

Guidance for reporting on rail suicides

Background

Suicides on the railways are relatively rare, accounting for less than 5% of the suicides in the UK every year. However, they are public incidents and as such can cause a great deal of distress to witnesses including passengers, train drivers and other rail staff. Because they take place in a public setting these incidents are sometimes deemed newsworthy, particularly if they cause disruption to services.

Details of suicide methods should not be included to reduce the risk of influencing suicidal behaviour. Studies show that explicit references to a suicide method can have particularly harmful effects, increasing awareness of the method and potentially leading to further deaths.

The contagion effect

As with all reporting relating to suicide, media coverage of rail incidents can increase the risk of encouraging imitational suicidal behaviour. There is substantial evidence that if too much detail is published regarding a method of suicide, vulnerable people may try to take their own lives using the same or similar methods. Reporting of a suicide on the railways requires extra caution due to the higher risk involved. Railway settings are often easily accessible and the likelihood of lethality can be high. This can mean it is particularly dangerous to publish any details of this as a suicide method.

For example, following widespread reporting of the suicide of the German national goalkeeper, Robert Enke, in 2009 a significant rise in railway suicide incidents was observed in Germany. This effect was also recorded in other countries in Europe.

The location

Railway stations, railway bridges and level crossings are highly visible locations and risk becoming known locations if they are reported in the media. It is vital that the media does not contribute to a specific location, on or near the railways, becoming a setting that vulnerable people could identify as easily accessible or as an effective place to take their own lives.

Disproportionate reporting

Suicides on the railways are disproportionately reported compared to other types of suicides and in relation to the actual number of rail incidents. This is problematic because coverage is likely to raise public awareness of rail as a method and overstate the prevalence of these incidents. Disproportionate coverage could also increase perceptions of the lethality or effectiveness of rail as a suicide method.

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Best practice for reporting railway suicides and attempts

- Avoid identifying the exact location of a suicide, for example by naming or showing a station, railway bridge, piece of track or level crossing. It is also dangerous to describe a location as quiet and isolated with fast trains running through. Doing so may draw vulnerable people to the same or similar locations.
 - Be aware of the effect of cumulative facts. Reporting the route, time, speed and destination of the train involved gives emphasis to the method and can influence other vulnerable people to focus on these details when planning a suicide attempt. Stories containing these details can increase perceptions of the lethality of this method of suicide, or of a specific location.
 - Using terms such as 'died instantly' or 'was killed immediately' in stories is advised against. Such phrases may give the impression to vulnerable people that deaths on the railways are quick and painless.
 - Don't place railway suicide stories on the front page or position them as the lead story. Research shows that prominent, detailed reporting can influence vulnerable people.
 - Don't broadcast from the site of a suicide. This reinforces the idea of a location being a known site and could encourage further incidents.
 - Think carefully before approaching witnesses, whether it is a member of the public or rail staff, as they may be traumatised and being questioned could cause additional distress. If possible, avoid speaking to witnesses. Take care not to include explicit details supplied by people involved with a case of railway suicide, for example train drivers, rail staff or police.
- People responding to journalists' questions or giving evidence at an inquest are unlikely to be aware that referring to some details could lead to imitative behaviour if reported. Consider industry regulation and guidance, and apply caution when selecting which aspects to include in a report so as not to inadvertently increase the risk of contagion.
- Please be careful not to report suicides on the railways sensationally. Samaritans' regular monitoring and assessing of news reporting has shown that the public nature of these deaths means they are often reported more 'dramatically' than other suicides, for example by prominent placement of pictures or showing photographs and film of an exact location.
 - People often use social media to comment on a rail suicide, for example to complain about delays to services. They may also post graphic details about incidents they have witnessed, unaware of media guidelines and regulation or the risk associated with suicide coverage. Avoid repeating or sharing such comments and refrain from opening articles to comments from your audience as they are likely to cause distress to bereaved family and friends and trivialise a death.
 - We know from research that when media guidelines are adhered to it may have a positive effect on reporting of suicide. Research also shows that sensitive portrayals of suicide, focusing on someone overcoming a crisis, can have a protective influence. This is known as the Papageno effect. Coverage describing a person seeking help and coming through a difficult time can serve as a powerful testimony to others that this is possible. This can encourage people to seek help and has been linked to falls in suicide rates.

Action to tackle suicides on the railways

Samaritans works with Network Rail and the wider rail industry to reduce suicide on the railways and to support everyone affected by them. This partnership work focuses on seven key areas:

- Engaging the rail industry in suicide prevention and support activities
- Reaching out to those most at risk through our awareness campaigns
- Training rail industry staff in suicide prevention
- Supporting people affected by a suicide
- Volunteer outreach and support at stations after a suicide
- Working with the police and health services
- Working with the media to encourage responsible reporting of rail suicides

For more information on Samaritans' work on tackling suicide on the railways visit the **Network Rail section** of our website.



How Samaritans can help you

Samaritans' media advice team is available to support journalists and to answer questions relating to suicides on the railways at mediaadvice@samaritans.org

For general advice and best practice consult **Samaritans' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide** on our website.

When covering the topic of suicide or self-harm please encourage help-seeking by including sources of support, such as Samaritans' helpline:

When life is difficult, Samaritans are here – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free on 116 123 or visit www.samaritans.org for more ways to speak to a Samaritan.