

Suicides fall during pandemic

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While suicide levels in the USA fell during the first year of the pandemic, Australian researchers warn the lower suicide rate now faces the challenge of dealing with the COVID-19 health and socio-economic gap in society.

Echoing similar trends during the great Spanish Flu [pandemic](#) (1918-1920), provisional National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS)

data from the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 show an estimated 17.7% increase in overall mortality but a 5.6% decline in US suicides compared to 2019 mortalities (from 47,511 to 44,834 suicides).

"These findings should be cautiously interpreted because further research is required to analyze the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on US [suicide](#) rates among [vulnerable populations](#) including by race-ethnicity, as disadvantaged groups are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 related health and economic impacts," says Professor Tarun Bastiampillai, from Flinders University's College of Medicine and Public Health, and Monash University.

Clinician and academic neuropsychiatrist Associate Professor Jeffrey Looi from ANU Medical School, is network coordinator of the Consortium of Australian-Academic Psychiatrists for Independent Policy and Research Analysis (CAPIPRA) in Canberra. Co-authors are Flinders University Associate Professor of Psychiatry Stephen Allison and Flinders University Professor Tarun Bastiampillai, who is also affiliated with Monash University.

"Research on [social cohesion](#) and welfare support measures is also needed to better understand their impacts on pandemic-induced suicide risk for vulnerable US communities."

Major crises are often associated with a reduction in suicide because great upheavals in society such as war and pandemic can sharpen collective feelings, stimulate [community spirit](#) and social resilience, the Consortium of Australian-Academic Psychiatrists for Independent Policy and Research Analysis (CAPIPRA) researchers say in a new article in *The Primary Care Companion for Central Nervous System Disorders*.

The latest study compared the latest findings with similarly lower suicide

rates before and after the major historic Spanish Flu pandemic (1918-1920) which killed an estimated 1%-2.7% of the world's population and reduced US life expectancy by 13%. While the headline US suicide rate fell by 26% during that pandemic, declines were even more evident among non-White (mostly Black) population (51% versus 23%) compared to the pre-pandemic period (1910-1917).

This mirrors a separate study (Pirkis et al) which found that suicide rates in 21 countries (16 high income and 5 upper-middle income) have either been stable or lower since the start of the worldwide pandemic last year. We need to remain vigilant and be poised to respond if the situation changes as the longer-term mental health and economic effects of the pandemic unfold, *The Lancet Psychiatry* study concludes.

It also follows two recent papers from CAPIPRA researchers, including Flinders University Associate Professor Stephen Allison, which examined the impact on Spanish Flu on suicide rates in the USA and New Zealand.

Associate Professor Jeffrey Looi, from the Australian National University (ANU) Medical School and CAPIPRA Network Coordinator, says greater social and cultural cohesion among many non-White communities—led by strong family and kinship bonds, religious beliefs, higher levels of resilience or other factors—appears to be somewhat protective during times of great adversity.

"Communities with higher levels of social integration are more likely to 'pull together,'" Associate Professor Looi says.

"And while there has been the additional secular sociocultural changes brought by the Black Lives Matter movement, these communities are bearing disproportionate pressures from the extended pressures of the current pandemic."

More information: Tarun Bastiampillai et al, Spanish Flu (1918–1920) Impact on US Suicide Rates by Race, *The Primary Care Companion For CNS Disorders* (2021). [DOI: 10.4088/PCC.21com03088](https://doi.org/10.4088/PCC.21com03088)

Jane Pirkis et al, Suicide trends in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic: an interrupted time-series analysis of preliminary data from 21 countries, *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/S2215-0366\(21\)00091-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(21)00091-2)

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