



H44 Leaving the Familiar: Suicidal Tourism in Cook County, Chicago, Illinois

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will have gained knowledge in suicidal tourism within Cook County, IL.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing data of a relatively rare phenomenon of suicidal tourism and the challenges this provides to death investigation, suicide prevention, and public health.

For many, suicide is a very personal and individualized act. Whether it is spontaneous or meticulously planned out, the action of taking one's life usually revolves around the familiar. It occurs at home, at work, or in a location the decedent is most comfortable with. In rare occasions, however, a person chooses to leave their immediate surroundings to commit suicide, in an act referred to as suicidal tourism.¹ Many who choose to travel head to larger cities and national landmarks. Places like the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, CA, and the Grand Canyon National Park in Arizona are hotspots for those seeking to commit suicide away from home.^{2,3} As a destination for suicidal tourism, Chicago and Cook County are different, as they lack well-known national landmarks, large national parks, or famous high bridges. What attracts people to Chicago to commit suicide is currently unknown. The goal of this investigation is to answer that question and look for epidemiologic and locational patterns to better support the public health mission of suicide prevention.

A retrospective search of the Cook County Medical Examiner's Office (CCMEO) electronic database, LABlynx ELab (LabLynx, Inc.), was undertaken. All cases where the manner was classified as suicide between 2014 and 2018 were collected and reviewed.

A total of 2,045 suicides were examined at the CCMEO over a five-year period (2014 through 2018). Of those, 4.6% (94/2,045) were committed by persons whose home address lay outside of Cook County. Persons with out-of-state addresses made up 1.9% (39/2,045) of total suicides. The leading five causes of death in descending order of frequency included jumping from height, self-inflicted gunshot wounds, hanging, train deaths, and drug overdose. Over half of the individuals travelled to Cook County from other parts of Illinois (59%; 55/94). Fewer travelled from out of state (41%; 39/94). No cases of international travelers were identified. Ages ranged between 17 and 75 years old, with an average age of 39. Most were identified as Caucasian (85%; 80/94), and the male-to-female ratio was 3.27. Common types of suicidal locations included hotel rooms, parking garages, train stations, and forest preserves.

For forensic pathologists, suicides present a unique challenge. Though the cause and manner of death may be relatively straightforward, the prevention of such deaths is not. The uniqueness of each suicide makes recommendations for prevention difficult to formulate. Studies such as the current one are crucial to provide data to help families, law enforcement, and medical professionals recognize individuals at risk of suicidal tourism and the common locations within Chicago that they frequent, in an attempt to prevent further loss of life.

Reference(s):

1. Gross, Charles et. al. Suicide Tourism in Manhattan, New York City, 1990–2004. *Journal of Urban Health : Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 84, no. 6 (November 2007): 755–65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-007-9224-0>.
2. Blaustein, Mel and Anne Fleming. Suicide From the Golden Gate Bridge. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 166, no. 10 (October 1, 2009): 1111–16. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2009.09020296>.
3. *Suicides in National Parks—United States, 2003–2009*. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5947a2.htm>.

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