

What happens in Vegas? Place as a risk factor for suicide

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Every day 85 Americans die by suicide and hundreds of thousands more make attempts every year. The vast majority of recent studies on suicide have focused on identifying psychiatric risk factors. However, a new study by Temple University Sociology Professor Matt Wray, published online this month in *Social Science and Medicine*, explores time and place as factors in suicide by closely analyzing the patterns of suicide in a single geographic area—Las Vegas—over a 30 year period.

For his study, "Leaving Las Vegas: Exposure to Las Vegas and Risk of Suicide," Wray and his colleagues from Harvard University set out to determine whether or not there was hard data to support the anecdotal evidence that the risk of suicide in Las Vegas is higher than elsewhere in the country. To do so, Wray compared statistical patterns of suicide in Las Vegas to the rest of the nation.

The results showed:

- residents of Las Vegas face a suicide risk that is significantly higher than the risk faced by residents elsewhere
- people who die while visiting Las Vegas are twice as likely to die by suicide than are people who die visiting someplace else
- visitors to Las Vegas face an even higher suicide risk than residents of Las Vegas

Also noteworthy, according to Wray, is the finding that if you live in Las Vegas, but travel away from home, your risk for suicide decreases. "So,

one conclusion we might draw from this fact is that something about the place is toxic or 'suicidogenic,' and that there is something about reduced exposure to Las Vegas that is beneficial," said Wray.

According to Wray, there a couple of scenarios that may explain the reasons for this geographical suicide cluster, but these need further research. "One would be 'gambler's despair'—someone visits Las Vegas, bets his house away and decides to end it all. Another would be that those predisposed to suicide disproportionately choose Las Vegas to reside in or visit. And, finally, there may be a 'contagion' effect where people are emulating the suicides of others, with Las Vegas acting as a suicide magnet, much like the Golden Gate bridge. Some people may be going there intent on self-destruction."

What about Las Vegas as a place may be contributing to these higher rates of suicide? Problem gambling is just one piece of the puzzle, explained Wray. "Las Vegas is also one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the U.S., a pattern of growth that may amplify social isolation, fragmentation and low social cohesion, all of which have long been identified as correlates of suicide," he said.

The study also found that suicide risk in Las Vegas has declined over the 30 year period in the study, while the risks in the rest of the country have begun to climb slightly. Additionally, the data showed that for residents, the protective benefit of leaving Las Vegas, while still significant, has begun to decline.

In response to these findings, some would argue that Las Vegas is becoming more like the All-American city, having become a very normal place to live in and finally making good on older marketing campaigns that have depicted it as a family-oriented vacation destination. "But, it is equally possible that the converse is true," said Wray.

"Maybe it's actually a sign that the rest of the country is becoming more like Las Vegas—with increased social isolation, sprawling growth, and casino-style gambling now in every state and many metropolitan regions," he said.

Source: Temple University

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