

Suicide Rates in Older Spanish Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020

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Key highlights:

- Higher rates of suicidal behaviors were detected during 2020 in Spain.
- Suicide rates in adults greater than 80 years of age increased over 20% compared to previous year.
- It is important to reduce suicide risk factors and promote protective factors in this population.

In studies of suicidal behavior in older adults over 65 years of age, multiple risk factors have been identified. Some of these risk factors are, for example, sex (male), the presence of chronic and/or disabling diseases, psychopathological disorders (e.g., depression), toxic substance use (such as alcohol), institutionalization in care homes, adverse life experiences (e.g., grief), lack of social support, and social isolation.

On the other hand, protective factors against suicidal behavior include adequate family support, integration into an adequate social network, and also the ability to access community health services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our society in most domains including social, economic, physical and mental which has been more evident in extreme age groups (childhood-adolescence and older adults). At the start of the pandemic, home lockdown was decreed in Spain on 14 March 2020 to reduce the number of contacts and stop the spread of the virus as much as possible. This lockdown lasted until 21 June of that same year, which meant that many individuals and couples had to stay home without being able to interact with family, friends or their usual social network. The lockdown increased risk factors such as loneliness, and increased anxiety levels in the face of fear of illness, while worsening protective factors like adequate family support and the support of social and community health networks.

Over time, data reflecting this great impact is starting to be published. Data for the year 2020 have recently been published by the Spanish National Statistics Institute and later by the Suicide Observatory in Spain (of the Spanish Foundation for Suicide Prevention). In their report, 3,941 completed suicides were reported (74% males, 26% women) which is the highest number of suicides in Spain since records have been recorded; an increase of 5.7% in men and 12.3% in women compared to 2019 was described in the Observatory. Of the 3,941 suicides, 1,608 were found in those over 60 years of age (40.8%), and in those over 80 years of age, there was a 20% increase in suicide rate compared to 2019.

De la Torre-Luque et al. report a significant relationship between the suicide rate and the timing of the pandemic: during the lockdown period of 2020, the suicide rate was lower compared to the same period of 2019. After the lockdown was finished, the suicide rate rates increased rapidly. This increase has not been seen in other countries, now with other results being published. Thus,

for example, in Finland, in a recent article published by Partonen T and collaborators, there has been no increase in the number of suicides throughout 2020. In Japan, the suicide rate increased 16% during the second wave of the pandemic from July to October 2020. More data will be needed to observe trends and draw further conclusions from 2021 and beyond.

However, these results, although preliminary, make it necessary to focus our efforts on promoting and re-establishing social support networks for older adults, especially now that they can once again access the health system and connect in-person with family members.

For further reading:

(1) Wand APF, Zhong B, Chiu HFK, Draper B, De Leo D. COVID-19: the implications for suicide in older adults. *International psychogeriatrics* 2020;32(10):1225-1230.

(2) Tanaka T, Okamoto S. Increase in suicide following an initial decline during the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. *Nature human behaviour* 2021;5(2):229-238.

(3) de la Torre-Luque A, Pemau A, Perez-Sola V, Ayuso-Mateos JL. Suicide mortality in Spain in 2020: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Revista de psiquiatría y salud mental* 2022.

(4) Partonen T, Kiviruusu O, Grainger M, Suvisaari J, Eklín A, Virtanen A, et al. Suicides from 2016 to 2020 in Finland and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 2022;220(1):38-40.

(5) Observatorio del suicidio. *Fundación española para la prevención del suicidio* (Spanish Foundation for suicide prevention): <https://www.fsme.es/observatorio-del-suicidio/>



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