

Press release

Launch of National Self-Harm Registry Ireland Annual Report 2021

The National Self-Harm Registry Ireland operated by the National Suicide Research Foundation launches its Annual Report for 2021 via the NSRF website and social media channels at 11 a.m. today.

The National Self-Harm Registry Ireland reports that during 2021 a total of 12,661 self-harm presentations were made to hospital by 9,533 individuals. The rate of individuals presenting to hospital following self-harm in 2021 was 196 per 100,000, similar to the rate of 200 per 100,000 reported in 2020.

The data in the Annual Report 2021 provides an opportunity to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 in comparison to the first year of the pandemic and pre-pandemic years.

Dr Mary Joyce, Manager of the National Self-Harm Registry Ireland states that:

“The finding of no increase in self-harm rates during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic is reassuring. This is similar to the findings from 2020 in the early stages of the pandemic. However, it will be important to continue to monitor and evaluate the incidence of suicide and self-harm in subsequent years and post-pandemic. The consequences of economic disruption on suicidal behaviour are of particular concern given existing evidence for increases in suicidal behaviour during economic recessionary times.”

“There was a similar proportion of presentations accounted for by repetition in 2021 as in 2020, when a slight increase was observed in comparison to previous years. These findings highlight the need to further develop mental health services and supports in Ireland for individuals engaging in self-harm, particularly vulnerable groups such as those who are homeless. This is of particular importance given the record levels of homelessness and migration in Ireland and other countries.”

What did the Annual Report 2021 find?

- Consistent with previous years, the highest rates of self-harm were recorded in young people. The peak rate for women was in the 15-19 years age group at 888 per 100,000. The peak rate for men was in the 20-24 years age group at 387 per 100,000. Last year, in 2020, the peak rate was among 25-29 year-old men, though in the years prior to that, the peak rate was consistently among 20-24 year olds.
- Over the past 20 years, the highest rates of self-harm have consistently been observed in young people. In this year's report, we further examined the trend in hospital-presenting self-harm by sex and age since 2007. Among young adolescents aged 10-14 years, rates have increased for both boys and girls but in particular for girls.
- The number of monthly presentations varied over the course of the year, coinciding with COVID-19 restrictions. Level 5 COVID-19 restrictions were in place during January – April and in December 2021. There were fewer presentations in January and December, coinciding with these periods of restrictions. The lower-than-expected number of presentations during these months was most pronounced in January (-17%). The number of self-harm presentations subsequently increased across the first four months of 2021 when Level 5 restrictions applied. Of note, on the first day of easing of Level 5 restrictions on April 12th, one of the highest daily numbers of self-harm presentations in 2021 was recorded (n=50).
- Consistent with previous years, intentional drug overdose was the most common method of self-harm, involved in almost two-thirds (61%) of self-harm presentations in 2021. In general, the type of method used in self-harm was similar to recent years.
- There was a similar proportion of presentations accounted for by repetition in 2021 as in 2020 (25% and 24%, respectively). Of all individuals who presented to hospital with self-harm in 2021, 15.5% made at least one repeat presentation during the calendar year.
- Presentations made by residents of homeless hostels/ shelters and people of no fixed abode accounted for 6.6% of all presentations recorded by the Registry in 2021. This is comparable to the 7.5% reported in 2020.

What are the implications of the findings?

- 1) The findings from the Annual Report 2021 showed no increase in hospital-presenting self-harm during the second year of the pandemic. This is contrary to early concerns and expectations of a potential increase in self-harm and suicidal behaviours during the pandemic and statements in the media. These findings demonstrate the importance of ongoing surveillance to monitor the potential impact of the pandemic on these behaviours. The use of Registry data is fundamental in addressing misinformation, in particular during public health emergencies.
- 2) The trends highlighted in this year's report underline the need to further develop outpatient and inpatient mental health services in Ireland for individuals engaging in self-harm, particularly vulnerable groups. In addition, activities to reduce access to means, early intervention and prevention measures, and the delivery of campaigns that promote awareness and information about the safe sales of over-the-counter medications such as paracetamol are critical to reducing the incidence of self-harm in Ireland.
- 3) The Registry informs core actions in Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2024, *Connecting for Life (CfL)*, and the National Clinical Programme for Self-Harm and Suicide Related Ideation. It is a key component of the outcome's framework being used to monitor the progress of CfL and to examine the impact of implemented actions.

Funding

The work of the National Self-Harm Registry Ireland is funded by the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention.

Commenting on the trends over time in hospital-presenting self-harm, Dr Paul Corcoran, Head of Research, National Suicide Research Foundation, states that:

"The more detailed section on trends over time in the Annual Report 2021 highlights some interesting findings. The male rate of hospital-presenting self-harm has returned to pre-economic recession levels. The rate in 2021 was 17% lower than it was in 2018 and 24% lower than the peak rate that was observed in 2010. In contrast, the female rate of hospital-presenting self-harm has remained relatively stable for over a decade and in 2021, it was 45% higher than the male rate, the largest difference observed in the 20 years of Registry reports."

"For most age groups of men and women, the rate of hospital-presenting self-harm in 2021 was similar to, or lower than, it was before the recession. The main exception is women under 25 years of age, especially adolescents. The adolescent female rate of hospital-presenting self-harm has increased persistently for over a decade, with the greatest annual increase occurring from 2020 to 2021. Some of this increase may reflect greater help-seeking and accessing care, however, it emphasises that young girls are a priority group for self-harm prevention efforts."

Notes for Editors

- The report will be available to download at the following link from Tuesday February 13th, 2024 at 11 a.m.: <https://www.nsrif.ie/findings/reports/>
- For further press queries please contact Mr Niall McTernan, National Suicide Research Foundation.
E: niall.mcternan@ucc.ie
- Suicide reporting guidelines can be found here: <http://www.samaritans.org/your-community/samaritans-work-ireland/media-guidelines-ireland>
- Journalists reporting on this event are advised to include information on relevant helpline and websites: **TextAboutit:** Text HELLO to 50808; **Samaritans:** free phone 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.ie; **Childline:** 1800 66 66 66; www.aware.ie; www.yourmentalhealth.ie ; www.spunout.ie