



Hospital-presenting self-harm during January-August 2020

Data Briefing, December 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in a wide range of risk factors associated with self-harm and suicide. This includes the sudden loss of loved ones, depression, anxiety, substance misuse, fear of infection, job loss and economic uncertainty, social isolation and loneliness, restrictions on healthy activities and on access to health services including mental health services (Burke et al 2020; Fancourt et al 2020; Niedzwiedz et al 2020; O'Connor et al 2020; Yang et al 2020). Consequently, there are concerns that the pandemic has led to an increase in self-harm and suicide.

The National Self-Harm Registry Ireland (NSHRI), operated by the National Suicide Research Foundation (NSRF) and funded by the Health Service Executive National Office for Suicide Prevention, collects data on self-harm presentations to hospital emergency departments in the Republic of Ireland. This data briefing provides information on the monthly number of self-harm presentations to 19 hospitals during January-August 2020, compared to presentations made to the same hospitals in the equivalent months of 2018 and 2019.

These 19 hospitals provide nationally-representative data given they are spread across the country and are located in the centres of large cities, in city suburbs and in large towns. In 2018 and 2019, these hospitals accounted for 60% of the national number of self-harm presentations recorded by the NSHRI. It should be noted that the data presented for 2020 is provisional and subject to change.

The NSHRI recorded a total of 4,923 self-harm presentations to the 19 hospitals during January-August 2020, equivalent to 20.2 self-harm presentations per day. During the same eight months of 2018-2019, a total of 10,056 self-harm presentations to these 19 hospitals were recorded, equating to a rate of 20.7 per day. Therefore, the rate of hospital-presenting self-harm was similar, just 2% lower, during these months in 2020 compared to 2018-2019 (Rate ratio=0.98, 95% confidence interval=0.94, 1.01).

However, there were significant differences in February, March and April 2020 versus 2018-2019 (see Figure 1).

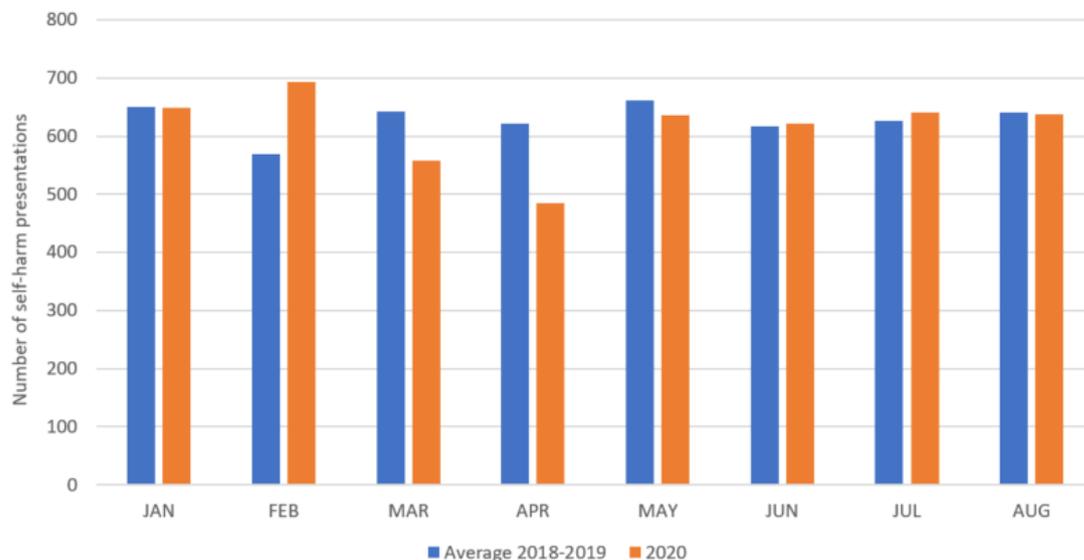


Figure 1: Monthly self-harm presentations to 19 hospitals in Ireland during January-August 2018-2019 and 2020

In February 2020, a total of 694 self-harm presentations were made to the 19 hospitals examined, a rate of 23.9 per day. This is 18% higher than the rate of 20.3 per day observed in February of 2018-2019 (Table 1). February 2020 was associated with the outbreak of COVID-19 in Italy and Spain, whereas Ireland's first case was not confirmed until February 29th.

In March 2020, the first month of the outbreak in Ireland, there were 558 self-harm presentations to the 19 hospitals. The daily rate was 18.0, which is 13% lower than the rate of 20.7 per day in March 2018-2019.

The Irish government's stay-at-home restrictions came into force on March 27th. April 2020 saw 485 self-harm presentations to the 19 hospitals. The daily rate was 16.2 which is 22% lower than the daily rate of 20.7 in April 2018-2019.

While the stay-at-home restrictions continued until mid-May 2020, the rate of self-harm presentations returned to usual levels that month – 20.5 per day compared to 21.3 per day in May 2018-2019.

As was the case in January 2020, the rate of self-harm presentations in June, July and August 2020 was almost identical to the rate observed in the same months of 2018-2019. This pattern of a return to usual levels is similar to reports on the impact of COVID-19 on hospital-presenting self-harm in other high-income countries (John et al., 2020, Hawton et al., 2020).

Table 1: Monthly self-harm presentations to 19 hospitals during January-August 2020 and 2018-2019

Month	Number (daily rate) in 2020	Average number (daily rate) in 2018-2019	Rate ratio (95% confidence interval)
January	649 (20.9)	650 (21.0)	1.00 (0.91, 1.10)
February	694 (23.9)	569 (20.3)	1.18 (1.07, 1.30)
March	558 (18.0)	642 (20.7)	0.87 (0.79, 0.96)
April	485 (16.2)	621 (20.7)	0.78 (0.70, 0.87)
May	636 (20.5)	662 (21.3)	0.96 (0.87, 1.06)
June	622 (20.7)	617 (20.6)	1.01 (0.92, 1.11)
July	641 (20.7)	627 (20.2)	1.02 (0.93, 1.12)
August	638 (20.6)	642 (20.7)	0.99 (0.90, 1.09)
Total	4,923 (20.2)	5,028 (20.7)	0.98 (0.94, 1.01)

Note: The rate ratio (RR) is the daily rate for a period in 2020 divided by the daily rate in the same period of 2018-2019. RRs equal or close to one indicate that the rate in 2020 was equal or similar to the rate in 2018-2019. RRs greater than one indicate that the rate in 2020 was higher than in 2018-2019. RRs less than one indicate that the rate was lower in 2020. The difference between the rate in 2020 and 2018-2019 is statistically significant if the 95% confidence interval for the RR does not include the value one, which is the case for February, March and April.

Key Findings

- Overall, the rate of hospital-presenting self-harm in January-August 2020 was similar to the rate in the same eight months of 2018-2019.
- In February 2020, before the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland, the rate of hospital-presenting self-harm was 18% higher than in February 2018-2019.
- During the outbreak in March 2020, the rate was 13% lower than in the same month of 2018-2019.
- During the 'stay-at-home' month of April 2020, the rate was 22% lower than in April 2018-2019.

These findings indicate that there was no increase in the incidence of hospital-presenting self-harm since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland. However, we cannot infer that there was no change in the incidence of self-harm not presenting to hospital or in the incidence of suicide during this time. Owing to the process involved in registering suicides in Ireland it may be some time before the impact of the pandemic on suicide can be assessed.

For further information, please contact:

Dr Paul Corcoran,
Head of Research,
National Suicide Research Foundation
E-mail: pcorcoran@ucc.ie

- Media guidelines for reporting suicide can be found here: <http://www.samaritans.org/your-community/samaritans-work-ireland/media-guidelines-ireland>
- Journalists reporting on this briefing are advised to include information on relevant help lines and websites: Samaritans: 116 123; Childline: 1800 66 66 66; www.aware.ie; www.yourmentalhealth.ie; www.spunout.ie.

References

- Burke T**, Berry A, Taylor LK, Stafford O, Murphy E, Shevlin M, McHugh L, Carr A. Increased Psychological Distress during COVID-19 and Quarantine in Ireland: A National Survey. *J. Clin. Med* 2020, 9, 3481. doi.org/10.3390/jcm9113481
- Fancourt D**, Steptoe A, Bu, F. Trajectories of anxiety and depressive symptoms during enforced isolation due to COVID-19: longitudinal analyses of 36,520 adults in England. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2020 doi.org/10.1101/2020.06.03.20120923
- Hawton K**, Casey D, Bale E, Brand F, Ness J, Waters K, Kelly S, Geulayov G. Self-harm during the early period of the COVID-19 Pandemic in England: comparative trend analysis of hospital presentations (In press)
- John A**, Pirkis J, Gunnell D, Appleby L, Morrissey J. Trends in suicide during the covid-19 pandemic. *BMJ* 2020; 371. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4352>
- Niedzwiedz CL**, Green MJ, Benzeval M, *et al.* Mental health and health behaviours before and during the initial phase of the COVID-19 lockdown: longitudinal analyses of the UK Household Longitudinal Study. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2020. doi: 10.1136/jech-2020-215060
- O'Connor R**, Wetherall K, Cleare S, McClelland H, Melson A, Niedzwiedz C, *et al.* Mental health and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic: Longitudinal analyses of adults in the UK COVID-19 Mental Health & Wellbeing study. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 2020: 1-17. doi:10.1192/bjp.2020.212
- Yang S**, Lin H, Zhu J, Chen Y, Wang N, Zhao Q, Fu C. Depression and anxiety symptoms among returning workers during the COVID-19 period in East China. *Soc Psychiatry Psychiatr Epidemiol.* 2020 Nov 24:1–8. doi: 10.1007/s00127-020-01983-w