

FACTSHEET RAIL SUICIDES

MEDIA GUIDELINES for Reporting Suicide

SAMARITANS

Background

Suicides on the railways 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 public and because they may disrupt rail services, media interest is commonplace, particularly from local news outlets.

Occasionally suicides and attempted suicides on the railways attract intense media scrutiny, especially if there have been a number in a single location. Such stories are frequently the lead in a news bulletin or a front-page splash and can have a significant and upsetting impact on bereaved individuals and people experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Be aware

The 'copycat' effect:

- As with all reporting relating to suicide, be aware that vulnerable people might be exposed to media coverage about suicide which can increase the risk of encouraging 'copycat' 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. This is as true for railway suicides as for others.

The location:

- Railway stations, railway bridges and level crossings are highly visible locations and risk becoming a known location, especially if they are repeatedly referred to 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 an easily accessible place to take their own lives.

➔ Best practice for reporting railway suicides and attempts:

- ⦿ Don't place railway suicide stories on the front page or position them as the lead story in a bulletin. Research shows that prominent, detailed reporting can influence vulnerable people.
- ⦿ Avoid identifying the exact location of a suicide, for example by naming or showing a railway bridge, piece of track or level crossing. It is also dangerous to describe a location as quiet and isolated with fast trains going through. Doing so, may draw vulnerable people to the same or similar locations.
- ⦿ Be aware of the effect of cumulative facts. Reporting the exact time, speed and destination of the train involved, can influence other vulnerable people to focus on these details when planning a suicide attempt.
- ⦿ Take extra care not to include explicit details supplied by others involved with a case, for example train drivers or police, particularly when reporting on inquests.
- ⦿ Don't broadcast from the site of a suicide. This reinforces the idea of a location being a known site and could encourage 'copycat' behaviour.
- ⦿ 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 painless or quick.
- ⦿ Be careful not to report suicides on the railways sensationally. The public nature of these deaths sometimes means they are reported more 'dramatically' than other suicides, for example by the prominent placement of pictures or showing film of an exact location.
- ⦿ Think carefully before approaching witnesses, whether it is a member of the public, train driver or rail staff, as they may be traumatised and being questioned may cause additional distress. If possible, avoid speaking to witnesses.
- ⦿ People often use social media to comment on a rail suicide, for example to complain about delays to services. Avoid repeating such comments as they may cause distress to bereaved family and friends, and trivialise a death.

For general tips on best practice consult *Samaritans and IAS' Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide* at: www.samaritans.ie/mediaguidelines

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