

Successful solo rock/pop stars twice as likely to die early as those in a band

December 19 2012

Successful solo rock/pop stars are around twice as likely to die early as those in equally famous bands, indicates research published in the online journal *BMJ Open*.

And those who died of drug and [alcohol problems](#) were more likely to have had a difficult or abusive childhood than those dying of other causes, the findings showed.

The authors included 1489 North American and European rock and [pop stars](#) over a 50 year period between 1956 (Elvis Presley) and 2006 (Regina Spektor, The Arctic Monkeys, and Snow Patrol)

Their achievements were determined from international polls and top 40 chart successes, while details of their personal lives/childhoods were drawn from a range of music and official websites, published biographies, and anthologies.

During the 50 year period, 137 (9.2%) famous rock/pop stars died. The average age of death was 45 for North American stars and 39 for those from Europe.

The gap in life expectancy between rock and pop stars and the general population widened consistently until 25 years after fame had been achieved, after which [death rates](#) began to approach those of the general population—but only for European stars.

Solo performers were around twice as likely to die early as those in a band, irrespective of whether they were European (9.8% vs 5.4%) or North American (22.8% vs 10.2%).

A successful solo career may be a proxy for fame, it also raises the question of whether the peer support offered by band-mates may be protective, suggest the authors.

While gender and the age at which fame was reached did not influence life expectancy, ethnicity did, with those from non-white backgrounds more likely to die early. And the chances of survival increased among those achieving fame after 1980.

Nearly half of those who died as a result of drugs, alcohol, or violence had at least one unfavourable factor in their childhoods, compared with one in four of those dying of other causes.

These factors—referred to as adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs for short— included physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; living with a chronically depressed, suicidal, mentally or physically ill person; living with a substance abuser; having a close relative in prison; and coming from a broken home or one in which domestic violence featured.

Four out of five dead stars with more than one unfavourable childhood factor died from substance misuse or violence-related causes.

A career as a rock/pop star may be attractive to those escaping an unhappy childhood, but it may also provide the resource to feed a predisposition to unhealthy/risky behaviours, say the authors.

"Pop/rock stars are among the most common role models for children, and surveys suggest that growing numbers aspire to pop stardom," they write. "A proliferation of TV talent shows and new opportunities created

by the internet can make this dream appear more achievable than ever."

But they caution: "It is important they [children] recognise that substance use and risk taking may be rooted in childhood adversity rather than seeing them as symbols of success."

More information: Dying to be famous: retrospective cohort study of rock and pop star mortality and its association with adverse childhood experiences, [doi 10.1136/bmjopen-2012-002089](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2012-002089)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: Successful solo rock/pop stars twice as likely to die early as those in a band (2012, December 19) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-successful-solo-rockpop-stars-die.html>

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