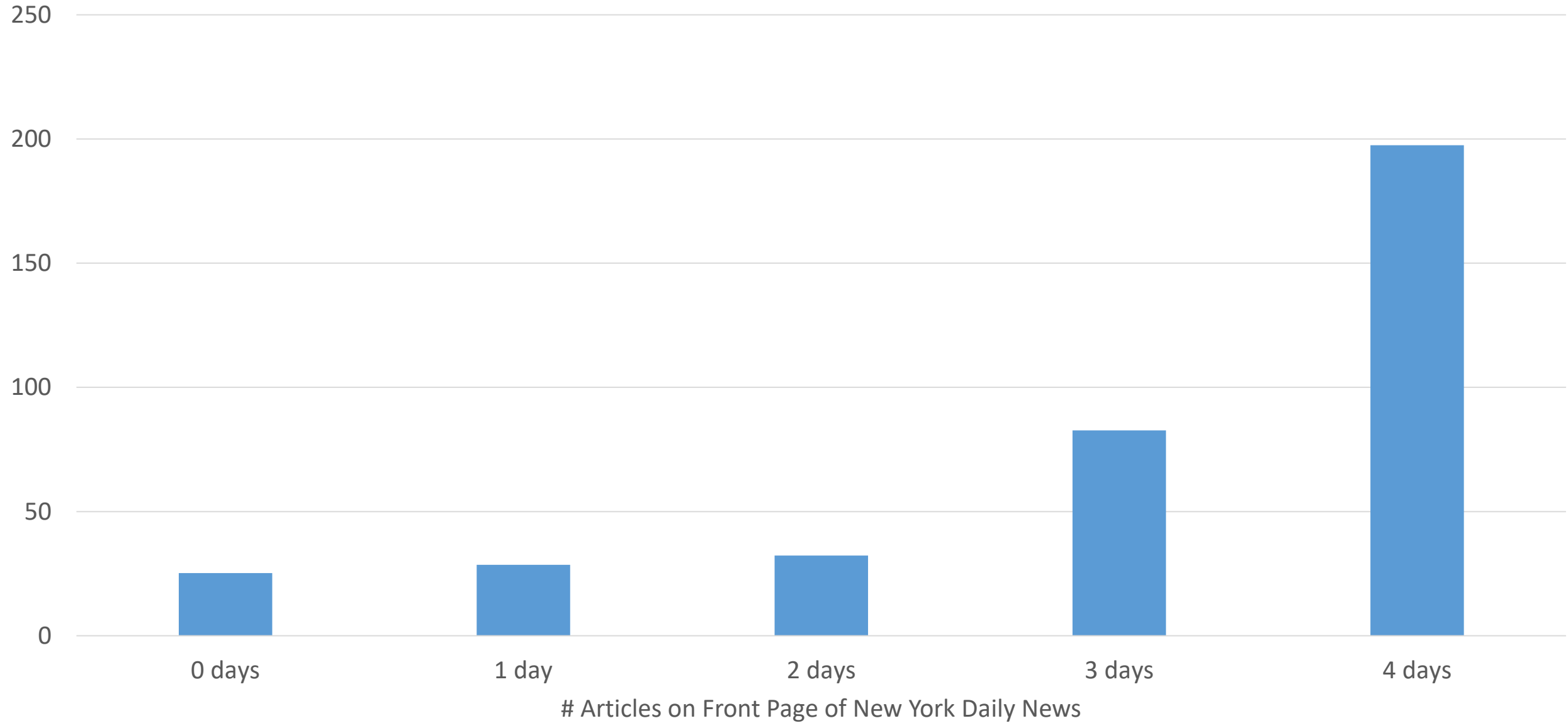
suggestion but he felt that these would probably have occurred eventually even in the absence of suggestion. Students of suicide have tended to follow Durkheim rather than Goethe or Tarde; and in the eighty years since *Suicide* was published, the influence of suggestion on suicide has seldom been studied. The comprehensive *Bibliography on Suicide and Suicide Prevention, 1897-1970* (Farberow, 1972) which includes several thousand items, does not list the words "suggestion," "imitation," or "contagion" in its index.

In his book reviewing the literature on suicide, Lester (1972) found seven studies on suggestion or imitation, and he devoted a chapter to describing them. Lester noted that the results of some studies were inconclusive (Motto, 1967), contradictory (Crawford and Willis, 1966; Seiden, 1968) or could be explained by processes other than imitation

Additional Suicides per Month for 35 Front Page Articles in the New York Times (1947-1967)



Average Rise in U.S. Suicides after Each Suicide Story in  
New York Daily News (1947-1967) where also in New York Times





Original article

# The effects of media reports of suicides by well-known figures between 1989 and 2010 in Japan

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Accepted 17 February 2014

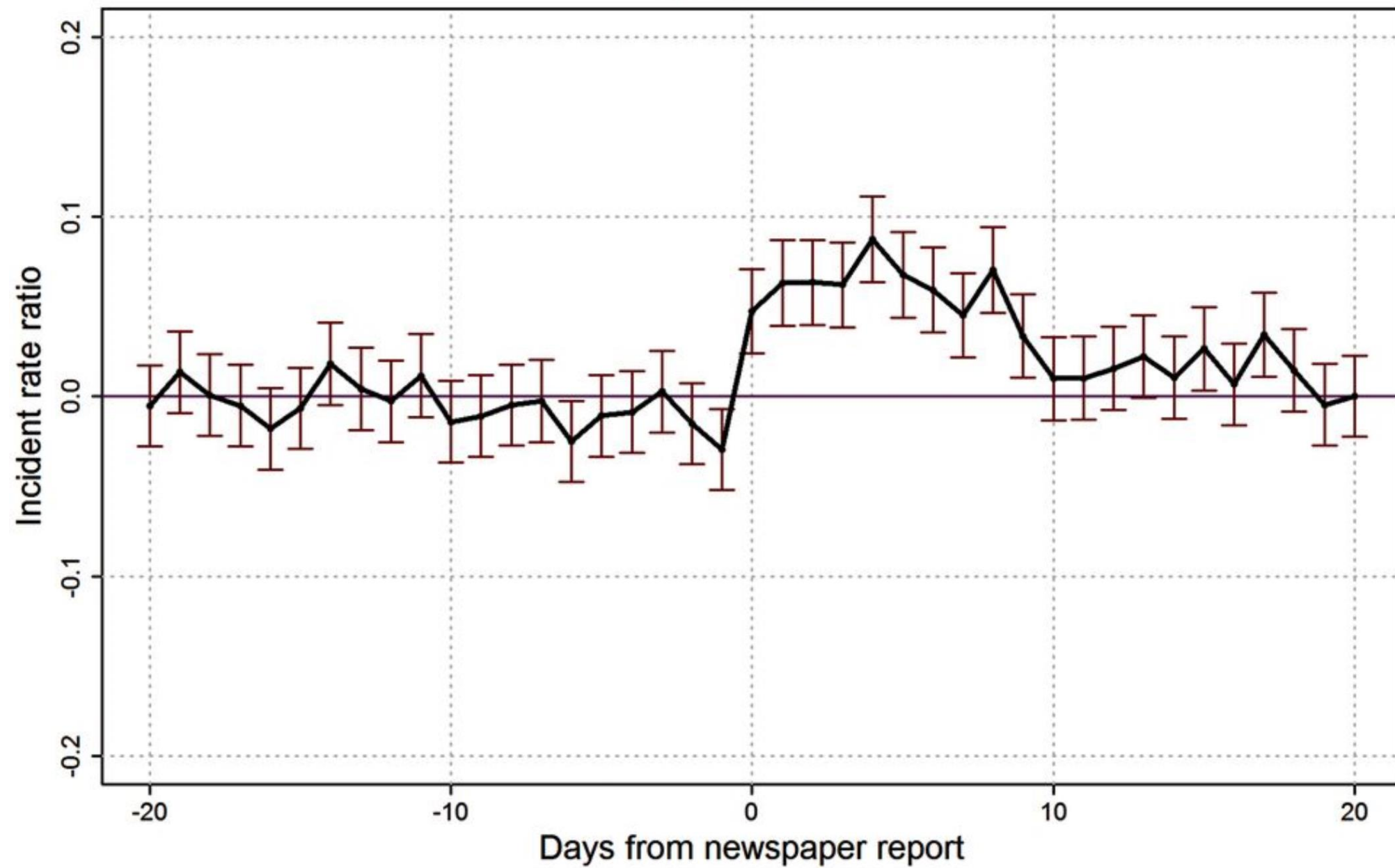
## Abstract

**Background:** Many studies have shown that media reporting of suicide incidents can trigger suicidal behaviours in viewers and readers. Yet little is known about the exact timing and duration of the imitative effects.

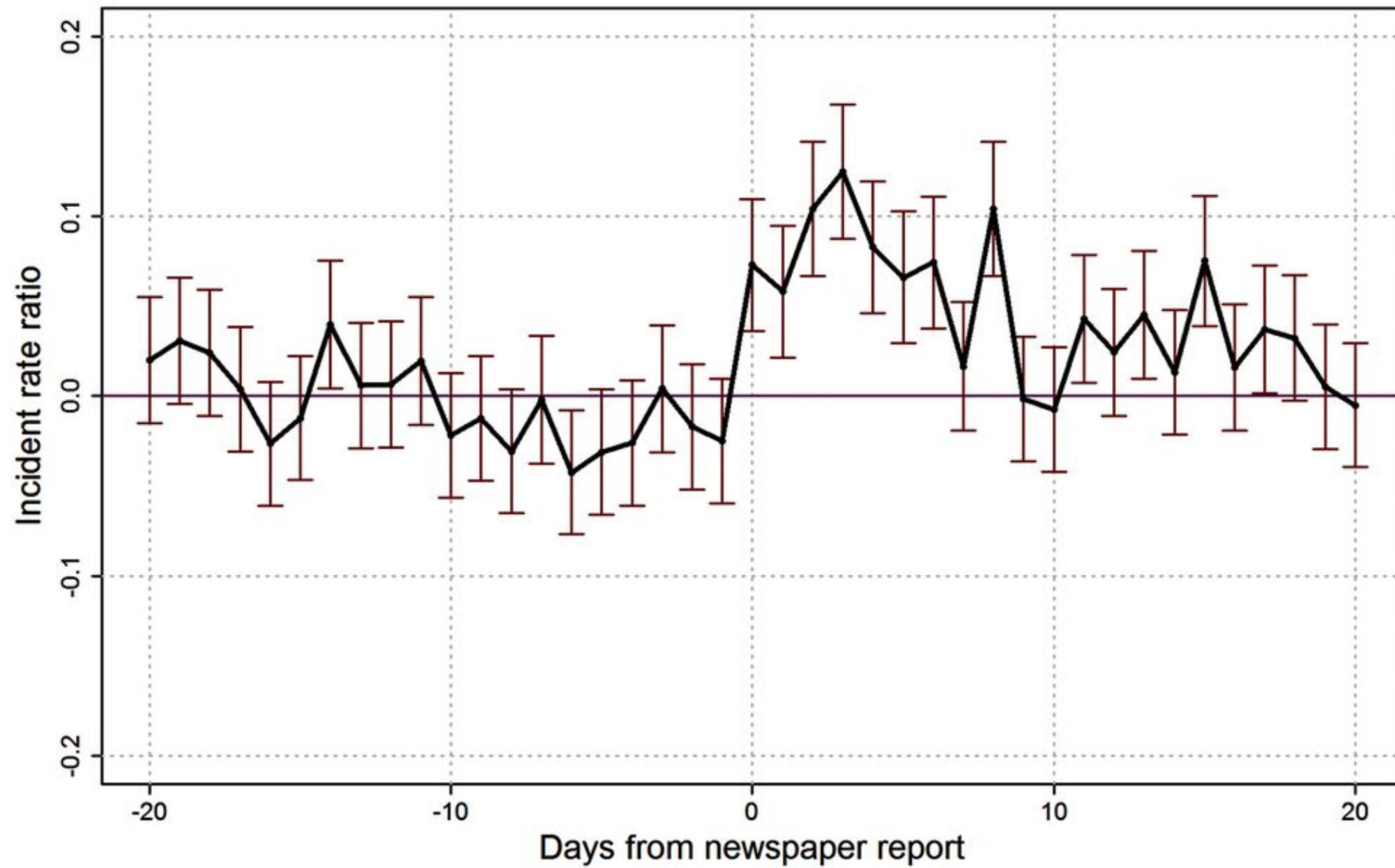
**Methods:** We estimated the Poisson regression model using original data on 109 celebrity suicides and daily suicide counts ( $n=8035$ ) in Japan from 1989 through 2010. Various fixed effects were included in the model to control for the effects of seasonal variations and time-specific shocks.

**Results:** The media reports on celebrity suicides were associated with an immediate in-

## All celebrities



## Celebrities with two and more articles





**Suicide contagion**

Exposure to suicide may be associated with suicide ideation and attempts in teens

**RESEARCH**

An organized system of stroke care may improve patient outcomes

**REVIEW**

Preventing cognitive decline

**PRACTICE**

Isoniazid toxicity

## Association between exposure to suicide and suicidality outcomes in youth

Sonja A. Swanson ScM, Ian Colman PhD

See related commentary by Bohanna on page 861 and at [www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.130678](http://www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.130678)

**Competing interests:** None declared.

This article has been peer reviewed.

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*CMAJ* 2013; DOI:10.1503/cmaj.121377

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Ecological studies support the hypothesis that suicide may be “contagious” (i.e., exposure to suicide may increase the risk of suicide and related outcomes). However, this association has not been adequately assessed in prospective studies. We sought to determine the association between exposure to suicide and suicidality outcomes in Canadian youth.

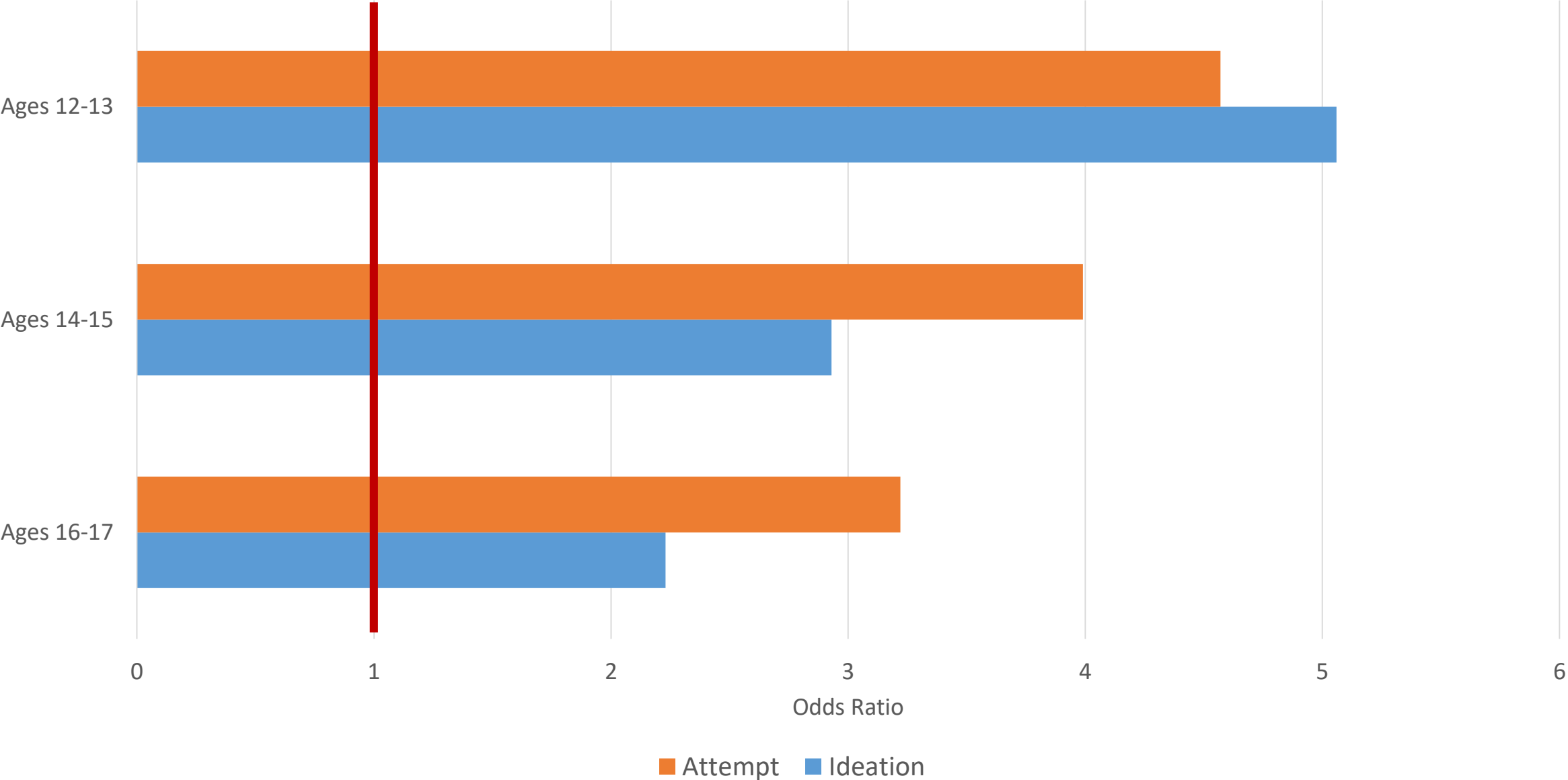
**Methods:** We used baseline information from the Canadian National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth between 1998/99 and 2006/07 with follow-up assessments 2 years later. We included all respondents aged 12–17 years in cycles 3–7 with reported measures of exposure to suicide.

**Results:** We included 8766 youth aged 12–13 years, 7802 aged 14–15 years and 5496 aged 16–17 years. Exposure to a schoolmate’s sui-

4.24) and 16–17 years (OR 2.23, 95% CI 1.43–3.48). Such exposure was associated with attempts among respondents aged 12–13 years (OR 4.57, 95% CI 2.39–8.71), 14–15 years (OR 3.99, 95% CI 2.46–6.45) and 16–17 years (OR 3.22, 95% CI 1.62–6.41). Personally knowing someone who died by suicide was associated with suicidality outcomes for all age groups. We also assessed 2-year outcomes among respondents aged 12–15 years: a schoolmate’s suicide predicted suicide attempts among participants aged 12–13 years (OR 3.07, 95% CI 1.05–8.96) and 14–15 years (OR 2.72, 95% CI 1.47–5.04). Among those who reported a schoolmate’s suicide, personally knowing the decedent did not alter the risk of suicidality.

**Interpretation:** We found that exposure to suicide predicts suicide ideation and attempts

Suicidality After Suicide of Someone in the Same School in the Past Year



# The association between suicide deaths and putatively harmful and protective factors in media reports

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■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2018 July 30;190:E900-7. doi: 10.1503/cmaj.170698

See related article at [www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.180900](http://www.cmaj.ca/lookup/doi/10.1503/cmaj.180900)

## ABSTRACT

**BACKGROUND:** Exposure to media reporting on suicide can lead to suicide contagion and, in some circumstances, may also lead to help-seeking behaviour. There is limited evidence for which specific characteristics of media reports mediate these phenomena.

**METHODS:** This observational study examined associations between putatively harmful and protective elements of media reports about suicide in 13 major publications in the Toronto media market

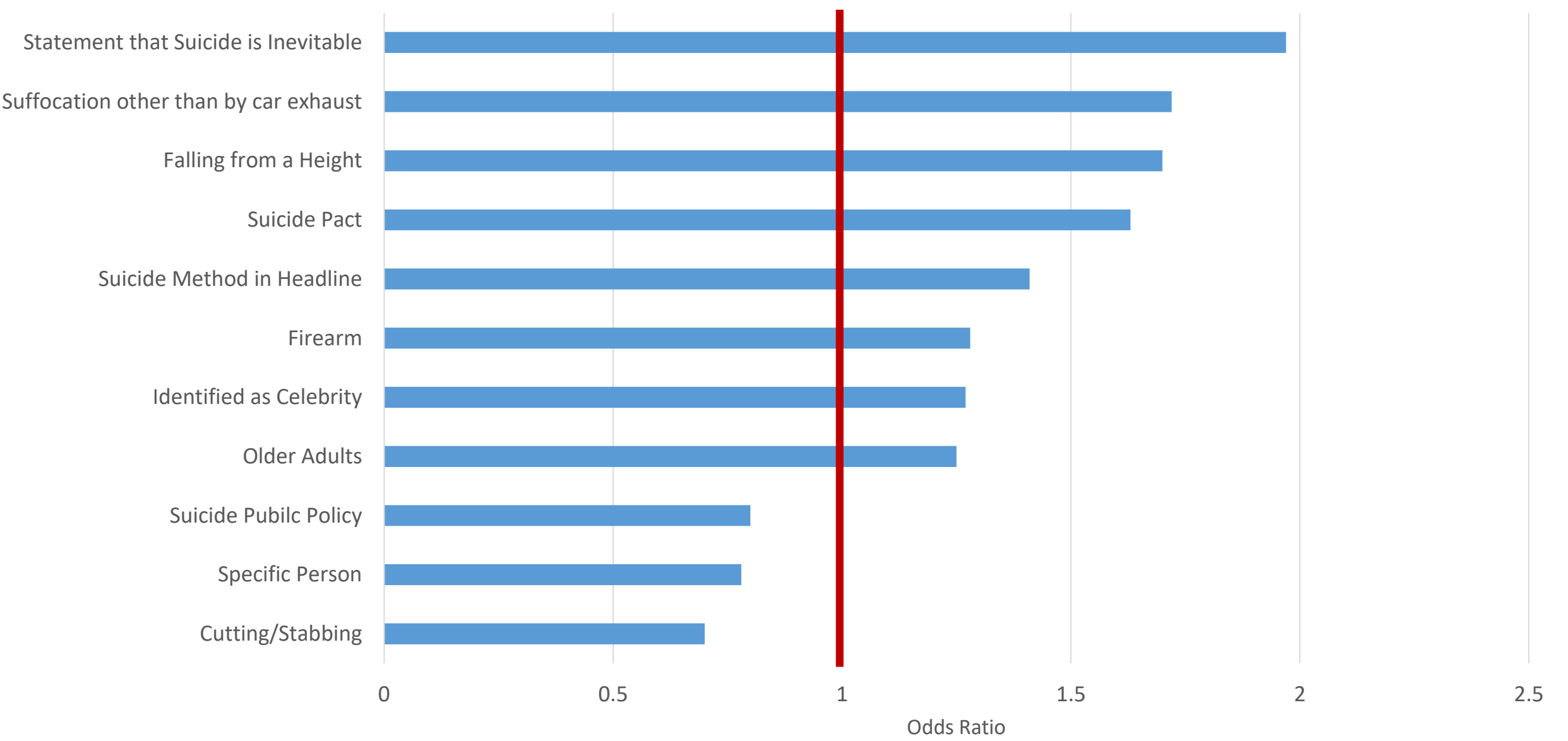
deaths in the 7 days after publication, compared with a control window.

**RESULTS:** From 2011 to 2014, there were 6367 articles with suicide as the major focus and 947 suicide deaths. Elements most strongly and independently associated with increased suicides were a statement about the inevitability of suicide (odds ratio [OR] 1.97, confidence interval [CI] 1.07–3.62), about asphyxia by a method other than car exhaust (OR 1.72, CI 1.36–2.18), about suicide by

independently associated with decreased suicides were unfavourable characteristics (negative judgments about the deceased; OR 1.85, CI 1.20–2.84), or mentions of railway (OR 1.61, CI 1.10–2.36) and cutting or stabbing (OR 1.59, CI 1.19–2.13) deaths, and individual murder-suicide (OR 1.50, CI 1.23–1.84).

**INTERPRETATION:** This large study identified significant associations between several specific elements of media reports and suicide deaths. It suggests that

# Association of Characteristics of Media Articles on Suicide Death



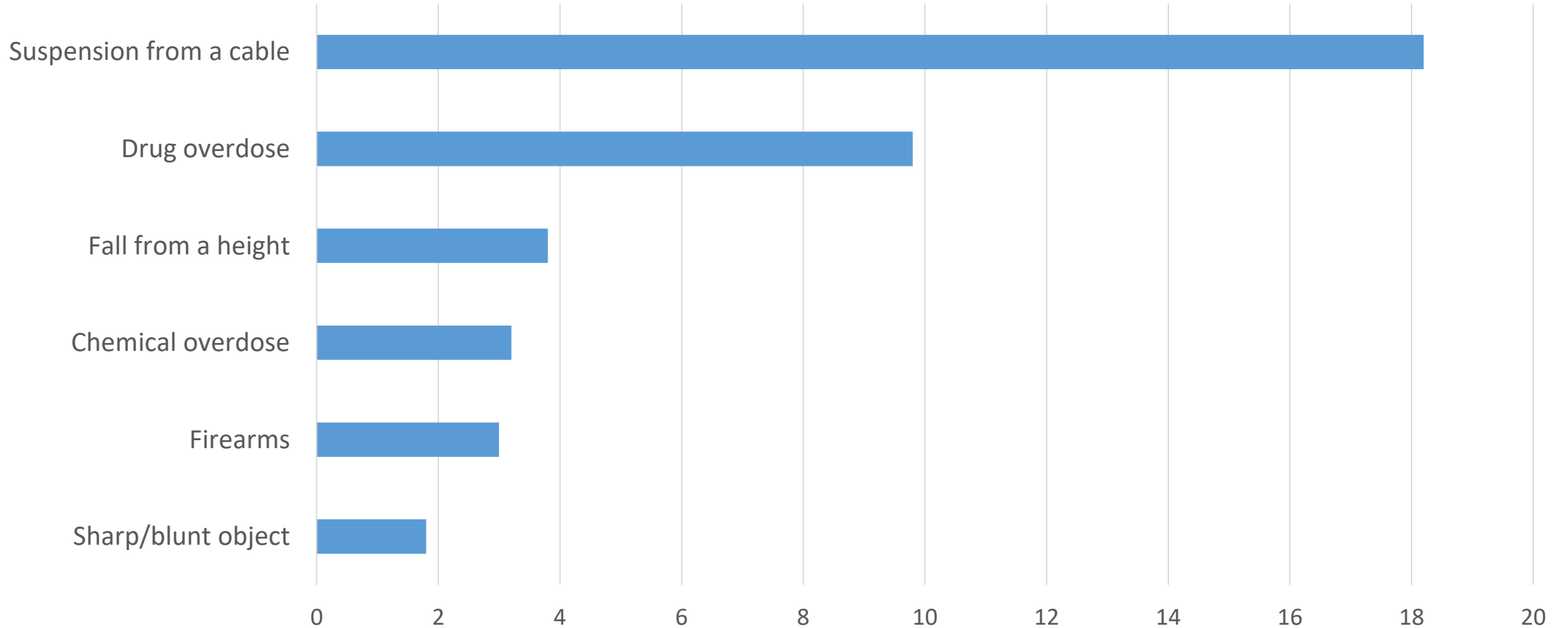
## Increases Suicide

- greater volume or profile (e.g. front page)
- specific and graphic
  - including the means and/or location
- descriptions of the victim in relatable terms
- coverage of sympathy and concern towards the victim
- ascribing simple or singular reasons
  - e.g. bullying
- language that implies action, control, or solution
  - e.g. “committed”, “successful” or “failed” attempt, “took their life”, prominent use of “suicide”
- portrayal as achieving a result
  - e.g. relieving of pain/suffering; leading to peace or a “better place”; going to “heaven”; the act was quick, easy, and/or painless

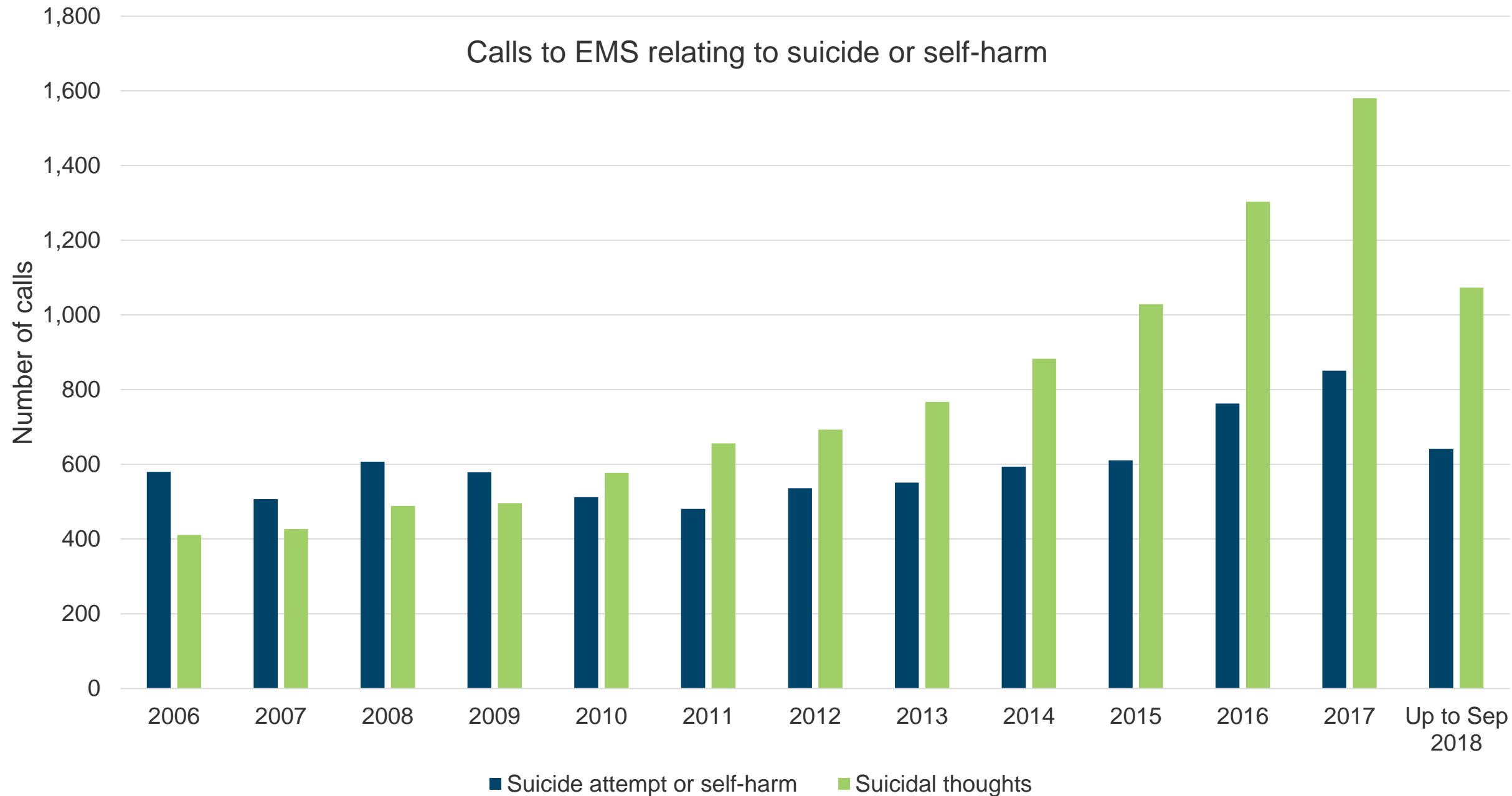
## Reduces Suicide

- Appropriate language
  - e.g. “died by suicide”, “suicide death”
- Reducing stigma, challenging myths
  - Linking mental disorders to suicide
  - Mental disorders are treatable
  - Death loses opportunity for someone to have received help
- Discussion of alternatives
  - Treatment
  - Community resources, hotlines
  - Reaching out to social supports
- Positive outcomes of treatment
- Information for friends/relatives to help

# Average 44.4 Suicide Deaths per Year



## Calls to EMS relating to suicide or self-harm



# October to December 2018

Infrastructure 1	3 deaths by suicide	Within 10 days of media coverage
	1 attempt to die by suicide	Within 18 days of media coverage
Infrastructure 2	1 death by suicide	Within 10 days of media coverage



# Ontario Coroner

- Investigates every suspected death by suicide
  - Determine cause as definitively as possible
  - Make recommendations to prevent repetition

## Deaths by Suicide at This Infrastructure (2010 to November 20, 2018)

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0*	3*

\* preliminary figures

# Recommendation

- Regional Council as the Board of Health **RESOLVES** that current public discourse around suicide has caused contagion and **REQUESTS** local media and others with a public audience to adhere to the Canadian Psychiatry Association's 2017 "Media Guidelines for Suicide Reporting" to prevent further contagion of suicide

# Framework: Preventing Deaths by Suicide

- Restricting means
- Increasing opportunities for help-seeking
- Increasing probability of intervention
- Redefining image of suicide magnets
- Supports in mental health system

	Deaths & Attempts (2010-2017)		Deaths & Attempts (2018)		Suicidal Ideation (EMS Responses)	
Infrastructure Element	Coroner (To Nov. 20)	EMS Calls	Coroner (To Nov. 20)	EMS Calls	2006–2017	2018 (To Dec.14)
NF-1	11	1	1		16	2
NF-2	10		0		7	
NF-3		1			2	
StC-1	0		3*	1	22	7
StC-2					1	
StC-3		1			4	
Thorold-5					1	3
Welland-1					4	1

# Barrier at STC-1

- Engaged Parsons
- Conceptual designs completed
- Cost: Est. \$4,000,000
- Timeline: Late 2019
- Ongoing
  - Detailed design work
  - Refinement of cost estimate

# Recommendations

- Within this framework, Regional Council as the Board of Health **ENDORSE** the importance of considering a barrier at the location of multiple recent deaths by suicide and **DIRECT** staff to proceed with further planning for such a barrier, and report back by spring 2019 with a final recommendation, detailed cost estimates, and budget options
- To implement this framework, Regional Council **DIRECT** staff to engage with the Ministry of Transportation on opportunities for provincial funding to support a possible infrastructure barrier as in recommendation #2
- As part of this framework, Regional Council **DIRECT** staff to include consideration of barriers on any future major infrastructure projects, and to include details of their consideration in reports to Council for approval of such projects

# Increasing Opportunities for Help-Seeking

- Signs to call Niagara Distress Centre
- Crisis phones
- Automated messages
- Staffed sanctuary



### Alternative Community Support

**Access Line 1-866-550-5205**

Providing confidential 24/7 telephone support for adult residents of Niagara facing addiction and mental health concerns.

#### Upcoming Events



### Who We Are: An Alternative Community Support

An intentional community designed to foster a restorative environment where people can grow, build self-confidence, and experience themselves as citizens in creating a world for themselves and others.

[Learn more](#)



### Become a Member

Encouraging participation and empowering individuals through connecting, education, work, and activities.

Connect with someone at the Oak Centre today!

[Learn More](#)

[Contact Us](#)



### Acorn Newsletter

We have a lot of interesting topics, some will make you laugh and others will make you think. We also have a puzzle and our delicious lunch menu. We work hard to bring it to you on a monthly basis.

[Newsletters](#)



# Recommendation

- To implement this framework, Regional Council as the Board of Health **DIRECT** staff to develop and report back in spring 2019 with detailed cost-estimates for approval of
  - Support for a Mental Health Hub/Clubhouse in St. Catharines

# Increasing Probability of Intervention

- Patrols by emergency workers
- Surveillance cameras triggering intervention
- Training to identify/intervene

# Recommendation

- To implement this framework, Regional Council as the Board of Health **DIRECT** staff to develop and report back in spring 2019 with detailed cost-estimates for approval of
  - Suicide identification/intervention training

# Redefining the Public Image

- Change media coverage and public discourse
- Memorials & floral tributes
- Lighting
- Redecoration/landscaping

# Improving Supports in Mental Health System

- Suicide Risk Assessment Strategy
- System Mapping & Integration

# Recommendations

- To implement this framework, Regional Council as the Board of Health **DIRECT** staff to develop and report back in spring 2019 with detailed cost-estimates for approval of
  - Suicide risk assessment capacity-building
- Regional Council as the Board of Health **ENDORSE** the proposed framework for preventing suicides on public infrastructure

# Questions?