

Claire Rocks, Vital Statistics Team in Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency, discusses the Review of Suicide Statistics in Northern Ireland; the issues, the impact of the revision of the previously published time series and next steps.

The findings from the Review of Suicide Statistics in Northern Ireland and new data series were published on Thursday 26th May 2022.

Setting the Scene

Accurate and timely suicide data is crucial for understanding trends and patterns in these tragic deaths and, in turn, assisting in the development of healthcare policy and prevention strategies. Each death behind these statistics represents the loss of a loved person and valued member of our society and the Government's overarching message, irrespective of the numbers, continues to be 'One death by suicide is one too many'.

It is widely recognised that due to the complex circumstances surrounding many sudden deaths, accurately determining the number of deaths by suicide is challenging, and in determining the intent behind the circumstances of a death, statisticians, researchers and Coroners are limited by the information available to them. The review set out to improve the accuracy of recorded drug and suicide deaths within the review years. It also set the future standard for more accurate statistics and stronger working relationships between those who rely on such statistics for the purposes of analysing and preventing deaths by suicide, and deaths due to accidental drug overdose.

The Issue

The review was considered necessary following the identification of a classification issue in published statistics from 2015 to 2020 with both Coroner's Service for Northern Ireland (CSNI) systems and also within NISRA processes.

The CSNI system records details on cause of death and information on intent. Prior to 2019 official statistics showed that the number of deaths of undetermined intent had been increasing annually. This was primarily driven by an increase in the number of drug-related deaths, but was also linked to recording issues and assumptions around information on intent which in turn impacted on the coding of cause of death by NISRA. In short, systems did not provide enough detail to allow reliable coding of intent.

The absence of clear intent information led to a number of cases being inaccurately coded as deaths of 'undetermined intent' rather than accidental.

Impact

The main impact of the review is that the majority of cases (84 per cent) previously coded as undetermined intent have been reviewed and established as accidental and recoded as such. This excludes them from the official suicide definition. The annual average reduction in suicides over the 3 year period 2015-2017 is almost 30 per cent compared with previously published figures. The later years of the review saw smaller reductions in numbers; a 23 per cent fall in 2018 and a 17 per cent fall in 2020 – this was due to some improvements in systems and processes being implemented from 2019.

Prior to the review it was believed that NI had the highest age-standardised suicide rate in the UK (18-19 suicides per 100,000 population, next to Scotland at 13-16 per 100,000). The revised figures show that NI had a lower suicide rate than Scotland in the last few years. For the latest year, 2020, NI had an age-standardised rate of 13.3 suicides per 100,000 population compared to Scotland at 15.0. The rate for England & Wales is lower at 10.0 suicides per 100,000 in 2020. It should be noted, however, that cross country comparisons will take account of differences in the data collection and collation processes in the separate jurisdictions and should therefore be treated with some caution.

The full findings and revised data series can be found here: [Review of Suicide Statistics in Northern Ireland | Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency \(nisra.gov.uk\)](#)

An explanation video is available, explaining the Review; reasons for the review, the outcome and what it means here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxhkkPj5dPU>

What Next?

Currently cases between 2015 and 2017 are not yet finalised due to some non-drug-related cases still being reviewed; these will be finalised and released on 30th November 2022. At the same time more granular information on 2021 suicide statistics will be published (the total of 237 has already been presented in the Annual Report of the Registrar General 2021) thereby providing a comparable series for the period 2015-2021.

Given the importance of this data series to researchers, the Northern Ireland Longitudinal Study (NILS) & Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS) have been updated with the revised 2018 – 2020 data. Data previously shared for research purposes with the BSO Honest Broker Service have also been updated with the revisions.

NISRA will also continue to work closely with key stakeholders to ensure that we build on the review, developing our outputs to address user need in this important area.