

Single Vehicle Crashes – Accidents or Attempted Suicide?



Suicide is the act of killing oneself that results from an action or omission initiated with the intention of causing death and in the expectation of a fatal outcome. It is suspected that many single vehicle crashes are suicide attempts. These one car crashes generally “occur” in the early hours of the morning or late at night. They (crashes) can also involve mental health problems, “excessive speeding” and intoxicification of the driver through alcohol or drugs. This article looks at suicide as defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the socio-economic costs entailed. It examines suicide crash rates in Ireland and the UK and covers a PACTS report plus LGV drivers concerns about oncoming vehicles crashing into them. Coroners’ findings are highlighted and various researches are examined. Finally, a conclusion is given.

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“A road traffic injury is a fatal or non-fatal injury incurred as a result of a collision in a public road involving at least one moving vehicle”.

Introduction

Suicide is a worldwide phenomenon. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), suicide or *felo de se* is the act of killing oneself that results from an action or omission initiated with the intention of causing death and in the expectation of a fatal outcome.¹ The moral concept of suicide was expressed by the term *felo de se*; (“a felon in himself”) was defined as the act of feloniously committing self-murder.² The socio-economic cost of each death by suicide of someone of working age is estimated to be £1.6 million. This figure covers the direct cost of care, indirect costs relating to loss of productivity and earnings and the intangible cost associated with pain, grief and suffering.³ About one million people die by suicide each year according to a World Health Organization (WHO) estimate.⁴ This is staggering; indeed, a report of the WHO (2002) “*World Report on Violence and Health*”, found that more people die by self-directed violence than terrorism, wars and homicides combined. Suicide particularly affects the most vulnerable, as Ruth Sutherland from the Samaritans said in the 2015 Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) Westminster lecture: “*Those from the most deprived and lowest classes are ten times more likely to take their own lives than those from the most affluent areas and social classes*”. The brutal truth about single-vehicle crashes is that we may never know whether they were “genuine” or “normal” accidents or whether they were an attempted suicide attempt. The reality is that suicide by car accident is particularly difficult to determine definitely. For this reason, as a 1995 study⁵ on the subject notes: “*death by automobile offers a unique opportunity for concealment of suicide intent*”.

¹ WHO World Health Organisation. *Primary prevention of mental, neurological and psychosocial disorders*. Geneva: WHO, 1988

² Political Dictionary: vol 2. London, Charles Knight & Co. 1846.

³ *Population-level suicide awareness training and intervention*. IN Knapp, M. and McDaid, D. and Parsonage, M., (eds.). *Mental Health Promotion and Mental Illness Prevention: the Economic Case*. Department of Health, London.pacts.org.uk

⁴ Antoon, A. Leenaars. *Suicide Among the Armed Forces. Understanding the Cost of Service*. Books.google.ie

⁵ Peck, Dennis L. & Warner, Kenneth. A 1995 study- accident or suicide? Single-vehicle car accidents and the intent hypothesis. questia.com

The same study noted that one per cent of vehicular fatalities that are actually suicides could be anywhere from 1.6 to 2.5pc with the precise number impossible to calculate because “*a significant albeit unknown proportion of vehicular deaths classified as accidents are in fact suicides*”. The study also found that: “*the automobile constitutes an ideal self injurious or self-destructive instrument for a person’s intent upon camouflaging their suicidal intentions from others and from themselves*”.

Individuals – Non Compos Mentos

There are many means of committing suicide e.g. hanging, drowning, firearms, pesticide poisoning, overdosing on drugs, jumping in front of trains, falling off structures and others. However, when a driver dies from a head-on road crash; it is difficult to determine whether it was accidental due to an error of judgement or a suicide attempt. Also, run-off road events are frequent and can result in severe consequences. The reasons for leaving the road are numerous for example, driver fatigue, driver distraction, inappropriate speed in relation to traffic situations and suicide attempts to mention but a few. Run-off road events are complex and require a broad approach, addressing the whole sequence of the event, and a large variation of situations.⁶ When a person commits suicide, more than one life is destroyed. Not only are family, friends, neighbours and co-workers devastated but if the suicide victim involves strangers in their demise, the results can be even more damaging. Not only are the prevalence of suicide attempts and suicides elevated in individuals with psychiatric illness or who are *non compos mentos* but, also in the context of physical health problems. These problems include disorders such as cancer and HIV infection. It appears that the level of suicides double in individuals who are diagnosed with cancer, irrespective of comorbidities such as substance use and depression.⁷ Suicide is the leading cause of death for men in the UK aged between 20 and 49.⁸ The male suicide rate for men is more than three times the rate for female suicide. However, in 2015, female suicide rates were at its highest in a decade.⁹ The Government’s chief ministerial responsibility for road-related suicides is the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS). It is led by the Department of Health with support from the Department of Transport.

⁶ Car crashes as a method of suicide. A comprehensive review. academia.edu

⁷ Keiser, O. et al. Suicide in HIV-infected individuals and the general population in Switzerland, 1998-2008. Am. J. Psychology.2009; 167; 143-150.

⁸ Samaritans. (2016) ‘Suicide Statistics Report 2016’

⁹ Office for the National Statistics (2017) Statistical Bulletin. Suicides in the UK 2016.

Suicide Ireland

Suicide in Ireland was decriminalized in 1993, an act that precipitated Ireland's suicide prevention activities.¹⁰ In 2003, 444 people took their own lives in Ireland. The vast majority were male between the ages of 15 and 44 years. The Samaritans said that, for every woman who takes her own life, eleven men do so.¹¹ However, if young men are killing themselves by using their vehicles, the figure could be higher. Traditionally, suicidal men choose certain methods. Generally, they are violent and more likely to succeed. Car accidents fit into this male category. A Monash University (Australia) international study¹² found the almost 90pc of suicides through crashes are young men by disguising their deaths as car accidents. Paul O'Hare, spokesman in Ireland for the Samaritans confirmed that calls have been made to the charity's helpline from suicidal people intending their intentions to crash their cars. He said:

“We do need to raise awareness that this is a way people are taking their lives,” he added: *“Those who have died may be trying to save people close to them extra pain”*. He went on to say: *“In Ireland, there is a massive stigma surrounding suicide and there is a belief that suicide is extremely shameful and a car accident always leaves a major doubt”*.

The most common type of vehicle crash in Ireland is a single vehicle crash. In 2002, 102 people died in single-vehicle accidents. In the media, we regularly hear of a single vehicle ‘accident’ where the driver was killed. Normally, the news states that the vehicle ‘left the road’ and crashed into a wall, tree, utility pole, lighting post or some other solid object. However, there is evidence that all such crashes were not accidents – but suicide attempts. Moreover, it is generally underreported, because suicide involving a vehicle crash may be recorded as an accidental death. Some of these fatal crashes could be disguised as suicide rather than road accidents, a leading psychologist has claimed. Mr John Connolly, Consultant Psychologist at the Western Health Board and Secretary of the Irish Association of Suicidology, claims that as many as six per cent of fatal single-vehicle crashes in Ireland could be suicide.

¹⁰ Irish Health. Suicide tackling myths and misinformation. www.irishhealth.com

¹¹ Samaritans. (2016) ‘Suicide Statistics Report 2016’

¹² Virginia, Routley *et al.* (August 2003) Report No. 216. *Suicide and natural deaths in road traffic – Review*. Monash University-Accident Research centre.monash.edu

His claims are backed up by an international study in 2019. Connolly says: “*If we were to speculate, then possibly six or seven of those may well have been suicides*”. Also, one of the country’s top hospitals has reported a rise in the number of one-car collisions which are suspected attempted suicides. The National Centre for Treatment of Pelvic and Acetabular Fractures at Tallaght Hospital in Dublin has recorded that around 10pc of the cases it sees each year involve single-vehicle collisions with one occupant are suspected suicide attempts. Dr. John McElwain, a professor of trauma orthopaedic surgery said, that around 12 out of 120 major trauma cases which the centre sees each year are likely attempted suicides. He also said the injuries are the most difficult musculoskeletal fractures to treat.

Suicide UK

In the UK, around 6,000 people commit *felo-de-se* each year.¹³ However, the number has been falling since the 1980s, but has been rising since 2007. In contrast to the detailed information available on the 1,800 death from road “accidents” very limited data is published on methods of suicide. The Annual Office for National Statistics shows only five categories and provides no further details. The report shows roads, vehicles and road infrastructure are being used by individuals seeking to end their lives. Highways England has estimated that there were between 15 and 41 suicides per year on England’s road network in the period 2001 to 2014. It is not possible to give a precise figure but, based on various sources the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) estimates an average of over 50 deaths by suicide per year on roads in the UK.¹⁴ The number of suicide attempts is also not known with any precision. Police told PACTS that they are very wary of recording incidents as suicide, particularly on the road network. More than one police officer admitted that they did not feel expert enough to determine whether incidents are suicide, suggesting that, except in cases where intention to inflict self-harm is evident, they will not be recorded as suicides by police. Some stakeholders also told PACTS, that some life insurance claims could be affected by a verdict of suicide and that this could lead these persons using roads as a suicide method to withhold evidence of intent, such as a suicide or not. PACTS were unable to corroborate this.

¹³ *Felo-de-se* is a person who commits suicide or who dies from the effects of having committed an unlawful malicious act.

¹⁴ Katy Harrison (18 October 2017). *Suicide on UK roads. Lifting the lid*. PACTS News and Publications.

In response to a parliamentary question by Lillian Greenwood, the then Road Safety Minister, Andrew Jones stated that there were 856 suicide attempts recorded on the Strategic Road Network in England in 2014, 790 in 2015 and a further 568 in the first half of 2016.¹⁵ PACTS consulted with experts on suicide prevention, mental health and road safety in order to establish a definition of road-related suicide for the purposes of their report. They have defined the following five methods of “road-related” suicides or attempted suicides:

- Jumping off or on to road infrastructure with the intention of self-harm
- Stepping into the path of a moving vehicle with the intention of self-harm
- Driving a vehicle off road infrastructure with the intention of self-harm
- Driving a vehicle into road infrastructure with the intention of self-harm and
- Driving a vehicle into another vehicle with the intention of self harm.

Katy Harrison author of the PACTS report said:

“Every incident on UK roads impacts on other road users and potentially puts the lives of other road users at risk. Incidents cause delays on the network and the associated costs have serious repercussions for the UK economy. More importantly, behind every statistic is an individual and behind many of these deaths there is likely to be family and a community devastated by their loss... There is no official record of the number of suicides and attempted suicides taking place on roads in the UK every year and no central database for recording this information.”¹⁶

Suicide is no longer an offence in the UK, so the term “to commit suicide” is not appropriate. Suicide was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1960 and in Northern Ireland (NI) in 1966 however, suicide was never an offence under Scottish law.

LGV Drivers Concern

When the front end of a vehicle collides with the front end of another vehicle, the event is called a head-on collision. Head-on collisions are an especially terrifying and deadly type of crash. As a result, victims often suffer debilitating injuries or die more frequently than in any other type of crash.

¹⁵ Parliamentary Written Question. Roads suicide written question. - 26134. 8 February 2016.

¹⁶ Katy Harrison (18 October 2017). *Suicide on UK roads. Lifting the lid*. PACTS news and Publications.

(Consider the impact of two vehicles approaching each other at a modest speed of 100km/h (60mph), the closing gap is 200km/h or 120mph. Ed.) Suicide by truck, forcing a stranger to kill you with his speeding vehicle is something that drivers don't want to think about and don't want to discuss openly. Experts don't know how often suicide by truck occurs because legally proving that someone purposely ran in front of a moving truck or drove their car directly into its path is nearly impossible and is difficult to prove without a suicide note or verbal forewarning. Moreover, the social stigma often attached to suicide causes police and courts to err on the side of calling the death an unfortunate accident or misadventure. Every profession has its own safety and health risks. In addition to the risk of being involved in a "normal" crash, professional heavy vehicle drivers are at risk of becoming victims of people attempting suicide by crashing into their vehicles. Road suicides are not that rare, at least not in Finland, where they represent about 12pc of all fatal road crashes. About 18pc of a Finnish study¹⁷ reported as suspected suicide attempts of a motor vehicle crashing into their vehicle, with 15pc of these also reporting a resultant crash. More than half the respondents reported personally knowing another professional driver who had experienced a crash caused by a suicidal driver. Almost 80pc of drivers reported being afraid that someone would attempt suicide by crashing with their vehicle, however, thinking about such a possibility produced a level of anxiety in less than half of all respondents. Most respondents agreed about the challenges of avoiding a crash if somebody deliberately drives their car towards their vehicle. LGV drivers perceived road suicides as an occupational risk in their profession.¹⁸ *(About two years ago, when presenting a CPC course, a driver approached me during lunch break. He recounted that on one occasion when driving in the Dublin area, a car that was fourth in an oncoming queue of traffic, suddenly pulled out and crashed headlong into his truck. The male driver was about 25 years of age and was killed instantly. The truck driver felt that in some way he had contributed to the fatal crash and felt he should have done more to avoid it. He said that it is something that will remain with him for the rest of his life. Ed.)*

Coroners Findings

A number of Irish coroners were surveyed, and of the 13 who responded to the survey, eight cases of the past five years have been identified as possible or attempted suicides by four coroners.

¹⁷Igor, Radun *et al* (18 November 2019) *Suicide by crashing into a HGV: Professional drivers view*. Journal of Traffic Injury Prevention. Issue 6, vol. 20 2019.

¹⁸ Igor, Radun *et al* (18 November 2019) *Suicide by crashing into a HGV: Professional drivers view*. Journal of Traffic Injury Prevention. Issue 6, vol. 20 2019.

Six cases were possible suicides and two were attempted suicides, involving both men and women. Professor Denis Cusack, Director of the Medical Bureau of Road Safety at University College Dublin, said the number of intended deaths through single-vehicle single-occupant car crashes is relatively small, in the overall context of road deaths. He said that deliberate self-harm by means of a car crash is more likely to result in serious or catastrophic injury. He said the incidents generally “occur” in the early hours of the morning or late at night. They can also involve “excessive speeding” and intoxication of the driver through alcohol or drugs. Professor Cusack also said, the priority must be to provide the social, psychological and mental health service supports for people who are in distress and at risk. A coroner can only return a verdict of suicide if three conditions are met.

- It must be shown that the deceased took their own life without any third party intervention
- The person was intent on taking their own life and
- The self-killing and the intention are proven on the evidence beyond a reasonable doubt.¹⁹

The House of Commons Health Select Committee recommended a lowering of the standard of proof that coroners are required to apply for suicides. If implemented, the number of road deaths classified as suicide would almost certainly rise.²⁰ A recent innovation in Australia is an electronically based National Coroners Information System which enables researchers and other approved persons access to more detailed and timely information on injury deaths than data systems previously supplied. Aside from aggregate data, with more limited access, the system enables text searches of findings, police circumstances, toxicology and pathology reports.

Research

Globally, there has been a limited amount of research conducted on the issue of road-related suicide. ***Pompili M. et al (2012)***²¹ undertook a comprehensive review of research reports in English between 1955 and 2011 into car accidents as a method of suicide. This concluded that over 2pc of all single vehicle traffic accidents are suicide behaviours.

¹⁹ independent.ie 20 November 2013. Increase in one-car collisions which are suspected suicide attempts.

²⁰ Katy Harrison, Policy Officer, PACTS October 2017. *A report: Suicide on UK roads – Lifting the lid.*

²¹ Pompili et al (2012). ‘Car accidents as a method of suicide’. *A comprehensive review.* Forensic Science International 223. (2012) 1-9.

It provided evidence that road suicides may be reported as accidents in national statistics.²² Research on road-related suicide in the UK has been limited. Previous research into suicide by motor vehicle crash has identified a reluctance to classify cause of death as suicide without concrete evidence such as a suicide note, or other piece of evidence that is rarely found in single-vehicle crashes. There is a belief that suicide by motor vehicle crash is a preferred method for disguising suicidal intent as an accident. *Wyatt et al (2009)*,²³ studied fatal road traffic collisions in Scotland between 1993 and 2003, concluding that the general number of road related suicides may be underestimated. Also, the Samaritans who are a leading organisation on research into suicide prevention in the UK, through their recent work with the rail industry, have addressed the issue of suicide in transport. As yet, the Samaritans have not specifically investigated suicide in the UK road network.²⁴ According to a review by Monash University, Australia,²⁵ any deaths that would be termed suicide according to medico-psychological criteria are reported as accidental or from undetermined causes. The difficulty of positively identifying a death as suicide is complicated by the complexities of determining true intent and psychological motivation. The Monash University study also points to researchers in GB who looked into single-vehicle crashes in which the coroner had returned an open verdict. One British study re-examined 330 open verdicts and found that 213 were likely suicides; this suggests that the most open verdicts are actually unidentified suicide cases, says the Monash University report.

Conclusion

Suicide by any means is truly devastating but suicide by single-vehicle crash is difficult to determine because of the inability to understand the driver's mental state at the time. When a driver dies from a road head-on road crash; it is difficult to determine whether it was accidental due to an error of judgement or a suicide attempt. Not only are the prevalence of suicide attempts and suicides elevated in individuals with psychiatric illness, but, also in the context of physical health problems. These problems include disorders such as cancer and HIV infection. However, if the deceased driver left a note or had called e.g. the Samaritans then, suicide by vehicle crash could be ascertained. Around the world, a substantial proportion of motor vehicle crash deaths are recognised as "hidden" or attempted suicides.

²² Pompili et al (2012). 'Car accidents as a method of suicide'. *A comprehensive review*. Forensic Science International 223. (2012) 1-9.

²³ Wyatt, J. P. et al, Road Traffic Suicides. *Journal of forensic and legal medicine*. 16, 212-4.

²⁴ Samaritans (2017) Suicide in the UK and ROI.

²⁵ Virginia, Routley et al. (August 2003) Report No. 216. *Suicide and natural deaths in road traffic – Review*. Monash University-Accident Research centre.monash.edu

Road traffic suicides typically involve a car driver driving his or her vehicle into a heavy vehicle because death is almost certain due to the large mass difference between these vehicles. There is a belief that suicide by motor vehicle crash is a preferred method for disguising suicidal intent as an accident. The social stigma often attached to suicide causes police and courts to err on the side of calling the death an unfortunate accident. Every profession has its own safety and health risks. In addition to the risk of being involved in a “normal” crash, professional heavy vehicle drivers are at risk of becoming victims of people attempting suicide by crashing into their vehicles. According to a Finnish study (above), almost 80pc of drivers reported being afraid that someone would attempt suicide by crashing with their vehicle, however, thinking about such a possibility produced a level of anxiety in less than half of all respondents. Most respondents agreed about the challenges of avoiding a crash if somebody deliberately drives their car towards their vehicle. LGV drivers perceived road suicides as an occupational risk in their profession. Research on road-related suicide in the UK has been limited. Previous research into suicide by motor vehicle crash has identified a reluctance to classify cause of death as suicide without concrete evidence such as a suicide note, or other piece of evidence that is rarely found in single-vehicle crashes. Traditionally, men who are suicidal choose certain methods. Generally, they are violent and more likely to succeed. Car crashes fit into this male category. Suicide affects many people. When a person commits suicide, more than one life is destroyed. Not only are family, friends, neighbours and co-workers devastated by pain, grief and suffering, but if the suicide victim involves strangers in their demise, the results can be even more damaging. Every effort must be made to help suicidal people with mental disorders or other predicaments. There is a need for public discussion of suicide by targeting those who may be contemplating killing themselves by single-vehicle crash. It is less likely that suicidal drivers are unable to choose and more likely than not considered the consequences of their actions. The evidence suggesting the existence of an association between single car accidents and suicide is not firm as yet, but this topic is worthy of further investigation and could lead to a much better understanding of the causes of accidents and proposals for reducing their incidence. Evidence suggests that this phenomenon may be underreported in the current literature. Finally, the brutal truth about single-vehicle crashes is that we may never know whether they were “genuine” or “normal” accidents or whether they were a ‘hidden’ suicide attempt. The reality is that suicide by car accident is particularly difficult to determine definitely in the absence of any forewarning or the presence of any evidence such as a suicide note.