

Age of onset of suicidal thoughts and attempts in women over the life course and the influence of early life adversities

3. Epidemiology and surveillance

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Abstract text

Background: Non-fatal suicidal acts are far more common in women than to men, yet little is known about the natural history of suicidal behavior in women over the life course.

Aim: The study aimed to examine the age at onset of suicidal behavior in women followed into very late life and to study the influence of early life adversities.

Methods: A representative sample of women (n=800) born in 1914, 1918, 1922 and 1930 were examined in 1968-69 within the *Prospective Population Study of Women in Gothenburg*. A detailed mental health history including suicidal behavior and 12 early life adversities was taken. The women were re-examined until 2018-19 (n=46) in up to eight follow-up waves. Follow-up assessments included the Montgomery-Åsberg Depression Rating Scale and the Paykel questions about suicidal feelings. Participants' medical records and national register data were reviewed.

Results: Over the lifetime, 27.5% reported suicidal thoughts, 9.0% had made at least one suicide attempt and six died by suicide. Nearly 60% were aged ≥ 40 at their first suicide attempt. Most early life adversities were associated with lifetime suicidal thoughts and six (physical abuse, feeling misunderstood as a child, father with alcoholism, broken home before age 17, mental illness in mother and in father) showed an association with lifetime suicide attempt. For each additional adversity, the age at onset of suicidal thoughts was reduced by 1.78 years. A similar trend was observed for attempted suicide, but the difference did not reach statistical significance.

Conclusions: The lifetime prevalence of suicidal behavior in women may have been underestimated in earlier studies. Risk associated with specific early life adversities differed for suicidal thoughts and attempts.