Abstract:

Background While coverage of a celebrity suicide in the mass media may trigger copycat suicides, evidence for the effect of media reports of non-prominent suicides is moderate. Diversification of current media may raise further doubts as to whether their influence on suicidal acts is still present. We examined whether widespread media coverage of a railway accident, in which several people were killed while investigating a presumed railway suicide, subsequently increased the number of railway suicides. Methods The daily incidence of railway suicides was derived from the national accident registry on the German railway net. We estimated incidence ratios by Poisson regression, adjusting for relevant confounders (eg, outdoor temperature, unemployment rate), for the months following the accident (predefined index period) and predefined control periods (preceding months; years of the same period and month before/after the index period). Results The mean number of railway suicides per day in the index period increased significantly to 2.66 (95% CI 2.19 to 3.13) compared to 1.94 (95% CI 1.78 to 2.10) during both control periods. Fully adjusted Poisson regression showed a 44% daily increase in railway suicides in the index period compared to the control periods (incidence ratio 1.44, 95% CI 1.02 to 2.03). A maximum of eight suicides per day was reached about 1 week after the accident. Conclusions Non-fictional
media coverage of a fatal accident appears to affect subsequent railway suicide numbers. Supposedly, media reports drew attention to railways as a means of suicide.