

# Finland managed to halve its suicide rate—here's how

March 14 2024, by Leah Prencipe, Marieke Liem and Sami Pirkola

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The end of the 20th century was a particularly grim period for Finland. Suicide rates were among the [highest in the world](#), peaking in 1990 with over 30 deaths per 100,000 citizens, compared with a European average of ten per 100,000.

Finland responded aggressively, implementing a comprehensive national strategy, and ultimately cutting this rate by more than half, to about [13 deaths per 100,000](#).

Each suicide is unique, with many precipitating factors and personal characteristics, adverse occurrences and failures to get help. These things add up and finally cluster in a lethal way.

That is why there is no single remedy when it comes to suicide prevention. There are, however, several factors that may have contributed to the decline in the Finnish suicide rate.

The [main strategy](#) undertaken by the Finnish government included educating health and other [care workers](#) to conduct a comprehensive, nationwide research project that collected data on all suicides that occurred during a one-year period.

§The research project itself was a huge intervention, spanning Finland's 400-plus municipalities, which provided direct feedback on suicide rates and specific preventive actions, simultaneously raising awareness of suicide risks.

The media learned to report on suicides in a neutral way—without glorifying or romanticizing language. Policies were implemented to limit access to firearms and poisons. And the arrival of a [new generation](#) of antidepressants, with fewer side-effects, in the 90s may also have

contributed to bringing down the rate.

Counterintuitively, the fast rise of mobile phones in the 90s may have given a big helping hand, too. While we now look at [mobile devices](#) and [social media](#) as a source of decreasing physical social contacts, they probably helped people keep in touch with others in this large, sparsely populated country. (Loneliness and a lack of sense of belonging are [known risk factors](#) in suicide.)

But to what extent was Finland unique in experiencing a decline in suicide rates?

## How other countries fared

Over roughly this same period, suicide rates have fallen [across Europe](#). We can never be certain why this is the case, but a good guess might be that there is now better awareness of suicide and [greater willingness](#) to talk about mental health. As in Finland, suicide is also reported in a [more neutral way](#) in the media.

And, as mentioned above, the new generation of so-called SSRI antidepressant drugs may have played a large role in the fall in suicides, along with more effective [mental health](#) treatments, such as [cognitive behavioral therapy](#).

Unfortunately, the outlook is not universally bright, as death by suicide is increasing in some parts of the world. For example, [suicide rates](#) in the US have [increased by 35%](#) in the first decades of the 21st century, now amounting to about 14 deaths per 100,000.

Why are some countries seemingly thriving in the modern era and others seemingly seeped in despair? This probably points to inequality in well-being distribution that leaves some groups vulnerable and unprotected.

In the US, the risk groups seem to include under-educated, marginalized [younger people](#), many of whom are victims of the opioid epidemic. We know that suicide risk is higher among poorer people, and Finland, with its more extensive Nordic welfare state, may be better equipped when it comes to the difficult task of suicide reduction.

The story continues in Finland, where the current [mental health strategy](#) includes a [suicide-prevention](#) program with similar focuses to the previous agenda, with an added emphasis on improving crisis services. And they're conducting a nationwide suicide study on [young people's suicides](#). The synthesis of these findings, coupled with continuing endeavors, has the potential to further decrease the rate.

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