



RESEARCH NOTE

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Suicides

There has been much public discussion recently on the subject of suicide, particularly in comparison with deaths from road accidents and with regard to the situation amongst the young and rural dwellers in Australia.

During the years 1982-1993, 24 453 people have committed suicide in Australia, an average of about 2200 each year. The highest figure recorded was 2360 in 1991 at the height of the recession, whilst the lowest figure recorded during this period was 1712 in 1984; there were 2081 suicides in 1993. In comparison during the same period, there were 32 250 deaths

from motor vehicle traffic accidents, ranging from a high in 1982 of 3364 to a low of 1956 in 1993. Table 1 below shows the comparative figures for each year. These two causes have resulted in the highest rates by far of all "preventable", "avoidable" or "externally caused" deaths in Australia.

These figures show that while deaths from road accidents seem to be generally declining, having reached their lowest level since 1950, the trend with suicides is much more erratic (and may reflect the economic cycle to some extent). In fact in 1991, for the first time in several decades,

there were more deaths from suicide than from road accidents. This situation is particularly marked for males, and even so is probably understated, as many experts in this area believe that at least some road accident deaths are in fact suicides.

However, the *rates* of suicide during the 1980s were not significantly different than at other times throughout Australian history — rates were higher in the 1960s and the 1910s and only in the 1940s were they substantially lower. The apparent identification of suicide as more of an "issue" recently may well be because it is

Table 1: Deaths: Selected causes, Australia, 1982 to 1993

	Suicides			Motor vehicle accidents		
	Males	Females	Persons	Males	Females	Persons
1982	1 318	459	1 777	2 492	872	3 364
1983	1 308	418	1 726	2 058	773	2 831
1984	1 309	403	1 712	1 933	781	2 714
1985	1 428	399	1 827	2 083	850	2 933
1986	1 531	451	1 982	2 132	855	2 987
1987	1 773	467	2 240	1 995	788	2 783
1988	1 730	467	2 197	2 176	902	3 078
1989	1 658	438	2 096	2 000	828	2 828
1990	1 735	426	2 161	1 751	738	2 489
1991	1 847	513	2 360	1 570	651	2 221
1992	1 820	474	2 294	1 408	658	2 066
1993	1 687	394	2 081	1 384	572	1 956
Total	19 144	5 309	24 453	22 982	9 268	32 350

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), various.

more noticeable when it happens, perhaps because young and/or rural people are more conspicuous victims. Table 2 shows the rates of suicide for these groups compared with older and urban groups.

Table 2 does show that there appears to be an increasingly significant difference in the incidence of suicide between urban and rural dwellers. However, this trend is entirely amongst males, as for females ABS data shows generally higher rates for urban dwellers than for rural people. People aged 20-24 years have generally been the

most "prone" to suicide. Further analysis shows that rural males aged 20-24 years have by far the highest incidence: 51 suicide deaths per 100 000 people in 1993. Rural men had the highest rates of suicide of all groups, except for men aged 25-34 years, in 1993.

The incidence of suicide amongst women has always been substantially lower than amongst men and far less varied generally: urban women aged 75 years and over and rural women aged 25-34 years were the most prone in 1993 at 7 deaths per 100 000 people in these groups.

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Table 2: Rates (a) of suicide: Selected age groups and usual residence, Australia, 1986 to 1993

	Age group (years) -						Usual residence		
	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	55-64	75+	Total	Urban(b)	Rural(c)
1986	8	19	17	16	16	17	12	13	12
1987	12	19	18	18	19	21	14	14	14
1988	13	20	18	17	16	21	13	13	14
1989	10	18	19	15	16	17	12	12	13
1990	12	20	18	16	16	17	13	12	14
1991	11	20	19	19	16	19	14	13	14
1992	12	21	19	16	15	16	13	12	15
1993 -Total	10	19	17	14	14	16	12	11	13
-Males	17	32	29	21	24	31	19	18	22
-Females	3	5	6	6	5	6	4	5	4
-Urban	10	17	17	13	13	15	11	11	..
-Males	16	29	29	20	21	30	18	18	..
-Females	3	5	5	6	5	7	5	5	..
-Rural	10	30	17	16	19	16	13	..	13
-Males	19	51	27	26	30	33	22	..	22
-Females	1	6	7	5	6	4	4	..	4

(a) Standardised/age-specific numbers per 100 000 mid-year population.

(b) Areas containing a total population of 20 000 or more.

(c) Areas containing a total population of less than 20 000.

Source: ABS, various.