

High rates of suicide continue among older NZ men, research reveals

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There continues to be a high rate of suicide among older New Zealand men and an Otago psychogeriatrician says more needs to be done to understand why and to help prevent this occurring.

Associate Professor Yoram Barak recently investigated the rates of [death](#) by suicide of older males aged 85 and over, comparing them to women of the same age, youth and [young adults](#) between 2011 and 2019.

Suicide rates for all cohorts were comparable. For every 100,000 people there were 23.5 deaths among 15 to 19 year-olds annually, 29 deaths among 20 to 24 year-olds, 27 deaths among 25 to 29 year-olds and 27.9 deaths in those aged over 85.

Associate Professor Barak, a consultant psychogeriatrician, who undertook the research together with Professor Paul Glue, explains the latest provisional suicide figures released by New Zealand's Chief Coroner shows the overall suicide rate slightly increased over the 2018-2019 year to

13.93 people among every 100,000 people, up from 13.67 people in 2017–2018.

"The Chief Coroner's media release focused on the increase in the number of young people who die by suicide. However, it is concerning the Chief Coroner did not publicly comment on the finding that the suicide rate of oldest-old men is comparable to that of young men," Associate Professor Barak says.

"Older men show the highest death by suicide rate in almost all countries, more than four times the U.S.'s age-adjusted rate for white men and even higher rates in rural China."

His analysis shows that between 2011 and 2019 the number of suicides of older men remained consistently high and almost doubled that of women of the same age. In 2013, the suicide rate for men aged over 85 for every 100,000 people in New Zealand was 31 while women of the same age was 7. The comparison blew out the following year to 39 men compared to four women and in 2019 was 32 men compared to two [women](#).

International research suggests the main risk factors for death by suicide among older men are becoming a widower, suffering from a mental disorder, physical illness and bereavement. Loneliness, dementia and depression are common among the elderly who die by suicide.

Associate Professor Barak says it is possible that these same characteristics underlie the ominous rates of death by suicide amongst New Zealand's "oldest old men".

"Psychosocial adversity may be driving rates of death by suicide in older men in New Zealand. In a country that established a universal, tax-funded [national health service](#) with long-standing commitment to reducing health inequities, a focus on secondary services and performance targets

has been prioritised over tackling issues such as suicide and poverty-related diseases," he says.

"Research to inform about this vulnerable population and prevention are urgently needed.

"Our older citizens are owed a change in [suicide](#) awareness and prevention so that New Zealand may yet become a great country for older men."

Provided by University of Otago

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